

# African American Evangelical Development

## Subtitle

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Abstract

Despite the prevalent beliefs of black inferiority and doctrines of social control maintained by whites in antebellum America, free blacks and slaves in the South overcame the contradictions between slavery and religion and accepted Christianity. This acceptance was primarily accomplished through the missionary labors of conscientious whites, pioneering black pastors both licensed and unlicensed who took it upon themselves to preach to their own people, and the evangelical Awakening movements. Each of these elements contributed to the development of expressive African American evangelism and promoted the eventual founding of the black Christian church.



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Despite the prevalent beliefs of black inferiority and doctrines of social control maintained by whites in antebellum America, free blacks and slaves in the South overcame the contradictions between slavery and religion and accepted Christianity. This acceptance was primarily accomplished through the missionary labors of conscientious whites, pioneering black pastors both licensed and unlicensed who took it upon themselves to preach to their own people, and the evangelical Awakening movements. Each of these elements contributed to the development of expressive African American evangelism and promoted the eventual founding of the black Christian church.

The apparent contradictions between the doctrines of the Bible and the experience of slavery caused blacks to question the nature of Christianity. Many African Americans wondered if Christianity was a white man's religion. What meaning did Christianity have for black African slaves? How could the Christian God look upon slavery with any degree of allowance? How could God permit racism and prejudice, the beatings and the separation, torture, misery, rape or murder? Frederick Douglass expressed the soul searching of African Americans when he wrote, "When I think that these precious souls are to-day shut up in the prison-house of slavery, my feelings overcome me, and I am almost ready to ask, 'Does a righteous God govern the universe?'"<sup>1</sup> The attitudes and prejudices of white Christians towards blacks also hurt their views of Christianity. Whites felt that their race and culture were superior, inherently more spiritual than blacks'. They generally assumed that blacks had an unusually exaggerated proclivity to backslide.<sup>2</sup> In addition, whites tended to view blacks as largely incompetent, not fully human, and unable to learn Christian dogma.

Blacks also struggled to see themselves within the context of the Bible. They wondered where they fit in. African slaves and free blacks alike were hurt by discriminatory doctrines of their own origin which were taught by white protestant ministers. The story of Genesis chapter nine has been called the "single greatest justification for black slavery."<sup>3</sup> The early biblical account tells of how the patriarch Noah cursed the seed of his son Ham, who was generally considered to be the father of the black

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<sup>1</sup> Milton C. Sernett, ed., *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, 2d ed., (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1999), 105.

<sup>2</sup> Paul E. Johnson, ed., *African American Christianity: Essays in History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1994), 23.

<sup>3</sup> David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), 1.

race. Many whites interpreted this saga to mean that God had pronounced an anathema upon blacks, condemning them to eternal bondage; that blacks were actually predestined for slavery. Another notorious account reveals that God punished the first murderer, Cain, for killing his brother Abel by setting a mark upon him which was construed by many Christians as blackness, dark skin. Whites thus associated blacks with evil, crime and murder, people who were distant from God, fugitives and vagabonds. Whites adopted a view of Ham and his descendants as men of the world, strangers and foreigners who did not know God.<sup>4</sup> Such ideologies projected an ignoble identity upon African Americans.

These views caused many blacks to identify Christianity with slavery; to accept one was to accept the other. The contradictions between the words and actions of whites were exceptionally distressing to blacks and discouraged the willingness to attend church. Others rejected Christianity outright. They simply could not accept any creed or institution which justified slavery. Several slaves became atheists and forsook religion altogether; they sneered at their pious Christian masters who attended church on Sunday and then whipped their slaves on Monday. In particular, Frederick Douglass proved one of the most vehement opponents of slave owners with whited sepulchers. At one point he lampooned this false Christianity as the “climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels.”<sup>5</sup> With deep emotion and with characteristic energy Douglass cried out,

*I am filled with unutterable loathing when I contemplate the religious pomp and show, together with the horrible inconsistencies, which everywhere surround me. We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who wields the blood-clotted cow-skin during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus. The man who robs me of my earnings at the end of each week meets me as a class-leader on Sunday morning, to show me the way of life, and the path of salvation. He who sells my sister, for purposes of prostitution, stands forth as the pious advocate of purity. He who proclaims it a religious duty to read the Bible denies me the right of learning to read the name of the God who made me. He who is the religious advocate of marriage robs whole millions of its*

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<sup>4</sup> Ivan Hannaford, Race: The History of an Idea in the West (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 95.

