

“Dr. Carl Ellis was and is ahead of his time. This book was first introduced in the early 1980s; however, the items Ellis deals with have been timeless issues to African Americans. I have read and reread this book and quoted from it more than I can say. In essence, this is a classic work. It has found new life, as the same question of black identity is rearing its head again. The gospel must be applied to our issues contextually without changing its content. The scope of the gospel must be engaged in the black experience. Dr. Ellis is a brilliant theologian and sage! I recommend *Free at Last?* as foundational cross-ethnic reading for thinking through and dealing with the issues of today. Kudos to IVP for rereleasing the seminal work. I’ll be continuing to refer to it in my ministry and recommend it to the lost and the found for shaping their journey.”

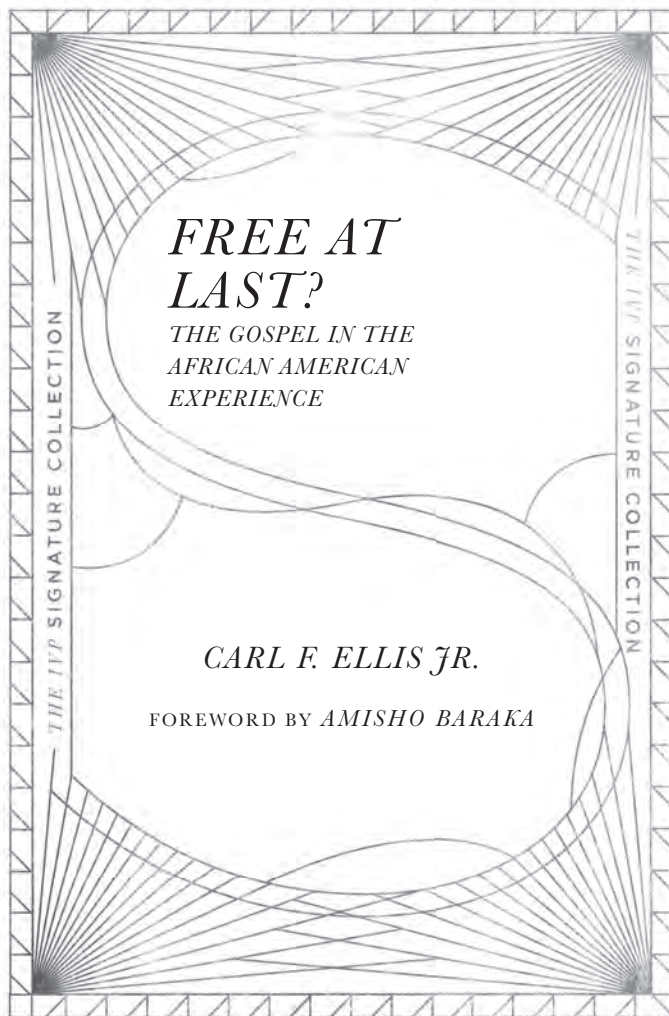
Eric M. Mason, lead pastor of Epiphany Fellowship Church, Philadelphia

“I was a first-year seminary student in 2001 when I first heard the name Carl Ellis. My professor, John Frame, listed *Free at Last?* among the list of recommended books in his course syllabus. I was at a majority-white seminary in need of resources written by black authors. Little did I know the gift this book would be for my formation as a disciple of Jesus Christ and shepherd in his church. Everyone should read this book. Learn of the faithfulness of God to a particular people from this elder and sage. Thank you IVP for putting it in the hands of a new generation!”

Irwyn L. Ince, director of the Grace DC Institute for Cross-Cultural Mission, author of *The Beautiful Community*

“Outside the Bible, *Free at Last?* has had the most influence upon my life, ministry, and identity. My twenty-five-year-old copy is wrinkled, tattered, and dog-eared on virtually every page. I reread it at least once a year and have counseled countless others to do the same. This book nourishes my soul and quickens me to action, which is why it has traveled with me to Uganda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Ethiopia, Ghana, and back to these shores we call home. In *Free at Last?* Carl Ellis invites us to believe that we too might be a jazz theologian—one who can see the way to the Promised Land.”

