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The Origin of African American Christianity in the English North American Colonies to the Rise of the Black Independent Church

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The Origin of African American Christianity in the English North American Colonies to the Rise of the Independent Church

A thesis submitted to the
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Christianity has played a major role in African American lives from Africa to the North American Colonies. African Americans have had an important presence in both the Old and New Testaments of the bible. From a black woman named Keturah who was Abraham’s second wife, which had six children by him, to the Queen of Sheba that had a son by Solomon and others blacks in the bible. These were the beginnings of the rise of the Black Independent Church. The independent black church became a refuge in times of trouble for the black race and a place of comfort for the despair. The church is a noble place that strove to meet the spiritual, educational and social needs of its people in times of trouble.
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Introduction

The idea for this thesis was given to me when one of my professors in the graduate division of the University of Cincinnati asked her students: “Do you know who you are?” She then challenged us to research our families for three generations to discover their backgrounds – the migratory patterns, the occupations, the family traits and other interest of value. While doing this, I noticed there were several of my family members who were Christian ministers (Baptist and African Methodist Episcopal Methodist) and I discovered the same in the family of my husband.

With the above in mind, I began to wonder about the beginning of Christianity for African Americans in North America. Did Christianity exist in Africa? Did Africans come to the American Colonies as Christians? When did African Americans become Christians if they were not such upon arrival? What role Christianity played during the epoch of slavery, and most importantly for me, how did the independent black churches (in which members of my family were ministers) evolve?

As I began to read the King James Version of the Bible in preparation for this study, I learned that blacks have had an important presence in both the Old and New Testaments. I learned that East Africa (Kenya) is thought to be the focus of the origin of mankind. Did the children of Adam and Eve migrate
from there throughout the world? I found that blacks were important in the “Second Creation Story” for after the Great Flood, Noah’s sons; Schem, Ham and Japheth repopulated the earth. Japhethites went northward, and settled in regions around the Black and Caspian Seas; and became progenitors of the Caucasian races of Europe and Asia. Ham, who is recognized as the “Father of the Hamites” went southward to dwell in Africa in the land of Cush. The names given seem to indicate South and Central Arabia, Egypt, the East Shore of the Mediterranean, and the East Coast of Africa. Canaan, son of Ham, and his descendants, settled, and gave their name to the land, which later became the homeland of the Jews. Egypt was called the “Land of Ham.” Shemites included Jews, Assyrians, Syrians, Elamites, in the north Euphrates Valley and its borders. I found that Abraham, the father of three religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) had taken a black woman (Keturah) as his second wife and had six sons with her. I read the story of Sheba and Solomon and their son Melinik who became the father of the Falasha Jews in Ethiopia, and of Frumentius who converted Ethiopia to Christianity five years after the Emperor Constantine declared it the official religion of the Roman Empire. Egypt, before the Muslim conquests, I discovered, was an early center of Christianity and that many of the early anchorite monks and “saints” were black. I was amazed by my research. During the era of European exploration,
the west coast of Africa was replete with Christian missionaries and black Christians. This culminated when the King of the Congo (Alfonso the Good) tried to convert his entire kingdom to Christianity in the 16th century and Henrique was made a Bishop in the Roman Catholic Church.

Africa is crucial for the understanding of our existence. It is the “mother of us all.” Both blacks and whites emanate from its loins. So in order for me to understand where my Christianity came from and who I am, I felt I must begin my study of the beginning of black Christianity in the United States by reviewing its African origins. From there, and with the African Diaspora, I found that the institution of black chattel slavery played a part, sometimes negative and sometimes positive, in its development.

Because of the complexity of this story and upon the suggestion of my committee chairperson, I chose to end my research with the development of the independent black church that became a refuge in times of trouble for the black race and a place of comfort for the despair. The church is a noble place that strove to meet the spiritual, educational and social needs of its people in times of trouble. It provided food for the hungry, clothes for the needy, and both physical and psychological shelter. In modern times, the black church would become the center of political activity that helped bring about equity to American society. The black church was the institution that gave the
dispossessed black man and woman religious and practical education. Its establishment gave fulfillment to the lives of millions of African American people.

Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Mary Anne Pitman who sparked my interest in the topic by asking the question: “Do you know who you are?” in her Cultural Diversity Class; and Dr. Leo Krzywkowski, Dr. Marvin Bertowitz and Dr. Vanessa Allen Brown for the guidance they have given me in this most rewarding exercise.
Chapter I
The Judaic-Christian Background of Africa

The roots of the Judaic-Christian tradition in the African and the African American Church run deep. The Old Testament, modern scientific discovery, and the history of early Christianity are replete with examples of blackness in the best traditions of Africa.

Modern science identifies East Africa as the true “Cradle of Mankind” from which the children of the original Adam and Eve migrated throughout the world. Could the “Garden of Eden” so prominently mentioned in Genesis have been located in Kenya, and could a black Adam and Eve be the mother and father of us all?

The Old Testament lesson of Noah and the Great Flood is another example of the black roots of Judaic-Christianity. After the flood Noah’s three sons would repopulate the world: Shem, Ham and Japheth. Ham became the father of the Hamites who went to dwell in Africa. In the Old Testament the Land of Ham connotes Egypt and areas further south. (Genesis: 10:19).

The story of Abraham, the founder of monotheism (whom some regard as a black man), is an interesting one. For in addition to the children he begot with the handmaiden Hagar (Ishmael), and his wife Sara (Isaac), Abraham took another
wife, Keturah (Genesis 25:1) a black Egyptian, by which he had six more children. One of these was the founder of the tribe of the Midianities who later play a part in the story of Moses. They give him shelter as he flees from the Pharaoh and he intermarries into that tribe. During this period and before the Semetic and Greek invasions, the Egyptians were a black skinned race. All evidence points to that fact. Most pictures and statues of that era depict the Egyptians as such. Even the great Sphinx (still in existence today) has African features. One but has to look at any reproduction of Egyptians gods or pharaohs to bear this out. (Kings 25:1-11).

In the year 1012 B.C., an Ethiopian Queen named Makkida visited the Jewish King Solomon in Jerusalem. She came from the Kingdom of Sheba in what is now Yemen in southern Arabia. Sheba was part of the Ethiopian empire, which included Upper Egypt, Ethiopia and parts of Arabia. Josephus, the historian of the Jews writing in Rome, calls her the Queen of Egypt and Ethiopia. In addition to his account, her story is transmitted to us from the archives of Abysinia/Ethiopia. This Ethiopian account states that she came to Jerusalem with a great train and abundant wealth. While in Jerusalem Solomon fathered a child by her, a boy named Menilek (Solomon will also take another African woman to be his wife, the daughter of the Pharaoh of Egypt). Sheba later returned to Ethiopia. Menilek stayed at Solomon’s court to obtain an education. Eventually, Menilek returned to his kingdom bearing with him the Ark of the Covenant. According to Ethiopian religious traditions it
still exists in a monastery in the holy city of Askum today. The black Jews, of Ethiopia called Falasha, still exist in Ethiopia today in what has become a Coptic Christian nation. (Judges 6,7,8, Flavius, 1957, p. 10).

In the Old Testament, the land of Kush usually meant Nubia, the kingdom south of Egypt, from the first cataract of the Nile to the point south the sixth cataract, now the modern city of Khartoum. It is the northern part of the country now known as Sudan. The black skinned people of Nubia were the earliest beneficiaries of Egyptian civilization. They not only received Egyptian culture but took it and made it an integral culture of their own. Nubia was a black African nation with its own pharaohs. They built their own pyramids, constructed their own majestic temples, developed their own style of architecture and writing and founded their own empire. (Davis, 2002, p. 2).

By the eight century B.C., this former colony of Egypt became a dominant power in the region. Shortly before the middle of that century the Nubian King Kashta assumed power of Upper Egypt. He died in 750 B.C. That same year, his son Piankhi, assumed the title and trappings of the office of Pharaoh of both Upper and Lower Egypt. With Piankhi began the XXV Dynasty and the reign of the black pharaohs who would rule Egypt and Nubia together for over a hundred years. It was during this period that Nubia and the black pharaohs made their appearance in
the Old Testament. Isaiah speaks of them in his promise to King Hezekiah of Judah, stating that the Assyrians would abandoned the siege of Jerusalem because they had to meet an invasion of Egyptian troops led by Tirhakah. In 663 B.C., under the rule of Tanoutamon, the nephew of Tirhakah, the Assyrians invaded Egypt and took over the city of Thebes, the seat of the black Pharaohs. With this defeat, the Nubians returned to the Sudan and never again held Egypt. It is of interest to note that another black Nubian emerges from the pages of the New Testament. He is referred to as the “Ethiopian Eunuch.” (Acts 8:26). This text is important as it places a person of non-Jewish origin as proselyte of Judaism. Phillip the Deacon baptized him and converted to Christianity. He was said to have been the royal treasurer of Nubia. The term “Ethiopian” was the generic name in Greek for the black African. (2 Kings 19, Isaiah 37:5-11, Davis, 2002, p. 3).

Later, the Byzantine Emperor, Justinian (527-565 A.D.) sent missionaries to Nubia. Theodora, his wife also sent missionaries. By the sixth century A.D., Nubia had broken up into three lesser kingdoms (Nobaia in the north, Makouria in the center, and Alwa in the south). By the end of that century Nubia had become Christian. Only in the last several decades has it become clear that in a black African nation, cut off from the rest of the ascending Christian world, an ancient black people built their churches with murals depicting Jesus, the Virgin and the saints (usually with white skins) and their kings, queens, bishops, and nobles (with
dark skins) clad in rich vestments and royal insignia in the stylized Byzantine manner. The Byzantine influence was unmistakable in this country in the heart of Africa. Not only did the art bear the mark of Constantinople, but the Byzantine titles of the imperial government were replicated in Nubia’s administration. Evidence suggests that the upper classes in Nubia spoke both the Greek and Coptic language of Egypt as well as their native Nubian tongue. Very likely, their church also used Greek. It is not clear how long the Nubian Christian church existed under the jurisdiction of the Byzantine church. In ensuing years it came under the influence of the Coptic church of Alexandria. With the Moslem invasions of Egypt in the seventh century C.E., it became an independent Christian entity with monasteries cathedrals, and thirteen Episcopal seats (Adams, 1994, p. 472).

Nubia, however, was not the most ancient Christian community in black Africa. Ethiopia was converted to Christianity two centuries before the kingdom of Nubia. Ethiopia is a mountainous kingdom in the horn of Africa, across the red Sea from the more ancient kingdoms of southern Arabia. A great civilization of indigenous black peoples came into existence there in the first century C.E. A major source for the knowledge of this civilization is the massive remains of the royal capital of Axum. Here a centralized monarchy evolved and here the language of the people of Ge’ez received an alphabet and a written form. Ethiopia had a written language with its own alphabet from the second century C.E. The
Ethiopian kings located in Axum, gradually extended their dominance over Nubia and parts of Southern Arabia. By the fourth century, the ruler of Axum held the title “King of Kings,” for he had become the overlord of other kings in the area. In the first part of the fourth century, the King of Kings was Ezana, an excellent and powerful ruler (Davis, 2002, p. 7).

Ethiopia became a Christian country in the first part of the fourth century (330 C.E.) through the activity of Frumentius and Edesius, two Syrian slaves at the royal court at Axum during the reign of Ezana’s father (Ella Amida). At Ella Amida’s death the queen’s mother became regent during Ezana’s minority. The influence of Frumentius and Edesius led to the conversion of the royal court. Ezana freed both at his accession and they returned to Syria. Frumentius who is honored as a saint in both the Roman Catholic and Ethiopian churches visited Anasthasius, the Patriarch of Alexandria on his way to Syria. He apprised the Patriarch of the growth of Christianity in Ethiopia, and requested Anastasius to ordain a bishop to be sent back to Ethiopia to minister to the people. Anastasius made Frumentius a bishop and sent him back. He is rightly considered to be the founder of the Church of Ethiopia. Inscriptions on the monuments of Axum and elsewhere in the country, as well as symbols on the coinage of the time (Ethiopia was one of the first black countries to have its own coinage), indicate the conversion of Ezana to Christianity. By the last quarter of the fourth century, Ethiopian pilgrims were a
frequent sight in Jerusalem. By the end of the fifth century, Christianity was firmly established in the country, and by the end of the sixth century; Ethiopia was a powerful nation whose rulers were militant protectors of the Christian church in the neighboring areas including Nubia and southern Arabia. In the first part of the sixth century, the Ethiopian King Caleb (Elesbaan) led an expedition into southern Arabia to punish those responsible for the massacre of Christians in the city of Najran. (Davis, 2002, p. 8).

Ethiopia was a Christian nation with its own traditions and culture. By the fifth century, it had its own liturgy derived from the Coptic Church in Alexandria. This liturgy had its own unique characteristics in term of texts, sacred rites, music, artwork and architecture (like the famous churches hewn out of rock at Lalibela). Ethiopia had made its own contribution to the Christian heritage with its own translation of Holy Scripture, its own version of paristic texts, and its own tradition of monasticism and asceticism. Monasteries began to be established as early as the fifth century, and monks played an important role in the spiritual life of the people throughout Ethiopian history. In the history of the Christian Church, Ethiopia occupies a special place. It is a black African Christian Church that was in existence before such churches were established in Ireland, England or many others of the European nations. The Ethiopian Christian Church is a reminder that Africa forms part of the rich heritage of Christianity. Africa was also the home of
early monasticism and an extraordinary black saint was one of its leaders during the first century of the Christian monastic experience. His name was Saint Moses the Black. Much that we know about him comes from a core of historical fact in The Lausiac History of Palladius. (Meyer, 1965, pp. 67-70).

