

African American Christianity

Summary: The First Great Awakening led many enslaved people in the United States to convert to Christianity. Through the 18th and 19th centuries, distinct Black churches emerged, seeking autonomy from white Christians. These congregations grew into denominations, and many thrive in the present day. They have served as homes to various political and religious movements, including Black nationalism and liberation theology.

The first African captives entered England's North American colonies through Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619. For over 200 years, Africans, largely from the west coast of Africa, were brought to the United States through the slave trade. At first, Christianity made few inroads into the African slave population, which had its own religious traditions. Many white colonists resisted missionizing the enslaved population, fearing that converted slaves would have to be freed and treated with the respect that would be accorded to fellow Christians.

The first large-scale conversions of slaves in North America coincided with the First Great Awakening in the mid-18th century, when the colonies were swept with a religious spirit that crossed racial lines. The historic center of Black Christianity is in the Baptist and Methodist churches. During the antebellum period, when the vast majority of African Americans remained enslaved, it was Methodist and Baptist evangelicals who worked most successfully to missionize slave quarters. Many leaders within these denominations actively promoted the idea that all Christians were equal in the sight of God, a message that provided hope and sustenance to enslaved women and men. Biblical themes also spoke directly to the conditions of Black oppression, such as the captivity of Israel, which was likened to plantation slavery, and Israel's exodus from Egypt, which became a metaphor for escape to the North.

A few white Christian evangelists supported the gradual abolition of slavery and the ordination of Black ministers. But within a generation, the overwhelming majority of white church leaders in the South had instead embraced religious rationales for slaveholding. Styling themselves as biblical patriarchs, they claimed a moral responsibility over their slaves, and argued that slavery was providentially ordained to bring Christianity to Africans.

Autonomy was an important goal for many Black Christians, as interracial fellowship in white-led churches was predicated upon the subordination of Black rights and interests. Though they remained

few in number until the end of slavery a century later, separate Black churches began to emerge in the 1760s. For example, the African Baptist Church of Savannah was formally organized in 1788 and, by 1830, boasted over 2,000 members, free and enslaved. A former slave and licensed Methodist preacher named Richard Allen, who had formed Philadelphia's Bethel Church in 1794, founded a distinct denomination called the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.) in 1816. Soon after in 1821, the A.M.E. Zion denomination was founded in New York, having seceded from a mixed-race church in which Black congregants could take communion only after all the white congregants had received it. Many of the independent Black Baptist congregations and associations that gathered after the Civil War merged to form the National Baptist Convention in 1895. All these denominations became vital institutions in the African American community, both in the rural South and, with Black mass migration to industrial centers, northern cities.

Many Black clergy, particularly in southern states, encouraged congregants to worship in ways that incorporated familiar African worship patterns, such as enthusiastic singing, clapping, and dancing. For example, the "ring shout"—a southern form of worshipful singing and rhythmic dancing in a circle—is often invoked as one of the distinctive contributions of African culture to African American Christianity. This distinctive musical tradition emerged during the antebellum era and morphed into the more genteel spirituals popularized by the Fisk Jubilee Singers in the late 19th century. It was later augmented by the distinctively urban Gospel music of Thomas E. Dorsey and others beginning in the 20th century.

From the perspective of many of their leaders, the "Africanness" of African American churches and denominations lay mainly in their distinctive social status and the special responsibility they felt to other Africans and African Americans. Highly literate and well-versed in scripture, northern Black ministers not only fought for the abolition of slavery, but also sent missions both to the South and to Africa. Their concern was to "redeem" their brethren from oppression and ignorance.

In the 1910s and 1920s, the "Back-to-Africa" movement of Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association gave voice to a powerful and positive Black nationalism. While the UNIA was largely political and economic in its orientation, its motto was "One God! One Aim! One Destiny!" Garvey emphasized the responsibility of African American Christians to build an independent African homeland. His vision of a Black God in whose image Black people were created would be developed

decades later in the writings of a new wave of African American theology. Black nationalists and liberation theologians in the late 1960s both forcefully restated the UNIA's "Afrocentric" sentiments.

In the mid-1950s, African Americans' struggle against inequality, injustice, and violence coalesced in the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King, Jr., and other black ministers formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to protest segregation. Churches played an important role in these organizing efforts, and protest marches took on characteristics of a church service with prayers, songs, and sermons. Some Black churches, however, declined to join the movement, viewing its tactics of civil disobedience and mass protests as ineffective. In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, but this was only one small step in an ongoing battle for racial equality in the United States.

In the post-civil rights era, the status and role of African American Christianity has been widely debated among Black Christians and scholars alike. Should Black churches continue to carry forward the work of the Civil Rights Movement in fighting for social change? Or should they focus more on cultivating congregants' personal relationships with God and spreading the Christian message through evangelism? Should Black churches work to cultivate interracial fellowship with white congregations? Or should they preserve their African identity and maintain predominantly Black congregations? While these questions continue to be the subject of lively debates, one thing is certain: for hundreds of years, Black churches have empowered Black Christians to come together in solidarity for prayer, worship, and lamentation.