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Christ Unchained:  
*African American Conversions During the Civil War Era*

**DAN FOUNTAIN**

In the words of the historian Charles Joyner, slave Christianity gave African Americans “a source of strength and endurance that enabled them to triumph over the collective tragedy of enslavement.”2 Such words are typical of the way that historians use Afro-Christianity to counter old arguments saying that slavery stripped Africans of their culture and reduced them to an infantile state of existence. However, such worthy attempts by zealous historians to refute racist or inaccurate interpretations of the past have created an illusion, specifically the impression that most slaves actively participated in Christianity, attributing the religious behavior of a few slaves to the many. This strident defense of African American religiosity further suggests that no boundary imposed by slaveowners proved too great for the slaves to overcome.3

Nevertheless, real institutional boundaries and obstacles both restricted and shaped the African American religious experience in profound ways. Several recent studies of slavery by Michael Gomez, John Willis, and myself suggest that no more than twenty-five percent of the South’s bondsmen converted to Christianity before emancipation.4 The reasons for such a low participation rate include the persistence of African religious ideas and practices, too little access to churches, the example of white Christians who failed to live up to their own teachings, and a proslavery Christian message. These scholars, however, do not challenge the existence of a vibrant Christian element within the slave community. My own earlier work describes this element as the Christian core and credits its members with leading a majority of African Americans to convert to Christianity during and after the Civil War.5

The Christian core among slaves formed a small but devoted segment of the larger African American population in the South. Many of these dedicated Christians willingly faced threats of physical punishment and even death in order to pursue their faith as they saw fit, in part, because Christianity gave these believers spiritual relief from the everyday pain of slavery and hope for

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*If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*

— John 8:31-32

*I tell you chile, it was pitiful, but God did not let it last always. I have heard slaves morning and night pray for deliverance. Some of ‘em would stand up in de fields or bend over cotton and corn and pray out loud for God to help ‘em and in time you see, He did.*

— Clayborn Gantling

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*SUMMER 2003*
a better world to come. Most Christian slaves also believed that God would ultimately provide them with earthly freedom when the time was right, and they regularly but quietly prophesied and prayed about the day when God would break the shackles of bondage and set his righteous people free. When that anticipated deliverance arrived, Christian freedpeople understood themselves as justified in their faith and themselves as the greatest testament to God’s power. The Christian core’s faithfulness and accuracy in anticipating emancipation also attracted ever greater numbers of African American freedpeople to Christianity. Freedom, rather than slavery, proved to be the greatest force for conversion among African Americans in the South.

Before the Civil War, slaveholders commonly attempted to shape the religious experiences of slaves in ways that favored the needs of whites rather than African Americans. This could mean anything from prohibiting some religious services to dictating the content of a sermon or allowing only family prayer meetings. Failure to comply with these restrictions often led to a ban of all religious services, physical punishment, and even death for some Christian slaves. For instance, the Baptist Church in Elkton, Kentucky unanimously adopted the following resolution in 1846:

Resolved that it is the opinion of this church that the meetings of the colored people conducted as they are, are of no benefit to them either in a religious or civil [sic] point of view and that the secston [sic] of this church be instructed not to allow them the use of this house any more for that purpose.

Likewise, William Williams of North Carolina recalled that his overseer “would whip a slave if he found him praying.” The master of Mary James, a slave in Virginia, sold her grandfather south for being religious and praying that God would set the slaves free. Kentucky native Isaac Throgmorton reported that his overseer whipped slaves who “got happy” at prayer meetings and repeatedly told them that he would rather see them stealing, swearing, and whoring than to be religious. The master of Thomas H. Jones swore that if he did not abandon religion “I will whip you to death.” And while Jones’ master ultimately stopped short of murdering Thomas, the sister of John Andrew Jackson paid the ultimate price for her religious prin-
ciples. She died at the hands of her mistress because she refused to quit praying in spite of several previous warnings to do so.  

