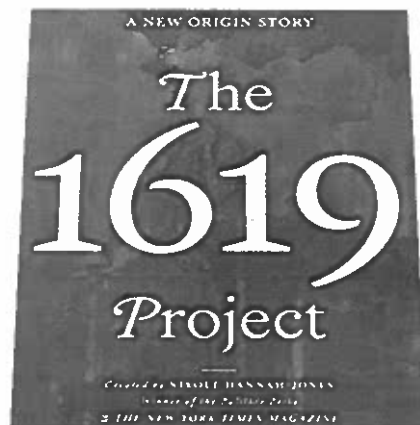




Unpacking Our History Article Packet



A New Origin Story Part 9: Religion and Slavery

**December 8, 2022
6:30 – 8:00 PM**

Zoom ID: 823 648 5349 | Password: 691353

Upcoming Unpacking Our History Programs

January 12, 2023

Religion and Civil Rights

February 9, 2023

Critical Race Theory Part 1

Second Thursday of each month hosted on Zoom

Zoom ID: 823 648 5349 | Password: 691353

Please check out our 1619 Discussion Homepage
heightslibrary.org/services/1619-project

The Library's 1619 interviews are on Youtube
#1619projectdiscussion #heightslibrary

Unpacking 1619 Podcast
New episode every other Wednesday

Contact John Piche at jpiche@heightslibrary.org

Authors in this packet

Anthea Deidre Butler is an African-American professor of religion and chair of the University of Pennsylvania Department of Religious Studies, where she is the Geraldine R. Segal Professor in American Social Thought.

Frederick Douglass was an American social reformer, abolitionist, orator, writer, and statesman

Katharine Gerbner is associate professor of history at the University of Minnesota. Her research explores the religious dimensions of race, authority and freedom in early America and the Atlantic world.

“God damn America.”

The words belonged to the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, the leader of Trinity United Church of Christ, and they ripped through the airwaves in 2008, creating a furor for Senator Barack Obama, who was running to be the United States of America’s first Black president. Obama had been a member of Wright’s congregation for twenty years. He had been married in that Chicago church and had baptized his children there. His relationship to Jesus Christ had solidified in a congregation that, as he later described it, embodied “the black community in its entirety—the doctor and the welfare mom, the model student and the former gang-banger.”¹ The title of his 2006 memoir, *The Audacity of Hope*, was taken from one of Wright’s sermons.

But the prophetic aspect of Wright’s theology, which mounted a direct and forthright critique of American power, would become a problem for Obama. On March 13, 2008, in the middle of his hard-fought Democratic primary with Hilary Clinton, ABC News ran a report called “Obama’s Preacher: The Wright Message?” The segment contained a portion of a Palm Sunday sermon Wright gave in 2003 about the Gospel According to Luke and the peril of conflating divine rule with the rule of national governments. Near the end of this sermon, Wright reached a crescendo as he described the plight of Black people in America:

When it came to treating her citizens of African descent fairly, America failed. She put them in chains. The government put them in slave quarters, put them on auction blocks, put them in cotton fields, put them in inferior schools, put them in substandard housing, put them in scientific

experiments, put them in the lowest paying jobs, put them outside the equal protection of the law, kept them out of their racist bastions of higher education, and locked them into positions of hopelessness and helplessness. The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law, and then wants us to sing “God Bless America.” No, no, no. Not God bless America! God damn America! That’s in the Bible, for killing innocent people. God damn America for treating her citizens as less than human. God damn America as long as she keeps trying to act like she is God and she is supreme!²

The news report aired only the final part of this: Obama’s pastor shouting, “God damn America” again and again. This critique was unfamiliar to most white Americans, many of whom immediately attacked Wright for being unpatriotic, for sowing seeds of division and hate, and for advocating Black separatism. Within forty-eight hours of the ABC News special, Obama had sent out a statement about Wright’s sermon, calling the words of his longtime minister “inflammatory and appalling.” “I reject outright the statements by Rev. Wright that are at issue,” he wrote.³ But it quickly became clear to his campaign that he had to respond more fully to the firestorm. He did so by giving a speech in Philadelphia entitled “A More Perfect Union.”⁴ In that speech, Obama called Wright’s sermon “incendiary language” and went on to say that his pastor’s message “expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country that sees white racism as endemic and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America.”

Obama’s response seemed to be designed to save his political career by presenting himself as a measured, reasoned man who loved America and did not believe that all white people were racists. His speech was widely praised, and it succeeded in its aims: three months later he won the Democratic nomination, and that November, the presidency. But it also revealed a painful truth: at the moment the nation was preparing to elect its first Black leader, the role the Black church had played in bringing about that possibility had to be disavowed. The prophetic power of the church had given Obama his soaring speeches and fervor for change, but it was anathema to the political arena of accommodation, especially during an election cycle.

For many Black Christians, however, Wright’s adversarial tone, rooted in a centuries-long quest for justice and righteousness, was not out of the ordinary at all. Wright was an adherent of Black liberation theology, a concept developed in the 1960s by James H. Cone, who had been a mentor to Wright. Cone argued that the plight of Black Americans must be a central concern of the

church. "Life-giving power for the poor and the oppressed is the primary criterion that we must use to judge the adequacy of our theology," he declared. "Not abstract concepts."⁵ Cone criticized white Christians for what he saw as their historical failure to fight against slavery, violence, and racial oppression; that failure, he argued, had proved their tradition to be an unrighteous one, out of step with the essence of the gospel.

Cone's theology grew out of an even older prophetic tradition. Over the centuries, Black preachers in America have used their pulpits just like Wright did, to challenge the hypocrisy of white America's racism, sometimes with harsh language. Black preaching by historical necessity used the jeremiad, a rhetorical mode of denunciation or chastisement about the corruption of people, events, or nations that stretches back to the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. More than two thousand years later, in the antebellum United States, Black preachers castigated the nation for the evils of slavery. Preaching in the Black church was primarily done by men, in part because of religious prohibitions barring women from the pulpit.⁶ And while Black preachers generally did not confront the issue of unfairness regarding gender, they repeatedly confronted the moral ills of a society built on chattel slavery.

White Protestant Christianity in early American history also inherited the tradition of the jeremiad, but it was put to different ends, focused on an individual's relationship to God, and personal sin, and legislating morality. "The Puritans gave a special supernatural legitimacy to the Protestant work ethic in the New World," the scholar Sacvan Bercovitch has observed. "They raised the success story to the status of visible sainthood." In his book *The American Jeremiad*, Bercovitch points out that the Puritan jeremiad was a lament about how the colonists had neglected to seize the opportunity presented by land they had been given in New England. "The clergy bewailed," Bercovitch writes, "the 'sloth' of those who failed to take advantage of 'this good land whither the Lord has sent us.'"⁷

By contrast, the style of the Black church that developed following the Great Awakening and in the antebellum period was one of prophetic witness to the moral outrage of racism in America. It was the rhetoric of dissent, according to Bercovitch. David Walker, a nineteenth-century anti-slavery advocate and a member of the A.M.E. Church, embraced this approach in his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, excoriating white Christians for their role in the slave trade: "They cram us into their vessel holds in chains and hand-cuffs—men, women and children all together!! O! save us, we pray thee, thou God of Heaven and of earth, from the devouring hands of the white Christians!!!"⁸

In the twentieth century, Black preachers decried lynching, Jim Crow, segregation, police violence, and other moral ills in America. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s leadership in the civil rights movement and his opposition to the Vietnam War exemplify this tradition as well. In a speech at Riverside Church in 1967, he declared that the government of United States was "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today." "If we do not act," King thundered, "we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark, and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight."⁹

But the Black church has not only been a forum for righteous anger. Forged out of slavery, it was also a place of protection and practicality. For many decades it was one of the few places Black people could gather for educational purposes, to arrange mutual aid groups, or to form political organizations. As a result, it has always been a target. As an independent institution operating free of white control and oversight, the Black church had inherent revolutionary potential that often made it an object of white fear and anger. During the widespread violence that followed emancipation, the Ku Klux Klan burned scores of Black churches to the ground, eventually helping to extinguish the promise of Reconstruction. In the buildup to the Wilmington coup in 1898, white "citizens' patrols" harassed Black churches where they suspected leaders were conspiring. During the Tulsa Race Massacre in 1921, white people fired machine guns at the Mount Zion Baptist Church. And on September 15, 1963, members of the Ku Klux Klan bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, killing four little Black girls and injuring many other people.