In the Egyptian desert just north of the Nile Delta, men and women began living the monastic life singly in twos or threes, or as hermits in small dwelling far enough apart for solitude but nevertheless located around an oratory or a central church. These colonies of hermits had already begun by the fourth century when Saint Anasthasius wrote, The Life of Saint Anthony of Egypt, who is considered to be the founder of Christian monasticism. These hermits were not only the dwellers in the Egyptian desert. During this period of history, many citizens from the municipalities, who could no longer face heavy taxation, found their way to the desert. Outlaws and bandits also sought refuge in the wilderness. One of these outlaws was a strong, athletic black man who had been a slave. He was difficult in character, a murderer by some reports and too much for his owner to control. His name (or perhaps the name he took later) was Moses. Moses went into the desert and became a leader of a band of outlaws. He was converted and became a monk. Eventually he was ordained a priest. (Meyer, 1965, pp. 67-70).

Saint Moses the Black became known as spiritual leader of a group of hermits in the desert of Scete, about a hundred miles south of Alexandria. It was
there that he and his monks were martyred around the year 410. We have forty savings or *apophtegmata* of Abba Moses. The title “Abba” (from the Aramaic for father) was given to monks who were spiritual teachers. The saying attributed to Saint Moses the Black alone would be sufficient to place him among the spiritual teachers of early monasticism; but present day scholarship also attributes the first two chapters in a collection known as *The Conferences* by Cassian, which deal with the ends and purposes of monastic life. The monastic writings of the early monks of the period between the fourth and seventh centuries had a great influence on the spirituality of the early Christian church in both the east and the west. These writings laid the foundation of the future ascetic and mystical writings of the church. It is important to note the role of an early black man in this movement. (Luibheid, 1985, pp. 37-80).

The history of blacks in the early church is documented in Ethiopia, Nubia and Egypt in the identity of individuals such as Abba Moses. In the period of early Christianity, the delta region and particularly the city of Alexandria where Greek speaking centers with a highly cosmopolitan citizenry among which were black Africans from Nubia, Ethiopia and areas of Sub Sahara Africa. Some were slaves and the descendants of slaves, other were soldiers, ambassadors, legets, government functionaries and freemen and their families. As such, it is the
consensus of historians that Egypt was for centuries a region of mixed people both racially and culturally. (Snowden, 1983, pp. 88-90).

Three popes of the early Christian church were African: Saint Victor I (186 - 197), St. Miltiades (311-314) and Saint Gelasius I (492 - 496). Victor I was pope during the quarrel between those in Asia Minor who celebrated Easter on the day of the first full moon of the Vernal Equinox, which could be any day of the week, and those in the rest of the church who celebrated Easter on the first Sunday after the first full moon of the Vernal Equinox. By this time Sunday was the weekly commemoration of the Resurrection. Pope Victor’s position eventually prevailed. Pope Militiades is especially important because he was the pope at the time of the Peace of Constantine (313 A.D.). Although not baptized until much later, Constantine’s conversion had begun, and with it the process by which the Christian church would be recognized as the official religion of the Roman state (325 A.D.). Gelasius was probably the most significant of the three popes from Africa. His strong declaration to the Byzantine Emperor Anastasius spelled out the right of the Roman Pontiff to exercise jurisdiction over all parts of the Christian church including Asia Minor. He also enunciated the papal right to be judged by no one including the emperor. He laid the foundation of what would become known as the Primacy of the See of Rome, which held as church doctrine that the Bishop of Rome was “prime” or first in authority over all other bishops. Gelasius also played
a part in the elaboration of the Christian liturgy during a period of increased splendor in liturgical ceremonies. While they are not known in detail, the reforms that Gelasius introduced, one of the oldest texts and collections of prayers for the mass, bear his name. The Liber Pontificius, which gives the birthplace all the popes of the western Christian Church beginning with Peter, assigns “the nation of Africa” to these three popes. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that a black man from Africa could be a leader of the church in Rome. (Davis, 2002, p. 14).

The historical research of Frank Snowden, Jr., Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco – Roman World, shows through his detailed and careful examination of artwork depicting the human figure in the Hellenistic period that men and women of Negroid features were to be found in almost every large city in the Roman Empire from Gaul to Asia Minor. In the city of Rome in the third century, blacks were found as actors, public and household slaves, gladiators, soldiers, charioteers, religious attendants for the Cult of Isis, and as emissaries of foreign governments. In a passage of Eusebius’ Life of Constantine, he describes the court of his emperor in Constantinople. Ambassadors were continually arriving from all nations bringing for his acceptance most precious gifts. He states that he sometimes stood near the entrance of the imperial palace and observed people of all colors in attendance, differing in costume and decorations presenting gifts to the emperor. The Roman Empire was culturally and racially diverse and black men
and women played important parts in it as they did in the early Christian Church (Davis, 2002, p.15).

In the seventh century, the rise of a new religion, Islam, would play havoc with the Middle East and especially with Christianity. After the death of Muhammad, the Arabs, driven by religious motives:

a) To fight against such as those who were given the scripture.

b) Given the mandate that Muslims should not enter into war with other Muslims.

c) As well as the desire for booty, which swept across Persia, Syria, Palestine and Egypt muting the growth of Christianity in those regions.

The budding Christian Church of North Africa would never recover from this religious invasion. It would be left to East Africa and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to carry the torch of the Christian faith in Africa until the sixteenth century. (Armajani, 1970, p. 35).

The Christian Church reappears in Africa at the beginning of modern times. This was the result of the Portuguese explorations at the end of the fifteenth century in what is now West Africa, especially in the Congo. Portugal, the first maritime power that opened the modern “Age of Exploration,” allied itself with one, Alfonso, the eldest son of Nzinga a Nkouwou, King of the Congo. Alfonso, who became known as “Alfonso the Good,” wholeheartedly accepted the Christian
faith, and in a war with rival claimants to the throne, won the help of the Portuguese. He ruled as King of the Congo from 1506-1543. His rule was marked by two concerns. The first was to convert his people to Christianity and to profit from the technological knowledge of the Europeans. The second was to control the rapacious of the Portuguese for riches and slaves. The tragedy of Alfonso, a man of extraordinary ability and wisdom, was his failure to accomplish these goals. (Davis, 2002, p. 16, Thornton, 1984, pp. 147-167, and Hilton, 1985, pp. 154-161).

Alfonso was sincere in his zeal for religion. A Portuguese missionary described him as follows in a letter to King Manuel I, in 1516: “It seems to me that his Christianity is not that of a man but of an angel whom the Lord would have sent to convert this kingdoms. I can in fact testify to your Highness that he teaches us and that he knows better than we do the prophets of the gospel…all the lives of the saints and everything that relates to the Holy Mother the church.” He goes on to point out that Alfonso would preach to the people after mass was over and that he was determined to stamp out the traditional tribal religions and burned their images (Saunders, 1982, pp. 11-12 and Davis, 2002, p. 18).

In the end, slavery caused the undoing of all that Alfonso had tried to accomplish. It must be admitted that he did agree, from the beginning to supply slaves as part of a trade agreement with the Europeans. Slavery was to be found in practically all of the African civilization of that era. The African form of slavery,
however, resulted primarily from being captured in war or punished for crime. He soon found that the European appetite for slaves was insatiable and that nothing could be done to stop it. In a letter written to Alfonso by Joan II, the Portuguese King pointed out that there was an endless supply of slaves outside of the Congo; hence Alfonso need not worry that his subjects would be sold as slaves. He also made it clear that if the slave trade were to be stopped, commerce with Portugal would be reduced to one ship a year; and suggested that this arrangement would procure little honor and wealth for the African King. (Davis, 2002, p. 17).

The one hope that Alfonso had for the Christianization of his kingdom as an institution independent of the Portuguese crown was to establish a diocese, with a bishop of its own in the Congo. He wanted a direct communication with the Pope without depending on the Portuguese. To that end, he sent his eldest son, Henrique, to Portugal to study for the priesthood along with other noble Congolese children to receive a Christian education and bring western culture back to the Congo. Henrique was ordained a priest. In 1517, Pope Leo X gave permission for him to be consecrated a bishop despite his relatively young age and in 1521, Henrique was made Auxiliary Bishop of Funchal in the Madeira Islands. Returning to the Congo to establish the church there, he died in 1531. His death, ended the hope of an independent Congolese Christian Church in West Africa with direct access to Rome and an indigenous clergy. It would be the curse of the slave trade that drove
many of Alfonso’s subjects against Christianity after his death in 1543. The Christian Church in West Africa would not ascend again until the twentieth century, and then only after the end of European colonialism. (Davis 2002, p. 18 and Thornton, 1981, pp. 183-204).

In conclusion, one can see that Christianity in Africa has a long and rich tradition. Egypt was once a black empire and one of the original sites of the Christian faith and gave the early church many faithful, many saints, doctors of the church and even three popes. The influence of Egypt through the Coptic Church affected the conversion of the King of Ethiopia in 330 C.E., just five years after Constantine the Great (325) mandated Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. The Byzantine influence under Justinian and Theodora converted the Sudan; and in the sixteenth century, and under the leadership of Alfonso the Good, Christian inroads were made into West Africa. It is of interest to note that Ira Berlin, in his classic work on slavery: *Many Thousand Gone*, states that the first generation of African captives to the New World, whom he calls Creoles, were not only people with indigenous African religious, but that among them were Christians and Muslims whose faith would be lost in North America because of their isolation.
Chapter II

The Protestant Reformation’s Effect on the Colonization of English America

The European Reformation and its brand of Christianity would have both a positive and a negative effect on the Africans who came to America, first as indentured servants (1619) and then by 1660’s as slaves. A review of its principles is needed for an understanding of this thesis.

The roots of the reformation are varied, but one might see it nascent origin in Hapsburgh controlled Bohemia. There, the reform of the Roman Catholic Church, which was the religion of Europe, was already under way when Jan Hus, who might be considered the “Father of the Reformation,” was born (1372). Charles IV was the King and Emperor who ruled Bohemia from 1333 to 1378. He wanted his capital, Prague, to be a great political and cultural center, and in 1348 established a university modeled after the Universities of Paris in France and Oxford in England. The exchange of ideas that flourished at Charles’ university profoundly affected the religious thought of this time. (CH, 2000, p. 35).

Often, Jan Milic is called the “Father of the Czech Reformation,” but he was not able to carry forward what he had begun. He died while defending his cause before accusers in the Papal Court who deemed him a heretic. In 1391, his disciples established the Bethlehem Chapel, a public center in Prague for preaching and worship. Jan Hus was appointed chaplain there in 1402. From the pulpit in
Bethlehem chapel, Hus preached with great power and persuasion to a large number of followers. At the same time, he emerged as leader at the University of Prague serving as both a dean and rector. Hus trained in theology and appealing to the masses, became widely known as a popular religious leader. He insisted that the Christian Church was the Invisible Body of Christ composed of all the redeemed of the ages. They were God’s chosen elect known only to Him. “The unity of the church,” he wrote, “consisted of the concept of predestination, since it’s individual members are united by it and in blessedness.” Hus’ ideas ignited a national reform movement in Bohemia with revolutionary implications. He insisted that the Scriptures be in the language of the people and that there was a normative rule of faith and conduct for all believers. He defied his archbishop’s order to stop preaching. From his point-of-view, he was committed to a greater authority - the expressed law of Christ as set forth in the Holy Bible. He insisted that he must be corrected from the Scriptures before he would retract his views. This did not mean, he had little respect for the tradition of the church, but rather that the church’s tradition could not be placed above the written Word of God. (CH, 2000, p. 35).

Hus supported the Doctrine of Transubstantiation, which held the bread and wine offered at the mass, was transformed by the priest into the actual body and blood of Christ. He argued that when priests failed to give the faithful both species, by withholding the cup of wine from the laity, they became “thieves of the blood
of Christ.” The sacrament of the “Lord’s Supper” was prominent among the Hussites. They often celebrated it under open skies on mountaintops. The Hussites emphasized obedience and discipline and called for a return to the examples of Jesus and the early Apostolic Christian Church. Like Milic before him with his ministry to prostitutes and the poor, Hus with his devotion to Jesus, the King of the Poor, took seriously the mandate to reform the church and society—with special care given “the least of these.” The emphasis found in the Hussite movement would later be picked up by Calvin and the Reform Tradition in Western Europe and most importantly, by the English Colonies in the New World. Scholars of the church history see this Czech movement as the “First Reformation. (CH, 2000, p. 4).

Martin Luther in 1517 will claim continuity with Hus. He emphasized preaching, studying the Scripture, and eliminating clerical abuse. He rediscovered the Augustinian Doctrine of the Invisible Church, which enabled him to criticize contemporary church practices in the light of God’s sovereignty over time and eternity. (CH, 2000, p. 4).

The three leading movements of the sixteenth century reformation on the European continent were Lutheranism, Calvinism and Anabaptism. Lutheranism was adopted and defended by a large number of German princes. This meant that the Lutherans found political security to a large extent where it took root.
was, therefore, little Lutheran immigration to the new world as a result of persecution. In Germany, the Peace of Augsburg established the principal; “the religion of the prince determined the religion of the people” and thus, many German principalities were either Lutheran or Roman Catholic because the established state religion. This trend would continue in the Scandinavian countries (Norway and Denmark in 1527 and Sweden in 1593). In southern German (Austria), which would remain Roman Catholic, the dissenters were persecuted and as a result, some came to America. As a whole, however, Lutherans did not come to America because of religious persecution but for economic advantage. (Sweet, 1942, p. 13).