Despite all this, some Christian slaves persisted in worshiping their God according to the dictates of their hearts. One Louisiana slave even believed that such persecution made African American believers better Christians. He argued that when slave Christians faced little opposition “All quiet, den all grow cold, and dey follers de Lord afar off.” In contrast, when slaveowners fought slave prayers with punishment or death, “all these troubles and trials dey drives us to de Lord.” Christian slaves also refused to abandon their faith because its teachings gave them an identity and future that they could embrace fully. Specifically, Christianity asserts the value of every human being whether black or white or slave or free because all individuals are an important part of the Christian God’s creation. No one, no matter how lowly in earthly status, is worth less than another person in the eyes of God, and all persons are children of God and equally subject to His commandments. The Christian God even sacrificed his only son in order to offer eternal life to every individual who accepts and follows his teachings. Furthermore, Christian theology promises the gift of eternal life, a heavenly existence of divine justice and peace.

While the Christian core certainly looked forward to heaven, salvation in their own time held an even greater appeal for slaves. Christian slaves, for example, seized on the biblical story of the Ancient Israelites’ exodus from slavery in Egypt and made it their own. As Albert Raboteau has argued, this link with Israel “gave the slaves a communal identity as a special, divinely favored people” and foretold of their future deliverance. Slaves who believed in Christ spoke to one another about their anticipated freedom and made it a common feature in their sermons and prayers. When a devout Christian named Solomon, for instance, reacted calmly to ill treatment from his overseer he was asked how he could tolerate such treatment. Solomon replied saying “it would not always be so—that slavery was to come to an end for the Bible said so.” Similarly, Mingo White believed that the slaves “had a instinct dat we was goin’ to be free” and as a result frequently prayed “for de Lawd to free dem lack he did de chillun of Is’ael.” According to Robert Cheatum, “The negro preachers preached freedom into our ears and our old men and women prophesied about it.” Finally, Victoria Perry’s mother routinely awakened her by praying: “Someday we are going to be free: the Good Lord won’t let this thing go on all the time.”

When Christian slaves learned about the Confederate assault on Fort Sumter, many believed accurately that their deliverance was at hand. As a result, throughout the war, an increasing number of slaves prayed to God for a Southern defeat and the end of slavery. In later life, former Georgia slave Mary Gladdy remembered that, during the war, slaves gathered for prayer meetings because “their great, soul hungering desire was freedom.”
On the plantation where Maria Heywood lived such prayer meetings occurred “All bout in people house. Hold the four year of the war.”24 Once Ebenezer Brown’s masters left for the war, “All de time dey wus gone de slaves kept prayin’ to be sot free.”25 And during wartime prayer meetings that she attended, Channa Littlejohn remembered that prayers being offered asked very specifically for the Yankees to come.26 Such prayer meetings were so common during the war that some whites sought to prevent their occurrence lest the slaves’ prayers come true. Callie Williams pointed out that “Dey tried to make ‘em stop singin’ and prayin’ durin’ de war” because whites knew “all dey’d ask for was to be set free.” Williams goes on to say that attempts by whites to stop these meetings seldom succeeded.27 In fact, according to Tom Robinson, despite attempts by white people to prohibit petitions for divine intervention, “All over the country the same prayer was being prayed.”28

With the war ended and freedom secured, most former slaves had little doubt who was responsible for their deliverance. Many freedmen, like Mingo White and Robert Cheatum, believed that “Abraham Lincoln was the agent of the true and living God” sent to deliver his people from bondage.29 Others like O. W. Green and Clayborn Gantling emphasized that “Twas only because of de prayers of de cullud people, dey was freed....”30 Former Louisiana slave Charlotte Brooks gave credit for the coming of emancipation to both God and the North. Brooks believed that “We done the praying and the Yankees done the fighting, and God heard our prayers ‘way down here in these cane-fields.”31 Some freedmen, like L. M. Mills of St. Louis, proved extremely eloquent in their analysis of emancipation. Mills noted that it was no wonder God sent war on this nation! It was the old story of the captivity in Egypt repeated. The slaveholders were warned time and again to let the black man go, but they hardened their hearts and would not, until finally the wrath of God was poured out upon them and the sword of the great North fell upon their first born.32

