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Swing Low, volume 1
A History of Black Christianity in the United States

October 29, 2024 | \$28, 272 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0420-3

The dynamic witness of the Black church is an essential part of Christian history. In this groundbreaking two-volume work, Walter R. Strickland II presents a theological-intellectual history of African American Christianity. Volume 1, a narrative history, explores five theological anchors of Black Christianity from the 1600s to the present.

A Sweeping History of the Black Church in America

It was April 24, 1823, and after months of braving the open sea, land was in sight. A passenger on the vessel, a woman with the complexion of cocoa, later recalled, “The sight chilled our very hearts. The ladies retired to the cabin and burst into tears; and some of the gentlemen turned pale: my own soul sickened within me, and every nerve trembled.” She recollected thinking to herself during the voyage,

I must look forward to that Sabbath which will never end—there to see, face to face, what we now see dimly through a glass; and to meet you, with my other friends, whom I have left behind. It is a source of consolation to me to be able to think that you, with many others in my native land, pray for me. Were it not for that, I should almost despair.

This is not a record of the dreaded Middle Passage but of missionary Betsey Stockton’s transit from America’s Eastern Seaboard to the Sandwich Islands (later named Hawaii). Stockton was born into slavery in 1798 and was soon without mother or father to look after her. She converted to Christianity in 1816 and was manumitted (freed) the following year. Stockton became a member at First Presbyterian Church in Princeton, and soon after she concluded that it was the sacred duty of every Christian “to offer themselves in humble obedience to God’s call to carry out his plan of salvation through Jesus Christ for the world” (Robert J. Stevens, *Profiles of African-American Missionaries*).

Her conviction kindled a desire to depart for Africa as a missionary. Shortly thereafter, Stockton learned that Princeton Theological Seminary student Charles S. Stewart was planning to depart for the Sandwich Islands, and she joined her efforts with those of his family. Stockton was commissioned by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and became the second single American woman sent overseas.

While on the island, Stockton established a school for the Maka’ainana, the common people of Maui. After receiving some opposition from the local chiefs, in 1824 Stockton established a school and was its first teacher (Gregory Nobles, *The Education of Betsey Stockton*). She taught algebra, English, Latin, and history. Her missionary strategy was upheld by the conviction that reading and writing were essential to ongoing discipleship. By 1826, the school Stockton founded had educated eight thousand Hawaiian students with the intention of imparting the gospel of Jesus Christ. In 1825, Stockton returned to Princeton due to the poor health of Stewart’s wife, Harriet.

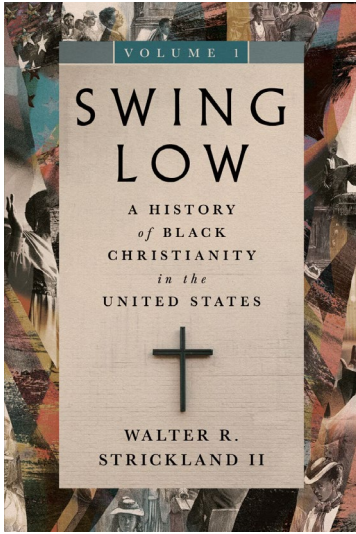
Like the tale of Betsey Stockton, the African American Christian story recounts a determined people driven by faith to pursue spiritual and social uplift for themselves and others to God’s glory. The narrative contained in these pages tells the story of countless heroes and heroines of the faith who were often overlooked while they walked the earth, who have been forgotten in history, but whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.



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The Christian story is a global story composed of a “cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1) from “all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues” (Revelation 7:9). Contributions from Black Catholics and other organized faiths notwithstanding, this volume is limited to professed Black Christians within Protestant denominations and communions in the United States, or missionaries who were sent from America to other nations. This volume’s focus on African American Christianity means that the expansive witness of the broader African diasporic Christian community is not within the book’s immediate scope despite their meaningful contributions to the faith. The tale of Black faith is interwoven into the tapestry of God’s people but is often absent in the pages of church history. This Christian narrative steps into that void by featuring the stories of Hosea Easton, Zilpha Elaw, Elias Camp Morris, Harriett A. Cole Baker, Gardner C. Taylor, Mary McCleod Bethune, and others as they displayed how the gospel of Jesus Christ redeems sinners and restores them to walk faithfully within their cultural and historical context. This narrative highlights the beauty of the African American contribution to the universal Christian story, of which Jesus Christ is at the center.