Of greater significance for religiosity in Colonial America was Calvinism. Initiated in Geneva, it was not only a creed but also a partnership between religion and government with the state serving as the protecting arm of the church. Lutheranism, in contrast, had grown up under a situation in Germany in which religion was recognized as occupying a separate sphere from that of the state. In Lutheranism the duty of the church was to establish the “Kingdom of God” on earth; in Calvinism it was the duty of both the state and the church to work intimately toward salvation. For these reasons Lutheranism had little influence in shaping the political ideas of Colonial America. The Church of England (Anglican) was established by Henry VIII and as it evolved later in the sixteenth century
would incorporated some of Calvin’s ideas but it will be the Puritans, dissenters from the Church of England, who while pressing for further reformation in England, accepted the designation of Calvinist. (Heimert and Miller, 1976, p. 38).

In Germany, the Lutheran Reformation, which started as a national movement, became middle class in its orientation, while the peasant movement in that country broke into many different fragments gathering under the name Anabaptists. By the latter part of the sixteenth century there were some forty different Anabaptists sects representing a variety of religious opinions in Germany. After 1640 they began to be known as Mennonites, after Simon Menno, a Dutch priest, who in 1536 renounced the Catholic faith and threw his lot to the peaceful wing of the Anabaptists becoming their respected leader. The Anabaptists were outlawed in practically every country in Europe except Holland. They were unprotected and on the defensive. Their refusal to bear arms or to take an oath of allegiance to the crown brought misunderstanding and persecution. The Diet of Spires (1520) provided that they should be executed without a trial for they were considered by other Protestants and Catholics as disloyal, rebellious and untrustworthy subjects of the state. It is estimated that some five thousand suffered martyrs’ deaths. With little opportunity in their native lands for the cultivation of their religious life and economic opportunity the Anabaptist constituted an
increasing body of colonist for the New World. (Sweet, 1976, p.14 and Smith, 1929, p. 37).

The course of the Reformation in England followed much the same pattern as in Germany. At the center was the Anglican State Church, which at the time of its establishment was not Protestant in the European continent’s sense of the word. In fact, the only change made in it by The Act of Supremacy (1534) was the transfer of religious authority from the Pope to King Henry VIII. In doctrine and worship the English Church remained Roman Catholic. It is true that the king abolished the monasteries and the charities and confiscated their lands and endowments; but it was not for the purpose of reform or for transforming the English Church into a Protestant one. It was for the financial and political gain. It would be later, that the English Church would be purged of elements of its Roman Catholicism. The Sacrament of Confession was abolished and the celibacy of the clergy was abandoned. Latin gave way to the English language in church services. The Protestant interpretations of the Sacrament of Holy Communion replaced the Doctrine of Transubstantiation (it becomes a commemoration of the Last Supper not the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ under the appearance of bread and wine. (Sweet, 1976, p.15 and Knappen, 1939, p. 51). Hence, Anglican religious leaders formed a close relationship between the church and state, with the latter becoming the dominant partner. The dominance of the state over the church was
displeasing to the more Catholic minded Anglicans and the growing numbers of Calvinists or Puritans. But the church was Catholic enough to satisfy moderate reformers and they made up the majority of the English people. There came to be in England then, three major religious parties. In the center were the Anglicans established by law and closely allied with the government. To the right were the Roman Catholics, made up of the landed gentry whose wealth and position made them naturally conservative. On the left were the Puritans, or the extreme Protestants, constituting people holding different shades of religious opinions but all agreeing in their dissatisfaction with the established English Church. The presence of these dissatisfied Protestant groups in England and the political agitation that they precipitated would influence the course of the colonization in North America. More importantly, their interpretation of Christianity would eventually become the religion of the African Americans. (Sweet, 1976, p. 16).

The members of the Anglican Church in England settled in the New York and the southern colonies (Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia). The number of English Roman Catholics coming to America was insignificant when compared to the left wing Protestant groups who immigrated. They kept a low profile and would not make a significant impact in North America until the latter part of the nineteenth century when Catholics from Ireland, and eastern and southern Europe immigrated in America. During the Colonial Period, they were concentrated in the
Maryland Colony and then in small numbers. Their brand of Christianity had little effect on the American colonies and African Americans. (Sweet, 1976, p. 18).

It will be the left wing Protestants (Puritans) who will evolve into Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptist and Methodist, that will play an important part in America’s colonization and the religion of African America. They began to signify an attitude of mind toward religion and initially included all those who wanted to “purify” the church of those religious practices and ceremonies they considered anti-Christian. In England, just as with the Mennonite Germany, the Puritans had little chance to come to their full economic and religious development. They faced bitter laws which were instituted everywhere against them. The New World furnished them opportunities, which the Old World denied. In America, small, radical and despised sects found an atmosphere that allowed the practice of their religious principles. The religious freedom which America stands for today will be the principle reason these left wing Protestant groups came to America. As these groups evolved their effect on African Americans would be significant. (Sweet, 1976, p. 18).

In conclusion, the vast majority of the English immigrants to the North American colonies will be white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant (WASP). Their religion will dominate America until the twentieth century. It will especially effect the religious directions of African Americans, who were brought here, first as
indentured servants and then made slaves. They will seek the comfort of religion for the explanation of their trials and the promise of a better life after death. The Protestant churches, especially the Baptist and Methodist will be, in effect, their only choice.
Chapter III

The Evolution of African American Christianity During the English Colonial Period

Established in 1482 by the Portuguese and captured by the Dutch in 1637, Elmina was one of the first of the slave factories on the West Coast of Africa and a model for those that followed. A meeting place for African and European commercial ambitions, Elmina consisting of the Castle Sao Jorge da Mina and the town that surrounding it became headquarters of the Portuguese and later Dutch merchants on the Gold Coast with a population of about 20,000. In 1682, it was the largest of some three dozen European outposts in the region. (Kea, 1982, pp. 38-50 and 133-134).

The people of the enclaves both long-term residents and wayfarers joined together genetically. European men took wives and mistresses among the African women, and the children born of these unions helped populate the enclave. Elmina sprouted a substantial cadre of Euro-Africans. They were men and women of African birth, whose swarthy skin, European dress and deportment, acquaintance with local norms, and multilingualism gave them knowledge of African and European ways but denied them full acceptance in either culture. By the eighteenth century, they numbered several hundred in Elmina. Along the Angolan coast they may have been more numerous. (Berlin, 1998, p. 19).
People of mixed ancestry and tawny completion composed but a small fraction of the population of the coastal factories but few observers failed to note their existence which gave their presence a disproportionate significance. Africans and Europeans alike sneered at the Creole’s mixed lineage and condemned them as haughty proud, and overbearing. When they adopted African ways, wore African dress and amulets, or underwent circumcision and scarification, Europeans declared them outcasts. When they adopted European ways, wore European clothing and crucifixes, employed European names or titles, and comported themselves in the manner of “white men,” the native Africans denied them the right to hold land, marry, and inherit property. Operating under European protection but always at African sufferance, the enclaves developed a politics as diverse and complicated as the peoples who populated them and a credit system that drew on the commercial centers of both Europe and Africa. Although the trading castles remained under the control of Europeans, the towns around them developed independent political lives, separate from African and European domination. Their presence enabled new men and women of commerce to gain social prominence; and intermarriage with established peoples allowed the Creoles to fabricate lineages that gained them full membership with the local elites. The resultant political upheaval promoted state formation, along with new class relations and ideologies. (Berlin, 1975, p. 20).
New religious forms emerged and then disappeared in much the same manner, as Europeans and Africans brought to the enclaves not only their commercial and political aspirations but also all the trappings of their cultures. Priest and ministers sent to tend European souls made African converts, some of who saw Christianity as a way to ingratiate themselves with their trading partners and gain a new truth. Missionaries sped the process of Christianization and occasionally scored striking successes. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the royal house of the Kongo converted to Roman Catholic Christianity. Catholicism, in various syncretic forms, infiltrated the coast and spread northward. (Kolchin, 1970, p. 170). Islam filtered in from the north. Whatever the sources of the new religions, most converts saw little cause to surrender their own needs and gave Jesus and Muhammad a place in their spiritual pantheon. New religious practices, polities, and theologies emerged from the mixing of Christianity, Islam, polytheism, and animism. (Berlin, 1998, p. 21).

When arriving in the North American colonies the Atlantic Creoles identified themselves with the colony’s most important institutions registering transactions in county courthouses and celebrating rites of passages in established churches. While they cared little for the precise nature of colonial jurisprudence and religious observance, the existence of courts and churches carried great weight with the black men and women who struggled for a place in colonial society. At
every opportunity, free blacks in Virginia and Maryland had their property and
debts recorded in the courthouse and their wills notarized. Such documentation
afforded the occasion to certify Christian belief. The belief in acknowledging “the
Lord Jesus Christ” was another marker of belonging. For like reasons, black people
baptized their children and selected godparents from among the leaders of the
colony. Occasionally, they adopted orphaned black children, giving them parents
in a manner that confirmed their commitment to conventional family arrangements
assuring white neighbors that they raised their children “in the knowledge of our
Savior Christ Jesus.” (Breen and Innes, 1980, pp. 1640-1676).

In New Netherlands, the diverse needs of the Dutch mercantile economy
strengthened the slave’s hand relative to their owners. Far more than Maryland or
Virginia in mid-seventeenth century, New Netherlands rested upon slave labor.
The prosperity of the Netherlands and the opportunities presented to ambitions
men and women in the far-flung Dutch empire reduced the number of free Dutch
immigrants available to New Netherlands and limited its access to indenture
servants. To populate the colony, the Dutch West India Company scraped the
Atlantic basin for settlers, accepting German Lutherans, French Huguenots, and

At first, the Dutch West India Company housed its slaves in barracks and
worked them under an overseer. But before long some of the company’s slaves
secured the right to live out and work on their own in return for a stipulated amount of labor and an annual tribute. Free to reside independently and frequently to work on their own, they mastered the Dutch Language, took Dutch surnames, attached themselves to the Dutch Reformed Church and most importantly, established families. During the first generation, some twenty-six black couples took their vows in the Dutch Reformed Church in New Amsterdam where they also baptized their children. Suggesting the strength of family ties, church records generally named the father, not the owner, of the newly baptized. Black families witnessed the baptism of one another’s children rarely calling upon white people to serve in this capacity. Upon occasion, they legally adopted orphaned black children knitting the community together with a web of kinship and documenting their commitment to what the Dutch would deem conventional family relations. (Berlin, 1998, p. 51).

The aspirations of black people in New Amsterdam were not confined to family and church. In 1635, within less than ten years of the arrival of the first black people, a group of company slaves understood enough about the organization of the colony and the operation of the West Indian Company to petition the corporate headquarters in Amsterdam for payment of wages. Indeed, black people participated in nearly every aspect of life in New Netherland by the middle of the seventeenth century. They sued and were sued in Dutch courts, and they drilled in
the Dutch militia. Slaves as well as free blacks traded independently, accumulating property and establishing the foundation of an independent economy. Thus, the connections that the first generations of African Americans established with English institutions in the new world Virginia and Maryland were duplicated in New Netherlands by other Africans who forged ties with similar Dutch institutions.

The periodic upheavals that peeled away the patina concealing inter-racial activities also revealed the complex underworld where black people free and slave, gathered for after-hours conviviality. White northerners “feigned outraged” at the extent of such activities, but could hardly deny knowledge of their existence. Their slaves publicly consorted with sailors and servants, and interacted with them whenever an opportunity presented itself. The Atlantic Creoles early identification with established churches arose perhaps more to secure a place in society than from a commitment to Christianity. Although churchmen allowed slaves to register their marriages and baptize their children, they showed no systematic interest in slaves’ conversion and sometimes went out of their way to denigrate people of African descent. (Hastings, 1906, pp. 548-555).

The founding of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) in 1701 changed the relationship between black people and the Anglican Church, the most important Christian denomination in the middle colonies. Armed with a special mission to bring Christianity to the slaves, SPG
missionaries commenced the work of conversion, often in direct oppositions to owners, who feared that baptism would mean freedom. Although the missionaries did not support the leveling implications of conversion, they did little to convince suspicious slave owners of the same. Nonetheless, black people saw allies among the missionaries. Early in the eighteenth century, black men and women crowded into Elias Neau’s SPG school in New York. Following Neau’s death, his successor reported that “swarms of Negroes came about my door…asking if I would be pleased to teach them to build on Mr. Neau’s foundation.” Although no one came forward to take Neau’s place as a catechist to the black people of New York, a steady stream of slaves most of them connected to the city’s wealthiest merchants continued to be baptized, married, educated and buried in Anglican churches in New York and other northern cities. However, Neau’s estimate that one black person in ten accepted Christ appears overly generous. (Berlin, 1998, p. 60).

