

# History of the Black Church in North America

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The development of the Black church in North America was in essence a response to the surrounding cultural dynamics of its time. Therefore, it is through understanding the historical progression of racially and culturally homogenous, ecclesiastical organizations in history, that we might observe the dynamics that contributed to a community of faith with apparent exclusivities. An observation of church history equips one to have insight into how things became what they are. Furthermore, we can see the development of the religious social order, as we now know it. Samuel Dewitt Proctor in his book *The Substance of Things Hoped for*, in reference to his postgraduate studies at Yale Divinity School in 1945 says,

Here they are the cream of the academic crop, yet they felt uncomfortable talking to someone with a background different from their own. Despite their training in theology and philosophy, they seemed not to recognize how much all humans shared the same estrangement, and the same sense of awe and wonder about God and the potential transcendent life. Our likeness far outweighed our few differences.

This mindset while observed by Dr. Proctor in 1945, is still prevalent to this day, and is reflected in the cultural and racially motivated events throughout history. We will explore the historical factors that have contributed to what we experience today as segregation among churches.

The Black church began in the form of an established institution as a derivative of

established Anglo churches. While it is true that many African-Americans would gather unofficially to worship God long before this in North America, the establishment of the Black church evolved from preexisting churches that were operated and founded by those who were Anglo. The transition among many of the churches would be similar to what occurred in South Carolina in 1737.

*The Encyclopedia of African American Christian Heritage* tells the story of Andrew Bryan who was born in Goose Creek, South Carolina. He was one of the first Black men in American history to be ordained to the ministry and assigned to a congregation. Bryan was officially licensed to preach as a Baptist minister by a white Baptist pastor named Abraham Marshall. The followers of Bryan were officially organized into the First African Baptist Church of Savannah, with Bryan as pastor. They were allowed to meet in the barn on his master's plantation three miles outside of Savannah after receiving much resistance from whites who believed that slaves who organized for worship could use that organization to plot a rebellion against the slave regime. The lingering fear about slave insurrections created certain guidelines such as only being able to meet from sunrise to sunset. "By 1794 when the church moved from the barn into its own building in the city; the continuing fear of having large numbers of blacks gathered together resulted in whites sitting in every service to be sure nothing was said that could fuel a slave uprising or plant seeds of discontent among the slaves." This sheds much light upon the formation of the mindset of many today in the African-American churches who often take concern when there is an Anglo that might visit the church, join the fellowship, or become a part of the church for the purposes of taking on a leadership position.

The suspicion can be understood as having its basis in the historical development of the church. The legitimatizing of the church as an institution seems to only have value upon the

sanction of those who are white. They would come into the church to check up on what was happening in this now sanction organization. This observation is not about establishing a particular judgment upon any particular race, but to discover the point of distrust, division, and suspicion that perpetuated not just a separation among these two races but a mindset that insured that barriers are formed to prevent the two from coming together.<sup>1</sup>

*The African American Christian Heritage* gives another example of this by describing the experiences of Richard Allen who was born a slave in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on February 14, 1760. Allen worked for six years to pay for his freedom at a price of \$2000 in 1786. Allen had a belief for the need of Blacks to own and operate their own institutions. This was first seen through the Free African Society, which he co-founded in Philadelphia with Absalom Jones and William White in May 1787. He was offered an opportunity to travel with Bishop Francis Asbury, the famous Methodist preacher, but Allen decided against doing so. He objected to the conditions that would have been imposed upon him as a Black man traveling and appearing in public with a white man, especially when traveling through slaveholding states.

As a result of Allen's efforts at St. George Methodist Episcopal Church, the Black membership of that church increased dramatically. White members of the church often could not find a seat on the main floor of the sanctuary. So, a policy was established relegating Black members to standing around the walls of the sanctuary on the first floor or sitting in the balcony. As a result, Allen wished to build a separate sanctuary for the Black members, but that was initially met with stiff resistance from

Black and white members. Allen's belief of an all-Black place of worship became more pressing when he and several Black members of St. George's walked out of that church in November 1787. The walkout occurred when they were pulled from their knees while praying one morning because they were in a section of the sanctuary reserved for whites.

Forced racial segregation in churches was the order of the day in Philadelphia, the same city, in the same year in which the United States Constitution was being ratified. One can conclude that the formation of the Black church had much to do with a response to a lack of total acceptance as an equal Christian brother, as well as a desire for Black people to have something of their own.

This is further understood by the treatment of Blacks in the churches of the South. The *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South* informs the reader that hundreds of thousands of whites and Blacks worshipped under the same roof in the 1840s and 1850s. As a result, whites convinced of slavery's justice poured more energy into adding Black members to their churches, but this coerced biracial experiment proved fragile and short-lived. "During the Civil War, much to the dismay of Southern whites, Black evangelicals began a massive exodus from the South's churches and began to build their own houses of worship."<sup>2</sup> These historical realities can pose as an issue toward the integration of churches.