Regardless of what spin freedpeople put on their newfound freedom, most identified the Christian God as the ultimate source of their deliverance. This was even true for some individuals who previously had been skeptical about the Christian core’s expectation of freedom. One freedman admitted, “I’ve heard them pray for freedom. I thought it was foolishness then, but the old time folks always felt they was to be free. It must have been something vealed unto ‘em.”33 Thus, freedpeople commonly identified emancipation as either the fulfillment of biblical promise or as the answer to decades of prayer. In either case, the faithfulness, now rewarded, of the Christian core drew thousands of previously skeptical African Americans to Christianity. Where slavery had once barred the door to Christian salvation, freedom allowed the multitude to enter God’s kingdom unobstructed.

Freedpeople vividly remembered the dramatic impact that the Civil War
and emancipation had on their religious lives. For instance, Mollie Edmonds recalled: “After surrender us held meetings in big tents and had a preacher, what could tell us the word of God. Before that, there wasn’t much Christianity amongst us.”

Kentuckian Charles Green pointed out that immediately after the war “lots er churches sprung up.” Virginian Julia Williams similarly noted that “De slaves had more meetin’s and gatherin’s aftah de war.” Likewise, Henry Baker exclaimed, “We served de Lawd sho nuff aftuh we wux sot free cause we had sumpin tuh be thankful for. Aftuh Surrender, ‘niggers’ dey sung, dey prayed, dey preached....” Similarly, Harriett Gresham recalled that upon emancipation, “One and all they remembered to thank God for their freedom. They immediately began to hold meetings, singing soul stirring spirituals.”

According to Charlie Robinson, “When freedom come...Dat year us all jined de church...”

Freedmen who had served in the United States Army also remembered their experiences during the war as being crucial in encouraging their commitment to Christianity. After serving as a soldier, Kentucky native Barney Stone became a preacher out of “...gratefulness to God for my deliverance and my salvation.” Another black Union veteran credited his conversion to the fact that, since God protected him during the war, he felt it was appropriate to trust in Him after being discharged. Tenesseean Julius Jones “had never tended a real service before...I was grown” but “got religion while I was in one of those war hospitals.” Finally, white Union soldier Zenas T. Haines recalled hearing African American soldiers who sought conversion while camped in New Bern, North Carolina. As Haines noted in his diary,

Our nights are rendered musical by the plaintive choral hymnings of devotional negroes in every direction, alone and in groups. From their open cabins come the mingled voices of men wrestling painfully and agonizingly with the spirit, and those uttering the ecstatic notes of the unredeemed.

Haines was hardly the only white person to detect an increase in Christian conversions among African Americans during and after the Civil War. James Mallory, an Alabama slave owner and a deeply religious man, made several observations concerning the religious condition of African Americans in his
community between the years 1862 and 1868. On August 17, 1862, Mallory noted in his journal that “a revival is in progress amongst our blacks, a number were added to the church and baptised.”44 Later that year, Mallory continued to note an increase in the number of conversions among his slaves. On October 19, Mallory wrote “their [sic] is quite a revival amongst the servants, from twenty eyght [sic] to thirty were baptized today.”45 After emancipation, Mallory became disturbed by the intensity of the freedpeople’s increased religious feelings. “Religious excitement amongst the freedmen has become alarming, they seem falling fast into idoletry [sic].” “The Negroes,” he continued, “have almost quit work, waiting for the judgment to come in a few days.”46 While one might interpret Mallory’s observations as the bitter commentary of a slave owner stung by emancipation, this does not appear to be the case. Mallory, while frustrated by the South’s stumbling steps toward free labor, was not vicious in his general remarks about the freedpeople. In fact, just a few days before expressing concern about the religious excitement taking place, Mallory dispassionately noted in his journal: “The freedmen are holding a protracted meeting near here, largely attended.”47 Given this earlier matter-of-fact observation, it seems that Mallory only became concerned when the freedpeople’s Christian enthusiasm reached a crescendo in both scope and form that he had never seen before. Therefore, Mallory’s words most likely bear witness to a religious transformation among African Americans that began during the war and accelerated with emancipation.