While slaves mixed with whites at both the top and the bottom of the social order in the northern colonies, they preferred to spend their free time with those who most fully shared their own origins, status, and circumstances. During the 1690s, white New Yorkers complained repeatedly about the “tumultuous gatherings” of slaves on the Sabbath. According to one informant, “Philadelphia’s blacks gathered on Sundays and holidays and were seen dancing after the manner of their several nations in Africa, and speaking and singing in their native dialects.”
To a considerable degree, slaves sometimes joined in this “great concourses,” pushing the number of congregants into the hundreds. The frequency of such gatherings and their perceived threat to public order provoked northern jurisdictions to prohibit black men and women from congregating, especially on the Lords’ Day. (Watson, 1830, p. 62).

The north’s charter generations greatly expanded the culture of the Atlantic littoral. By the eighteenth century, most blacks in the north were brought into the world by a black midwife, married by mutual consent, and were buried in an African graveyard with what one Christian missionary called: “ridiculous heathen rites” performed their own people. Because white northerners excluded black corpses from their burial grounds, the graveyard became the first truly African American institution in the northern colonies and in mainland North America. Confronted by the all too obvious mortality of their human property, slave owners retreated in horror from the responsibility of buying their slaves, a distasteful and often costly obligation. Conversely, while slaveholders lamented the dispatching of their slaves to eternity, missionaries bemoaned the absence of Christian burial. As early as 1699, twenty years after the first slave arrived in Philadelphia, a separate section of the Strangers Burial Ground had been allocated to black men and women, and slaves were protesting that they could not secure enough time off from work to bury their dead during daylight hours. (Berlin, 1998, p. 62).
While something less than a metropolis, Charlestown, South Carolina, was a magnet for runaways. Some only wanted a few days’ respite from slavery, but others hoped to make a permanent escape on some visiting vessel. For Atlantic Creoles it was the sea, not the backcountry that provided the surest route to freedom. In Charlestown itself, few black people won their freedom, and there developed no free black population to compare with that of New Amsterdam. In short Charlestown’s significance for black life was not as an island of freedom in a sea of servitude, but a meeting ground in which slaves from throughout the low country could gather on occasion to the “prejudice of their masters and apparent hazard of peace.” (Wood, 1974, pp. 99-103).

Thus, during the first years of settlement, African American and European-Americans culture and society evolved along parallel lines with a large degree of overlap. South Carolina’s charter generations spoke far better English than the slaves who succeeded them, perhaps better than any other black people to inhabit the Carolinas prior to the American Revolution. Numbers combined with other circumstances to allow Carolina’s charter generations a large role in shaping their society, creating similarities in the development of the lives of Atlantic Creoles and the colonies farther north. (Berlin, 1998, p. 71).

During the last decade of the seventeenth century, however, economic and social changes undermined these commonalities and set the development of black
life in South Carolina and the rest of the south on a distinctive course. The changes that truncated the charter generation in South Carolina and compressed it into slavery at the end of the seventeenth century assured the survival and the prosperity of the charter generations in Florida. The rapid expansion of the English settlement in South Carolina deepened the fears of Spanish officials in Florida. They searched for allies against the growing menace to the north, and could find only one reliable friend, their own slaves and those of the Carolinians. Hence, they offered freedom to those who escaped if they accepted Roman Catholicism as their religion and would serve in the militia. Atlantic Creoles were quick to recognize that the enemy of their enemy could be a friend. An alliance was sealed which spurred the growth of Creole Society in Florida. (Dunlap, 1933, p. 24, Landers, 1984, pp. 296-302, TePaske, 1975, pp. 13-14).

Spanish raiders took the first steps toward the alliance in 1686 when, in assaulting Edisto Island, they carried off some dozen slaves. The governor of South Carolina demanded their return, along with others who successfully escaped to Florida. Once they arrived there, it became difficult for their owners to retrieve them; as Spanish officials would not surrender their co-religionist. The escapees were integrated into the black community in St. Augustine as soon as they were baptized and learned their catechism, although they prayed, as one Miguel Domingo told a Spanish priest in Kikongo. The former Carolina slaves did more
than pray. As there numbers grew, black militiamen augmented by their continued 
stream of Carolina fugitives, took a more active role in the border warfare against 
their former owners. The former slaves’ presence and the Spaniards’ promise of 
freedom, military commissions, and even a “A coat face with velvet,” augmented 
the steady stream of runaways to Florida. Among those enlisted in the militia was 
one Francisco Menendez, a former slave who may have adopted the name of one St. 
Augustine’s most powerful magistrates. Menendez’s heroics in repelling an 
English attack on St. Augustine in 1728 had won the attention of local officials and 
he received a special commendation from the Spanish Crown, along with the 
promise of freedom. When he was not freed, Menendez and his fellow militiamen 
petitioned the governor of Florida and then the bishop of Cuba for their liberty, 
which they eventually received. (Landers, 1990, p. 13).

To better protect St. Augustine, the governor of Florida established a black 
settlement to the north of the city. Gracia Real de Santa Teresda de Moses was a 
walled fort surrounded by some ramshackle huts. It served as a barrier against 
another English assault on St. Augustine and an agricultural settlement, for the 
former slaves planted substantial crops in nearby fields. The governor placed 
Menendez in charge. Whatever their agricultural objectives and religious 
aspirations, the black men and women stationed at Moses understood that their 
future was tied to the strategic purposes of the settlement. They pledged to “shed
their last drop of blood in defense of the Great Crown of Spain and the Holy Faith.” Within St. Augustine, Florida’s charter generations expanded in new directions. The disproportionately male fugitives intermarried with Indians and newly arriving slaves, many of them from Spain, Cuba, and Mexico. As their connections grew, old hands and new arrivals created a tight community whose lives revolved around the militia and the church. In 1746 black people composed about one-quarter of St. Augustine’s population of 1,500. Like the charter generations in the Chesapeake and New York, they sanctified their marriages and baptized their children in the church, choosing godparents from among both the white and black congregants. From the perspective of the blacks, that the church was Catholic rather than Anglican or Dutch Reformed, was less important than membership in it, for it knit black people together in bonds of kinship and incorporated them into the larger community. (FHQ, 37, 1958, p. 5).

The plantation revolution came to Virginia with the thunder of cannons and rattle of sabers. In quick order, they elaborated a slave code that singled out people of African descent as slaves and made their status hereditary. In the years that followed, as the number of European servants declined and white farmer migrated west, the great planters turned to Africa for their workforce. During the last decades of the seventeenth century, this new order began to take shape. As Virginia’s economy stumbled into the eighteenth century, the grandees prospered
as the profit of slave economy mounted. The triumph of the planter class began the transformation of black life in Virginia. Following the legalization of chattel bondage in the 1660’s black slaves all but replaced white indentured servants as the main source of plantation life. Planters also enslaved Native Americans under new legislation that declared those taken in war be held as slaves for life. But the Native American population was dwindling at the end of the seventeenth century; hence, Africans became the object of the planter’s desire. Between 1675 and 1695 the, Chesapeake tobacco planters purchased more slaves than they had in the previous twenty years. In 1668 white servants had outnumbered black slaves more than five to one in Virginia’s Middlesex County and much of the Chesapeake region. By 1700 the balance of bound labor had reversed, and Virginia counted more black slaves than white servants. (Kulikoff, 1986, pp. 37-42, Menard, 1975, pp. 30-32, Berlin, 1998, p. 110).

The transformation sped forward with increasing velocity in the 1730s. During that decade the number of forced immigrants averaged over 2,000 per year and sometimes rose to twice that number, as slaves replaced indentured servants on large plantations and the smaller farms. Men and women with filed teeth, plaited hair, and ritual scarification (which slave owners called “country markings” or Negro markings”) were everywhere to be seen. Their music (particularly their drums) filled the air with sounds that frightened the European-American settlers,
and their pots, pipes, and other material effects left a distinctive mark in the landscape. An American missionary stationed in Delaware found it difficult to converse with Negroes because they had a language peculiar to themselves. It was a medley of Negro and corrupt English, which made them unintelligible except to those who conversed with them for many years. The language of black America turned from the Creole of the Atlantic world to a mixture of English and the languages of the African interior. Whereas the Atlantic Creoles had beaten on the door of the established churches to gain a modicum of recognition, the new arrivals showed little interest in Christianity. The clergy who placed them outside the pale of civilization dismissed their religious practices as idolatry and devil worship. The white Americans found the manner in which the new arrivals spoke, prayed, married and buried their dead to be foreign in ways that the charter generations was not. Africa had come to Cheapeake Colonies. (Berlin, 1998, p. 110).

As they took control of a larger portion of labor, slaves also reformulated their religious life. Some discovered Christianity. They were, to be sure, a tiny minority of the whole. They numbered in the hundreds and the slave’s population of the Chesapeake could be counted in the thousands. Still, the new Christians seemed to be the very men and women most in touch with the changing currents of Colonial life. They were literate, skilled and well traveled. A handful attended the schools established in Williamsburg and Fredericksburg by the Society for the
Propagation of the Gospel. Anglicans ministers converted or baptized others. Many more were attracted to the new Evangelical Protestant sects that took root in Virginia and Maryland during the 1740s and then spread northward, first under the leadership of New Light Presbyterian, then Methodist, and finally Baptist preachers. (VMHB, 1985, pp. 247-78, Jones, 1961, pp. 12-23, Tate, 1965, pp. 73-85).

Whatever the African American slaves thought of the Evangelicals’ religious aesthetic, they understood that the new religion recognized the spark of divinity in every man, encouraged fellowship, and respected the Godly no matter what their status. In God’s eyes, all were equal, for the greatest slaveholder was as corrupt as the lowliest slave. Slaves also appreciated that the Evangelicals despised the opulence and pretension of the planter class. Perhaps a people who suffered so much found attractive the notion that their abuse, like Christ’s suffering, might have some larger purpose and that their suffering would be exchanged for everlasting glory in heaven. No doubt the Old Testament story of triumphant liberation of God’s chosen people resonated among the slaves, and the prospect of the “Great Jubilee” that accompanied liberation was incorporated into African American theology. Whatever the particular mix of theology and practice, some slaves embraced the new religion and grasped Evangelical fellowship. (Berlin, 1998, p. 138).
When the revival known as the Great Awakening began in the mid-eighteenth-century black people were at its center, celebrating spiritual equality in their search for the New Jerusalem. White preachers encouraged black converts and welcome their black brothers and sisters into the fold, as nothing demonstrated the transformative power of Christ’s message as their conversion. Black people for their part saw new opportunities. They welcomed the chance to articulate openly their own religious vision and, occasionally, to participate as equals in matters of church discipline. Inevitably, the rush for spiritual equality became entwined with the desire for worldly equality; something that the rising class of slave artisans and hirelings had come to believe was there due. However carefully white Evangelicals sought to separate the two messages, the slaves sought to combined the two. Samuel Davies, the Presbyterian Evangelical from whose Virginia church much of the new religious radicalism, emanated, found the slaves he had awakened eager to make the connection. “There are multitudes of them,” asserted Davies, “who are willing, and even eagerly desirous to be instructed, and to embrace every opportunity for that end.” (Berlin, 1998, p. 139).

The desire for instruction, however, went only so far. Before long, black people took control of their own religious education, interpreting the evangelical message in light of their unique experience and incorporating biblical stories into their own spirituality and African theology. Black men and women sized the
initiative and created new forms of worship. In time, black preachers became an increasingly visible part of the evangelical awakening. When Jupiter, a six-foot insurrectionist, fled from his Virginia plantation, his owner noted he was “a great New Light preacher.” He would be followed by others, like Primus, an active, artful young man of twenty who had been a preacher since he was sixteen years of age, and did much mischief in his neighborhood. By the American Revolution, black churches began to appear. (Jackson, 1931, pp. 168-239, Sobel, 1979, pp. 199-203, Berlin, 1998, p. 140).

The links between Christian piety and salvation on one hand, and the hope for material advancement on the other, grew steadily among the new converts and especially the black artisans. The mixture of spiritual validation and revolution moved swiftly as blacksmiths, wagoners, coopers, carpenters and boatmen, whose numbers had swelled with changes in the Chesapeake economy, accepted Christ. The combination awakened hopes for freedom in this world, as well as in the next. When Evangelical Christianity arrived in the person of Methodist George Whitefield in the 1740s, slaves on the plantations of Hugh and Jonathan Bryan accepted Christ because the message of salvation contained within it the possibility of deliverance from slavery. At least Bryans’ slaves thought so but not the neighboring planters, who put a prompt end to his activities. Still, the seed of Christianity was sowed within the black community and inadvertently linked
salvation to liberation. After being dragged before the General Assembly and forced to recant their errors, the Bryans withdrew their public support for the conversion of all slaves, although they continued to Christianized their own. The Evangelical awakenings that had begun in 1740s, reignited in the 1780s. Beginning with a series of revivals along the James River. In 1785, the movement spread quickly, stoked by the growth of the Baptist Church in Virginia and the Methodist Church in Maryland and Delaware. Even more than in the pre-revolutionary period, the movements began to harness a growing antislavery sentiment and a willingness to allow slave and free black members to participate in some aspects of church governance and discipline. Within the white population, Evangelical preachers were the most determined opponents to slavery. But whether it was the hope of eternal salvation or temporal equality that drew slaves, black men and especially black women began to come to Christianity in unprecedented numbers. (Frey, 1993, pp. 23-44).