Many historically Black churches have embraced the tenacity and ingenuity of those Blacks that faced these problems and created the solution in the formation of the Black church. While this celebration has validity, one would wonder if the solution is intended for the specific

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<sup>1</sup>Marvin A. McMickel, *An Encyclopedia of African*

*American Christian Heritage* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2002), 37.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

problem that existed in that day and time, and that there might be a different solution that God is calling us to as a church today. Is there a fear of losing something good that has been created despite the injustices? Or could it be that there is such a tight grasp on what was; that what could be is overlooked?

While this can be seen in the relationship between these two distinct races and cultures in the local church, it can also be observed on the denominational level. *The Encyclopedia of African American Christian Heritage* presents the life of Richard Henry Boyd who was connected to many divisions in the Convention, but has made major contributions to the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.; He was born in slavery in Mississippi on March 5, 1843. After emancipation he enrolled in Bishop College in Marshall, Texas and was ordained as a Baptist preacher.

When the National Baptist Convention, USA was formed in 1895, Boyd was appointed general secretary of the Home Mission Board. When the Southern Baptist Convention objected to Black preachers being allowed to contribute articles to the American Baptist Publication Society, Boyd led in the effort to establish the National Baptist Publishing Board in 1897. The control of this Board became the source of many factions yet the beginning of other conventions such as the National Baptist Convention of America and later on the National Missionary Baptist Convention.<sup>3</sup>

During the Antebellum Period, the justification for slavery became one of the tightest bonds holding white evangelicals together. However, it also ultimately became the most divisive issue in Southern Protestantism. By the 1830s, Southern whites insisted in their formation of a regional, evangelical orthodoxy

that God had ordained slavery and that slave owners could confidently hold property in persons so long as they were attentive to the spiritual condition of their slaves.<sup>4</sup> It is a wonder that churches today have become homogenous and cling to the perspectives that they have.

“Could it be that there is such a tight grasp on what was; that what could be is overlooked?”

There are wounds that have left gaping holes in the fabric of denominations.

It is further observed in the life of Richard Allen, who on April 11, 1816 was consecrated the first bishop of the AME Church, which was the first Black denomination formed.<sup>5</sup> It is further concluded that the Baptist and Methodist Churches split in 1844, explicitly over slavery. An Alabama church probed the Triennial Convention and revealed in 1844 that the national body of Baptist would not sponsor a slaveholding missionary, and Southerners promptly organized the Southern Baptist Convention at an 1844 meeting in Augusta, Georgia. Southern Methodist were likewise disgusted by the 1844 General Conference’s insistence that Bishop James O. Andrew divest himself of slaves that his wife inherited after he became a bishop or else forfeit his position. They formed the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in 1845. Southern Evangelicals thus institutionalized their differences from Northern believers.<sup>6</sup>

The cultural divide cannot only be seen on a church level and on a denominational level, but it can also be seen on a national level. The impact of the founding fathers in response to the economical and the sociological needs of the nation, presents some historical realities that

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Samuel S. Hill and Charles H. Lippy, *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South* (Mercer University Press: Macon, Georgia) 34.

<sup>5</sup>McMickle, *An Encyclopedia of African American Christian Heritage*.

<sup>6</sup>Hill and Lippy, *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South*, 45.

continues to have effects upon the nation today. Anthony Iaccarino presents in his book *The Founding Fathers*, “The last remaining founding fathers during the 1830’s eventually enacted a ban on the importation of foreign slaves in 1808, however the enslaved population continued to expand through natural reproduction, while the growing internal domestic slave trade led to an increase in the tragic break-up of enslaved families.”<sup>7</sup>

While there was change in the external slave trade, the nation was faced with an expanding internal slave trade. Therefore, a need to justify slavery particularly for the Christian slaveholder became a growing desire. Iaccarino further states, “At one-point Europeans had long believed that they have the missionary right to enslave anyone who was not a Christian. But slaves could then convert to Christianity and gain their freedom. Sometime in the mid-seventeenth century this changed.”

This is a historical fact that shows the way that Christianity was adapted to embrace slavery and used as justification for those Christians who owned slaves. It is interesting to note that in 1639, the colony of Maryland declared that a Christian baptism did not make a slave free. Religious salvation no longer spelled liberty. Soon the definition of who could be made a slave would change forever.

No longer were Christians singled out. Now if you did not look European—if your skin was not white—you could be enslaved. It is also stated, “as racial categories grew harsher, the English gradually chose to describe themselves not as Christians, but as white people.” The psychological, social, and spiritual chasm seems to have grown with the development of various cultural pressures.

What is seen in society at this point in history is highly reflective of what is seen in the

local church. The societal values had a major impact on the churches that assembled in places such as South Carolina. Iaccarino speaks of how the white citizens of South Carolina established public policy designed to restrict communication among Blacks. Church assemblage was monitored, reading was forbidden, and mail was inspected.