This long history of violence against Black churches continues in our own era. After Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, the pastor of Flood Christian Church repeatedly called out police brutality.¹⁰ One week after Brown's father was baptized at the church, the building was burned to the ground. The following year, the unthinkable happened: nine members of Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina, one of the country's oldest A.M.E. congregations, were murdered when a white supremacist named Dylann Roof opened fire in a Bible study group that included Reverend Clementa Pinckney, both the pastor of the church and a state legislator.

The murders at Emanuel A.M.E. were devastating. What was also striking to many observers was the speed with which some of the families were willing to forgive Roof. They told him so at his bond hearing just days later. "I forgive you," said Anthony Thompson, whose wife was killed. "My family forgives you." The daughter of Ethel Lance, who was also killed, told Roof, "May

God forgive you. And I forgive you."¹¹ That Sunday, Reverend Norvel Goff, Sr., told the congregation, "We still believe that prayer changes things . . . prayer not only changes things, it changes us."¹² This spirit of acceptance and forgiveness culminated later in the week when President Obama gave the eulogy for Reverend Pinckney and led the congregation in singing "Amazing Grace."

The controversy over Reverend Wright's sermon and the horrific attack on Emanuel A.M.E. bookended the presidency of the nation's first Black president, offering the country different perspectives on the Black church. Wright's theology, his understanding of the gospel as fundamentally about justice and standing with the oppressed, represented to many white Americans the threat that the Black church has historically posed to the nation's status quo. For others, it was the correct response to the violence and injustice that Black people continue to face in this country, violence exemplified by the shocking murders at Emanuel A.M.E. seven years later. The response of some in the congregation following Roof's massacre represented another dimension of the church: a Christian tradition of forgiveness, nonviolence, love, and suffering. To understand how these tendencies have shaped a unique Black American theology, we need to begin where the Black church began, in slavery.

The African men, women, and children who were captured and transported to the Americas on slave ships brought with them their own religious beliefs and practices.¹³ Some were practitioners of African traditional religions like Yoruba and Vodun; others were Muslim or Catholic. But they were all often seen as heathens by the colonists, who found justification for enslaving them in interpretations of biblical scriptures, most notably Genesis 9:25, the "curse of Ham," in which Noah's youngest son, Ham, the father of Canaan, looks upon his father's nakedness and is punished severely: "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren." Theologians of the Reformation period understood Africans to be the descendants of Canaan and, therefore, destined to be slaves.¹⁴

Still, in the North American colonies, modest numbers of free Black and enslaved people baptized their children and observed other Christian practices. Though this was initially limited by English laws that some colonists interpreted as prohibiting the enslavement of Christians, by the second half of the seventeenth century, new laws had clarified the matter. For instance, one passed in the colony of Virginia in 1667 specified that "the conferring of baptisme doth not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage."¹⁵ This led to further efforts to introduce the enslaved to Christianity. In 1701, the

Church of England founded the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, which evangelized to English colonists and non-Christians, including some enslaved people. Despite the new laws, these missionary efforts alarmed many enslavers, who feared that baptism could lead to freedom.

The First Great Awakening saw the rise of religious fervor not only among white Americans but also in both free and enslaved Black people. This revival period, starting in the 1730s, introduced a more emotional and ecstatic religious practice that would also empower the enslaved. In the decades that followed, they would create what Albert Raboteau describes in his groundbreaking book *Slave Religion* as an "invisible institution." There were few formal Black churches at this point, but the enslaved could gather in outdoor spaces and hear from Black preachers an interpretation of Christianity that diverged from the one offered by white churches, which in most cases amounted to: "slaves ought to be obedient to their masters."¹⁶ The Black preachers and the emerging tradition of Black spirituals contributed to a different understanding of the gospel, one that encouraged and supported a longing for freedom.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the Methodist Church provided an institutional home for some Black Christians. Though they were segregated from white parishioners, Black Methodists could join congregations, and they soon made up 20 percent of the church's members in North America. It was in this context that the first "visible institutions" for Black religious practice began to emerge.

In April 1787, just one month before the Constitutional Convention gathered in Philadelphia to draft the nation's charter document, two leaders of the city's small community of free Black people, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, founded an aid organization called the Free African Society to help formerly enslaved people get on their feet. Both had been born into slavery themselves, with Allen purchasing his freedom in his early twenties and Jones being manumitted when he was nearly forty years old. They met at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church, where Allen, who had been preaching since he was a young man, would sometimes lead services for the small group of Black members. Though the Free African Society was initially a non-denominational organization, it provided services in keeping with the gospel of the church, offering various kinds of aid and support to the many widows, orphans, and sick, injured, or destitute Black people, some of them fugitives from slavery, who were arriving in great numbers in the new nation's capital city during those years.

As the population of free Black people in Philadelphia grew, tensions

mounted at St. George's over the increasing number of Black parishioners showing up for services. One Sunday in 1792, a dispute arose over where Allen and Jones would sit and pray. In Allen's memoir, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*, he describes the incident:

Meeting had begun, and they were nearly done singing, and just as we got to the seats, the elder said, "let us pray." We had not been long upon our knees before I heard considerable scuffling and low talking. I raised my head up and saw one of the trustees, H— M—, having hold of the Rev. Absalom Jones, pulling him up off of his knees, and saying, "You must get up—you must not kneel here." Mr. Jones replied, "wait until prayer is over." Mr. H— M— said "no, you must get up now, or I will call for aid and I force you away." Mr. Jones said, "wait until prayer is over, and I will get up and trouble you no more." With that he beckoned to one of the other trustees, Mr. L— S— to come to his assistance. He came, and went to William White to pull him up. By this time prayer was over, and we all went out of the church in a body, and they were no more plagued with us in the church. This raised a great excitement and inquiry among the citizens, insomuch that I believe they were ashamed of their conduct. But my dear Lord was with us, and we were filled with fresh vigor to get a house erected to worship God in.¹⁷

Both Jones and Allen set about raising funds from Black and white Philadelphians to establish churches. Before they could do so, a yellow fever epidemic struck the city. Many of the city's white residents, including Dr. Benjamin Rush, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, erroneously thought that something in the constitution of Black people kept them from catching the virus.¹⁸ So they pressed African Americans into service as nurses, caretakers, and gravediggers. Allen, Jones, and other members of the Free African Society were instrumental in tending to the city's sick, with Allen himself falling ill and recovering. Others were not so lucky. Still, under the leadership of Allen and Jones, the city's Black population performed many noble acts during the crisis. As one Philadelphian wrote in a letter, "I dont know what the people would do, if it was not for the Negroes, as they are the Principal nurses."¹⁹

Allen preached about the demonstration of Christian charity represented by these selfless acts. Nevertheless, when the virus subsided, Black contributions to the city's survival during the epidemic were contested, erased, and denied, with one white printer going so far as to accuse the city's Black nurses

of extorting large fees from their patients and looting their houses. The slander against the city's Black community was so great that Allen and Jones published a response, entitled *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793: And a Refutation of Some Censures Thrown upon Them in Some Late Publications*.²⁰ Their reputations prevailed, and in 1794, Allen was able to garner enough support to start the Bethel Church in an old blacksmith's shop. That same year, Jones opened the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas. Both churches had grown out of the Free African Society, the founding of which one A.M.E. pastor would later refer to as "a Liberty Bell for Black folks."²¹

Allen and Jones were not alone in their efforts to establish independent Black churches in some of the nation's Northern cities. In the 1790s, a Second Great Awakening swept through the country, spreading the gospel even farther. By 1816, Black congregations from Baltimore; Attleborough, Pennsylvania; and Salem, New Jersey, had joined together with the Philadelphia churches to incorporate the A.M.E. denomination, with Bethel as its mother church. In 1819, Jarena Lee became the first African American woman licensed to preach, at Richard Allen's invitation. (Lee had approached Allen some years prior, but he had declined her request; she would continue to preach after Allen's death, and would work with the New York Anti-Slavery Society.)²² Over the next decade, Black people founded other A.M.E. congregations, primarily in the Northeast and the Midwest, and even as far away as Hispaniola, when, in the 1820s, six thousand free Black people emigrated to Haiti from the United States.²³

From the beginning, these A.M.E. congregations demonstrated the crucial role the Black church would play in resisting slavery and oppression. "God himself was the first pleader of the cause of the slaves," Allen wrote in his autobiography.²⁴ In 1830, Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church was the site of the inauguration of the Colored Conventions movement, gatherings of free Black leaders who met to discuss and strategize about educational, political, labor, and legal rights. Allen, then seventy years old, was elected president of the convention, combining the roles of spiritual and political leader in a way that would become common for Black clergy.²⁵ Throughout the nineteenth century, these conventions, which provided a critical foundation for building a political case for abolition, equality, and Black citizenship, were often held in churches.