The Evangelicals’ antislavery moments soon passed. Antislavery preachers faltered in the face of planter opposition and their own quest for respectability. White Evangelicals bridled at the equation of slave and slaveholder as brothers and sisters in Christ. The fear that spiritual resurrection would lead to social insurrection necessitated a withdrawal of the hand of Christian fellowship. But slaves who had adopted Christ as the savior maintained their commitment to the
Evangelicals’ spiritual and social promise. Although still but a tiny portion of the slave population (not more than 10 percent at the turn of the century) black converts filled churches and camp meetings. In the portion of the upper south west of Maryland, black people composed 40 percent of all Methodists in 1794 and 1795. They were even more prominent in some Baptist congregations. Black believers took to the pulpits themselves, and a small cadre of black ministers could be found scattered throughout the region, preaching openly to blacks, and occasionally mixed congregations. Their clandestine services were even more active. Several, like the fugitive Nat Turner, who “pretends to very religious, and is a Baptist preacher,” or the slave Peter, “who was fond of conversing on religion, and professes to be in the Baptist church, “ or George, who could deliver many texts of Scripture, became leaders of the nascent black church. (Clark, 1958, pp. 403, 503).

The process by which new world Christianity gave form to an African religion sensibility had begun in the south as well as in the north, but the southern the Evangelical retreat from abolition and its acceptance of slavery slowed the rate of conversion. The hollow responses of Evangelicals to black men and women who asked, “What have you got for me?” did nothing to aid the cause. Nonetheless, black Christians began the process of joining Christ’s mission to the advancement of their people and themselves. Like many ambitious black men and women, free
black preachers gravitated toward the growing towns and cities of the region. Prior to the revolution, the emergence of cities like Norfolk, alongside the administrative centers of Annapolis, Williamsburg and Philadelphia provided the Chesapeake region with the beginning of an urban network. The postwar economic expansion stimulated the development of a host of greatly enlarged and sometimes new urban place such as Alexandria, Frederick, Fredericksburg, Lynchburg, Petersburg, Richmond, and most importantly Baltimore and Philadelphia. (Brownwell, 1977, pp. 23-51, JSOH, 45, 1979, pp. 26-44).
Chapter IV

The Rise of the African American Independent Church

in the New Republic to 1816

The black religious experience is the matrix out of which the black church tradition is born. It has its roots in Africa. Hence, any in-depth study of the black church must begin with a look at the traditional religion brought over by various West Africans who were pressed into slavery. Slavery struck a terrible blow to the African’s worldview and value system. The survivors are still reeling from its impact today. The most important inheritance of black Americans from Africa, however, is not musical or rhythmic, but lies in the nature of philosophy. (Roberts, 1980, pp. 39-40).

The similarities between many European and African cultural elements enabled the slave to continue to engage in his/her traditional activities or to create a synthesis of European and African culture. In the process of acculturation the slaves made European forms serve African functions. An example of this is religion. Christian’s forms were so similar to African religious patterns that it was relatively easy for the early slaves to incorporate them with their traditional practices and beliefs. In America, Jehovah replaces the Creator, and Jesus, the Holy Ghost and the saints replaced all, the lesser god. After a few generations, the
slaves forgot the African deities represented by the Judo-Christianity but in other facets of their religious services they retained many African elements. (Roberts, 1980, p. 41).

The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts organized in London in the year of 1701, as the proselytizing arm of the Anglican Church was one of the first to reach out to the blacks. During eighteenth century the colonies of the New World constituted the principal field of missionary endeavor for this organization. During that century, in North America, there were 250,000 settlers (both white and black) living in heathenism while others were adhering to almost every variety of strange faith. The work of preaching to these people was too important to be entrusted to individual enterprise and too expensive to be successfully prosecuted by the heads of Church only. Hence, the Anglican Church, with the help of the government reached out to save souls for Christ. The ministrations of the Anglican Church were limited because of economics to a few places in Virginia, New York, Maryland and the cities of Boston and Philadelphia. To reach its goal the Society endeavored to use missionaries as a direct means to convert the heathen of all races, whether European, Native American or African American. (Pierre, 1916, pp. 349-360).

From the very beginning of this work the conversion of the slaves was just as important to the society as that of bringing the whites or Indians into the church.
The first really effective work of the society was done in South Carolina. A Mr. Thomas, of Goose Creek parish, instructed the Indian and Negro slaves in his vicinity. He directed his attentions to the Negroes in 1695 and ten years later counted among his communicants, twenty blacks, who with several others “well understood the English tongue,” and could read and write. The missionaries sent out by the society, however did not cease to labor in behalf of the slaves, and the number of masters willing to have their slaves instructed gradually increased. Among these liberal owners were the following: John Morris, Lady Moore, Captain Davis, Mrs. Sarah Baker at Goose Creek, Landgrave Joseph Morton and his wife of St. Paul’s, the governor and a member of the Assembly, Mr. and Mrs. Skeen, Mrs. Haigue and one Mrs. Edwards. (Pierre, 1916, p. 351).

Blacks were attached to the Christian faith by a strong religious bent in their heritage. Slaves took the initiative to translate their African beliefs into English and Christian terms. When possible, they sorted through the Bible and selected the ideas useful to them in view of their slave experience. By the time the masters were willing to concede souls to the slaves, and become satisfied that the Christian faith could be used to enforce obedience, they were building their own invisible institution - the underground black church. They, transformed religious traditions developed in Africa and transported to the new world through the encounter with Christianity, into a unique form of worship. With this experience there sprang up a
black invisible church during slavery and the black institutional church, which would become a force in the early part of the nineteenth century before emancipation. This invisible institution a term coined by E. Franklin Frazier, describes the earliest slave invitation into Christianity. It was an underground church for the practice and experience of religion by blacks as slaves. Hence, the Christian religion provided a new basis of social solidarity for slaves. Since practically all of their African cultural and religious bearings were destroyed, Christianity offered a new orientation for existence in the alien environment. At the same time the slave owners began to use the Christian religion as a means of social control. White Christians used simple catechisms to convince both blacks and themselves that slavery had divine sanction as an institution, and that eternal salvation was the slave’s reward for faithful obedience and service to the master; while religious assembly was looked upon as a dangerous thing for it were the seeds of rebellion.

Control of the slave was exercised through religion, whether encouraged as a type of escape from the trouble of the world or used as a form of indoctrination. The all-slave church gave birth to the spirituals with their apparent emphasis on a promised land in the hereafter. The spirituals, however, may not have been as “otherworldly” as they seemed. They were of double meaning, and slaves interpreted the language of the spirituals in a manner unsuspected by the whites. In
slave-attended churches with white pastors, a special catechism, of which the following is an example, was prepared for the darker brother.

Q. Who keeps the snakes and all bad things from hurting you?
A. God does.

Q. Who gave you a master and a mistress?
A. God gave them to me.

Q. Who says that you must obey them?
A. God says that I must.

Q. What book tells you these things?
A. The Bible.

Q. How does God do all his work?
A. He always does it right.

Q. Does God love to work?
A. Yes, God is always at work.

Q. Do the angels work?
A. Yes, they do what God tells them.

Q. Do they love to work?
A. Yes, they love to please God.

Q. What does God say about your work?
A. He that will not work shall not eat.
Q. Did Adam and Eve have to work?
A. Yes, they had to keep the garden.

Q. Was it hard to keep the garden?
A. No, it was very easy.

Q. What makes the crops so hard to grow now?
A. Sin makes it.

Q. What makes you lazy?
A. My wicked heart.

Q. How do you know your heart is wicked?
A. I feel it every day.

Q. Who teaches you so many wicked things?
A. The Devil.

Q. Must you let the Devil teach you?
A. No, I must not. (Fishel and Quarles, 1970, p.114).

Blacks who met together without authorization were guilty of civil disobedience. In 1819, South Carolina enacted a law against “all unlawful assemblies.” Patrol officers were charged with the responsibility of upholding the law. These officers were often poor, landless whites who were jealous of the slaveholders and held the slaves in the greatest contempt. Since the poor whites could not attack the master, they took their frustrations out on the slaves. As the
slave owners feared insurrection, worship for blacks was restricted, monitored, or against the law. A secret place became necessary for black worship but was hard to find with “patter-rollers” (patrollers) all around. If they were caught worshipping, harsh punishment or a brutal death was a possibility. Yet the slaves still gathered in worship. (Roberts, 1980, p. 46).

These secret meetings and assemblies gave rise to the independent black churches. The earliest known black church was established at Silver Bluff, South Carolina, 1773. Later in the eighteenth century, the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church and the St. Thomas Protestant Episcopal Church sprang up in Philadelphia in 1794, under the auspices of the Benevolent Free African Society. Ten free black men instituted the first organization of the African Methodist Zion denomination in New York City in 1796. (Roberts, 1980, p. 48).

Scores of slaves attended Charles Colcock Jones’ services at Sunbury, Massachusetts, and the other seven missions he conducted. The slaves and free blacks responded positively to other white missionaries as well. The white missionaries’ services and instruction served a religious and social function for bonding people and contributed to the evolution of the black church in antebellum America. But in their construction of the black institutional church, slaves also added other practices essential to their need to express spiritual reality in a fashion closer to the African worldview. Based on Christian language, biblical phraseology
and imagery, African rhythm and trance possession, services in Hush-Harbors were held by slaves all over the south. Hush Harbors were meeting places, usually secret, which slaves created outside the plantation quarters. As humans have historically created sacred places out of natural elements—rivers, hills, forest, swamps, or coastal areas—slaves met in wooded and other naturally secluded areas. The term Hush-Harbor is an obvious parallel to Brush Harbor, a name that white evangelicals gave to the camp meetings, revivals, and places of worship created in burns or groves on the frontier. However, as the name Hush Harbor implies, the site and occurrence of the slave meetings were often secret. As Sallie Carder, a former bondswoman recalled, at nights “dey would slip off and git in ditches and sing and pray”. (Cornelius, 1999, p. 9).

Many slaves reported that although they were allowed to attend church services on plantations, they wanted to hold secret meetings to share what they remembered of African lore and wisdom and to control of their own practices. As Emily Dixon explained, “Us could go to white folk’s church, but us wanter go whar us could sing all the way through, an ‘hum’ long, an’—yo all know, jist turn loose lack.” Black folklore and folk sayings recall these secret meetings. According to a black minister on the Sea Islands, the expression “let morning star greet you on yo prayin’ ground” referred to slaves who snuck to their secret places in the woods late at night but kept an eye out for the morning star. When it started
twinkling, slaves knew morning would soon follow and it was time for them to return home before they were missed. (Daise, 1986, p. 64).

Hush Harbors were usually built in or near the quarters, typically in forest, in dugouts and hollows, or by riverbanks. Susan Rhodes recalled “we used to steal off to de woods and have church, like de spirit moved us—sing and pray to our own liking and soul satisfaction…We had dem spirit-filled meetings at night on de bank of de river and God met us dere.” Wooded areas were so identified as sites for black religion that after being granted their freedom many blacks began their churches with a Brush Arbor. Mary Veals could precisely locate the Brush Arbor where she worshipped: “on de old Banduslian Spring Hill, near de south fork of Scotts Creek.” Mary Smith remembered the Oak Arbor where her church began after freedom with “Uncle Tony Murphy” as preacher. The owner gave Mary’s mother a “spot of ground and de lumber fer our church,” and this became sacred ground. By the time Mary was interviewed in 1937, black worshipers had built a second church on the same spot. Slaves made Hush Harbors of poles and brush and sawed rough planks from small logs for seats. Former slaves, remembered turning a big pot upside down for noise control: Clara Young remembered that, after a meeting had lasted all day, “when dark come, de man folks would hang up a wash pot, bottom up’ ards in de little brush church-house us had so’s it would catch do noice an’ de oberseer wouldn’ hear us sing’ and shoutin.” (Sobel, 1979, p. 170).
By the 1840s a typical hush-harbor meeting of African Americans had become “an amalgam of African initiation practices and camp meeting Christianity,” which included “bits of Christian doctrine and ritual” with a “focus on African initiation and ritual events.” The structures for these meetings resembled that established by the white camp meeting and the white missionary service: first opening with a spiritual, then a prayer and a Scripture lesson, followed by testimonials from the congregation, the preacher’s sermon, and closing with hymn singing. However, Hush-Harbor services showed how blacks could take white ritual and create unique services with elements from the African and slave experiences. Typically, a Hush-Harbor meeting began when slaves “created an understanding among themselves as to the time and place of getting together.” This was often followed by “the first one arriving breaking boughs from the trees, and bending them in the direction of the selected spot.” When others arrived they would “first ask each other how they feel (state of their minds). The male member would then select a certain space, in separate groups, for their division of the meeting. Then they began praying and singing all around, until they generally feel quite happy.” (Cornelius, 1999, p. 10).

A lined hymn or a “sperchul” provided the opening music. In “linin,” also called “deaconin,” an elder would sing two lines of a hymnbook song, which would be repeated by the group worshipers in “wailing cadences.” Black
worshipers lined songs as slow initiations to more intense use of music and rhythm later in the service. When a “sperchul,” began the meeting, it was usually joyous or prayerful and had a “community theme.” Such a spiritual might mention the individual members present, either by name—Sister Tilda, Brother Toney, or by description—the strangers over there in the corner—in effect including all in the experience of mutual exhortation and support. Spirituals could be community songs, sorrow songs or songs of protest. A former slave gave an example of a communal spiritual: “I’ll tell you: it’s dis way. My master called em up and order me a short peck of corn and a hundred lashes. My friends see it and is sorry for me. When dey come to de praise meetin’ dat night dey sing about it. Some’s very good singers and dey…work it in you know: till dey get it right; and dats’ de way.” (Raboteau, 1978, p. 265).