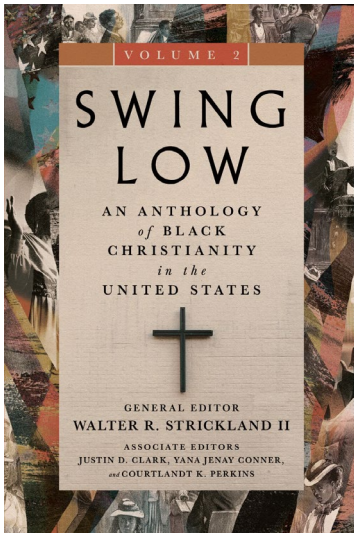
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Swing Low, volume 2 *An Anthology of Black Christianity in the United States*

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The dynamic witness of the Black church is an essential part of Christian history. In this groundbreaking two-volume work, Walter R. Strickland II presents a theological-intellectual history of African American Christianity. Volume 2, an anthology of historical primary sources, allows us to listen to Black Christianity in its own words.

The Theological Anchors of Black Christianity

Swing Low volume 2 excavates the breadth and depth of theological expression emerging from African American Christian foremothers and forefathers into the present. Because Black faith has been an overwhelmingly oral tradition, primary sources bearing witness to African American Christianity are often scattered. This anthology simultaneously fortifies the presence of Black Christians within the universal cloud of witnesses and attests to distinct voices within the tradition. By mining the riches of African American literary history and understanding its doctrinal contours, this anthology conveys, in its theological orientation, the breadth of the literary witness of African American Christianity.

Resources that comprise the African American theological tradition have been curated in a variety of ways. Among trained theologians, the most common criterion for inclusion is radicalism. Theologian James H. Cone argues that “the black church was born in protest” and that a radical posture is the hallmark that legitimizes a Black church (*Black Theology and Black Power*). Historian Gayraud S. Wilmore’s 1973 publication of *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* cemented Cone’s insistence on political protest as the means of belonging to the African American religious tradition. This approach incorporates figures based on their opposition to slavery, resistance against Jim Crow segregation, and fight against social injustice—and simultaneously overlooks Conversion stories and the vibrant spiritual witness of Black Christianity.

The two-volume work *Swing Low* resists assessing the African American Christian tradition with a method that materialized in the middle of the twentieth century. While this volume includes a broad alliance of self-professed African American Christians, the anthology employs a theological framework that emerged from the nascent days of African American faith to guide contemporary readings. The primary sources in this volume document how the theological Anchors emerged and matured in their sophistication and emphasis through history.

The Anchors maintain a familiar cord that goes back to the orthodox theological commitments of both African and non-African church fathers. While Black Christians did not set out to establish an organized doctrinal framework, these thought patterns consistently emerge from the literature. The following theological Anchors summarize the doctrinal commitments that African Americans have historically affirmed.

Anchor 1: Big God. A Big God is at the center of African American Christianity—the one who is “able to do exceedingly abundantly above all we ask or think” (Ephesians 3:20). The God who is able is affirmed without dispute throughout the tradition. In the Black community, African American theologians conclude that the ultimate question is not “Does God exist?” but rather “What is his character?”

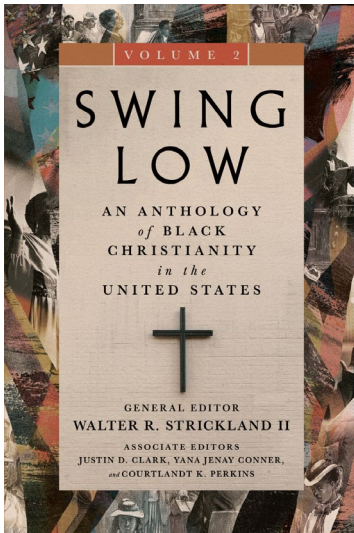
During the Great Awakenings, Black converts received an overly spiritualized faith from evangelists. Despite accepting the Christian faith, they did not internalize all they received. African slaves contested a dualistic expression of God confined to the spiritual realm. From the beginning of the African American story, there was an assumption that divine interaction profoundly shaped every area of human existence—including the social, political, and economic spheres. Divine handiwork ascribed intrinsic value to God’s creation and especially to his image bearers. Consequently, Black Christians were convinced that the oppression they endured and the counterfeit doctrine used to uphold Black inferiority were not beyond divine judgment.