The gospel clearly contained inspiration for the freedom struggle, and not

always through peaceful means. In the first few decades of the nineteenth century, enslaved people, often motivated by religious fervor, regularly joined uprisings led by Black spiritual leaders. Denmark Vesey, a free carpenter and a member of Charleston's A.M.E. church, made plans for a rebellion in the city in 1822. After his capture and execution, local white residents burned the church—the same congregation Dylann Roof attacked in 2015—to the ground. Nat Turner, a preacher who believed he had received prophetic visions of Jesus's apocalyptic return, led a rebellion in 1831 that killed fifty-five white people. After he was captured and executed, along with some two hundred freed and enslaved Black persons, Virginia enacted laws forbidding Black people from attending religious gatherings without white observers present.

After emancipation, some Black religious figures took a new approach to demanding justice: they ran for political office. One of the first was Henry McNeal Turner, a minister in the A.M.E. Church. Born a free man in South Carolina in 1834, Turner joined the church in St. Louis in 1858 and soon after was ordained. In 1863 he played an instrumental role in forming the first Black military regiment in the Union Army (there would ultimately be 175), and he served as the first Black chaplain commissioned to minister to Black troops. At the end of the war, Turner headed south to work for the Freedmen's Bureau and ended up in Georgia, where he planted numerous A.M.E. churches.

But it was as an elected official that he believed he would have the greatest impact during Reconstruction. In 1868, Turner and more than two dozen other Black men in Georgia won races for the state legislature, running as Republicans. In response, white Georgia lawmakers introduced a measure to expel them. Once Turner realized that those white officials had no intention of allowing him or the other newly elected Black lawmakers to be seated, he wrote a defiant speech entitled "I Claim the Rights of a Man." Though it would be voiced from the statehouse floor, it was very much in the tradition of the jeremiad, delivered from the pulpit, that had already begun to define the Black church in America.

In arguing for electoral legitimacy, Turner pinpointed the core issue in the Reconstruction era: the rights white people had were also now available to Black people. Many Southern white people rejected this idea entirely. On September 3, 1868, along with other elected Black lawmakers, Turner addressed the legislature, demanding that they not be stripped of their elected offices:

If you deny my right—the right of my constituents to have representation here—because it is a "privilege," then, sir, I will show you that I have as many privileges as the whitest man on this floor. If I am not permit-

ted to occupy a seat here, for the purpose of representing my constituents, I want to know how white men can be permitted to do so. How can a white man represent a colored constituency, if a colored man cannot do it? The great argument is: "Oh, we have inherited" this, that and the other. Now, I want gentlemen to come down to cool, common sense. Is the created greater than the Creator? Is man greater than God? It is very strange, if a white man can occupy on this floor a seat created by colored votes, and a black man cannot do it.²⁶

The speech aroused the ire of the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacists. A statement in the Columbus *Weekly Sun*, a local newspaper, declared that "we should be neither seized with anger or regret" if Turner were to be lynched.²⁷ He survived and Congress intervened, compelling the Georgia state legislature to seat the elected Black lawmakers, including Turner. But over the next nine years, Reconstruction would begin to crumble as white politicians, law enforcement, and Christians banded together to push back violently against the autonomy of Black people in the South.

During this period, known as Redemption, starting in the 1870s, white men embraced a completely different religious rationale to methodically erase the gains of Reconstruction. The white "Redeemers" who overturned Reconstruction claimed they were driven by divine right to bring God's order back to the South. According to the historian Daniel Stowell, Redeemers imagined that, like Jesus, they could "redeem" the South with blood sacrifice and rescue their states from the captivity of Northern and African American political power.²⁸ In the words of Carole Emberton in her book *Beyond Redemption*: "Disparate movements and agendas simultaneously sought redemption *from* violence and also *through* violence."²⁹ Black families and communities throughout the South, as well as many white people who supported them, were terrorized by waves of ferocious brutality that started almost as soon as the Civil War ended. Frequently, these attacks targeted Black churches.

One episode took place in Memphis in 1866, when the city's police department, along with a mob of white men, attacked Black neighborhoods and contraband camps of formerly enslaved people. The white mob burned down four Black churches, destroyed twelve schools, killed forty-six African Americans, and raped five women.³⁰

In the wake of this violence and with a newfound understanding of the futility of working within the system, Turner evolved in new directions. Discouraged by his experience in politics, he became a bishop in the A.M.E. Church, and a more radical voice. He had always advocated an accommoda-

tionist relationship with white people; now he began to preach a version of Black nationalism: the belief that Black people should have their own autonomy, even their own country. He became a proponent of the Back to Africa movement, and believed that slavery had existed in order to expose Africans to Christianity. He argued that Black people had “needed to come in contact with Christian civilization and by intercourse with the powerful white race,” so that they could “fit themselves to go back to their own land and make of that land what the white man had made of Europe and America.”³¹ Turner would eventually plant churches in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and South Africa. He believed that Christianity would make Africa a great continent if it was brought there by free African Americans in the form of the A.M.E. Church, which had already done so much to advance the cause of Black liberation in the United States.

The traditions arising out of Black nineteenth-century churches and leadership included social uplift, liberation, pragmatism, and Black nationalism. All of these and more would prove necessary for Black citizens to survive the oppressive laws, terroristic violence, and grinding deprivation of the Jim Crow era. During this period, the church continued to serve as a structure that protected Black Americans, supported them, and shielded them from the wrath of white people who refused to see them as equals. But as time went on, it went beyond being a place of refuge and evolved into the primary site of a revolutionary movement. Buttressed by groups like the NAACP, the National Urban League, and the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, the church was the home base of the civil rights movement in the 1950s. It was one of the few places where Black people could meet safely, and for leaders of the movement, it offered a connection to prominent people in the community who could provide finances and lodging.

When police arrested Rosa Parks on December 1, 1955, for not giving up her seat on the bus, the Black community in Montgomery was ready; they had been planning this act of civil disobedience. A group of local ministers and community leaders met at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church to prepare a boycott of the city’s buses. They called themselves the Montgomery Improvement Association and elected as the organization’s leader the new pastor of the church, a twenty-six-year-old graduate of Boston University’s doctoral program in systematic theology named Martin Luther King, Jr. For King, the prophetic confrontation began with the bus boycott, a protest sustained by

weekly meetings at the city’s churches, where activists would organize car-pools and facilitate support from other church groups around the country.

The Montgomery bus boycott highlighted King’s rhetorical skill, as well as his message of nonviolent action. It lasted for just over a year, during which King was arrested and his home firebombed. Speaking after the bombing, King urged his followers to “meet violence with nonviolence.” Though his message had been honed by his undergraduate mentor Benjamin Mays, the president of Morehouse College, whose study of Gandhian nonviolence influenced King’s doctoral work at Boston University, it was also informed by Christian theology:

Remember the words of Jesus: “He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword.” We must love our white brothers, no matter what they do to us. We must make them know that we love them. Jesus still cries out in words that echo across the centuries: “Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; pray for them that despitefully use you.” This is what we must live by. We must meet hate with love. Remember, if I am stopped, this movement will not stop, because God is with the movement. Go home with this glowing faith and this radiant assurance.³²

The movement attracted young divinity school scholars like James Lawson, a student at Vanderbilt Divinity School, who organized the Nashville sit-ins in 1960, and John Lewis and C. T. Vivian, both divinity students at American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville, as well as college students like Diane Nash, who was at Fisk University. The church sat at the center of their activism, as a locus of worship and as a community and organizing space for political and social engagement. Numerous actions of this period were born in church basements, meeting rooms, and pews, including the Albany Movement, a desegregation effort in Georgia; the 1961 Freedom Rides; and the Birmingham campaign.