<sup>5</sup> Milton C. Sernett, ed., African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness, 2d ed., (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1999), 106.

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*sacred influence, and leaves them to the ravages of wholesale pollution. The warm defender of the sacredness of the family relation is the same that scatters whole families, -sundering husbands and wives, parents and children, sisters and brothers, -leaving the hut vacant, and the hearth desolate. We see the thief preaching against theft, and the adulterer against adultery.<sup>6</sup>*

Amazingly, the pharisaic tendencies and prejudice of Southerners did not prevent thousands of blacks from accepting Christianity. Despite the contradictions of Southern Protestantism and biblical doctrines with slavery, the vast majority of African Americans embraced the basic religion of their masters. By 1860 over one million slaves had found membership in Southern Christian churches.<sup>7</sup> This conversion remains one of the most remarkable phenomena in religious history. Blacks had every reason to reject beliefs and practices which connected prejudice, inferiority, and violence with religion. How did this happen?

Through a combination of missionary work by conscientious whites, pioneering blacks, and the great Awakenings, African Americans ultimately converted to Christianity. Black ministers both licensed and unlicensed taught protestant dogma to their own people including attractive biblical doctrines which helped African Americans identify with Christianity. Originally however, slave owners greatly feared the effects of organized religion among the slave quarters. Whites opposed Christianization when they considered that religious instruction would require time that would otherwise be economically productive. Slave masters also felt strongly that any assembly of African slaves could quickly spark insurrection. Furthermore, prominent English tradition held that once Christianized a man could no longer be a slave.<sup>8</sup> Plantation owners also distrusted church pastors, and doubted that religionists would adequately defend the slave system. Racial prejudice and ethnocentrism similarly hindered missionary work. Many whites were disgusted by the thought of blacks living among them in Heaven. They also feared that conversion to a white man's religion would make Africans more like Europeans and thus Christianization would upset the social order. At the outset, evangelical Protestantism fomented social disorder as ministers preached spiritual equality and spoke inimically of slavery. Perfervid Baptists and Methodists gradually softened their message while Anglican

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>John W. Blassingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 98.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Battle, The Black Church in America: African American Christian Spirituality (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 48.

American ministers emphasized the compatibility between Christianity and slavery and assured plantation owners that conversion would in fact support the social status quo and make their Africans better slaves. Witnessing the effects of religion on slave discipline slowly encouraged whites to promote additional missionary work. Eventually, Christian clergymen also persuaded slave owners to educate their slaves with religious teachings by arguing that planters had a duty to promote Christianity among their human property and that their slaves would work harder as a result of their conversion. Some American Christians felt a strong duty to restore the children of Ham to the true, ancient faith of their fathers by preaching Christ Jesus. Southern leaders also turned to Christianization as a means to halt *Africanization*.<sup>9</sup> White pastors often agreed to baptize a slave only when their convert first covenanted to conform to standard moralities.

The intergenerational process of Christianization and acculturation initially began when blacks were introduced to Christianity through the ministration of whites. The acceptance of Christianity was a two-fold endeavor which involved both the efforts of whites and also the approval of blacks. The few African American converts of the 17<sup>th</sup> century overcame their reluctance to accept their master's faith through indoctrination and gradual acculturation. At the same time, plantation owners slowly surrendered the belief that Christian baptism granted manumission. As genuine Christian pastors began to recognize the humanity of blacks, they made more concerted efforts to share their religious sentiments with them.

In 1701, the Church of England established *The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts* (SPG). The society sent Anglican ministers to proselyte among slaves in the American South although their efforts were neither widespread nor very successful. The organization did not oppose slavery, but religious leaders did teach some slaves to read and write. During the 1730s, the famed preacher George Whitefield journeyed to Carolina spreading the gospel and sowing spiritual seeds among African Americans at Charleston and among the Sea Islands in the Low Country. White evangelicals later organized the Plantation Mission System for the purpose of introducing Christianity all at once to Southern slaves. In light of several slave uprisings, many slave owners and Southern planters also viewed Christianization as the only way to control

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<sup>9</sup> John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 100.