Robert Gelinias, lead pastor at Colorado Community Church, author of *Finding the Groove: Composing a Jazz-Shaped Faith*



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To my children

CARL III AND NICOLE

who have given me the joy of fatherhood

and to my mother

MILDRED ELLIS PROTHO

whose help and support I will always treasure

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Foreword

Amisho Baraka

“There are years that ask questions and there are years that answer.” The keen anthropologist and author Zora Neale Hurston made this observation. Maturity is a process that cannot be manipulated. As a young man I thought I had answers when I should have asked more questions. Some of my answers were harmful because of timidity. Some of my answers could have used more humility where certainty was applied. Some of my answers were thin when depth was necessary. Praise God I’ve learned from my ignorant mistakes when I spoke authoritatively. I had to learn that having information did not mean I had comprehension.

The Jedi and sage Carl Ellis Jr. is a man who has asked many questions, which bears much fruit. As we examine his collection of work we hear a poised exhortation that is often drowned out by the rushing swings of a pendulum. The prudence of a man or woman isn’t measured by their ability to consolidate with every wave in popular thought, but how they rise above the wave in defense of a truth that transcends time. I must say, as I write this, I fear that many Christians are more concerned with cultural relevance than the reverence of Christ. However, on the other end of the spectrum there are some who ignore the reality that God uses culture as a means to communicate

his truth. Praise God that Carl Ellis carries the arrows of biblical literacy and cultural awareness in his quiver.

As I observe the Christian landscape, I recognize that in many circles spiritual maturity isn't measured by the application of what we believe but how well we argue it. We engage as children who ride a hobbyhorse of issues ready to trample over our opposition. We abandon one bandwagon to board another while hardly walking alongside the droves. We praise theological carpetbaggers traveling miles to teach the "ill-informed." We are a culture that has an abundance of information but a scarcity of wisdom. Are we wasting our years with not asking the right questions?

Do we have ears to hear? How can we hear about him unless someone is sent? Praise God for the wisdom of Carl Ellis Jr. He has been a steady voice crying out from the halls of academia and the church.

I could only imagine a young Sho Baraka getting his hands on *Free At Last?* I would have discovered many answers in my years of search. I would not only have saved time consuming a thin theology but I would have been directed to an application that was most beneficial for my context.

There are well-natured Black practitioners who were baptized into a one-sided orientation of White evangelicalism that was void of a biblical view in social justice. However, some Black practitioners who were educated in liberal institutions have a high regard for addressing systemic injustice but a low regard for biblical authority. Praise God for Carl Ellis Jr. and the courage to speak grace and truth no matter the subject.

This book lifts up a gospel that not only renews hearts but also renews institutions. This book taught me to have a fidelity to the Scriptures while having a compassion for social justice. The Right wants you to believe that a concern for justice equates to licentiousness. The Left wants you to believe that a preservation of historical biblical ethics equates to oppression. Praise God for Carl Ellis that he presented a book that tears down the dividing wall of confusion.

Carl has lived a life that refuses to be prostituted as a political pawn. He does not stand in a hopeless middle that hides behind indecision. He stands confident on the truth of God that refuses to auction off its allegiance. He may be too radical for some and not radical enough for others. He may be in the middle because we live in a society that settles on ideologies that have often lacked nuance. As a Joshua people we know there is a time to kill and a time to heal. There is a time to search and a time to quit searching. Praise God Carl cares about the unborn child and the precarious predicaments that put women in a position to consider abortion.

The truth in these pages, written over thirty years ago, reads as if Mr. Ellis scrolled through his Twitter feed to address the polarizing ideologies of 2020. Praise God that truth is timeless. Praise God that Carl was brave. Praise God that this book answers many of my questions. Praise God Almighty I am free at last!

Preface to the Signature Edition

In 1965, a year after my first steps as a Christ follower, I was a freshman at Hampton Institute (now Hampton University), a leading Historically Black College or University (HBCU). The intense discipleship I received during these months helped me thrive and grow in biblical knowledge. By the end of my first year at Hampton, I was well on my way to figuring out the complexities of the world with a handful of Bible verses—*so I thought*. Being outspoken about my faith earned me the nickname “Preacher.”