But not all religious leaders agreed on the way forward. King and other ministers who were active in the movement clashed with Joseph Jackson, the longtime leader of the National Baptist Convention (NBC), who was more moderate and resisted getting the convention more involved in civil rights. As a result, in 1961, King and other ministers would split away from the NBC to form the Progressive National Baptist Convention.

Malcolm X, the Nation of Islam, and the rise of Black Power presented a more serious challenge to the Black church’s vision of the path toward free-

dom. Malcolm X not only ridiculed the philosophy of nonviolence and disparaged the desire for integration; he rejected Christianity as “the white man’s religion” and was a vocal detractor of King. In an interview with Eleanor Fischer in 1961, he explained his denunciation of King’s philosophy:

I think any black man who teaches black people to turn the other cheek and suffer peacefully after they have been turning the other cheek and suffering peacefully for 400 years in a land of bondage under the most cruel, inhuman, and wicked slavemaster that any people have been under, he is doing those people an injustice, and he’s a traitor to his own people.³³

Malcolm X’s articulation of Black nationalism created a growing problem for King and the Christian leadership of the civil rights movement. For generations, the church had been the primary source of Black resistance to white racism and oppression, but Black nationalism unsettled the church’s centrality in this struggle. It provided an alternate, competing space that affirmed Black life while critiquing white supremacy.

The Black Power movement would intensify this dilemma for the Black church. The term “Black Power” was first used in the context of political activism by Stokely Carmichael, a leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).³⁴ By the mid-1960s, the country was boiling with urban rebellions and police reprisals. Like many activists, Carmichael had begun to feel frustrated with the slow progress of the nonviolent movement, which seemed increasingly out of step with the times. In 1965, during the Watts Rebellion, thirty-four people had been killed in clashes between the city’s Black residents and law enforcement. The following year, Carmichael traveled to Mississippi to take part in a rally for James Meredith, the Black student who had integrated the University of Mississippi and had recently been shot and wounded during his one-man protest, the March Against Fear.³⁵ Carmichael and some other SNCC members had been discussing introducing the phrase “Black Power” during the rally. After Carmichael was arrested and then released, he took the stage and addressed the assembled protesters. “We’ve been saying ‘freedom’ for six years,” he said. “What we are going to start saying now is ‘Black Power.’”³⁶

This rapidly became a mantra for the younger generation. Black Power was

a compelling vision of Black self-determination, and a clear repudiation of King’s emphasis on nonviolence and integration. “It is a call for Black people in this country to unite,” Carmichael explained, “to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community. It is a call for Black people to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations.” It was also far more confrontational: “When you talk of Black Power,” Carmichael said, “you talk of building a movement that will smash everything Western civilization has created.”³⁷

King was initially wary of the idea, commenting in public that “the slogan was an unwise choice.” To his staff, he described Black Power as “a cry of pain. It is in fact a reaction to the failure of White Power to deliver promises and to do it in a hurry.”³⁸ But he could not avoid the predicament Black Power created for his movement. Meanwhile, for white churches, Black Power raised a different concern: that perhaps the nonviolence of the civil rights movement would give way to something more aggressive. Alarmed, some white religious leaders criticized the Black Power movement for preaching hatred of white people.

In July 1966, the National Council of Churches, an ecumenical body of Black and white Christian churches formed in 1950, met to discuss the turmoil. At the conference, a group of Black pastors within the NCC came together to form an ad hoc committee that would become, later that year, the National Conference of Negro Churchmen. They were faced with complex fractures within the larger organization. On the one hand, they were disturbed by white clergy members who were up in arms about Black Power; on the other, they were also frustrated by the inability of King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference to respond effectively to the violence of the urban rebellions. Meanwhile SNCC, under the leadership of Carmichael, had fully embraced the Black Power movement, and Carmichael’s stature was rising. The Black pastors who came together at the NCC that year sought to navigate the tension between Black Power and the Christian tradition. On July 31, 1966, following the conference, the group took out a full-page ad in *The New York Times*. Their statement began:

We, an informal group of Negro churchmen in America, are deeply disturbed about the crisis brought upon our country by historic distortions of important human realities in the controversy about “black power.” What we see shining through the variety of rhetoric is not anything new but the same old problem of power and race which has faced our beloved country since 1619.

We realize that neither the term "power" nor the term "Christian conscience" is an easy matter to talk about, especially in the context of race relations in America. The fundamental distortion facing us in the controversy about "black power" is rooted in a gross imbalance of power and conscience between Negroes and white Americans.³⁹

The statement challenged the power imbalance between white men and Black men, but it also addressed how the Black church had been "created as a result of the refusal to submit to the indignities of a false kind of 'integration' in which all power was in the hands of white people."⁴⁰ Laying out the reasons why Black Power was important in the moment of struggle, the ministers declared that "America is our beloved homeland. But, America is not God."⁴¹ As in the sermon from Reverend Wright that caused trouble for Obama, the clergymen's statement asserted that America is not to be equated with God, and that America can be culpable for the injustices done to Black people throughout the nation's history.

The statement was a direct influence on a young Black theologian named James Cone. It highlighted the tension between the church's traditional role as the home base of Black resistance and the rising Black Power movement and set the stage for Cone's theology, which would find a way to integrate the two approaches. Cone recalled, "I shouted for joy when I read that statement because it showed that prophetic voices were still present in the Black Church."⁴² For Cone, a newly minted PhD from Northwestern University, the statement spoke to his own disappointments with the civil rights movement as well as his growing anger about the failures of white Christians to understand the systemic racism and injustices in America.

Cone was struggling to bring together the theological, ethical, and social implications of the Black church's centuries-long struggle for justice and civil rights at a moment in which that tradition had been plunged into crisis. The uncompromising moral vision of the Black Power movement offered a persuasive answer to a series of questions the Black church was having trouble addressing. As Cone put it, "The black church was thus faced with a theological dilemma: either reject Black Power as a contradiction of Christian love (and thereby join the white church in its condemnation of Black Power advocates as un-American or unchristian), or accept Black Power as the socio-political truth of the gospel."⁴³ Cone's resolution of this dilemma was Black theology.

He presented the idea in his first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, published in 1969, just a year after King was assassinated in Memphis. "While the

gospel itself does not change," he wrote, "every generation is confronted with new problems, and the gospel must be brought to bear on them."⁴⁴ Cone sought to reclaim the gospel from a tradition he saw as having become too accepting of "the evils of racism." Black Power, he declared, was not some "heretical idea" but, rather, "Christ's central message to twentieth-century America. And unless the empirical denominational church makes a determined effort to recapture the man Jesus through a total identification with the suffering poor as expressed in Black Power, that church will become exactly what Christ is not."⁴⁵ Cone's argument was that God is principally concerned with the suffering of the poor and the oppressed, beginning with the Israelites in Egypt; in America, the poor and the oppressed were Black—therefore, the salvation of Black Americans had to be the central preoccupation of the church.

Cone's vision not only recognized the struggles of Black people as the "point of departure" for a new theology but also called to account the manner in which white churches had been instrumental in upholding the structures of racism. "It seems that the white church is not God's redemptive agent," he wrote, "but, rather, an agent of the old society. Most church fellowships are more concerned about drinking or new buildings or Sunday closing than about children who die of rat bites or men who are killed because they want to be treated like men."⁴⁶ It was a scathing indictment of white racism, and it brought together the call for justice that King and others in the civil rights movement had made with Black Power's call for Black agency and self-determination.