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and civilize their human chattel. During the Antebellum period, multiple Christian denominations instituted missions with the responsibility to minister to African slaves. Preaching on the plantations gradually became an important pastoral duty and thoughtful ministers would follow a circuit and ride to local congregations, making several regular visits throughout the year. The majority of slaves during the antebellum period attended worship services with their masters<sup>10</sup> who often felt a duty to help in the conversion process.

Many white Southerners also utilized Christianization as an additional means of controlling the lives of their slaves. Many masters reasoned that blacks would get their religion one way or another and so owners focused more on making religion safe for slavery. This was, after all, a more humane and effective method of regulation than the despised whip. To ensure social control, white pastors often preached doctrines which were most repugnant to their slaves. Slave owners and masters often taught Christian doctrine in a way that emphasized a subordinate white-black relationship. White church leaders regularly adapted Protestant dogma to the Southern plantations focusing on the doctrines of original sin, Calvinist predestination, and unthinking obedience to authority.<sup>11</sup> Blacks generally rejected these doctrines. White evangelicals commonly accentuated the characteristics of a good slave and referred to biblical scripture to support their views. A common argument was made by citing Ephesians 6:5, “Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart”.<sup>12</sup> Slave owners also attempted to inculcate the obligation of compliance within the hearts and minds of their human property by reading Colossians 3:22, “Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God.”<sup>13</sup> Masters would then promise heavenly rewards and blessings for following orders. Slaves were especially ostracized by the repeated emphasis on obedience and the implied connection between serving the Lord of creation and the master of the plantation. Another Pauline verse declared:

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>11</sup> James A. Henretta and David Brody, *America: A Concise History*, vol. 1, *To 1877*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed., (Boston, New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010), 250.

<sup>12</sup> Ephesians 6:5.

<sup>13</sup> Colossians 3:22.

*Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honour, that the name of god and his doctrine be not blasphemed. And they that have believing masters, let them not despise them, because they are brethren; but rather do them service, because they are faithful and beloved, partakers of the benefit. These things teach and exhort.*<sup>14</sup>

Overseers used such verses and extensive catechisms to encourage submission, subordination, and ultimately, to justify degradation. Whites focused on serving God by serving earthly masters although slaves often felt that that the latter was stressed more thoroughly. Fearful of the excitement and energy which religion could potentially produce, white masters and their employed ministers strictly avoided biblical passages analogous to slave conditions and incendiary doctrines.

African Americans also accepted Christianity through the efforts of black pastors both licensed and unlicensed who assumed the responsibility of preaching to their own people. Early black ministers often received prescribed training by recognized white preachers. These apprentices worked alongside whites as assistant pastors at times and even accompanied them along the preaching circuits on occasion. In this way, white religion continued to assert control over African Americans. However, the rough egalitarianism of the Southern frontier, belief in the universal brotherhood of Christ, and the growing paucity of Christian ministers, helped black pastors to gain acceptance.<sup>15</sup> During the 1770s and 1780s evangelical churches demonstrated an increased willingness to certify black men as preachers and exhorters to their own people.

Many blacks however, investigated biblical verses for themselves, independent of whites. Many learned to read on their own after studying clandestinely while others benefited from the education of white ministers and masters. African Americans quickly realized that whites could not control their interpretation of the Bible or traditional Christian doctrines. The plantations were distant, outside, and apart from white society. This isolation permitted slaves to learn Christianity from each other between the intermittent visits of white ministers. Gradually, slave owners allowed their slaves to use cabins for religious meetings. During these gatherings, slaves discussed religion and Bible stories. Here, black ministers

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<sup>14</sup> 1 Timothy 6: 1-2.

<sup>15</sup> John W. Blasingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 92.

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developed the skills and styles which eventually became characteristic of the black church. The examples of Moses, Elijah, John the Baptist, and Jesus served as prototypes for unlicensed preachers; evangelists who spread their message without the world's credentials. They were not official preachers but rather exhorters. Widely denied access to formal religious training during the antebellum period, black pastors in the South rarely held any official qualifications to preach even among free blacks. They had no opportunity for attending Bible College. Nevertheless, African Americans often felt constrained by the Holy Spirit, called by God to ennoble their brothers with Christian principles.

