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by Luke G. Franklin

Abstract: The article reviews the book "Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities," by Robert M. Franklin.

In the last chapter of his book, *Crisis in the Village* (Fortress Press, 2007), Robert Franklin uses the analogy of prescribed medicine to illustrate the current condition of the black community. Many excellent books have been penned describing the problems facing the village. Franklin aims to provide methods for actually taking the prescriptions being written. *Crisis in the Village* hopes to fill the gap between great academic ideas and real life in American cities.

Franklin's writing is theoretically and philosophically based, but at its core the book is about life. The book is not meant to be read and discussed over long periods of contemplation. As Walker Moore noted in a review for *Family and Community Ministries*, "It presents concrete, tangible methods to improve families, churches and HBCUs – a plan that counters the paralysis that so often precludes initiative and action." Franklin means to urge the black community to immediate action.

In the introduction Franklin acknowledges the great calls being made for progress in the African American community. But calls are not enough, "I want to push the discourse to the next level, to name the specific stewards of our anchor institutions, and pose strategies for how they could be held accountable for effective service."

Franklin's book is unique in that it attempts to provide an approach of strategy, solutions, and accountability, all based in a theological foundation. The book's organization is simple. Franklin identifies the three most important institutions in the black community and illustrates the crisis each one faces along with possible solutions. Family, church and college are all examined historically as well as examining what's right and wrong about each institution.

Using Bill Cosby's criticism of the African American family as a springboard, Franklin identifies a crisis of commitment. The family sphere lacks a biblical dedication resulting in havoc for African American family relationships. Dating, marriage, parenting, divorce, familial violence, and more are all affected by the lack of commitment values. Franklin refuses to leave black families to bear the brunt of the criticism, "More than anything, the community's most responsible and influential leaders and institutions have not yet convened a sustained, national, strategic action focused conversation about the future of black families. . ." As will be repeated throughout the book, Franklin ends the chapter proposing practical steps to foster commitment and healthy family life, outlining steps clergy need to take.

No time is wasted identifying the crisis facing black churches, "I am convinced that the single greatest threat to the historical legacy and core values of the contemporary black church tradition is posed by what it known as the 'prosperity gospel' movement." Juxtaposing prosperity gospel with prophetic

stewardship, Franklin reveals a more sinister cause of the crisis as lack of mission within black clergy. Repeatedly, the author challenges church leadership to lead congregations away from the prosperity gospel and to reclaim the inspiring history of African American churches.

Franklin's proposed solution is simple and to the point. Three black denominations are challenged to foster the community, each in their own unique manner. Methodists are called to educational renewal. Enough specifics are given to build a curriculum for any pastor. Baptists are tasked with prisoner redemption and reentry. Finally, the Pentecostals must reach and impact black youth leadership. Franklin's plan is far from complete, but he takes aim at specific crippling tendencies within the village and proposes strategies to move beyond discussion, "Bob Franklin always cuts through the morass of blame and despair to offer us a politics of solutions and hope." (Jim Wallis, Huffington Post)

The final institution Franklin examines is the black college. He presents a fierce criticism of measuring worth by wealth and insists those who have been helped must give back to the community, "Every college-educated adult who has benefited from the public's investment in them should accept the moral obligation to provide leadership and service." Black colleges are experiencing a crisis of moral purpose. Franklin offers a detailed, inspiring history of perseverance in black higher education. He ends the chapter with a reminder of the great positive influences, such as following a strong moral compass and fighting for the entire village, that black colleges had during the Civil Rights era.

Crisis in the Village concludes with concrete strategies for rebuilding the health of these three mega institutions. Franklin provides "assignments" for those within the village. Adults should willfully engage in reconciliation and forgiveness each week; leadership should organize open conversation; etc. Showing a keen understanding of human nature, Franklin includes checks of accountability to African American leaders. David Everett notes the power of including a call for accountability, "In demanding accountability, challenging leadership, and seeking collaboration, *Crisis in the Village* calls for a reconciliatory work that taps into the power of community in an effort to heal, restore, and mobilize Black America." (*Currents in Theology and Mission*, 2009). Those in charge are responsible to the grassroots of the village. Franklin is clear; it will take all of the community. It's time to act!

Like a well-crafted sermon, Franklin's writing style mixes academia, personal stories and nostalgia for past leaders in the African American church. Those expecting a purely academic read might be turned away (Streets, *The Living Pulpit*), but the combination of informed data and compelling personal narratives is endearing. A strong use of historical context and relevant quotes adds meat to the author's own words. Franklin doesn't shy from political discussion, but largely his emphasis is on civil society and African American community, not government. There appears to be no question that Robert Franklin has written an excellent book to read, but as Walker Moore notes, "The lingering question remains: 'who will accept the call?'"