Black Theology and Black Power was published three months before another statement from the group of pastors who had come together at the 1966 NCC. They now called themselves the National Conference of Black Churchmen, and their statement opened with a section entitled "Why Black Theology?" The group articulated how Cone's liberatory vision for the Black church, influenced by the rise of Black Power, was rooted in its long history of fighting to protect and redeem Black Americans. "The black church has not only nurtured black people but enabled them to survive brutalities that ought not to have been inflicted on any community of men," they wrote. "Black Theology is the product of black Christian experience and reflection. It comes out of the past. It is strong in the present. And we believe it to be redemptive for the future."⁴⁷

The following year Cone published his second book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*. The book would make him a major expositor of Black liberation theology. It was a heady time for liberation theologies. The Dominican priest

Gustavo Gutiérrez published his book on Catholic liberation theology in 1971. In both the Protestant and the Catholic worlds, theological emphasis on liberation would become a major theme. Much of this emphasis was due to the influence of the civil rights movement in the United States and the central role of the Black church in that movement. Liberation theology in any national context, as Cone says, is an “interpretation of the Christian gospel from the experience and perspectives and lives of people who are at the bottom in society—the lowest economic and racial groups.”⁴⁸

Cone became a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, the former academic home to Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, major Protestant theologians of the twentieth century. Training students for both the clergy and the academy, Cone’s teaching and advocacy would span more than thirty years, and were a major influence on people like Reverend Wright. Cone’s thinking influenced the political world too, perhaps most directly through one of his students, Senator Raphael Warnock of Georgia. Warnock, who was born into a Black Pentecostal family, followed his father into the ministry. His dissertation with Cone turned into a book, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety, and Public Witness*, which deals with the tension in the Black church between piety and social justice and the public response to that conflict. For Warnock, the Black church has exemplified both radical and unradical tendencies. It has been at once the most prominent instrument of liberation within the African American community and the foremost conservative custodian of an uncritical evangelical piety that undermines the aims of liberation.⁴⁹


Today, Warnock stands as a bridge between the Black church, past, present, and future, and political action. What he learned from Cone is not simply what the theology of Black liberation is but how to be socially active and apply that to his ministry. Warnock’s first pastorship was at Douglas Memorial Community Church in Baltimore; then in 2005, he was appointed senior pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church, King’s family church in Atlanta. His career since then has exemplified the civil rights work and prophetic tradition that King embodied, along with the spirit of Cone’s Black liberation theology. Warnock was arrested in the U.S. Capitol building in 2017 for leading a prayer in the rotunda protesting the healthcare cuts in then-president Trump’s budget. Even before that, he was socially active, taking an HIV test in front of his congregation to affirm testing in the Black community. His election to the U.S. Senate in 2020 made him the first African American senator from Georgia, the same state that had refused to seat Henry McNeal Turner after he was elected to the legislature in 1868.

Warnock’s race for that Senate seat pitted him against Kelly Loeffler, who campaigned against him by distorting a sermon he preached in 2011 in which he said, “America, nobody can serve God and the military. You can’t serve God and money. You cannot serve God and mammon at the same time. America, choose ye this day who you will serve.” The sentiment was straight out of the Bible, Matthew 6:24. But Loeffler highlighted the first sentence, “America, nobody can serve God and the military,” and used it to paint Warnock as radical and unsupportive of U.S. troops.⁵⁰ It was a technique out of the same playbook used to vilify King, Wright, and other Black preachers who had confronted the broken promises of America. This time, however, it didn’t succeed. Warnock won a special election to the U.S. Senate on January 5, 2021, the day before the failed Capitol insurrection.

Loeffler and other Republicans claimed that Warnock’s radical liberalism was evident from his commitment to prophetic preaching. But Jonathan Lee Walton, the dean of Wake Forest University School of Divinity, more accurately describes that preaching as stemming from “a deep love for, and thus a deep disappointment in, a country that too often fails to affirm the self-evident truth in our nation’s creed, that all people are created equal and endowed by God ‘with certain unalienable rights.’”⁵¹

That deep love accompanied by deep disappointment is what drives the Black church today, and leaders such as Senator Warnock continue to carry forward the tradition of speaking truth to power in the Black church. Others have eschewed the formal Black church tradition and have looked to Black Lives Matter, Color of Change, and other social-justice movements to call America’s failings to account. Yet the Black church remains the prophetic voice of condemnation of America’s ills. As King so aptly stated in his “I Have a Dream” speech, “America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’” The Black church, pastors and members alike, is still demanding to cash the check of true democracy and freedom.

Slavery in the Pulpit of the Evangelical Alliance

 glc.yale.edu/slavery-pulpit-evangelical-alliance

April 7, 2015

Frederick Douglass

Citation Information: Frederick Douglass, "Slavery in the Pulpit of the Evangelical Alliance: An Address Delivered in London, England, on September 14, 1846." *London Inquirer*, September 19, 1846 and *London Patriot*, September 17, 1846. Blassingame, John (et al, eds.). *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One—Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. Vol. I, p. 407.

Slavery in the Pulpit of the Evangelical Alliance: An Address Delivered in London, England, on September 14, 1846

London Inquirer, September 19, 1846 and *London Patriot*, September 17, 1846.

1. Mr. Frederick Douglass rose to address the audience. He said that he had determined not to speak, as he could add nothing to what had been so eloquently told them; but since they showed a readiness to hear him, he would just say a few words, and add his testimony to that already given as to the character of American slavery, and the religion of the land in which it was upheld and sustained. The slave system in America finds no stronger ally in any quarter than in the American church.
2. You will observe, that during the speeches of Mr. Garrison and Mr. Thompson, special reference has been made to the church in America. Why, Sir, do we so often allude to this, and make special attacks on the American church and clergy? It is not because we have any war with them as a body of Christians, not because we have any war with the ministers in America, as such,—not at all; but they have thrown themselves across the pathway of emancipation, and made it our duty to make war upon them, or desert the cause of the slave. Why, Sir, the political parties in the United States that uphold the sin of slavery dwindle into insignificance, when compared with the power exercised by the church to uphold and sustain that system.
3. It is from the pulpit that we have sermons on behalf of slavery; it is with reasonings such as you have heard from Bishop Meade (alluding to some extracts read by Mr. Thompson, from a *Book of Sermons for Slaves*) that the Abolitionists have to contend. What is worse, all the religious instruction given to slaves in the United States is mingled with just such sentiments as you have heard here. The slave-holders doom the slave to ignorance first, and then take advantage of his ignorance, and that highest element of the human character, the religious sentiment, to reduce him to slavery.

4. I have heard sermon after sermon, when a slave, intended to make me satisfied with my condition, telling me that it is the position God intended me to occupy; that if I offend against my master, I offend against God; that my happiness in time and eternity depends on my entire obedience to my master. Those are the doctrines taught among slaves, and the slaveholders themselves have become conscious about holding slaves in bondage, and their consciences have been lulled to sleep by the preaching and teaching of the Southern American pulpits. "There is no place," said an Abolitionist in the United States, "where slavery finds a more secure abode than under the shadow of the sanctuary." The simple fact in itself, that three millions of slaves exist in a land where there are more than two millions of Evangelical Christians, ought to be sufficient to show that that Christianity, that Evangelical religion, is not what it ought to be—(cheers).
5. Only think of a religion under which the handcuffs, the fetters, the whip, the gag, the thumbscrew, blood-hounds, cat-o'-nine-tails, branding-irons, all these implements, can be undisturbed. Only think of a body of men thanking God every Sabbath-day that they live in a country where there is civil and religious freedom, when there are three millions of people herded together in a state of concubinage, denied the right to learn to read the name of the God that made them,—where there are laws that doom the black man to death for offences which, if committed by white men, would pass unpunished. Think of a man standing up among such a people, and never raising a whisper in condemnation of such a state of things, denouncing the slaveholders, or speaking a word of pity or sympathy with the poor slave. This in itself should have been sufficient to have led the Evangelical Alliance to have barred and bolted its gateways, to keep out from them the persons who have been here, such as Dr. Smyth, of Charleston, South Carolina. I happen to know something of him. Sir, that man stands charged, and justly charged, with performing mock marriages, in the city of Charleston, among the slaves, leaving out the most important part of the ceremony, "What God has bound together, let no man put asunder." When marriages are performed among slaves, this is left out, and for the best of reasons,—when they marry them with the understanding that their masters have the right and power of tearing asunder those they have pretended to join together—(cries of "Shame, shame").