My journey to Jesus had been an odyssey of seeming improbabilities. Though I previously had a longing to know God, I was not religiously inclined. Everything that claimed to represent God was abhorrent to me. I despised religion, especially Christianity. I hated going to church and was turned off by church music and the archaic language of the King James Bible, to name a few. In essence, I was *unchurchable*.

The Christianity I knew never answered my questions or addressed issues I was concerned about. However, because of the emerging civil rights movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., I grudgingly acknowledged that Christianity *might* have something to contribute. Several years earlier, Dr. King visited my city and grabbed my attention when I heard him speak. After the rally, my father bought me

Dr. King's newly published first book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, which the rising civil rights leader graciously autographed. It is in my library to this day.

The first "religious" person who ignited my imagination, however, was Malcolm X. Hearing him live in 1962 was life changing. Unlike my perception of Christianity as a "Black male unfriendly" institution, what Malcolm said was empowering. He made me want to stand up, affirm my identity, and be a man! Nevertheless, his devotion to Elijah Muhammad at the time was a stumbling block for me because of my antireligious sentiments. Yet it was Malcolm X who set me up to hear the voice of the True Shepherd in the biblical gospel.

My search for answers to life's questions changed when I became intrigued by a conversation with two fellow high school acquaintances. They had a reputation for being weird because of things they articulated over the years. This time they were talking about what the Bible teaches. However, because they were "unchurchable" like me, what they had to say made sense. They answered my questions and addressed my issues using biblical wisdom in nonreligious language that I could understand. In a matter of a few weeks, I also became a follower of Christ. They disciplined me so well that I was able to stand up to ridicule that came my way from the many skeptics I encountered.

As late as the spring of 1967 there was a general consensus at Hampton that we were "Negroes" and that nominal Christianity was the norm. Of course, my aggressive articulation of my faith was out of sync with the campus consensus. However, the autumn of '67 brought nothing short of a cultural revolution—yielding a new consensus that saw us as "Afro-Americans" and later as "Black." The norm of nominal Christianity was replaced by an anti-Christian hostility. "Christianity is the White man's religion" echoed across the campus and throughout the community in general.

The world I had figured out with a handful of Bible verses had *vanished*. The questions I was answering were no longer being asked. The questions being asked I had no answers for. The theology I absorbed from reading Christian books was not adequate in this new

context of anti-Christian hostility. The Christian bookstores were void of any books that could have equipped me with wisdom to understand this new reality or to speak into it.

As I poured through books by Black Consciousness thinkers in a quest for understanding, I faced an obvious choice: either acknowledge this new cultural challenge and dispense with my faith, or cling to my faith and disregard the new cultural challenge. Being a transcendent nonconformist, I rejected both options. Instead, I started reading a modern translation of the Bible beginning with Genesis 1:1—a portion of the Bible my theology said did not apply to today.

Letting the Bible speak for itself quickly bulldozed my inadequate theology and eclipsed it. God's sovereignty over history and over his covenant people came into sharp focus. In the prophets, I saw God's deep concern for justice and the plight of the oppressed—the very issues Black militants were debating in the streets. These discoveries moved me to seek God's wisdom about the contemporary cultural upheaval. As I grew in understanding of a biblical worldview, I was more than able to hold my own as I engaged militants in street debates. But what I fervently prayed for was a way to debunk the notion that Christianity was the “White man's religion” while clearly communicating biblical wisdom—preferably in the form of a book.

May of 1969 proved to be pivotal, as a seed thought disrupted my sleep at 3:30 a.m. It quickly exploded into a brainstorm regarding the developing Black Consciousness Movement—ideas I never would have imagined. For the rest of the morning I wrote down these insights as they erupted and organized them into a rough outline. By sunrise I could see that this was the outline for a book—this book.

It took almost twelve years to unpack and articulate many of the concepts in the outline and transform them into a manuscript. Though it made its publication debut as *Beyond Liberation* in 1983, I lamented that it wasn't published ten years earlier—that it had missed its ideal time. But when my sister-in-law read it she marveled at how “ahead of its time” it was. Though this book was revised and republished in 1996 as *Free at Last?*, it has seen a new wave of excitement among

recent generations. My sister-in-law was right.