The letters and publications of Northern missionary societies working among the freedpeople during and after the Civil War confirm Mallory’s observations. Between 1861 and 1868, organizations like the American Missionary Association and National Freedmen’s Relief Association consistently published accounts of religious revivals among African Americans living in Union-occupied areas. Most strikingly, these reports do not merely describe an awakening of religious enthusiasm among the freedpeople but point to a large number of conversions. In other words, most of the freedpeople described were not celebrating their age-old faith but were accepting Christianity for the first time.48

The American Missionary Association’s annual report for 1861 indicated that its missions to the freedpeople “give some evidence of the presence of the Spirit…”49 In particular, the missionaries had observed “the hopeful conversion of several individuals” as well as baptisms for “a number of converts, and they credited Christian freedpeople with improving the conditions for African American conversion.”50 A missionary working in Newport News, Virginia, indicated: “Were it not for the religious element among this people” the freedpeople “would be in great despondency.”51 A Rev. Lockwood of the Virginia mission at Fortress Monroe found that the preaching of black Christian ministers there gave African American religious meetings tremendous “spirit and power.”52 More importantly, Lockwood’s description
of sermons delivered by freedmen reveals that the Christian core had begun actively proselytizing their many unconverted brethren. For example, during a service held near Hampton, Virginia, one preacher who had been a slave warned an African American congregation: “I see sinners out of Christ, going to hell.” Still another admonished his fellow freedpeople that “If we would have greater freedom of body, we must first free ourselves from the shackles of sin, and especially the sin of unbelief.” Such exhortations proved to be the opening salvos in what would soon become a rapidly expanding and successful battle to convert many unbelieving freedpersons.

In the years following 1861 early missionary reports of modest numbers of African American converts quickly gave way to descriptions of a rising tide of conversions that grew along with the Union Army’s occupation of more and more Confederate territory. As runaway slaves entered contraband camps and other freedpeople’s settlements that sprang up around the Union Army, white and black Christians greeted them and vigorously sought their conversion. These efforts soon bore fruit. For example, in 1862, South Carolina missionary Charlotte Forten reported that ministers in that state baptized one hundred and fifty former slaves on a single Sunday. Reverend Green of Norfolk, Virginia, noted that his Sabbath congregations grew from less than seventy-five to over one thousand participants within three weeks. Missionaries in a contraband camp at Cairo, Illinois, reported, “During the winter of 1862 there was an almost continuous revival” with conversions occurring “frequently.” A year later, North Carolina missionaries exclaimed that “The Lord is doing a great work here…and many are being converted to God.” Likewise, missionaries from Natchez, Mississippi, Norfolk, Virginia, and St. Louis, Missouri, described “many” and “frequent” conversions at their mission stations. Reverend A.D. Olds, a missionary at a contraband camp in Corinth, Mississippi, reported to the American Missionary Association that he had founded the Union Christian Church there with one hundred original covenant signers. Olds goes on to report that by June 7, 1863, between two and three thousand freedpeople attended the church services he conducted. Speaking generally about the freedmen’s spiritual condition, Olds wrote, “I have been greatly cheered to see with what frankness they confess their sinfulness & their need of a savior.” Another Mississippi missionary described conversions among the freedpeople as “a deep, quiet work of grace…extending almost over the entire colored population.” These enthusiastic reports suggest that the pure air of freedom allowed the
flame of Christianity to burn brighter than it ever did before emancipation.

The diary and letters of Sarah Jane Foster, a missionary teacher among the freed people of Martinsburg, West Virginia, illustrate a similar spiritual transformation in one African American community. Initially, Foster believed she had never attended better prayer meetings than those in Martinsburg, but she also indicated that worshipers were "few." Approximately two weeks later, however, Foster wrote, "I have just returned from a good prayer meeting...nine or ten manifest a good religious interest...I [also] see great progress in many of my scholars, and the vicious seem to be becoming tractable. Some of the most troublesome are now seeking Christ." By February 11, 1866, Foster reported that the prayer meetings had become so full that many had to be turned away. Foster attributed this religious awakening to "a deep and widely spread interest" with "a number...seeking to find the Savior." As of March 5, 1866, Foster wrote that "the religious interest yet continues, and there is best evidence of genuine heart work." Finally, on June 18, 1866, Foster declared that "A deep, calm, widespread interest still pervades the hearts of the young...and has hardly flagged at all since its first awakening nearly six months ago."