6. I do believe the Evangelical Alliance was hoodwinked, that they were misled; I do not think they really understood the matter; they were led off by such statements as this,—that the slave-holders were in such a position, that they could not emancipate their slaves if they would; and there is just enough truth in this to save it from being an absolute falsehood; there are laws in America which make emancipation depend upon expatriation; they say that unless a slave be removed from the State, his master shall not emancipate him; or if he does, he shall be reduced to slavery again by the State. Well, the slave-holders who made this law take shelter under it; and Dr. Marsh, in Newcastle, the other day, on being called on to know why, if temperance had removed intemperance from the land, why it had not removed slavery? he declared, that the slave-holders, if they emancipated their slaves, would at once be thrown into prison. Well, it is by such statements as these that the slave-holders led them astray.
7. I wish to undeceive them as far as I can; the slave-holders are not compelled to retain their slaves. If they will leave it to their slaves for five minutes, they will decide the question. All the slave-holders have to do, is to say to the slave, I have done with you; I cannot, with any conscience, hold you; it is true you cannot be free on this soil, but the British lion rules on three sides of us; Canada is round us; go to Canada, and be free from the talons and beak of the American eagle—(loud cheers). All that the slave-holder has to do, is to say,—Go. But what if the law did make it impossible for a man to emancipate his slaves; there is one outlet yet; the slave-holder himself could leave the state, and say to the state,—If you will have slavery, if you will stain your soil and country with slavery, I for one will not stay among you—(hear, hear). If the slave-holding Christians of the South would only take that course, and say,—Unless you give up slavery, and allow us to emancipate our slaves, we will leave the state,—what a sublime spectacle it would present, to see the Christians of the Southern States marching out two abreast: it would present a far sublimer spectacle than the Evangelical Alliance—(loud cheers).
8. One word in reference to my friend Garrison's allusion to the prayers in the Evangelical Alliance: I have all my days been accustomed to prayer, in connection with slavery: my master was a praying man; the man who claims to own these hands, and who has bound himself almost with the solemnity of an oath, that if ever again I set my feet on the American soil I shall be a slave, that man prays, at morning, noon, and nights; and I have seen him tie up by the hands a female cousin of my own, and lash her with a cow-skin, till the warm blood trickled at her feet, and all the while say, "the slave that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes"—(shame). I have seen my master's brother trample my own brother to the ground, and stamp on him with his boot, till the blood gushed from his nose. I have seen these things in the midst of prayer.

9. When the Presbyterian assembly was called on a few years ago, to say that slavery is a sin against God, it was voted by the Assembly, that it is inexpedient to take action on the subject, and as soon as that was done, Dr. Cox jumped up and clapped his hands, and thanked God that their Vesuvius was capped; and having got rid of slavery, they all engaged in prayer; while the poor heart-broken slave was lifting up his hands to them, and clanking his chains and imploring them in the name of God to aid him; and their reply was, it is inexpedient for us to do so: and Dr. Cox clapped his hands and thanked God that the Vesuvius was capped; that is, that the question of slavery is got rid of. And so it was with Methodists; and so it is with almost all the religious bodies in the United States. It was these reverend doctors who led astray the British ministers in the Evangelical Alliance, on this question of slavery; they dared not go home to America as connected with the Alliance, if anything had been registered against slavery by that Alliance; they knew who were their masters, and that they must be uncompromising—(hear, hear)
10. I know the prayers of slaveholders. I have been the slave of religious and irreligious slaveholders, and I bear my testimony, that next to being a slave at all, I regard the greatest calamity to be that of belonging to a religious slaveholder. (Cries of hear, and cheers.) I have found them the most mean, the most exacting, the most cruel. This is a startling position, but it is true as far as my experience is concerned. I know not how to explain it, but such is the fact. The religious slaveholders are the most tenacious of slavery.
11. I wish the people of this country to be acquainted with the divisions that have taken place with respect to the Methodist church. It is believed here, that there is an anti-slavery and a pro-slavery Methodist Episcopal church; that the Methodist church, north and south, differ entirely with regard to that subject; but I wish you to understand that the Methodist church south is no more pro-slavery than the Methodist church north. The former is honest in declaring its adherence to slavery—the former has been governed by expediency, and, in 1844, after the division took place, Bishop Andrew became a slaveholder by marriage. He had the power of emancipating his slaves, and, coming to the slave conference, and being called upon to do so, said he would not. (Hear, hear.) A resolution was introduced, to the following effect: “That Bishop Andrew be, and he hereby is requested to suspend his labours till he has got rid of his impediment!” (Laughter and cheers.)
12. We have various ways of covering slavery. We call it sometimes a peculiar institution—the patriarchal institution—the civil and domestic institution, but it was left for the Methodists to coin a new phrase by which to designate slavery, and it is, “The Impediment!” He was requested to suspend his labour till he had got rid of his impediment. (Laughter and cheers.) One might have thought it was his newly-married wife. (Laughter.)

13. How long do you think it took the Conference to settle this question? Just three times as long as it took the Evangelical Alliance to settle the compromise—three weeks. They had prayers for the Committee to examine the matter—they had Conferences that they might be brought to an harmonious resolution. They fasted and prayed, and had communion and prayed, and had love-feasts and prayed. They held class-meetings and prayed, and held all kinds of meetings for three weeks, and came to the determination that Bishop Andrews be, and hereby is— what?—suspended? No; but requested to suspend himself till he got rid of his impediments,—only requested! He was left to determine how he should get rid of the slaves. Had the bishop become a sheep-stealer instead of a man-stealer, he would have been cut off at once. Had the Evangelical Alliance the other day had to do with sheep-stealing, had they known how much better a man is than a sheep, they would at once have declared against the slaveholders. (Loud cheers.)
14. Now, I want to say a word to you of grave importance, as Christians, as friends of the spread of the Gospel and the circulation of the Bible; I want you to remember, that there are three millions of people, within fourteen days' sail of your own green isle, unable to read the name of the Almighty. These are men; I hope you will consider them as such—(hear, hear). These are beings redeemed by the blood of Christ; I hope you will consider them as such—(hear). They are your brethren; I hope you will consider them as such—(loud cheers). They have no Bible; it is a crime to instruct them to read. I have a proposition for British Christians, and, by the help of God, I will go through the length and breadth of this land, calling on people to aid me in what I am about to propose; it is, that a large sum of money be raised in England to procure Bibles, that they shall be placed on shipboard, to supply the Negroes, not in a heathen land, but in Christian America, with Bibles—(great applause). I want you to think of this. I should like to see that ship laden with the Gospel, her sails spread to the breeze, manned by a Christian captain and crew, having on board true Christian missionaries to expound the words of inspired wisdom to those slaves. I should like to see that ship sailing before the gentle gale, to see her freighted with light and love to those benighted bondsmen in the United States.
15. And I should like to see another sight, which I know would follow, that the slave-holders, and among them Christians, would shoulder their muskets and buckle on their swords, to fight away the Bible and Christianity. They dread the spread of the Gospel among the slaves— (cheers). But let the thing be tried; the experiment is worth trying. What a spectacle for men and angels to look upon,—Christian England demanding the right to preach the Gospel in America. Let it be tried, and it will wake the attention of the civilised world to the position of the American people.