I am encouraged and humbled by this book's contribution to the discussions of today. Furthermore, to have it republished as a part of the IVP Signature Collection is an unspeakable honor.

Acknowledgments

This book would never have been conceived or written without the influence of people who have been significant in my life. To them I will always be grateful.

From the day I was born to Carl F. Ellis Sr. and his lovely wife, Mildred, I was raised to feel loved and wanted in more ways than I can count. They took great care to supervise my development, exposing me to a rich variety of learning experiences and challenging me to think things through. I will never be able to fully express my loving gratitude to them.

Also I want to thank others whose positive influence is still felt and appreciated:

- Catherine Owens (my maternal grandmother), whose example of godliness inspired me to seek God with all my heart
- “Uncle James” (James McLain), whose affectionate love for God and for me has been a great source of strength
- His wife, Blanch (my paternal grandmother), who instilled in me the assurance that being Black should never block me from doing what I set my mind to
- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who opened my eyes to God’s concern for justice and equality among people
- Malcolm X, who sensitized me to the beauty of my humanity

The Reverend Robert Lowery, who showed me through his example that the pastoral ministry can be “peopley” and practical

Robert Sykes and Gerald Garnett, who took time to share their faith with me, answering my intellectual questions and leading me to Christ

Mr. Robert Crowe, my high-school math and science teacher, who relentlessly challenged my new faith, driving me to develop sound reasons for the hope that was in me

Eric Fife, whom God used to call me into the ministry

Dr. Clark Pinnock, who first helped me appreciate how the truths of Scripture can successfully confront human philosophies

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Dr. Columbus Salley, who provided the tools I needed to integrate my African-American awareness with my Christian commitment

the Reverend Orlando Protho (my stepfather), who ordained me and whose enlightenment enabled me to appreciate the African-American church and its preaching in a new way (he went home to be with the Lord on August 20, 1992—I really miss him)

Thom Hopler, whose impact on me was limited only by the brief time we had to share

All my professors at Westminster Theological Seminary (WTS), who helped to further clarify my thinking—especially Dr. John Frame,

Dr. Harvie Conn, Dr. Robert Knudson and Bill Krispin (director of the Center for Urban Theological Studies)

The Reverend Bill Link (dean at WTS), whose personal concern and financial sacrifice enabled me to enroll at WTS

The brothers and sisters in the West Philly (Philadelphia) group, whose fellowship and warmth carried me through the difficult days of my senior year at seminary

Prison Fellowship, which gave me, as a seminar instructor, a means of digesting the heavy things I learned at WTS

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InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, which brought me into contact with many of the influential people in my life

I also must acknowledge my children, Carl Francis Ellis III, born June 8, 1983, and Nicole René Elliott Ellis, born April 10, 1986. Only God knows how deep is my love and affection for them. They keep me young and on my toes as I watch them grow and develop. They have also inspired my faith and confidence in God's grace by reminding me of how God loves and delights in me.

Next I want to thank all those who did the typing, retyping, editing, reediting, critiquing and so on. For the first edition they include Isidra Smith, Carla Waiters, Michelle Black, Lesley Hamilton, Pat Ralston, Catherine Nordloff Tippens, Lunard and Sharon Lewis, David and Arlene Cadwell, Daniel Bockert, Mrs. Mildred Protho (my mother), E. Regina Elliott Smith, Edwina Morrison, Mrs. Estelle Elliott (whose helpful suggestions led to the development of the glossary), Joan Guest, Jane Wells and the rest of the editorial staff of InterVarsity Press (who were instrumental in the book's development), Mark Branson, Bob Hunter, Dr. Bennie Goodwin and others who reviewed the manuscript and gave many helpful suggestions.

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Most of all I want to give special thanks to my Heavenly Father, whose infinite love and amazing grace made all this possible.

1

Toward a Promised Land

For four hundred years they had been oppressed. Their sense of history and destiny was all but wiped out. Their consciousness was blurred and distorted, their culture polluted with false values. Their knowledge of the one true God had become tangled up with a proliferation of man-made gods. Their sense of dignity had been overwhelmed by feelings of inferiority, feelings that came from the dehumanization inflicted by a racist society. The people felt forsaken by God.