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The dynamic witness of the Black church is an essential part of Christian history. In this groundbreaking two-volume work, Walter R. Strickland II presents a theological-intellectual history of African American Christianity. Volume 2, an anthology of historical primary sources, allows us to listen to Black Christianity in its own words.

God's sovereignty affirmed that neither slave masters nor bigots were ultimate—God was. The need for a Big God in the face of suffering did not expire at emancipation; it was necessary when Reconstruction unraveled, during Jim Crow segregation, and throughout decades of de facto racism and disenfranchisement. God's meticulous providence brought comfort to the faithful despite their circumstances because perfect love, grace, and mercy are essential to God's character. The tension created between life's barbarous circumstances and a sovereign God caused theodicy (that is, the issue of divine engagement with evil in the world) to emerge as a centerpiece of theological consideration. However, God's praiseworthy character deemed him worthy of confidence. God executes his divine will, which includes justice on earth as it is in heaven and hope in the life to come.

Anchor 2: Jesus. Christ is essential to the Christian faith, and his person and work are fundamental to the African American theological tradition. A driving motif of the incarnation is identification. Jesus identified with God the Father and the Holy Spirit at his baptism and with God the Father and the Holy Spirit at his baptism and with humanity during his wilderness temptations. For Black Christians, Jesus' identification with life's joys and sorrows forged meaningful solidarity with the marginalized. Referring to the Savior as Jesus (his given name), rather than Christ (his office), emphasized Jesus' nearness to the plight of the oppressed.

Jesus' kinship with those who are "despised and rejected" contradicts the social order's ongoing assault on their image-bearing capacity. Jesus' earthly life was a foretaste that casted seeds of love and justice that will fully bloom in his kingdom. While his life bespoke solidarity with the "least of these," this is only comforting because he is God. The God-man purchased redemption on Calvary's cross, and sinners who receive Jesus' death and resurrection for their sin are free from sin's deadly consequences.

African American Christians have long placed a strong emphasis on the blood of Jesus. "The blood," which is central in Black preaching and hymnody, testifies that the Savior is acquainted with grief, and his blood washes away their guilty stains. Blacks in the antebellum period were captivated by Christ's blood because unjust bloodshed by slaves draped over barrels, strapped to trees, and tied to fenceposts was a tragically common occurrence. But Jesus' redeeming blood, shed on the cross, granted hope in the pit of suffering, and his resurrection offered believers a foretaste of victory over sin and oppression that was theirs in Christ Jesus.

Anchor 3: Conversion and Walking in the Spirit. Conversion and Walking in the Spirit coalesce as an event and a process. Like two sides of the same coin, these distinct realities relate to each other. The Conversion (or salvation) event exchanges sin and condemnation for new life in Christ through his atoning death and resurrection. The moment of Conversion initiates the sanctification process, wherein believers are conformed to Christ's likeness by overcoming the power of sin in their lives by the Spirit's power. While the lion's share of the tradition affirms that sanctification is a lifelong process, those in the holiness tradition embrace Christian perfectionism, which affirms that believers are fully sanctified in a second blessing of the Spirit (distinct from salvation).

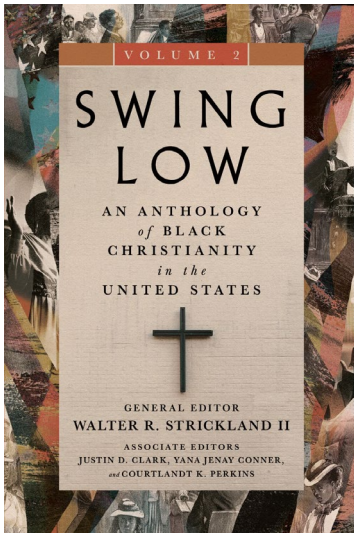
The concepts of sin, repentance, conversion, and sanctification are prominent within African American Christianity because large numbers of Blacks converted to faith in Christ at revivals during the Great Awakenings. These themes were woven into the fabric of African American Christianity. From one generation to the next, these biblical concepts were passed down through discipleship because believers are prone to pass along notions that fanned their belief into flame.