16. The Americans have again and again declared they would not entertain the proposition of giving the Bible to the slaves; yet I say they are men; they are just as I am. I am a human being. I know I am. I have all the feelings of a man—(cheers). What I claim for myself I grant to the blackest slave on the American plantations, many of whom are my superiors, many of whom are but poorly represented here in my person. I have, when a slave, stolen away, Sabbath after Sabbath, spent in the woods, with two or three coloured people,—slaves,—stealing a little knowledge of the letters which would enable them to read the Scriptures, and I have the pleasing reflection of having been able to teach three or four of them to read, before I left slavery—(cheers). Be it known to you, British Christians, that there is not a rood of land in America on which I can stand with any degree of safety—(“shame”). I am overshadowed in every part with the expectation of being snatched from my wife and children, and hurled back into the jaws of that slavery from which I have escaped, and I am everywhere pressed by the Christians in this land to stay here—(hear, hear).
17. I thank you; I feel mighty glad to be in England—(great applause). I thank such as invite me to stay. The Rev. Dr. Campbell, in another place in this city, formed a proposition to raise an amount of money, in order to bring my family to this land—(great cheering). The money was raised, and I thought, at the time, I would bring my family to this country; but, on reflection, I was fearful, if I settled here, I might forget my brethren in bonds, and I have resolved not to bring my family to England, but to return to America,—to go back, whether in slavery or freedom, and do what I can in that land to aid those in slavery; and I will continue to protest against Christian slavery, and man-stealing, woman-whipping, cradle-plundering religion—(great applause).
18. I will now close by thanking you for the manner in which you have received the various propositions contained in these resolutions. I tell you, your meeting to-night will do more good than all the meetings of the Evangelical Alliance together—(loud cheers). Nobody will care what the Evangelical Alliance has done, while the slave-holders will see in this demonstration the concentration of the anti-slavery sentiment in England, and they will not dare to venture here again—(cheers). I hope that the Anti-Slavery League, of which this is the first demonstration, may grow and prosper, till every slave throughout America, and all other lands, shall have been freed from his chains. Mr. Douglass resumed his seat amidst loud and long-continued cheering.

The Bible was used to justify slavery. Then Africans made it their path to freedom.

By Julie Zauzmer Weil

April 30, 2019

When the Rev. Jaymes Robert Mooney takes his pulpit to preach, sometimes he pictures the graveyard — that is where his congregation was born.

It was called Georgia Cemetery, named, he has been told, for the place the enslaved were stolen from before being sent to work the fields in Huntsville, Ala.

The graveyard was where they buried their loved ones. It was there they could gather in private. It was there where they could worship a God who offered not only salvation, but the thing they sought most — the promise of freedom.

That graveyard, and those who founded what is now St. Bartley Primitive Baptist Church in 1820, weighs heavy on the young minister who now leads the congregation. It is not lost on him that the Gospel he preaches, the Gospel so many African Americans embraced to sustain them through the horrors of beatings and rapes, separations and lynchings, separate and unequal, is the same Gospel used to enslave them.

“That’s the history of the black church,” said Mooney, who at 29 leads a congregation of 2,000 members that will celebrate 200 years in existence next year.

He makes sure every new member goes through a church orientation to learn that history — all of it. He preaches about the ways slaveholders claimed the Bible was on their side, citing passages that commanded servants to obey. And he talks about the ways African Americans have reclaimed the Bible and its message of liberation.

As America commemorates the 400th anniversary of the creation of representative government in what would become the United States, and the first documented recording of captive Africans being brought to its shores, it is also grappling with the ways the country justified slavery. Nowhere is that discussion more fraught than in its churches.

“Christianity was proslavery,” said Yolanda Pierce, the dean of the divinity school at Howard University. “So much of early American Christian identity is predicated on a proslavery theology. From the naming of the slave ships, to who sponsored some of these journeys including some churches, to the fact that so much of early American religious rhetoric is deeply intertwined . . . with slaveholding: It is proslavery.” Some Christian institutions, notably Georgetown University in the District, are engaged in a reckoning about what it means that their past was rooted in slaveholding. But others have not confronted the topic. “In a certain sense, we’ve never completely come to terms with that in this nation,” Pierce said.

Bible of oppression and liberation

The Africans who were brought to America from 1619 onward carried with them diverse religious traditions. About 20 to 30 percent were Muslim, Pierce said. Some had learned of Christianity before coming to America, but many practiced African spiritual traditions.

Early on, many slaveholders were not concerned with the spiritual well-being of Africans. But few had qualms about using Christianity to justify slavery.

Some theologians said it was providence that had brought Africans to America as slaves, since their enslavement would allow them to encounter the Christian message and thus their eternal souls would be saved, said Mark Noll, a historian of American Christianity.

Some preachers encouraged slave owners to allow their slaves to attend worship services — though only in separate gatherings led by white proslavery preachers. They had to be seated in the back or the balcony of a segregated church. Those men of God argued that the sermons on the injunction in Ephesians and Colossians, “slaves, obey your earthly master,” would promote docility among enslaved workers.

Washington’s Museum of the Bible displays a “slave Bible,” published in 1807, which removed portions of Scripture including the Exodus story that could inspire rebellious thinking.

Some ministers promoted the idea that Africans were the descendants of Ham, cursed in the book of Genesis, and thus their enslavement was fitting.

“That biblical interpretation is made up of whole cloth in the 15th century,” Noll said. “There’s just no historical record of any seriousness to back it up. It’s made up, at a time when Europeans are beginning to colonize Africa.”

Slaveholders frequently noted that the Israelites of the Old Testament owned slaves.

Abolitionists tried to make arguments against using the Bible to justify slavery, but they were in the minority.

“They were considered to be radical,” Noll said. “And often they were considered to be infidels, because how could they say God was opposed to slavery if it was so obvious in the Bible that he was not?”

The foremost objectors, of course, were African Americans themselves. Large numbers adopted the faith, and they quickly began remaking it into their own.

“As soon as enslaved people learned to read English, they immediately began to read the Bible, and they immediately began to protest this idea of a biblical justification for slavery,” Pierce said. “Literally as soon as black people took pen to paper, we are arguing for our own liberation.”

Those books and broadsides challenging prevailing biblical interpretations were savvy: “They very quickly learned that the only way we can be heard is to speak the language of our slaveholders, to speak to them about the text that they love, that they believe in,” Pierce said.

In the generations since — including during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, as well as a present-day movement spurring new interest in African religions — some African Americans have rejected Christianity as the religion of the oppressor. Many have embraced Islam or have explored African traditions; young adults today include complaints about the church not doing enough to address racial injustice on their long list of reasons for leaving church.

But for vast numbers, both centuries ago and now, Christianity motivated and uplifted with the promise of heavenly rewards and the possibility that their reward might come on earth, too. Christianity brought enslaved Africans “this powerful and profound sense of hope. That Jesus would return. That there is a life and world after this life. That what is going on with the human body, the mortal realm, is just temporary. That there is eternity. That you will be rewarded, you will experience joy and peace and comfort. . . . That this God is a God of transformation,” Pierce said. “No wonder it was embraced.”

That conversion did not come without questioning the faith that brought both oppression and liberation.

“More than anything, this challenged them the most: The challenge of believing in a God that at the time was used to intend to pacify, but still believing in the God that could provide freedom,” Mooney said.

Confronting history

The religion of African American Christians and white Christians is constructed on the same tenets — the belief in an almighty God, Jesus Christ as savior and the Holy Spirit as comforter. But the divide that began with such wildly divergent interpretations of the Bible's message about slavery would only expand. As of 2014, 80 percent of American churchgoers attended churches where at least 80 percent of the congregation is of only one race, according to Pew Research Center. "The church gave spiritual sanction [to racism], both overtly by the things that it taught and covertly by the critique that it did not raise," said Bishop Claude Alexander, who leads Park Church in Charlotte.

Political priorities vary widely. White evangelicals tend to be more focused on issues such as abortion and sexuality, while many black Christians rate issues of economic and racial inequality and criminal justice higher, Alexander said. "How does one account for that difference in priority when these groups basically believe the same thing?" he asked. "If I've never experienced oppression or marginalization outside of the womb, then it's easy for me to make what happens inside the womb a priority," he theorized.

"There's no quote-unquote 'theology' that's not shaped by context," he said. And racialized violence is the context that has always shaped America, and the American church, Alexander said. "It was the amniotic fluid out of which our nation was born," he said.

But he's looking to change the context. He is working on putting together groups of leaders — such as the presidents of predominantly white evangelical colleges and the presidents of historically black colleges; the pastors of influential white churches and influential black churches — who will travel together on what Alexander terms "pilgrimages."

They will travel together to the sites of America's unhealed racial wounds. To the lynching memorial in Montgomery, Ala. To Charleston harbor, where so many enslaved people were transported that, to this day, 60 percent of African Americans can trace their history back to that bloody port. To Virginia, where the first enslaved Africans set foot on this soil in 1619.

Perhaps, he hopes, they will leave their pilgrimage ready to face the fifth century since then with a bit more grace.