Singers were able to take others’ suffering and work it into their song. It was more common however, for service to begin with the European hymnbook and then turn hymns into the spirituals to initiate the movements toward trance and ecstasy. After the first hymn or spiritual came prayer, a major focus of the Hush-Harbor service. Prayers were lengthy and, like, the “sperchul,” supported members of the group by name. In addition, it was an essential community action, former slaves remembered getting together frequently, often secretly, to pray; as William Moore recalled, “half de life is in prayer.” Former slaves also remembered some
whites, who were uneasy about communal praying. Moore’s owner, “Marse Tom,”
did not mind singing, “but we better not let him cotch us prayin.” Marse Tom’s
slaves prayed anyway. They appointed a lookout, “ then they circle themselves on
the floor of the cabin and pray.” Prayer had overtones of liberation. Julia Malone
saw women “stick their head in the “washpot and talk out loud.” Her foster mother
told her they were, “prayin de Lawd to take dem out from bondage. Dey think it
right to pray out loud so de lawd can hear dey mustn’t let de massa hear them.”
(Cornelius, 1999, p. 11).

The cadence and the intensity of slaves’ prayer made them unique and
meaningful. Describing a slave’s camp meeting after the Civil War, David McRae
observed that, “their prayers are full of fire and often exceedingly vivid and
impressive.” “The women…are as free to lead as the men.” The group member
who gave the prayer and the lesson from the Bible, had learned to read or could
skillfully memorized interpret what has been heard. (Raboteau, 1078, p. 265).

Any member of the congregation could lead prayers but a person who was
chosen for their ability to interpret the sacred word conducted the sermon. Some of
these preachers were literate, but even those who were not demonstrated skill and
power with language. Clara Young describes her favorite preacher, Matthew
Ewing, in terms of his skill and power. “He was comely, black as night, and he
sure could read out of his hand. He never learned no real readin’ and writin’ but he
sure knewed his Bible and would hold his hand out and make like he was readin’ and preach de purtiest preachin’ you ever heard.” The preacher based his folk sermon on biblical phrases, verses, and whole passages he knew by heart and delivered them with a whole range of oratorical devices: repetition, parallelisms, and dramatic use of voice and gesture. The sermon would begin with normal prose and build a rhythmic cadence, regularly marked by the exclamations of the congregation and climax in a tonal chant accompanied by shouting, and singing. The folk preacher used vernacular English and concrete examples related to ordinary life. Black folk preachers, in their use of everyday words and symbols gradually increased the cadence and active delivery of their message and built up the excitement that would lead, to the shout. After the sermon the shout incorporated the rhythm and dance, which moved worshipers into trance possession and communion with the spiritual world. To untrained observers, the shout was “wild” and “barbaric,” but practiced observers and former slaves who had taken part it always remembered its careful structure. The shout would start with a leader calling out a verse of a spiritual, and the shouters responded by shuffling in a circle. This direction was always counterclockwise, and a watchful deacon made sure that the feet never crossed. When the singers who stood outside the ring took up the chorus, the shout proper would begin. The shouters shuffled rapidly to the beat announced by the hand clapping and foot-tapping of the chorus
of singers, who were then said to be “basing” the shouters. (Cornelius, 1999, p. 12).

The shout could go on for hours as its performance become louder and more energetic. The percussive rhythm from the swaying, stamping, singing, and dancing, resulted in some of the worshippers “getting the power or being” filled with the spirit.” Joe Oliver recalled “that dey singin” and shoutin’ till de break of day. Some goin’ into trances an’ some speakin’ in what dey called strange tongues…” Through the hypnotic result, a few slaves gained the opportunity for physical liberation. Oliver recalled that some blacks, pretending trance possession, slipped from the meeting held on the plantation and supervised by the master and ran away. Whites posted reliable slaves at the end of the door to stop this from happening, but the watchers protested, “dey can’t stop de Holy Ghost.” Most participants, though, experienced spiritual, not physical, liberation. The excitement of the Hush-Harbor transported them “out of the valley of oppression up to a spiritual summit” and helped them to endure the trials of their lives. (Pitts, 1993 , pp. 93-94).

Rise of the Independent Black Church: Richard Allen

Richard Allen is renowned as one of the first black ministers in America church history. As a young man he was one of several African –American evangelicals who fit W.E.B. Du Bois’ familiar descriptions of “the most unique
personality developed by the Negro on American soil” the black preacher. (Du Bois, 1903, p. 141).

Freelance black exhorters and self-appointed preachers were working among the Methodists in the years after the Revolutionary War, including one runaway slave, described by his new master as having lived with a Methodist family “on terms of perfect equality” and being accustomed to “instructing and exhorting his fellow creatures of all colors in matters of religion duty.” (Raboteau, 1978, p. 146).

During Allen’s young adulthood, the best-known early black Methodist traveler was a freeman by the name of Harry Hosier. He was the kind of preacher genius that the Methodist were known to produce. He was especially effective with white audiences in Virginia and the north where he accompanied the white Methodist Bishop Francis Asbury. In New Rochelle, New York, Freeborn Garrettson found that “the people of this circuit are amazingly fond of hearing Harry, and in Hudson, New York, the different denominations heard him with much admiration,” and the Quakers thought that, as he was unlearned, he preached by divine inspiration. In the 1780s, the New York Methodist advertised, Hosier’s arrival in the city describing him as an ignorant man of letters, who could preach in the Methodist Church like a person with learning. Hosier suffered a painful decline in the years to follow, succumbing to alcoholism before he died in Philadelphia in 1806. (Andrews, 2000, p. 139).
Hosier’s fame did little to alter one of the key obstacles African American men confronted in the Methodist movement, for while the new church welcome black preachers and evangelists, it was very hostile to their advancement in the church. The assumption that the church meeting served as the “university” for preachers seeking to rise in the church was exclusionary for blacks. Their regulations specified that only white leaders were to be appointed to head black church assemblies. (Andrews, 2000, p. 140).

The Methodist Episcopal Church’s (MEC) attitude toward black preachers, first embracing their talent and then denying them promotion the hierarchy goes a long way toward explaining Richard Allen’s behavior as his prominence rose with the movement. For while he was loyal to the faith that had freed him from slavery and sin, he was eager to escape the official dictates of a church that bound him to second-class citizenship. (Andrews, 2000, p. 140).

Allen’s conversion to Methodism and emancipation took place in the heart Methodist territory, Kent County Delaware. Allen was born around 1760 on the Whitehall plantation, owned by Benjamin Crew, a prominent Philadelphia lawyer. Crew sold Allen, his parents and three siblings to Stokeley Sturgis, a lesser planter in the same neighborhood. After Allen’s mother was sold to pay off Sturgis’s debt, he experienced the varying conditions of rural slave life from the big house to the small farm, and from the security of his mother’s protection to forced labor.
Stokeley Sturgis’s slave Richard Allen, his brother John, and a sister, discovered the Methodist way of preaching sometime in the 1770s. Allen joined a Methodist church led by white leader John Gray near Sturgis’s farm and began to make contact with the leading preachers in the movement. Like other slaves in the area, Richard and John, spent their free time growing produce to sell on the local market and delivering part of the profits to the Methodist preachers. At the same time they attended their Methodist Church meeting once a week and did public preaching every other week.

Sturgis and his wife succumbed to the new movement and attended their servant’s prayer meeting. Eventually, they permitted religious assemblies in their parlor, under the leadership of the local Methodist leader. Sometime in September 1778 or 1779, Freeborn Garrettson, at the beginning of his antislavery crusade, joined the Sturgises and their servants for religious worship. Shortly after attending these services Sturgis offered to release Richard from bondage for 60 pounds in gold and silver (about $2,000) to be paid off in five yearly installments. The agreement was sealed on January 25, 1780, on the eve of Richard’s twentieth birthday. A similar manumission was drawn up for Richard’s brother John. The two adopted their last name, and Richard set out on an extended itinerancy to pay the price of his emancipation.
Freed from forced toil, Allen hired himself out as a day laborer, cutting cordwood and earning a monthly income of $50 working in a brickyard. In the early years of the war, he was able to transform a teamstering job into a salt dealership, a better outlet for his entrepreneurial talents. In August of 1783, just three and half years after the original agreement, he paid Sturgis the price of his manumission, at the same time presenting his former master with a gift of eighteen bushels of salt. Allen then began to move on to his calling. (Singleton, 1960, pp.18-19, Nash, 1991, p. 139).

For a number of years, Richard Allen’s life followed the course of many other Methodist preachers in the making. Leaving Delaware, he traveled to New Jersey, where he met the charismatic preacher Benjamin Abbott, a “friend and a father to him.” He then traveled in wider circuits through the Middle Atlantic and South, including two months as a missionary among an Indian tribe. Like other evangelist he relied on hospitality of Methodist followers, white and black, such as Caesar Waters and his wife, both slaves in Radnor Township outside of Philadelphia. He preached on a Sunday to a large congregation and one of several white parishioners gave him a horse, a symbol of a preacher’s independence. In 1785 Bishop Asbury invited Allen to accompany him on a circuit of the south, but laid out conditions Allen found unacceptable; sleeping in the bishop’s carriage rather than in the residences of the Methodist’s host as well as having to avoid
contact with the slaves. Referring to the insecurities of a freeman’s life, Allen, unlike Harry Hosier, rejected Asbury’s offer. Allen felt that people ought to lay aside something while they were able, to support themselves in time of sickness or old age. While Asbury would be taken care of, Allen “doubted whether it would be the same for himself.” Absorbed with issues of economic autonomy, he returned to Pennsylvania where he alternatively preached and worked. In early 1786, Allen accepted one of several entreaties by the Methodist Church and he became a preacher in Philadelphia. Allen traveled for a while on the Lancaster circuit in Pennsylvania where he was a success among the town’s German population. By 1785, he was a member of the Fell’s Point Chapel, home to so many freemen and women. It was here in Pennsylvania that he received a call from the elder in charge of St. George’s in Philadelphia to preach to the black members of that church. (Andrews, 2002, p. 142).

Philadelphia was an attractive destination for a young black man keen to make his own way. Most important was the growing free population of the city. By 1790, more than 2,000 blacks, nearly 1850 of them free, lived within the limits of Philadelphia, a small but growing city of 44,000. By 1800, fueled by immigration, Philadelphia’s black population had nearly tripled, but its slave population had dwindled to insignificance. Blacks composed close to a tenth of the city populations. The majority, almost all free people, lived in the Northern Liberties
and in the New Market, Cedar, and Locust Wards skirting the mariner’s district of Southwark. (Nash and Soderlund, 1991, pp. 101-103).

Most worked in the unskilled occupations of food vending, chimney sweeping, laundering, and domestic work. But the early success of James Forten, an African American war veteran and artisan, who had taken over his former employer’s sail-making business, suggested the possibilities at hand. By 1795, thirty-eight families of “free people of colour” lived in the city; and blacks owned ninety-nine single-family dwellings, worth an average of $200 each.” (Andrews, 2000, p. 143).

In addition to providing a haven for ex-slaves in search of work and the company of fellow free people, the city was the capital of the nation’s first anti-slavery movements. While its status as the early seat of the federal government brought few benefits for African Americans, Philadelphia’s abolitionist activism set it apart. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS), founded in 1775 and reorganized in 1787, attracted the attention of the city’s elite, including Benjamin Franklin as well as numerous Quakers, Baptist, and Episcopalians. The society has been credited with successful passage of Pennsylvania’s two gradual emancipation laws in 1780 and 1788 and was among the nation’s most important advocates for freemen and women. Hundreds of former slaves, like Allen himself, deposited their manumission certificates with the PAS for safekeeping and were to rely in
future years on its defense against the claims of slaveholders and slave kidnappers. Philadelphia’s black population was a mixture of slaves and a free, aspiring labor class. As early as 1781, the efficacy of black activism in the city was evident when a group of African Americans successfully petitioned the state legislature to oppose measures designed to delay the enforcement of emancipation in the state. (Andrew, 2000, p. 143).

Arriving in Philadelphia in 1786, Richard Allen took the full measure of this urban panorama. He observed, that a large opportunity opened in seeking and instructing his African brothers and sisters, who had been long forgotten religiously with only a few attended public worship. Moving away from his earlier mission as a black evangelist crossing racial lines, Allen now focused on recruiting blacks into the Philadelphia Methodist Society. Over the next several years, he preached in common areas in the city, organized black prayer meetings and quickly succeeded in gathering together an informal black Methodist meeting of forty-two members. He also befriended several African Americans at St. George’s, among them Absalom Jones, a fellow former slave from Delaware and twenty-five year resident of the city. Together Allen and Jones devised a plan to meet the needs of Philadelphia’s growing numbers of black inhabitants. The two men decided that nothing would better suit these goals than the formation of a religious society. (Andrews, 2000, p. 144).
The pursuit of the idea of an exclusively black church was to consume the energies of Allen, Jones, and their allies for the next seven years. Initially, Allen’s plan for a separate worship attracted only three of the black parishioners of St. George: Doras Giddings, William White, and Absalom Jones. The officials at St. George’s and the Methodist Society opposed the idea of a separate black church from the start. Anxious to stay within the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC), Allen and Jones were initially forced back upon a less controversial project: the organizing of the Free African Society (FAS), a self-help association for Philadelphia’s freemen, women, and their children. As announced in the group’s opening minutes, Jones and Allen proclaimed “a love to the people of their complexion whom they beheld with sorrow, because of their irreligious and uncivilized state.” While the creation of some kind of religious society had been put aside for the time being, the two men had determined that a society should be formed without regard to religious tenets so long as the members lived an orderly and sober life, supported each other in sickness, and cared for members’ widows and children. William White and Dorus Jennings, two other black Methodist associated with Jones and Allen, quickly joined the group, and other followed: Quaker Cyrus Bustill; William Wilshire, a free black manumitted through the efforts of Methodist Lambert Wilmer the year before and probably from St. George’s; Moses Johnson, also recently freed; William Gray, the proprietor of a
West Indian fruit and confectionary shop; Caesar Cranchell, Cato Freeman, William Gardiner, Cesar Worthington, and Henry Stewart—men whose names appear repeatedly in the FAS records, and several of whom may have been members of the Anglican, now Methodist Church. (Andrews, 2000, p. 144).