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Walking in the Spirit is the means of demonstrating Christ's lordship in the believer's life. Sanctification encompasses pursuing personal piety expressed in the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) and social awareness as described in Micah's summary of godly living (Micah 6:8). Spiritual warfare, in the form of racial terrorism, reinforces the need for God's Spirit in daily life. The need for a powerful spiritual experience marked Black church gatherings, which featured exuberant worship and dynamic preaching that made doctrine dance. Parishioners gathered with expectancy to encounter the Spirit to overcome the hurts of the past and prevail over the trials to come. The role of the Holy Spirit in the African American Christian tradition cannot be overestimated.

Anchor 4: The Good Book. The Bible is the Good Book. African Americans are a Bible-centric people with a healthy dependence on God's revealed Word. Despite high illiteracy rates, Bible knowledge increased dramatically as enslaved Blacks rehearsed biblical stories and sang spirituals in the fields and in their living quarters. Telling and retelling biblical accounts of Israel was far more than entertainment; it was an act of resistance. African Americans avoided making the Good Book an object of distanced analysis and thrust themselves into the biblical narrative. Slaves identified with the Hebrew people and declared themselves participants in the biblical drama. Their identification with the story further cemented them within the people of God and reassured their inherent dignity.

During the antebellum period, few desires rivaled that for education within the Black community. During Reconstruction, literacy skyrocketed as Blacks were educated. Reading was the primary goal of education, and in particular reading Scripture. The impact of the biblical narrative was amplified, especially among Black leaders, because pastors did not read theological treatises crafted by formally trained theologians; they mastered "telling the story." African Americans also desired to read Scripture to undo the exegetical abuses of slave owners who sought to justify Black subservience with the words of God.

African American Christians affirmed that Scripture was the sole divinely authored guide for salvation and godly living. The nineteenth century gave rise to debates about the sufficiency and inerrancy of Scripture that were primarily located in the ivory towers of theological academies to which Blacks had no access. Among African Americans, the most fundamental assertion concerning Scripture's nature has been regarding authority—does the Bible have the right to guide personal and public life? An affirmative answer has been virtually unquestioned because it is assumed that when the Bible speaks, God speaks. Among contemporary African American Christians, interpretative issues that question the Bible's authority are largely relegated to the academy, not the church. Rank-and-file Black Christians are a Bible-believing people.

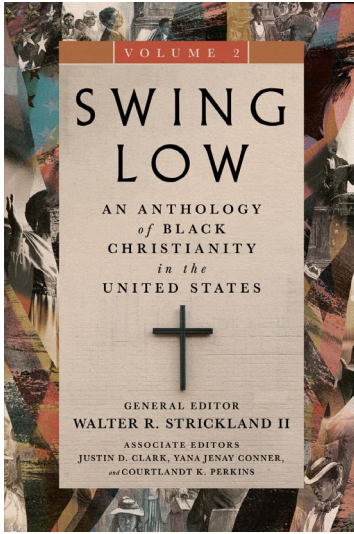
Anchor 5: Deliverance. God is a liberator. This biblical theme directly applies the Christian faith to the African American experience. Sometimes also called freedom or liberation, Deliverance is established in significant biblical events that serve as an interpretative key for unlocking Scripture's message and discerning the unchanging character of God. Most prominently, the exodus reminded Israel of God's faithfulness and demonstrated that slavery was against his will and that divine power was available to deliver his people. Similarly, Jubilee was a celebration of canceling debts and freeing slaves that was intended to establish God's liberating character in the social consciousness of his people. These acts of Deliverance culminated in Christ's death and resurrection, which secured victory over every manifestation of sin for his people.



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Liberation language describes a series of experiences in the Christian life. Three separate acts of Deliverance start with liberation from sin at Conversion and culminate with Deliverance in God's eschatological kingdom. Between the liberating acts of Conversion and glorification, sinfulness is palpable in the social, economic, and political realms of daily life. Consistent with his unchanging nature, God, by the power of Jesus' resurrection, is the deliverer from each of these dire circumstances.

Liberation's place in the biblical witness is nearly uncontested among African Americans, but the method employed to pursue liberation has been the locus of spirited discussion, especially since the civil rights movement. Wide-ranging proposals notwithstanding, two categories emerge in discussions of pursuing divine Deliverance. The first comprises those who insist that the gospel *is* liberation—with a nearly exclusive gaze toward political and social freedom. The second group constitutes those who hold that liberation is an imperative of the gospel and that the intensity of racial oppression warrants concerted attention to apply the balm of the gospel to this social wound. At its best, the tradition holds salvific, social, and eschatological liberation in tension and shrewdly applies this theme to the Black experience.