An earlier version of this story incorrectly spelled the last name of Rev. Jaymes Robert Mooney of St. Bartley Primitive Baptist Church in Huntsville, Ala.

Conversion and race in colonial slavery

 tif.ssrc.org/2018/06/26/conversion-and-race-in-colonial-slavery/

By Katharine Gerbner

On the evening of February 25, 1760, an enslaved man named Mathew requested baptism from the Moravian missionaries who had recently arrived in Jamaica. The missionaries said no. Two months later, he inquired again, this time noting that the missionaries had not yet baptized a single black person on the plantation. They refused again. On August 24 the same year, Mathew raised the subject a third time. Once more, Mathew's fervent requests for baptism were rejected.¹

If this forum is exploring "crossings" and "conversions," then my question is: who controls the threshold? If one is to cross—as an individual, as a family, or as a people—into the realm of Christianity, then who provides entry? And who gets turned away?

It took several years for Mathew to convince the Moravian missionaries to include him as a baptized member of the church. The missionaries' hesitation was not based on Mathew's "preparedness" for baptism, but rather on their experience working in other Protestant slave societies. Three decades earlier, in the Danish West Indies, white slaveholders violently and viciously attacked the Moravians for baptizing people of African descent. Enslaved and free converts, who had flocked to worship meetings to learn how to read the Bible, were beaten for carrying catechisms. In 1739, after years of abuse, African Christians wrote letters to the King and Queen of Denmark, requesting that the monarchs intervene on their behalf. "They Burn our Books and call our Baptism the Baptism of Dogs," the black converts wrote. "We are oppressed by everyone, beaten and struck with Swords when we assemble to learn about Lord Jesus."²

Most scholars have examined the history of slave conversion in colonial America and seen missionary failure. People of African descent did not join Protestant churches until the late eighteenth century, they write, because Protestants did not successfully appeal to enslaved and free blacks. This is part of the story, yet the language of "not joining" implies free choice. In practice, the majority of enslaved and free blacks were *forbidden* from joining Protestant churches. Before 1750, historical records tell the same story again and again. Missionaries, desperate to gain slave owner approval, tried to convince slave owners that conversion to Christianity would make enslaved people more obedient. Slave owners, convinced that baptism would make enslaved and free blacks "rebel and cut our throats," as the governor of Barbados put it in 1675, refused to listen. Thousands of enslaved and free blacks, meanwhile, intrigued by the theological content and the political power of Christian baptism, fought their way into churches.

Why was black conversion so controversial? Or to put it differently, why did the baptism of enslaved and free black men and women engender such violence in an empire ostensibly founded on spreading Protestantism? This is the question I address in my book, *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World* (UPenn, 2018). Using English, German, and Dutch Creole missionary records, along with law books and governmental records, I examine the political, social, and theological debates surrounding slave conversion in the Protestant Atlantic world. At the same time, I ask why people of African descent chose to convert to Protestantism, and how their conversion forced Europeans to reinterpret key points of Scripture and the meaning of “true” conversion. The debates about slave conversion, I argue, transformed the practice of Protestantism, the meaning of conversion, and the language of race in the early modern Atlantic world.

Mathew’s experience was a consequence of what I call “Protestant Supremacy”: the white suppression of black conversion to Christianity. It was the dominant ideology of oppression in the Protestant slave colonies in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. White slave owners used religious difference to justify enslavement and they policed the line between slave and free by restricting access to baptism. In places like Barbados, South Carolina, and St. Thomas, the vast majority of Protestant slave owners denied enslaved people access to Protestant baptism.

Protestant Supremacy was a cornerstone of the first slave laws in the English colonies. In Barbados, where the first English Slave Code was drawn up in 1660, Christian status was used to distinguish slaves from servants (many of whom were Catholic) and free people (most of whom were Protestant). In this context, before the codification of racial slavery, slave owners viewed conversion as a step toward slave rebellion. This practice was in striking contrast to most Catholic slave societies, where baptism was a tool of colonial governance, and enslaved people were, at least in theory, all baptized Catholics.

Slave owners were not entirely wrong about the subversive power of conversion. In seventeenth-century Protestant slave societies, to be a Christian—and, specifically, to be a member of the established Protestant church—was to hold political and social authority. Voting was based on gender (male), class (property-holding), religion (Protestant), and age (usually, twenty-one). In the Danish colonies, free black Christians were distinguished from unconverted blacks, and permitted to wear more elegant clothes and practice different trades. For many European Protestants, literacy was intimately connected with Protestant conversion. Missionaries reinforced this connection by teaching enslaved people to read and, sometimes, to write. These were deeply disruptive and dangerous skills in the highly militarized and ultra-paranoid slave societies of the Protestant Americas.

To convert, then, was not just a matter of belief; it was a claim to power. Enslaved and free black people recognized this. Hundreds and then thousands of black men and women risked violence to join Protestant churches. Some, especially the black Christian men who gained their freedom and acquired property, sought voting rights.

Just as a small number of free black Christians began to claim political authority, slave owners adapted: they introduced a new language of exclusion based on “whiteness” rather than Christian status. In Barbados and elsewhere, slave-owning lawmakers wrote whiteness into their lawbooks in order to suppress the political rights of free black Christians. The slave owners’ efforts were part of a broad effort to replace Protestant Supremacy with White Supremacy. Any history of race must acknowledge and reckon with these religious origins of racial oppression. Furthermore, any history of conversion in the early modern world must acknowledge the political consequences of slave conversion.

Conversion is always about power. In Protestant slave colonies, conversion was the first step toward wielding and exercising political and social authority. Without acknowledging the power relations embedded in conversion, we fail to recognize their political significance. And yet, to only understand the political aspects of conversion is to miss the point as well. Conversion can also be a moment of intimate reckoning and transformation.

Let us return to Mathew, and his efforts to gain baptism in the Moravian Church. We must interpret Mathew’s conversion on multiple registers. Without acknowledging the violence of Protestant Supremacy, we risk interpreting Mathew’s conversion to Christianity as a form of accommodation or acquiescence to slavery. But without recognizing the intellectual attraction of Christianity, and Mathew’s engagement in debates about theological issues like baptism, marriage, and the afterlife, we flatten his world. In reality, Mathew was intensely engaged in theological inquiry. He questioned everything from the proper preparations for baptism to the meaning of Christian marriage. He interrogated the missionaries about the nature of the Trinity and the meaning of sin. He used scriptural passages to defend and shift religious practice within the Moravian congregation.

On the evening of August 24, 1760, when Mathew requested baptism for a third time, he had just learned the story of Philip and the Ethiopian from Acts 8. This story recounts Philip’s journey into Ethiopia, where he met and baptized an Ethiopian eunuch. The missionaries were fond of the story of Philip and the Ethiopian, whom they called “the moor,” because it showed that the gospel should be spread to Africans as well as Europeans. Mathew, however, had a different interpretation. After hearing it, he approached the missionaries to make a case for his own baptism. Why did the missionaries withhold from him what Philip had granted to the Ethiopian? Reenacting the role of the Ethiopian, Mathew declared that he “believed that [his] creator is the Lord who redeemed [him] with his blood,” and requested immediate baptism.³

Conversion is about power, but it is also about meaning and narrative. When we, as scholars, write about conversion, we must be attentive to the ways our narratives can replicate the narratives of the missionaries and slave owners who wrote the historical sources that we examine. Was Mathew a Christian convert? For years, the Moravian missionaries would say no. The white slave-owning class, meanwhile, denigrated his conversion. For them, Mathew would never be a convert.

Historians and scholars of religion have narrative choices to make. Mine is to privilege Mathew's claim to conversion over the resistance of Moravian missionaries and white slave-owning Protestants. It is to write Mathew's story as part of the history of Christianity, not as a story about syncretism, which suggests that his conversion represented a blending of religious traditions. And it is to allow the multiple meanings of conversion to coexist. The history of conversion under slavery was about race, power, and oppression—but it was also about intellectual inquiry and theological transformation under brutal conditions. Mathew was not a "convert" in the sense that he exchanged one set of beliefs for another. Instead, his conversion to Christianity should be understood as a process in which Protestantism evolved as a lived practice.