For Blacks, the church represented a crucial sense of autonomy. And among Charleston whites, that autonomy was deemed dangerous.<sup>8</sup> Not only does this show a clear divide that has been established, one can also conclude that a major sense of distrust has set in. It is concluded by Iaccarino, “The idea of black and whites getting along peaceably while the specter of slavery darkened their path was seen as absurd. So this pie-in-the-sky dream was replaced by a very real fear, a fear that the country’s security was threatened by vengeful black freedmen unable to forget the indignities they suffered as captives.”<sup>9</sup>

Unfortunately as one takes a journey through history, slavery and the effects of it was just the beginning of this divide. The Directory of African American Religious Bodies says that every census from 1790 to 1900, at least 90 percent of the Negro population of the United States lived in the South. In 1910, 89 percent of Negroes still lived in the South, but the percentage fell in the succeeding decades, to 85 percent in 1920, 77 percent in 1940, and 60 percent in 1960.<sup>10</sup>

This communicates to the reader that there were a majority of African Americans that were impacted by slavery and the discrimination that followed. Despite the noticeable exodus of African Americans from the southern states by the 1960s, the percentage suggest that over half of African Americans continued to experience injustices while northern states began to take

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<sup>7</sup>Anthony Iaccarino, *The Founding Fathers* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons Inc., 2007).

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 290.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Wardell J. Payne, ed., *Directory of African American Religious Bodies* (Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1991), 24.

notice and address the plight of African Americans.

As a result of this, the decade between 1860 and 1870 was a period of accelerated growth for organized religion among African Americans. The African Methodist Episcopal church (AME), African Methodist Episcopal Zion church (AMEZ), and Baptist churches sent missionaries into the South hard on the heels of the conquering Union armies and found many recently freed slaves who were anxious to affiliate with their Black brethren. Most of these new members, although not all, had previously been members of the churches of their masters. For example, the Methodist Episcopal Church lost some 130,000 of its Black members during the decade. The exodus from white Baptist churches was comparable.

Of course, numerous African American Baptist congregations were already in existence in the South, some of them pastored by African Americans and all of them under the fairly strict control of white ecclesiastical bodies. These churches now became entirely free from white supervision. During Reconstruction, African Americans began to develop alternative structures as the means for dealing with their perennial problems. Involvement in political parties, particularly in the South, and the establishment of labor unions, commercial banks, and insurance companies, along with other types of voluntary associations, took some of the pressure off the churches.<sup>11</sup>

The history of the nation does not end at this point, but a greater challenge is placed on the floor, a challenge to end segregation and to acknowledge the civil rights of all people. While there are many who have been strong proponents of this movement and advocates for civil rights, one will find an individual that is hard to miss, he is a Christian preacher who within history

challenged the nation. Wardell A. Payne introduces him as “neither King the humble humanitarian nor King the rootless radical who challenged the status quo of the 1950s and 60s. Rather, it was King the committed Christian” who, firmly grounded in that tradition, reminded his Christian brothers and sisters that:

You have dual citizenry. You live both in time and eternity. Your highest loyalty is to God, and not to the mores or the folkways, the state or the nation, or any man-made institution. If any earthly institution or custom conflicts with God’s will, it is your Christian duty to oppose it. You must never allow the transitory, evanescent demands of man-made institutions to take precedence over the eternal demands of the Almighty God.<sup>12</sup>

Dr. Martin Luther King referred to his conception of the Christian social ideal as the Beloved Community. The term was a part of the popular theological vocabulary of the Boston University School of Theology. The term can be traced to the philosophical writings of Josiah Royce who played a major role in the development of the school of thought that is called personal idealism or personalism. Royce’s idea of the universal community is: All morality, namely, is, from this point of view, to be judged by the standards of the Beloved Community, of the ideal Kingdom of Heaven. Concretely stated, this means that you are to test every course of action by the question: What can we find in the parables or in the Sermon on the Mount which seems to us more or less directly to bear upon this special matter?

The central doctrine of the Master was, ‘So act that the Kingdom of Heaven may come.’ This means so act as to help, however you can, and whenever you can towards making mankind one loving brotherhood, whose love is not mere

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>12</sup>Hill and Lippy, *Encyclopedia of Religion in the*

*South*, 34.

affection for morally detached individuals, but love of the unity of its own life upon its own divine level, and a love of individuals in so far as they can be raised to communion with this spiritual community itself. Indeed, after the formation in 1957 of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, King described the purpose of that organization this way: “The ultimate aim of S.C.L.C. is to foster and create the ‘beloved community’ in America....

S.C.L.C. works for integration. Our ultimate goal is genuine intergroup and interpersonal living –integration.” King was then asked if he disagreed with their stated reason for refusing to help. Their reason was that “It is not the proper role of the church to intervene in secular affairs.” King responded most

emphatically in the affirmative and went on to elaborate. “The essence of the Epistle of Paul is that Christians should rejoice at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believe. The projection of a social gospel, in my opinion, is the true Christian life.” He further states, “This is the meaning of the true ekklesia—the inner, spiritual church.

The Church once changed society. However, the gaping wounds still exist in America and the state of the church clearly reflects the scars, scabs, and scraps. If we are to see a future of Christian unity among various races and cultures, we must see it through the lens of the past. It is then that we can properly address our wounds and healing can take place.

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