The common idea of the priesthood of all believers vindicated black ministers. In essence, they believed that anyone who was saved and felt that he had received a calling to preach could do so, no one ought to be limited by formal schooling. Black preachers, therefore, frequently testified of experiences which qualified their work in the ministry. Unlicensed pastors claimed to have received visions of God or dreams in which Jesus Christ ordained them to carry the gospel to all people. Many recalled how they saw lights and supernatural phenomena, or heard the voice of the Lord telling them to preach, authorizing them to minister. Others cited revelations from the Lord from which they claimed their authority to administer the word of God. Black evangelists commonly identified with the experiences of Moses and the Burning Bush, Isaiah, or Paul on the road to Damascus; powerful, singular incidents which commissioned them to spread the message of Christianity. People may have questioned intellectual or academic credibility but few could argue with a personal epiphany. Thus, pioneering black evangelists simply exchanged their experiential credentials for the academic qualifications of white preachers.

Deeply spiritual experiences also gave blacks additional independence and placed African American Christians outside the controlling circle of whites. It insulated them from the domination which slave masters and clergymen sought to impress upon African Americans. Blacks valued an awakened clergy over a learned clergy. In another sense, blacks adopted the notion of *sola scriptura*, viewing the Bible as the only claim to divine authority. Many black pastors therefore claimed familiarity or merely association with the Holy Bible as the justification for their ministry. Highly intelligent, the black preacher was usually one of the few slaves who could read. Pastors were also noted for their resourcefulness,

powerful imagination, and oratorical skills.<sup>16</sup> Where access to a Bible was limited black ministers relied heavily on their legendary ability to commit words to memory. Notable pastors could often quote parables or relate entire chapters by heart. Pastors also assumed authority as a counselor or arbiter in the black community. As a co-sufferer, the man had enormous empathetic power.

The Bible stressed important beliefs that were attractive to free blacks and slaves and proved enormously influential in their conversion to Christianity and later, in the development of the black church. Ignoring or rejecting the discriminatory interpretations of white Christians, African Americans instead found contrasting messages of redemption and triumph in the word of God. Biblical prophecies came alive and told of a restoration of the Lord's people, the return of the Jews to Jerusalem. In like manner, blacks hoped for a return to their homeland or at least the restoration of their freedom. When black Africans heard the Sermon on the Mount, they felt as though Jesus was speaking directly to them. The Good Shepherd addressed the poor in spirit, the down trodden. He identified with the poor, the dirty, those who were outcasts, lepers, publicans, and sinners rather than the wealthy, educated Scribes and Pharisees. Blacks spoke of the Lord as *our* Jesus. These ideas made Christian Protestantism the favored religion among African Americans. Christian religion also shifted the minds of African Americans away from their sufferings. Biblical teachings focused their thoughts on a life after death; a place where they would find freedom, rest, justice, and compensation.

For African Americans, the Bible told their story. In these ancient texts they read of Joseph who was sold into bondage, a servant to a foreign nation, and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, the Three Hebrew Children who were also enslaved to cruel Babylon. Blacks *did* see themselves within the context of the Bible; it was *not* a white man's book. In both cases, the hand of Divine Providence granted prosperity and protection. Joseph in Egypt rose to prominence, second only to the Pharaoh. By the grace of God, the Three Hebrew Children were miraculously protected from truculent and unrighteous punishment. Blacks took courage from these stories and readily applied them to their own circumstances. This Christian optimism helped slaves to overcome the all-consuming despair and despondency of bondage and created hope

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 131-133.

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for a better life, perhaps in emancipation, perhaps in death. Blacks especially gained vicarious insights into their experiences from the Book of Exodus. African Americans saw themselves as the Children of Israel. They drew parallels between the slavery of the New World and that of ancient Egypt. Plantation slave owners were American Pharaohs. The North or sometimes Canada, where freedom was, was the Promised Land of Canaan. The Jordan River was represented by the Ohio River, which served as the demarcation line between slave and free territory.<sup>17</sup> The story suggested that God opposed slavery and that eventually it would end.<sup>18</sup> Of course, Moses was the deliverer. For African Americans he took the form of Harriet Tubman and the other conductors of the Underground Railroad who helped slaves to freedom. At other times he was incarnated as northern abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass or William Lloyd Garrison.