The FAS was an unaffiliated with any church, but the FAS minutes are replete with Methodist Church values. The fold culture of slavery would be left behind as free Africans accepted the egalitarian message of the Scriptures and the call to religious sobriety. Shared goals did not necessarily translate into consensus on how to reach them, and in 1791, Allen, favoring Methodism over Quaker influence on the group was “expelled” for attempting to sow division among them. Nevertheless, the FAS temporarily resolved their disagreement by returning to a more sharply defined version of Allen and Jones’s original proposal: the creation of a Christian but nondenominational Union Church, one that would serve black members from all the various congregations in the city. They then contracted Benjamin Rush, Philadelphia’s best-known antislavery spokesman, and Robert Ralston, one of the city’s new merchants, for assistance in sponsoring the church. In July 1791, Rush presented the “Sundry Articles of Faith and a Plan of Church Government”, to a dozen free Africans, meeting at William Wilshire’s house. The group agreed to Rush’s draft, as did the FAS in a formal session on the 28th of July. (Rush, 1948, p. 202).
In an address published at the end of August, the representatives of the African Church, Absalom Jones and seven other society members, set out the purpose of their association and sought further fiscal support. The church, the address asserted, aimed to gather the otherwise scattered black religious fold under one roof. Why convene separately from white? Because, the address continued, the degree to which men are more often influenced in their morals by their equals than by those placed over them by “accidental circumstances;” as well as the ties of color and condition that held blacks together, “all evince the necessity and propriety of their enjoying separate, and exclusive means, and opportunities of worshipping God, of instructing their youth and taking care of their poor.” Rush, himself an Evangelical, who increasingly conceived of the American Revolution as a moral as well as a political victory drafted these statements. At the same time, Rush’s outline included another vital provision: the appointment of church elders. The plan contained with it the germ of black religious independence: a black ministry. (Andrews, 2000, p. 145).

The scheme for the Union Church would not require members to abandon their current denominational affiliation, proposing instead a form of dual membership. The officials at St. George’s were unsympathetic with the plan and used “degrading language” in responding to the FAS action, suggesting a rising
awareness that the new society might draw off black members from the MEC. (Singleton, 1960, pp. 25-26).

The effort to form an African Union Church moved apace over the winter and spring of 1791-1792. In February, the Free African Society purchased two lots on Fifth Street for an African Chapel. In March they began to circulate subscription papers to help defray the cost of construction. The racial stresses generated by these efforts boiled over at St. George’s during Sunday services in June 1791. That month, Allen, Jones and several of the other Methodist Free African Society members arrived for worship at the chapel and were directed to sit in the galleries running down either side of the church hall - a sign of trouble to come. Shortly into the service, as singing ended and prayer began, the Free African Society representatives were suddenly and forcibly interrupted by Henry Manley and another trustee demanding that they move to the back of the galleries where they would be less visible. Allen recalled: “I raised my head up and saw one of the trustees, Henry Manley, having hold of Absalom Jones, pulling him up off his knees saying, you must get up - you must not kneel here.” Jones insisted that they wait out the remainder of the prayer. Disturbed by this display of white dominance, Allen and his fellow FAS members walked out of the chapel. Allen, still angry about the incident years later, recalled that they were now free to worship. This
raised so much excitement among the citizens, that Allen believed the trustees were ashamed of their conduct. (Andrews, 2000, p. 146).

The MEC’s segregating tendencies, both accepted and resented by its black followers, came to a head with the incident at St. George’s. The crisis was exacerbated when the new presiding elder, John Mcclaskey, was asked by Allen’s group to show “where we have violated any law of discipline of the Methodist Church,” and declared that if Mcclaskey turned them out illegally, they would “seek further redress.” In a pointed reference to their spiritual equality with white Christians, they reminded the elder that “we were dragged off our knees in St. George’s Church, and treated worst than animals.” Mcclaskey pronounced the group “not Methodists.” In a second meeting, the black parishioners insisted that they would not return to St. George’s. (Douglas, 1862, pp. 119-122).

In November 1792, further fueling Mcclaskey’s wrath, the Union Church chose it’s first elders: former Methodist Absalom Jones, William White, and Dorus Jennings. In April of the following year, the society initiated construction on their new building. (Andrews, 2000, p. 146).

Allen’s struggles over his continuing connection with the Methodist were profoundly significant in the early black Methodist movement. The temptations for Allen to leave the Methodist behind were many. In 1793, a gathering of white workingmen and free Africans in celebrating the building of the new African
Church held out the promise of greater unity between black and white workingmen in the city away from the influence white church hierarchies. The ongoing battle with the Methodist elders however, suggested that advancement into the preachers’ ranks would be closed. (Nash and Soderlund, 1991, pp.119-121).

Allen was also one of Philadelphia’s rising black entrepreneurs and received greater esteem from his own religious society. Through a chimney-sweeping business, a venture in nail manufacturing, and a show dealership, Allen had risen swiftly through the black trades, employing sweeps, indentured servants, and apprentices, and purchasing a property at 150 Spruce Street to house his growing family. By the late 1790’s Allen, along with Absalom Jones, Cato Freeman, and William White from FAS, owned substantial housing stock in the expanding black district of the New Market Ward and had accumulated a considerable fortune in rents. While he and Absalom Jones stressed their support for poor blacks in their defense of black nurses and gravediggers accused of profiting from the 1793 Yellow Fever epidemic, the temptations of the comforts of prosperity might have been enough to draw him from the Methodist - but he stayed. A significant change in the plans for the Union Church provided Allen with an extraordinary opportunity for professional as well as social advancement. Later in 1793, the proposers of the black church began to abandon the dream of black community unity in exchange for affiliation with the Protestant Episcopal Church. In one of
the few instances in which the Episcopalians upped their Methodist competitors, they exempted blacks from the Greek and Latin tests usually required of Anglican clergy. Allen turned the offer down. In his place, Absalom Jones was ordained as deacon of the first African Protestant Episcopal Church, soon to be called St. Thomas’s. The Methodist Free Africans, including Dorus Jennings and William White now formally left the Methodist to join the Episcopal congregation. (Andrews, 2000, p. 147).

Allen’s, reason for staying with the Methodist were, straight forward. Recalling this critical decision, Allen told them FAS that he could not accept their offer. “As he was a Methodist and that he could not be anything else but a Methodist.” I was born and awakened under them, and I could go no further with them for I was a Methodist.” Methodism, furthermore, was the religion of Allen’s people. “I was confident that there was no religious sect or denomination would suit the capacity of the colored peoples as well as the Methodists,” he insisted years after the event. The plain and simple gospel was best for all people, especially for the poor and uneducated. The Methodists were the first people that brought glad tidings to the colored people, in an approach based on spiritual preaching that had benefited thousands. The Methodists, Allen emphasized, were a missionary movement, one that, intentionally or not, had transformed slaves and oppressed free blacks into religiously empowered, racially, conscious, independent
agents. Methodism, furthermore, provided potentially limitless chances for advancement for black preachers if the white leadership would only permit it. (Andrews, 2000, p. 147).

Allen was not willing to return to the church in the same capacity as in the past. In 1794, as St. Thomas’s prepared to open. Allen met with ten other black Methodists, who agreed to refurbish a house to meet in for religious worship separate from the whites. For this purpose, the group transported the frame of a blacksmith’s shop to a lot on Sixth Street that had been in Allen’s possession for several years. The “African Methodist Episcopal Church,” or Bethel, as the spin-off society was christened was supported by Allen’s old mentor, Freeborn Garrettson, with Bishop Francis Asbury preaching the inaugural sermon. (Andrews, 2000, p. 148).

The approval of Bethel’s congregation may not have seemed particularly risky to the Bishop Asbury at first. He noted that our colored brethren are to be governed by the doctrine and discipline of the Methodists. Bethel’s trustees also downplayed the radical implication of their actions in a public statement published that November, since many problems had arisen from white and black people mixed together in public assemblies, especially in a place of worship. The trustees declared, they had found it necessary to provide a house for them to assemble separate from their white brethren. The arrangement, the trustees explained, would
prevent offense on both sides. Their society would remain “in union with” the MEC forever and did not intend anything bordering upon schism. They would rejoice in the prospect of mutual fellowship existing between them. In keeping with this agreement, Bethel also accepted whites as class leaders.

The mission of the church’s organizers became clearer when preacher Ezekiel Cooper was called on to draw up Bethel’s Articles of Association in 1796. The article emphasized the racial distinctiveness of the congregation. The society would be groomed by a board of black trustees, and membership restricted to “Africans and descendants of the African race.” All complaints against Bethel’s congregants were to be judged by the elder, with the trustees acting as his “advisers and counselors” and with the possibility of appeal to the trustees and other church officers, provided these officers be of the African race. While the elder was to nominate preachers for Bethel, (expected to be from among the white evangelist) he was to obliged to license any Bethelites to preach who would appear to be adequate to the task, and have the proper gifts to appear in public. Bethel would be a training ground for black preachers. A number of these provisions were exceptions to the Methodist discipline, which reserved authority over most chapel affairs to quarterly meetings and the preacher’s conferences. Allen later discovered that the Article Two in particular, in which Bethel, was said, to be held in perpetuity, might be interpreted to vest legal control over the Bethel property in the
MEC’s general conference. Conflicts with the elders at St. George’s over this and other issues would continue to occupy Allen’s attention over the next two decades. Bethel’s first congregation was comprised of just sixteen men and fourteen women, or approximately half of St. George’s black membership, a small gathering compared to the several hundred worshipers meeting at St. Thomas’s. (PMHB 108, 1984, p. 484).

The congregation appears to have been composed exclusively of free but poor black people, the majority of which were residents outside the city’s central wards. Those for whom identifying information survives were current or future members of Allen’s family, including John Allen, Richard’s brother, a tenant of the Methodist William White, Flora Allen, Richards’s first wife; and Sarah Bass, “a poor black widow” who served as a nurse in the 1793 Yellow Fever Epidemic and was later to become Allen’s second wife. Bethel’s trustees have left firmer traces. William Hogen, a rag-gatherer, lived near the Allens on Spruce Street; Thomas Martin, a sawyer, resided on Cherry Street; John Morris, a master chimney sweeper by trade owned property in the South Mulberry wards; and Jonathan Trust, a coachman resident on Penn Street. The only former member of the FAS appears to have been Robert Green, later a contender with Allen for control of the Bethel Church. (Andrews, 2000, p. 149).
In the next few years, the new chapel grew rapidly. By 1795, membership had risen to 121, individuals and by 1787, to 163. St. George’s opened a second black Methodist chapel called Zoar in the Northern Liberties in 1796 and another called Beulah was in operation by 1802. Among Zoar’s class leaders was William Sturgis, a probable relation of Richard Allen’s old master in Delaware. But Zoar’s accounted for a small proportion of Philadelphia’s black Methodists, most of whom were to be found at Bethel. Black and white congregants flocked to the church. In 1798, Allen and Jupiter Gibson wrote to Ezekiel Cooper regarding a revival; “Our evening meetings mostly continue until 10 or 12 o’clock, & from 4 to 8. Our churches are crowded, particularly Bethel. The chapel building in fact is already too small. We are now making more seats and thinking we need to enlarge the church. For at prayer meetings the house is crowded and persons under conviction for weeks come there to get converted.” By the spring of 1801, more than 250 new white members joined Philadelphia’s Methodist Society, raising the total number of members at St. George’s and Ebenezer Chapel in Southwark to 660, while the numbers of black Methodist, chiefly the African Methodists at Bethel rose to 448. African Methodist now constituted an extraordinary forty-percent of the Philadelphia membership and outpaced even the number of African Americans in Baltimore. By 1813, Bethel’s 1,272 - strong congregation was more than twice the size of St. Thomas’s. (JNH, 1. 1916, p. 441).
Most important, the Bethelites and the other African Methodists constituted an increasingly race-conscious segment of the city’s black population. When in 1799, Allen and Jones spear-headed a petition to Congress calling for an end to slavery and the slave trade, close to twenty-percent of the seventy-one black signers, were African Methodists.

Allen made a significant sacrifice by staying with the Methodists. Despite the tremendous potential for an African American fraternity of evangelists in the Protestant Episcopal Church and its innovative adoption of black ordination, the Methodist Conferences consistently declined to bring black preachers through the ranks. It was not until June 1799, when Bishop Asbury recognized Allen’s special gifts by ordaining him as a local deacon, that Bethel’s founder achieved a status approximating those of white preachers on the bottom rung of advancement. A year later, MEC’s general conference gave the bishops authority to ordain local deacons from among black men where separate houses of worship had been established, but the measure was strongly resisted among the southern movement’s members. Their reluctance to sponsor a black ministry was one of the greatest failures of the MEC. Restriction on the rise of black men in the movement and on contact between the races at revival meetings did not discourage slaves and free blacks from becoming Methodists. In fact, barriers within the church, as well as its informality, inspired black leaders in the other Middle Atlantic towns to take the
same route to separation as had the Philadelphians. The die had been cast; the independent African Methodist Church was born. (Andrews, 2000, p.150).