Although impressive in its duration, Martinsburg's widespread and sustained religious awakening was not unique. In January 1866, the Methodist newspaper The Christian Advocate reported the presence of "several revivals of religion in the Virginia Methodist Churches." According to the newspaper's account, the Norfolk district, an AMA mission station since 1862, had experienced "nearly five hundred conversions' within the last three months." In fact, in its Twentieth Annual Report the AMA wrote, "The religious history of the year among the colored people of Eastern Virginia is marked by a great revival." That same year, the Berea Mission in Kentucky reported having to raise money for a new church as its "place of holding meetings has become too strait" since its Sunday school membership had grown by a factor of four. Not to be outdone, Reverend Gabriel Burdett of Camp Nelson, Kentucky, described the following year how his flock experienced a "great religious interest" with over sixty new church members being added in one summer.

Another sign of great religious change within the African American community in the South after the Civil War lay in the fact that men, not just women as before the war, converted in large numbers. Indeed, religious revivals had become common among both white men and black men in both the Union and Confederate armies. Scholars estimate that between 100,000 to 200,000 Union soldiers converted during these revivals and countless others participated in the associated services. But the unique experiences of African American men in the war made them especially receptive to these periodic revivals. Black soldiers serving with William Tecumseh Sherman, for example, marked the occasion of Charleston's surrender with enthusiastic camp meeting revivals. As previously mentioned, Union soldier Zenas T. Haines recalled hearing of large numbers of
African American soldiers who sought conversion while camped in New Bern, North Carolina. Likewise, Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s account of army life during the Civil War describes large prayer meetings that attracted both “the warlike and the pious.” So many of the black soldiers in Higginson’s camp began to attend prayer meetings that at least one Christian freedman complained of this new development. Higginson wrote that Old Jim Cushman “used to vex his righteous soul over the admission of the unregenerate to prayer-meetings, and went off once shaking his head and muttering, ‘Too much goat shout wid de sheep.” Apparently, the wave of African Americans seeking to convert during the Civil War was too much, too soon for Cushman to accept. Having spent his life as one of the Christian core’s small band of believers, Cushman found the rapid wartime expansion of the faithful to be overly convenient in its timing.

Missionaries in Mississippi also noted that many African American men there converted during the war. One missionary working in an African American regiment noted that “A glorious revival has begun in connection with our labors here... Fifteen of our soldiers dropped on their knees for prayers, at the moment an opportunity was given.” At Fortress Monroe, Virginia, an AMA teacher reported, “A great many old men and women are seeking the Savior... Last Sabbath 94 were baptized, a large proportion of them men.” Finally, the Reverend Edward Ball of Beaufort, North Carolina, recalled that boys led his mission into a deeply spiritual revival. According to Ball, in 1870 “the most powerful revival... since the war... commenced among the boys in our prayer-meeting, and has extended among the colored people.”

This momentous change in African American religious life occurred primarily because the Christian core had set an example in its faithfulness to Christianity and had accurately predicted emancipation. For several generations, unbelieving African American slaves witnessed the Christian core’s steadfast faith in Christianity, despite continuing bondage and, at times, brutal religious persecution. And with their religious prophesy fulfilled during the war, what greater testimony to the power of their God could the Christian core offer prospective converts? Not surprisingly then most former slaves accepted the Christian core’s interpretation of God as their agent of deliverance. Accordingly, more African