Mass conversions to Christianity among African Americans were primarily accomplished however, through the influence of the “Great Awakenings.” These Awakenings, bred a new religious movement; a form of rejuvenated puritanism, and established evangelism as the voice of American religion.<sup>19</sup> The revivals also triggered the establishment of new Protestant denominations, especially on the growing frontier. The First Great Awakening occurred during the 1730s and 1740s along the Atlantic coast and then intermittently until the 1760s, while the second—the “Great Revival”—generally affected New England, the Cumberland Valley, and Western New York from 1790 through the 1830s. During the 1780s protestant evangelists converted hundreds of African Americans along the James River and throughout the tidewater region.<sup>20</sup> Later, the fires of revival flared up again in Kentucky and Tennessee after the Cane Ridge revival in 1801 before swinging further south. The movement picked up momentum and energy as it rolled farther inland. East coast institutions and traditions seemed wooden and ingrained in the lives of the settlers while the frontiers of the south and west proved more dynamic and more successful. This rising spirituality developed new preaching forms and techniques. Passionate pastors spoke

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<sup>17</sup> Some black evangelicals even advanced the analogy to declare that God would pour out plagues upon the United States unless the African American people were let go.

<sup>18</sup> Paul E. Johnson, ed., *African-American Christianity: Essays in History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1994), 12-13.

<sup>19</sup> Timothy E. Fulop and Albert J. Raboteau, eds., *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture* (New York, London: Routledge, 1997), 3.

<sup>20</sup> James A. Henretta and David Brody, *America: A Concise History*, vol. 1, *To 1877*. 4th ed., (Boston, New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010), 250.

extemporaneously and with greater zeal than their mechanical predecessors. A new class of Christian ministers emerged who issued fire and brimstone sermons with conversion as the chief objective. Evangelical ministers in the South spoke with plain language from memory, and mastered a flamboyant style with theatrical gestures. The Awakening also imbued Protestant faiths with a new embellished emotionalism. For blacks the camp meetings offered the opportunity to sing which they relished immensely. The revivals were also characterized by strong, sensational feelings which prompted remorseful shrieks and weeping as well as redemptive shouting. This outward expression also took the form of fainting, outbursts of praise, rapturous trances, and euphoria. In effect, the Awakenings created nontraditional religion. The powerful, expressive, spiritual camp meetings succeeded in the mid-eighteenth century where Anglican missionaries had failed. Unlike their earlier counterparts who had focused on a gradual process of Christian transformation, revivalist ministers preached immediate conversion. This emphasis devalued instruction, learning, and catechisms as prerequisites in Christian life. Significantly, camp meetings benefited churches that preached spiritual equality and governed themselves democratically such as the Baptists and Methodists.<sup>21</sup>

These revivals proved especially encouraging and successful among blacks because everyone was welcomed; the poor, the uneducated, the underprivileged, and the enslaved, all were equal among the assembly.<sup>22</sup> Egalitarianism was an extremely agreeable doctrine and it rejected Christianity as merely a white man's religion. Free blacks and slaves alike attended the revivals en masse along with various other social classes and groups including indentured servants, immigrants, and backcountry farmers. This was exceptionally significant seeing that until this point blacks had been denied religion, or at least held back and segregated. Thus, in many respects blacks became Christians because they were invited. The very qualities of the revivals confronted or repudiated contemporary puritanical creeds and social conventions. In a dramatic shift, the Second Great Awakening infused Protestant institutions with polarizing abolition sentiment.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 246-247.

<sup>22</sup> Paul E. Johnson, ed., African-American Christianity: Essays in History (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1994), 4.

<sup>23</sup> John W. Blasingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 75.

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Some white preachers even went so far as to vilify slavery as evil. The ascendant evangelism liberated black preachers from obscurity and took them away from the plantations. This spirit of liberty increasingly allowed African Americans to assert themselves. Within an awakened America, blacks were given more frequent opportunities to address interracial congregations, a ridiculous notion a century or more earlier.

The acceptance of Christianity by African Americans in the antebellum South remains one of the most astonishing transformations in religious history. Although the contradictions between the Bible and slavery and the prevailing attitudes of whites discouraged conversion, African Americans resolved these troubling issues as white and black ministers helped African Americans to see parallels between antebellum slavery in the South and Bible stories. The emotional camp meetings of the First and Second Great Awakenings infused African American religion with passionate, spiritual zeal and won thousands of converts. The reasons and ways by which blacks accepted Christianity ultimately laid the foundation for the establishment of the black church and the beginnings of emotional and experiential African American religion that continues to exist today.

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