In the ensuing years, separate African Methodist chapels were established in three other mid Atlantic cities (Baltimore, New York, and Wilmington, Delaware).

In Baltimore as early as 1787, black Methodists led by Jacob Fortie and Caleb Hyland were meeting for worship in Hyland’s boot-blackening cellar near Belair Market. The activities of the black Methodists in Baltimore cannot be followed as closely as developments in Philadelphia were but their desire for autonomy within the church was just as strong. In 1793, they leased the African School run by the Sharpe Street Abolitionist Society for religious meetings. (Handy, 1901, pp. 23-24).

In May 1795, Bishop Francis Asbury met with a delegation of Baltimore’s black citizens to discuss “building a house and forming a distinct, yet Methodist church.” Later, he would complain that “the Africans of this town desire a church, which in temporals, shall be altogether under their own direction, and ask greater privileges than the white stewards and trustees ever had right to claim. (Andrews, 2000, p. 151).

Eventually the Sharpe Street group led by Jacob Gilliard and Richard Russell won support from the MEC for autonomy, and in 1802, bought a building and lot after profiting from investments from land sales in the city. In 1805, the old
building was replaced with a new one for use as a school as well as a chapel for African Americans. Although the chapel was unincorporated, the trustees controlled the property and provided an outlet for the talents of a number of black preachers living in the city and led by loyal deacon Daniel Coker. Through the first decade of the nineteenth century, the Sharpe Street Chapel continued to serve as the social and religious center of African Methodist life in Baltimore. (Andrews, 2000, p.151).

In New York, the move toward separation was headed by a mix of local preachers and prominent laymen. In 1796, Peter Williams and James Varick, Francis Jacobs and licensed preachers Abraham Thompson, June Scott, Thomas Miller, and William Miller. They petitioned Bishop Asbury for permission to meet in separate quarters. Asbury agreed so long as the black meetings were held at the same time the main services were. The group, calling themselves the Zion Society, began gathering on Cross Street at a cabinetmakers shop refitted as a chapel. Black Methodist Church membership continued to be significant in New York but not as significant as in the cities to the south. In July 1800, two lots were leased at Church and Leonard Streets and by means of public subscription and the Zion Society was able to construct a building of worship (Rush, 1843, pp. 9-11).

The following year, the Zion Society was incorporated as the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and signed Articles of Agreement with the
MEC. Control of the African Zion Society by a presiding elder, the bishop and the General Methodist Conference was encoded into several articles, but the requirement stood that none but Africans or their descendants were to be chosen as trustees and members of the AMEZ. In addition, the leaders were allowed to raise competent preachers from among the congregation providing they were recommended by a majority of the African officers. Like the Bethel Chapel in Philadelphia, the Zion Society was a relatively poor. Unlike Bethel, however, the Zion congregation maintained an amicable relationship with the larger white, Methodist, New York Church. In 1806, three of Zion’s founders (James Varick, June Scott, and Abraham Thompson) were ordained as local deacons. (Andrews, 2000, p. 152).

The African American Methodist in each of the above cities shared a passion for building an institution of their own. The same pattern would occur in Wilmington, Delaware. Never a large group, Delaware’s Methodist population was concentrated in the rural districts. In Wilmington itself, the Ashbury Chapel, at Third and Walnut Streets, was more than half black, with itinerant preachers reporting of a 1799 revival that “the best work seems to be among the blacks.” (Baldwin, 1983, pp. 41-42).

In February 1805, African Methodists in Wilmington agreed to build their own chapel and advertised the plan their local paper. The white trustees responded
by segregating the black members of their chapel into the galleries of the church and complained about broken benches and debris left after the church meetings. They stated that if the black congregants refused to meet in the gallery the door of the chapel would be closed to them. Forty black members, led by Peter Spenser and William Anderson left the chapel and proclaimed a lot at Ninth and Walnut Street as the site of the Ezion African Methodist Episcopal Church, which they soon constructed. Similar to the provisions of the churches in Philadelphia and New York, it held the distinction of being along with those in Philadelphia, Baltimore and New York – independent and black. (Andrews, 2000, p. 152).
Chapter V
Summary and Conclusion

The Great Awakening that extended from 1740-1790 marks the beginning of an aggressive American Christianity. It began with the advance of two or more popular revivalist churches - the Baptist and Methodist. The revivals, especially those following the American Revolution brought in black and white converts. Christianity became a thing of all classes. The Christian message stated we are weak, humble, naked, wretched and blind, and must present ourselves to God for salvation. This message provided help for the slave in his miserable state and Christianity became to him a religious escape. The revivals of this period stood for equality in religion. Social rank counted for nothing with the preacher of the day. The church was now open to all: poor, learned and ignorant, slaves and freemen. Thus, the Methodists not only set out to preach among the slaves, there was also a strong tendency in it to follow courses of action which ran counter to the slave code and social conventions. (JNH, 1931, p. 173).

The Presbyterians never appealed to the blacks so fully as the Methodist and Baptist. The first movement of the Evangelical Churches in the south toward the religious enlightenment of this class took place among the New Light Presbyterians. These Presbyterian leaders taught the slaves to read and spell and
supplied them with religious books. The important point to be noted is that this revival represented the first time considerable numbers of Negroes embraced the Christian religion. In the early Baptist Church the only requirement for preaching was a certain degree of piety and the “call to preach.” This preaching was largely of the informal casual type to an audience of blacks and whites. The willingness shown by Baptist in this matter of preaching or allowing Negroes to exercise their gifts was a great contribution to African American Church. Up until about 1830, the Baptist regularly licensed and ordained Negro ministers. On a whole, it can be said “that slaves were emancipated in fairly large numbers by masters who had come under the influence of the revivals, or not actually emancipated, were accorded a human treatment. (JNH, 1931, p. 179).

The forces that operated in the Negro population for three centuries were of such a nature as to create a distinctly separate Negro world within the American community. It was the system of slavery with its assumption of an inherent difference between the white and black men that gave rise to the deliberate separation of the races. The Christian equalitarianism unleashed by the religious revivals of the eighteenth century was complemented and strengthened by the idealism of the American Revolution. Like Revolutionary ideology, the religious awakening transcended sectional boundaries. Methodist and Baptist Evangelicals crisscrossed the nation and in hundreds of camp meetings made thousands of
converts. Propelled by the revolutionary idea that all men were equal in the sight of god, they accepted black and white converts with enthusiasm. The equality of the communion table proved contagious, and some of the Evangelicals broke the confines of other worldly concerns to make a connection between spiritual and secular equality. While shouldering the responsibilities of freedom, blacks did not immediately form separate institutions. The development of the African Church, for example, was not merely a product of the growth of the free Negro caste. At first, most blacks looked to the white-dominated Evangelical Churches, which made acceptance of the gospel the only criterion for salvation and welcomed blacks into the fold. Free Negroes along with slaves and poor whites found comfort in this open membership policy.

Each Sunday a scene of worship can be found in thousand of black churches across the country. Although only lasting for a few hours, it is a central element of what defines the black Christian experience as housed in black churches. Scholars of African America religious history such as Carter Woodson, Benjamin Mays, and C. Eric Lincoln have agreed on the importance of the black church in the development of black communities and their civil rights. (Pinn, 2002, p. xii).

Three Methodist Churches, three Baptist Conventions and One Pentecostal Church along with smaller black denominations constitute the black church. The black church-speaks to a tradition of Christian commitment that has helped shape
the collective community. It is true that not all black Christians make black churches their spiritual home. The substantial numbers in the Roman Catholic Church for example attest to this; there are two million black American communicants in the Roman Catholic Church. However eighty-percent of black Christians call black denominations their home. A solid portrait of the religious life of black Christians is captured through attention to the African Methodist Episcopal Church; the African Methodist Zion Church; the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church; the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc; the National Baptist Convention of America; the Progressive National Baptist Convention; and the Church of God in Christ. (Pinn, 2002, p. xiii). Some 25 million black Christians across the nation engage in worship each week for the same reason. And they agree, for the most part, that what happens on Sunday during service influences their activities during the week and informs their outlook in socioeconomic, cultural and political realities. That is to say, worship and the beliefs that inform it are more than passive expression of faith. They constitute a major impetus for extending it beyond church walls.

Worship grounded in theological assumptions has not always borne political fruit, as the black church has not been concerned with both the mystery of Christ and with the worldly struggle for freedom and equality. Black religion however, has always concerned itself with the mystery of God, and recently has become
concerned with the yearning of a despised and subjugated people for freedom from the religious, economic, social, and political domination that whites have exercised over blacks since the beginning of the African slave trade. It is this hope for human liberation expressed in theological terms and religious institutions that is the defining characteristics of black Christianity and black religion in the United States.

From the debate over slavery to the civil rights movement, black churches and their ministers have shaped the way political figures and the public view race relations. This commitment to the welfare of humanity is evidenced in an embrace of the social gospel and the impact of Christian principles in daily life. The basic premises of the black churches suggest service to God and to the human community through attention to the message of the Gospel. Black churches are marked by a tentative positioning between two worlds; giving attention to both the secular and the sacred. They have provided a full range of services from salvation to social services. The black church has developed as a response to discrimination that affected both worship and work yet it is not limited to political and social activities. The black churches recognized a Divine motivation for their activities in that word of God requires spiritual and material freedom. Humans were created by God for freedom. Black religion entails an approach to living in the world defined by Divine imperative in an effort to make sense of sacred promises. This
commitment is echoed throughout the history, doctrine, worship and outreach of black churches. It marks the essential elements of black Christianity. Although black churches have at times faltered with respect to this mission, they are concerned with the full range of human needs—spiritual renewal and the demands for a comfortable life. This process began with the secret gatherings of enslaved Africans in Hush Harbors meetings and continues today in the form of established churches found in cities throughout the United States. (Pinn, 2002, p. xv).

In order to keep the slaves ignorant and contended with slavery, slaveholders would not allow religious teachings. On some plantations slaves were permitted to attend the white churches and sit in the galleries or in the rear corners and listen to sermons in which slavery was justified. History shows that the highest and best in any people can be drawn forth only by its own teachers and leaders. Therefore, those black churchmen, who set about the organization of the black church, were spiritual and intellectual emancipators of the race. Richard Allen, the founder of the A.M.E. Church, James Varick, the founder of the A.M.E. Zion Church, Joseph Willis, Andrew Bryan and other leaders who organized Baptist Churches in all parts of the country, and William H. Miles and Richard Vanderhost, who led the movement to organize the C.M.E. Church, deserve the lasting gratitude and reverence of African Americans of whatsoever religious belief. The black church has been the spiritual and moral intellectual lighthouse for black America. The first
schoolhouses for the black citizens were in the black churches. It was here that many blacks received their training in books and dreamed the dreams of future greatness, which made them leaders of their people. To read the list of the eminent leaders of the African Americans of these early years would be largely calling the roll of the first students in the schools held in the black churches. The earliest teachers in these schools were the black preachers who had been taught to read clandestinely by their young masters or mistress in the days of slavery. The black church has saved the soul of the race as well as the souls of its members. When the African American was driven out of politics and legislated out of the right to use the ballot for his protection in the south after the Civil War he/she was thrust into a condition more deplorable in the days of slavery. The effect was destructive to the hopes and ambitions of the forward-looking young people of the race. Many of these entered the Christian ministry and from the pulpit preached a gospel of faith and hope for the race in the future. None but those who lived during those troubled days can estimate the value of the black church and its pulpit to people during that time of crises. African American would have gone down in despair if it had not been for the black church. The church has developed the racial consciousness and preserved the self-respect of the African American. When the leaders in state affairs were sent into obscurity it was the black churchmen who in the dark days of the Jim Crow era developed and sustained in the young and old, the pride of race.
and faith in its possibilities. This helped many to achieve something worthwhile. The black church, gave the African America its first lesson in the management of large organizations, and blazed the way for the social societies and business organizations which are our pride today. They observed how the leaders of the church marshaled the resources of their constituents and with the accumulated sums, built costly houses of worship and cared for the sick and indigent of their membership. Seeing the possibilities of such methods in commerce African Americans began to work to organize resources along these lines. The black church was the pioneer and trail blazer to these ends. (JNH, 1926, p. 7).

The black church has been the beacon of light for African Americans to find peace, safety, social organizations, spiritual needs and educational instructions. The black church has been apart of almost every black family to get its guidance. The black church for my family and my husband’s family played a very important role in developing who we are today.
### Abbreviations

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<td>AHR</td>
<td>American Historical Review</td>
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<td>CH</td>
<td>Christian History</td>
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<td>FHQ</td>
<td>Florida Historical Quarterly</td>
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<td>JNH</td>
<td>Journal Negro History</td>
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<td>SCHM</td>
<td>South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine</td>
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<td>SS</td>
<td>Southern Studies</td>
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<td>VMHB</td>
<td>Virginia Magazine of History and Biography</td>
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<td>WMQ</td>
<td>William Mary Quarterly</td>
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