ALLEN TEMPLE AFRICAN M.B. CHURCH;
Cor. Broadway and Sixth Street. Cincinnati, O. Feb. 6, 1874.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church of Cincinnati was organized on February 4, 1824. The image of the Allen Temple built in 1870 is from Proceedings of the Semi-Centenary Celebration of the African Methodist Episcopal Church of Cincinnati, 1874. Cincinnati Historical Society Library, Cincinnati Museum Center
Americans than ever before embraced Christianity as their religion in gratitude for all that its God had done for them. There was, however, a second reason for the widespread conversion of African Americans to Christianity. Whites did not control black churches after the war. As Katherine Dvorak demonstrates, most freedpeople seized the occasion of emancipation to create their own separate churches. This development received considerable aid from African American denominations in the North like the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AME Zion). As noted by historian William Montgomery, “The bond of race and experience united the [AME and AME Zion] missionaries with the freedmen in ways that whites could never be.” Beginning in 1862, this unique bond allowed the two denominations to spread their ministry from contraband camps in the eastern states all the way to Texas in four years. By 1871, most African American Christians worshipped in black majority churches led by black ministers.

Having deserted antebellum biracial churches, freedpeople celebrated a liberating theology quite unlike their former masters’ message of social control that Henry Bibb of Kentucky described as having “driven thousands into infidelity.” Gone too was the church’s endorsement of slavery as a divine institution. Understandably, this new emphasis increased the attractiveness of the faith for African Americans. Daniel Stowell argues that as “black members left the biracial churches and denominations behind, southern black Protestantism experienced a general revival. The freedom and hope born of emancipation led many freedpeople into the newly forming black churches.” Joe Gray Taylor seconds Stowell’s analysis by noting the “Negro church finished the Christian evangelism which had begun during slavery times.... The mushrooming growth of black churches in the last third of the nineteenth century is evidence enough of their successful missionary endeavor.” In short, the separation of white and black churches provided African Americans with moral and institutional control over a traditionally powerful symbolic presence in the South. Thus, the church became the center of the Afri-
can American community because whites could not destroy or deny legitimacy to a societal institution that they themselves endorsed. In this way, African Americans effectively turned the old white-sanctioned institution focused on social control into a vehicle for self-protection and social change.89

A final reason for the widespread conversion of African Americans during the Civil War era lay in the fact that freedom enabled them to more effectively practice their Christian faith. Beginning in the contraband camps, untold thousands of freedpeople learned to read as a result of the war, mostly with the aid of Christian missionaries who combined literacy training with religious instruction. For example, the AMA openly acknowledged that “In the prosecution of its work among the Freedmen...it commissions no teachers that are not members of some evangelical church, and in all its work endeavors to win men to Christ.”90 This approach yielded classes, for example, like that taught by G. W. Carruthers in a Corinth, Mississippi, contraband camp. Carruthers opened his class by having the class read scripture “in concert” and then he instructed his students to repeat the text aloud individually. After Carruthers commented on the text that had been read, he prayed aloud and then asked the class recite the Lord’s Prayer in unison. Finally, the class sang hymns before breaking into smaller groups for academic instruction.91 Not only did this instruction bring many African Americans to accept Christianity, but it prepared them to take the faith back into their communities. Armed with literacy, a greater understanding of Christianity, and in many cases their own copy of the Bible, African American Christians in the postbellum era became a formidable force for conversion.92