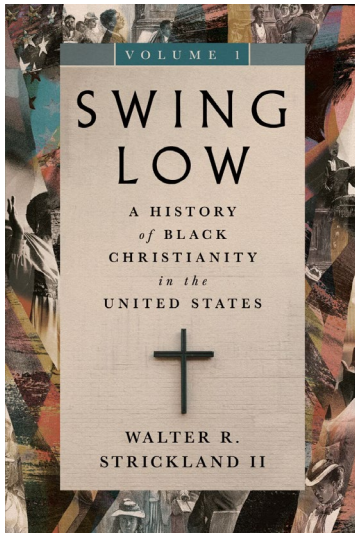
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A Groundbreaking Portrait of African American Christianity

“Walter Strickland’s narrative of Black American Christianity provides a well-researched, carefully organized, and immensely informative history of an immensely important subject. The accompanying volume of well-chosen and well-introduced documents makes a valuable project even more useful. With their focus on Black Protestants, these books are landmarks for the exploration of the nation’s past and its perennial struggles over race. Most of all they record a story that has been regularly neglected in accounts of American Christianity. It is the often unexpected, sometimes contentious, but enduring impact of the Christian gospel throughout African American history.”

—**Mark Noll**, author of *America’s Book: The Rise and Decline of a Bible Civilization, 1794–1911*, and *C. S. Lewis in America*

“In *Swing Low*, Strickland takes readers on a profound journey by combining historical narrative (volume one) with primary resources (volume two) to illuminate the triumphs, struggles, and theological developments that have shaped and continue to shape Black Christianity’s enduring legacy in the United States. Throughout the entirety of these volumes, readers are invited to deeply explore how the Black church in America continues to navigate the challenges and opportunities of our contemporary world. They are simultaneously encouraged to envision a future where the Black church remains a catalyst for holistic liberation and spiritual renewal and continues to be a voice for justice, reconciliation, and communal transformation. This book is essential reading for pastors, theologians, and all who seek to understand the unique and profound contributions of the Black church in America and to honor its enduring legacy, learn from its theological insights, and join in the ongoing pursuit of liberation, healing, and reconciliation in our communities and beyond.”

—**Bryan Carter**, pastor of Concord Church in Dallas

“In these complementary volumes, Walter R. Strickland II provides a detailed and profound rendering of the story of African American Christianity. The assembled documents, dating as far back as 1619 and as current as the present year, illustrate thought formed in response to various matters of concern. Among this wide range of ideas, Strickland brings to the fore the recurring, interrelated convictions about God, Jesus Christ, the Bible, conversion and sanctification, and freedom and liberation in each era.”

—**Frederick L. Ware**, professor of theology at Howard University School of Divinity

“Walter R. Strickland II has made an incredible contribution with both volumes of *Swing Low*, laying out a well-organized history of the African American Christian tradition and supporting it with an expansive anthology of primary sources. His thorough work highlights people and movements that were instrumental in American religious history. It is a valuable resource for those studying the holistic story of the church in America.”

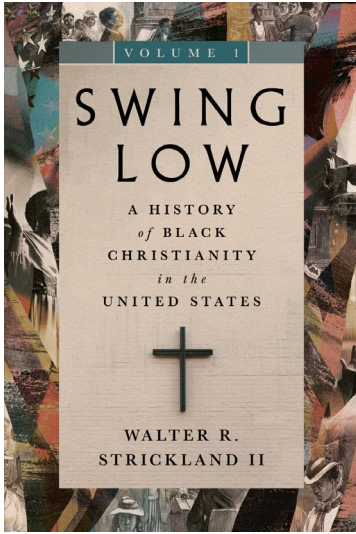
—**J.D. Greear**, pastor of The Summit Church in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina



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“There are many ways to tell a story; Walter Strickland tells the story of the Black church through a theological lens. These scholarly and accessible volumes tell the story of the Black church by introducing us to many faithful saints, some familiar but many less well-known. These lives show us how the Black church pursued and embodied a faith where beliefs matter as much as faithful and liberating practice. We encounter a holistic faith where we see many ways to walk faithfully in a world full of tremendous challenges. Strickland has given us a long-needed historical narrative and anthology.”

—**Vincent Bacote**, professor of theology and the director of the Center for Applied Christian Ethics at Wheaton College



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