Yet God remained faithful. He did not forsake them. In fact, he was already implementing his eternal plan of liberation. In ten demonstrations of judgment, God broke the back of a king who had used his technology to maintain a brutal system of slavery. God thus brought his people out of Egypt so that they might become his light to the nations.

This goal, however, could not be reached overnight. The people had to be prepared through gradual de-Egyptianization as they journeyed

in the wilderness. God began to restore their culture, raising it to new heights through Moses and the law.

Parallels in History

A survey of African-American history reveals that like the children of Israel, we have had a four-hundred-year collective trauma from which we have yet to fully recover. And like the children of Israel we have sojourned in a philosophical wilderness as our thinking has developed. The big question we face is, Has God been guiding us toward a promised land?

Martin Luther King Jr., in his *Memphis speech** the night before he died, prophetically answered that question:

We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountain top. I won't mind.

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will.

And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and *I've seen the promised land*.

I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land.

So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.¹

But questions still remain. What is this "promised land" like? Who is going to lead us there? How can we get there from here?

During the 1960s African-Americans had a real sense of direction. But by the time the eighties arrived our sense of direction had all but evaporated. More recently we've seen the emergence of a new militancy. Yet it seems we are still confused, like the children of Israel after they refused to possess the land God had given them (Numbers 13—14).

God had sent ten plagues to break the back of Pharaoh and discredit his pagan gods. He had dealt the mighty Egyptian army, with its

superior technology, a major military setback at the Red Sea. He had fed the people from the sky. He had provided fresh water from a pool of poison. The Israelites reached the Promised Land one year after leaving Egypt. Yet they failed to believe that the same God who had done all this could defeat some fifth-rate Canaanite tribes.

What was so bizarre was that having decided not to take God and his word seriously, they wanted to return to Egypt—to slavery and oppression! They wanted to readopt the false values that had obliterated their culture and sense of worth.

Where Have All the Leaders Gone?

Today the African-American community is in a similar situation. We are aware of the moral and legal victories of the sixties. But racism is still with us. In fact, it has even become “politically correct.” Now we are in a state of theological and cultural disarray. We have a crisis of leadership, of identity. We are in a morass of me-ism. Where did this crisis begin?

Much of the generation of leadership that carried us through the sixties has died naturally, been assassinated or gone off into relative obscurity. Dr. King is gone. So is Malcolm X. *Huey P. Newton** was blown away. Others have been co-opted by the establishment. Still others have lost touch with our people. We will not come into our own until a new generation inherits the mantle of leadership. But where will this new leadership come from? How will it build on the previous contributions?

Where This Book’s Discussion Will Take Us

These are among the questions we will examine in this book. In part I we will look briefly at a variety of concepts and issues that will be discussed more fully in the rest of the book. I want to lay some groundwork for a fresh analysis of some of the great issues in the African-American experience. Part II will touch on the major phases of African-American cultural history and point out some lessons we have learned.

In part III we will look at the root of *culture** as the human response to God's revelation. We will also look at the crippling effects of humanity's negative response to God, on consciousness in general and on the African-American consciousness in particular. In addition, I will discuss the nature of theology, along with some new ways it can empower our people to reach our cultural potential. Finally, part IV ties together what we have learned, suggesting how we can apply this knowledge toward developing a new agenda.

Though written from an African-American perspective, this work is not intended only for an African-American audience. Using the African-American cultural experience as the point of contact, I have attempted to forge a fresh understanding of how God by his *grace** is active in culture.

At the back of this revised edition is a glossary of people, events and terms. This is an alphabetical listing of (1) terms that either are used in a specialized sense or cannot be found in a standard dictionary, (2) historical information on events and organizations alluded to and (3) significant leaders (listed by last name), with biographical information. Names, events and terms included in the glossary are italicized and marked with an asterisk (*) the first time they appear in the text.

May you be encouraged to know God in new and deeper ways as you gain a fresh understanding of African-American *history** and culture. Whatever your background may be, I pray that this study will give you new insights to analyze the culture in which you live. Finally, it is my prayer that the principles contained in this book will play a role in building bridges of understanding and facilitating reconciliation where there has been alienation.