The results of these developments could be staggering. According to historian Mechel Sobel, approximately 14.3% of the antebellum African American population, North and South, belonged to a Christian church.93 But by the late nineteenth century, 32.5% or 2.7 million out of an African American population of 8.3 million were church members.94 African American church membership more than doubled within roughly thirty years. While some of this growth reflects the merging of the slaves’ invisible institution with formal, public churches, much of it can be attributed to postbellum conversions.95 In only its second year of existence, for example, a Tennessee association of freedpeople’s churches gained nearly seven times more converts than an association that before the Civil War had supported Southern Baptist missionaries. In 1860, the Southern Baptist Domestic and Indian Mission Board reported that it served 114 churches and baptized 215 African Americans for that year.96 In contrast, the General Missionary Baptist Association of Tennessee, composed of African American churches, reported in 1869 that it represented 152 churches and baptized 1,456 new members the previous year.97 And this was despite the fact that the General Missionary Baptist Association of Tennessee represented only 25% more churches than the Southern Baptist missionaries.
This postbellum success in converting African Americans would fuel the growth of African American church membership throughout the South. In Georgia, for example, between 1860 and 1877 the number of black Methodists more than doubled (30,912 to 75,803) and that of black Baptists more than tripled (26,192 to 91,868). The Reverend Henry M. Turner of the African Methodist Episcopal Church described 1866 as a year of revivals in Georgia during which, in just a two month period, Turner and his subordinates received 11,000 new members into the AME Church. Turner, as well as other AME missionaries working in the South, reported that “people who were formerly thought immovable had been brought into the church and ‘powerfully converted.’” Likewise, in 1870 the Louisiana Baptist Convention reported that “the increase among the colored people has been remarkable. At the close of the war their membership did not exceed 3,000 now their churches are scattered everywhere throughout the state...” Between 1865 and 1871 the number of African American Baptists in Louisiana grew from approximately 3,000 to 30,800, leading the state’s Baptist Convention to declare this growth “unparalleled in the history of religious movements.” The First and Fourth African Baptist Churches of New Orleans alone baptized nearly 3,000 new members between 1866 and 1870. Similarly, Jacksonville Florida’s Bethel Baptist Institutional Church grew to approximately 100 members during its twenty-seven years of existence before emancipation. In contrast, the church’s membership swelled to 1,200 during the twenty-five years after the coming of freedom. A survey of South Carolina African American Baptist churches founded during the 1860s demonstrates a similar pattern of membership growth particularly through the baptism of new converts. (See Table 1.) Total membership for these churches grew from 4,789 to 9,128 between the years 1867 to 1877, an increase of over ninety per cent. A total of 4,626 baptisms or new converts accounted for the bulk of this growth. Clearly, conversions among freedpeople were the leading factor in postbellum African American church growth.

Edward Wheeler and James Washington both argue that freedom was “the central theme in the history of the black Baptist movement.” This study agrees but would broaden the interpretation to include the entire African American transition to Christianity, as does historian William Hicks who has ar-
argued that once “freedom removed the persecutions and oppressions, new zeal for the faith sprang up and the once smothered flame burst forth and its influence spread...”106 So central was freedom to Christianity that in listing his reasons for gratitude to God, the Reverend Barney Stone of Kentucky specifically mentioned his deliverance from slavery before he did salvation.107 Another slave even rejected the Christian promise of salvation if he could not be free in this life or the next. According to the narrative of Beverly Jones, Uncle Silas, an elderly Virginia slave interrupted a church service to ask the minister “Is us slaves gonna be free in Heaven?” When the minister attempted to avoid the question by telling Uncle Silas that Jesus gave all Christians eternal salvation, the old slave responded “Gonna give us freedom ‘long wid salvation?” Uncle Silas reportedly remained standing throughout the service in expectation of an answer that did not come. Uncle Silas never attended church again.108

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*John Allen Middleton, Directory and Pre-1900 Historical Survey of South Carolina’s Black Baptists (Columbia, South Carolina: J. A. Middleton and Associates, 1992), 2, 11, 12, 14, 32, 34, 53, 63, 72, 73, 78, 80, 136.*

Slaves in antebellum America lived in a world enveloped by darkness. Still, within the dark night of bondage, a flame of religious hope nurtured by a core of African American Christians offered the promise of light and guidance for those who were attracted to its glow. This flame burned steadily despite the winds of oppression that often caused it to flicker but never extinguished it. Despite its many attractive properties, however, this Christian flame proved too distant to draw all to its warmth while others, wary of its source, stayed far away for fear of being burned. After emancipation, no longer buffeted by the storms of slavery, the flame burned brighter than ever, attracting many to its light in a wave of conversions unprecedented in the history of African Americans. Freedom also allowed those who had long benefited from the flame—the Christian core—to lead others to its healing warmth and form independent churches that served the needs of African Americans first and foremost. In this way, