

## The Inception of the Black Church- Class IV

*"We act toward them as brethren but, never again shall we let them rule us as masters." -Anonymous*

This new era of African American life, which was marked by the abolition of slavery would give way to the creation of autonomous black churches. The Black Church in America in the late 19th century would prove to be the central component of Black America's conception of freedom. The first institution fully created and controlled by Black people in America was the Black Church. With the dawn of Emancipation, Blacks withdrew from White institutions, pulled together their resources together, built their own buildings, and created their own churches. The Church played a central role in the Black Community!

### I. Up From Slavery

- a. **The Day of Jubilee** - African American Christians saw the Civil War as the fulfillment of their prayers for emancipation, education, and the right to worship freely in their own churches. After the Civil War, independent churches and denominational organizations sprang up quickly, including thousands of small congregations, as well as major National Organizations. Within a decade after the war only a few Black parishioners continued to worship in white dominated churches. In February 1865, the 13th Amendment put a permanent end to Race-based chattel slavery in the United States. In his second inaugural address in March of 1865, President Abraham Lincoln described the results of the civil war as "fundamental and astounding". With the death of 626,000 soldiers and the injuries sustained to thousands more, many Americans saw this revolutionary struggle in providential terms. They struggled to understand God's will even after Lincoln reminded them that God had His own inscrutable purposes. Black soldiers present understood God's purposes very clearly, for they knew that this was a war about freedom long before whites had seen it as such.
- b. **Reconstruction (1865-1877)**- Reconstruction was the period in U.S. History that immediately followed the Civil War. During this 12-year time period the aim was reorganizing the Southern states after the Civil War, providing the means for readmitting them into the Union, and defining the means by which whites and blacks could live together in a non-slave society. The South, however, saw Reconstruction as a humiliating, even vengeful imposition and did not welcome it. In spite of the intense hatred demonstrated by Whites, particularly in the South, the church proved to be a consistent safe haven for Blacks. During Reconstruction churches provided an indispensable public forum where African American men and women could advocate, organize, and agitate in their own defense. For former slaves, who reshaped Christianity for their own purposes, freedom meant that they would no longer submit to White Christians for Spiritual guidance.

Black churches would now be transformed into community institutions that provided spiritual sustenance, mutual aid, educational facilities, and a venue for political dialogue. With its newly revised purpose, the Black Church also faced a new set of challenges. These challenges would be centered around primary issues, one that was external threat and on that was an internal dilemma.

### c. **New Challenges for the Black Church**

1. **Systemic Racism**: The Black Church was forced to confront an elaborate set of segregation laws, a series of Supreme Court decisions that provided legal cover for those laws, and most horrifically an upsurge of hanging, burning, and torturing of African Americans in public lynching spectacles. From the advent of Emancipation in 1865 to coming of Jim Crow by the end of the 19th Century, black Christians had to grapple with the quandary of how God's purposes in war, emancipation, and Reconstruction could have been so undermined by the human evil of White Supremacy. In responding to the rise of the racially lop-sided laws and the terroristic violence of this segregated America, African American churches and

denominations represented the initiative freed people took to carve out separate cultural spaces, including churches, schools, clubs, political organizations, and fraternal orders.

2. **Worship Style:** Black church leaders struggled with the internal dilemma of merging the two prominent worship styles that existed within the Black church. These two worship styles were the informal "Folk" religious practices that were developed within slavery and the formal "high" church traditions that were emerging in many of the newly established Black denominations. This subject led to much debate among Black clergyman, but often resulted in a further combining of these two worship styles.
3. **Rapid Growth:** In the last third of the 19th Century, black church membership grew rapidly. Overall church membership among African Americans rose from 2.6 million to 3.6 million between 1890 and 1906. Independent Black Churches and denominations claimed the vast majority of black church goers. By 1906, the National Baptist Convention claimed more than 2 million parishioners, comprising 61 percent of all black church goers. That same year the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) numbered some 500,000 parishioners, and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) denomination 185,000, and the Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) church approximately 173,000.

## II. The Rise of Black Denominations

- A. **African Methodist Episcopal (AME)** - The African Methodist Episcopal Church is the first independent Protestant denomination to be founded by African American people in the United States. It was founded in 1787 in Philadelphia, PA by Richard Allen. The origins of this denomination were rooted in the Free African Society of Philadelphia. Prominent members of the Free African Society, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones were praying in what was designated as the white only section of the St. Georges Methodist Church. The Church Officials came to Allen and Jones while they were praying and lifted them up off of their knees in prayer and forcefully removed them from the church. When this happened all of the African Americans that were present that day in church immediately stormed out after them. Richard Allen later assembled a small group of freed African Americans and purchased a small blacksmith shop in Philadelphia and that would become the Bethel AME Church. Although the first AME church was founded in 1787 the AME church did not become an official denomination until 1816. Richard Allen was not only the founder of the AME church, but he was also the first Bishop of the denomination.

The African Means that the church was organized by people of African descent and heritage. It does not mean that the church was founded in Africa or that it is for people of African descent only. Methodist refers to Refers to the church's membership in the family of Methodist churches. Richard Allen, the founder and first bishop, felt that the form and format of Methodism would best suit the needs of the African community at that time. Refers to the form of government under which the church operates. The Episcopal form of government means that the chief executive and administrative officers of this denomination are their bishops. Their authority is given them by the General Conference, elected representatives of the entire denomination. Their responsibilities are to oversee the spiritual and temporal affairs of the church.

In 1821, just six years later, African Americans in New York formed organized a rival organization, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church. Founded by James Varick, a black Methodist Pastor who formerly served as the first assistant pastor at the segregated John Street Methodist Episcopal Church of New York City. He and 30 other free blacks in New York would form the AME Zion church in New York due to their belief that Black Methodist in New York needed their own distinct denomination that was separate from the leadership of Richard Allen and the AME denomination. Both black denominations, the AME and AMEZ viewed themselves as restoring the simplicity and purity of the old Methodist order, when all parishioners were welcomed as God's Children. These denominations would help lead the charge in the abolitionist's movement of the 19th Century.

- B. National Baptist Convention** - The National Baptist Convention was founded in 1895 by Reverend. E.C. Morris of Little Rock, Arkansas. The National Baptist Convention was founded primarily to provide education for ministers in the leadership in Black Baptist Churches and facilitating and aggressive home and foreign missions program. The Black Baptist in America would strive not to repeat the perceived disunity of the Black Methodist, instead they sought to unify all Black Baptist under the guides of one Black Baptist denomination. This process of unification would last almost an entire decade. At large Black Ministers meeting in Atlanta, Georgia in 1895, Three prominent unincorporated conventions of black Baptist unified under the leadership of Reverend E.C. Morris. Those conventions were the Foreign Mission Convention, the National Baptist Educational Convention, and the American National Baptist Convention consolidated to become what we now know as the National Baptist Conventions. The dream of unity among all Black Baptist was now realized within this denomination. The National Baptist Convention quickly became the largest African American Protestant denomination in the world. With nearly 2.2 Million members by 1906.

### **Key Figures**

**Rev. Lott Carey (1780- 1828)** - Known as the first African American Foreign Missionary. Born enslaved in 1780 in Charles City County, Virginia, Lott Carey became a disciple of Jesus in 1807, purchased his freedom in 1813, and led the first Baptist missionaries to Africa from the United States in 1821. His pioneering missionary team settled in Liberia, where he engaged in evangelism, education, and health care. Rev. Carey served as a well-respected and gifted missional and civic leader until his death in 1828. He was also the organizing pastor for the first Baptist church in Liberia – the Providence Baptist Church in Monrovia. His life of commitment, leadership, vision, and perseverance continue to serve as a mode for Christian service. In 1897 named there missionary arm of the convention after Lott Cary.

**Dr. J.H. Jackson ( 1900-1990)** - Legendary Pastor of the Historic Olivet Baptist Church in Chicago, IL from 1941 until his death in 1990. Dr. Jackson was a skilled orator, and his nickname was "Silver Tongue", because of his remarkable preaching ability. Dr. Jackson was the longest tenured President of the NBC, serving for 29 years in that role. Differing concepts about engagement in the Civil Rights struggle and differing postures on term limitations for the president led to a division in the Convention and resulted in the formation of the Progressive National Baptist Convention. Dr. Jackson's unusual skill as a homiletician allowed him to become a world religious statesman who not spoke for the Convention, but for some in the community as well. His theme "We Must Move from Protest to Production," was characteristic of his thinking. Under Dr. Jackson, the Convention's accomplishments were many, including the purchase of a Freedom Farm in Tennessee to provide haven for Black farmers divested of their land in the civil rights revolution.

- C. Progressive National Baptist Convention** - Founded in 1961 by T.M. Chambers, the PNBC was at its core a Social Justice movement. The Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC) grew out of the September 1961 convention of the National Baptist Convention (NBC), which was held in Kansas City, Missouri. This event demonstrated the hostility of the NBC's leadership to the use of nonviolent direct-action tactics such as those used by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). NBC president J. H. Jackson had previously denounced the tactics of SNCC's lunch counter sit-ins and CORE's 1961 Freedom Rides which Martin Luther King endorsed.

A group of younger ministers led by Gardner Taylor sought to overthrow Jackson and assume the leadership of the NBC. The convention ended with Jackson's decisive victory over Taylor for president and King's removal as vice president of the NBC's National Sunday School and Baptist Training Union. After Taylor's defeat, he and other ministers left the NBC to form a splinter organization, PNBC, founded November 1961, in Cincinnati, Ohio. The new Baptist alliance championed the more militant direct-action campaigns of SCLC, CORE, and SNCC. After the PNBC's first president, T. M. Chambers, left in 1966, Taylor was elected PNBC president in 1967.

- D. **C.O.G.I.C.** - The Church of God In Christ was Founded in 1897 in Memphis, Tennessee by Bishop Charles Harrison Mason. This is the largest Pentecostal denomination in the United States with 6.5 Million members. Their denominational description reads, "THE CHURCH OF GOD IN CHRIST is a Church of the Lord Jesus Christ in which the word of God is preached, ordinances are administered and the doctrine of sanctification or holiness is emphasized, as being essential to the salvation of mankind. Our Church is commonly known as being Holiness or Pentecostal in nature because of the importance ascribed to the events which occurred on the Day of Pentecost, the 50th day after the Passover, or Easter as being necessary for all believers in Christ Jesus to experience." This is a Holiness Pentecostal denomination has played a significant role in the area of Black Preaching, Civil Rights, and Gospel Music.

**Bishop Charles Harrison Mason (1864-1961)**- Bishop Charles Harrison Mason was the founder and first senior bishop of the Church of God in Christ (COGIC). Mason joined the African-American Missionary Baptist Church when he was an adolescent and later received his license to preach from the Mount Gale Missionary Baptist Church in Preston, Ark. In November 1893, Mason enrolled at the Arkansas Baptist College, but withdrew after three months to transfer to the Minister's Institute at the College; he graduated from the Institute in 1895. In 1895, Mason met Charles Price Jones, a popular Baptist preacher from Mississippi. Mason and Jones soon began preaching the doctrine of holiness and sanctification in the local Baptist churches, which led to their expulsion from the Baptist Convention. Mason and Jones decided to form a new fellowship of churches. Mason suggested the name Church of God in Christ, after what he described as a vision in Little Rock, Ark., to distinguish the church from a number of "Church of God" groups forming at that time.

**\*G.E. Patterson, Andre Crouch, James Cleveland, The Hawkins, The Winans, Vanessa Bell Armstrong, Clark Sisters**

- E. **Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship International** - Established in 1994 in New Orleans, Louisiana by Bishop Paul S. Morton. The Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship website states, "Our essence is best captured by the phrase "The Right to Choose", that freedom is based on the belief that the Gospel of Jesus Christ must be promoted by recognizing the free expression of the gifts of the Spirit as a viable part of the Body of Christ. The Fellowship is convinced that the choice to exercise these spiritual gifts is imperative for the local New Testament Church to fully function as the dynamic organism God has intended." The Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship International is unique, in the sense that it is a Charismatic Baptist denomination that is governed by a board of Bishops. The FGBCF has made significant contributions in the areas of Social Justice, Pastoral Leadership, and Gospel Music.

### III. The Great Migration

- A. **Mass Exodus:** It is perhaps the greatest untold story in American History. It was vast, leaderless, but absolutely necessary. Over the course of six decades, some six million black southerners left the land of their forefathers and fanned out across the country for an uncertain existence in nearly every other corner of the United States of America. Historians would call this mass silent pilgrimage, the Great Migration. This sixty-year span of time would prove to be a turning point in American history. This mass exodus of blacks from the American South would transform urban America and recast the social and political order of everything that it touched. Perhaps most significantly, it would force the Southern states to examine their soul and lay down the sinful, race based caste system that resulted in losing nearly a quarter of its population.
- B. **Conditions that led to the Migration:** The Great Migration was a response to several "push" and "pull" factors. Among those factors were the industrial vacuum created by the United States' involvement in World War I, the clear and present racial strife of the American South, the economic conditions of plantation life in the post-reconstruction South, and, most notably, the overall living conditions for African Americans in the South. If there was a single precipitating event that set off the Great Migration it was World War I. After all blacks had tried to escape the South with limited success from the time the first slaves arrived in Virginia in 1619. But the masses did not pour out of the south until they had something to go to. These individuals capitalized on their

chance to leave when business owners from the North began courting them, hard and in secret, in the face of white southern hostility. During the labor crisis of World War I, word was rapidly spreading that the North was opening up to African American labor. The need for labor was due to the cut of European workers as a result of the war. During this time period, Immigration plunged by more than ninety percent, from 1,218,480 in 1914 to 110,618 in 1918, when the country needed all the labor it could get for war production. So the North turned its gaze toward the poorest-paid labor in the emerging market of the American South. Steel Mills, railroads, and packinghouses sent labor scouts disguised as insurance men and salesmen to recruit blacks to the north for the purpose of cheap labor.

- C. **The Result:** the story of the Great Migration may have gone under reported by the mainstream, majority culture media because its contributors benefited from the very systemic injustice that motivated this monumental departure. These people did not cross the turnstiles of customs at Ellis Island. They were already citizens. But where they came from, they were not treated as such. Their every step was controlled by the meticulous laws of Jim Crow, a nineteenth-century minstrel figure that would become shorthand for the violently enforced codes of the Southern caste system.

The era of Jim Crow would last eighty years in the American South, spanning from the 1880's to the 1960's. Jim Crow is one of history's most diabolical examples of racialization. Its victims spanned across four generations, and its effects are still at work today. The Externalization of two centuries of raced based chattel slavery in the Antebellum South, would contribute to an Objectification of systems of thought that controlled the way both Whites and Blacks engaged the issue of race in America. This was internalized in such a way that the objectified reality that was appropriated within the minds of Southern Whites was one that considered Black people to be less than human, regardless of what the Thirteenth amendment indicated. In turn, it left millions of African-Americans in the south seeking refuge from a system of subjugation that was not of their doing and beyond their control.

The actions of the people during the Great Migration were both universal and distinctly American. Their migration was a response to an economic and social structure that was not of their making. They did what humans have done for centuries when life became untenable. It is what the pilgrims did under the tyranny of British rule, what the Scottish Irish did in Oklahoma when the land turned to dust, what the Irish did when there was nothing to eat, what the European Jews did during the spread of Nazism, what the landless in Russia, Italy, China and elsewhere did when there was something better across the ocean. They did what human beings looking for freedom, throughout history, have often done. They left.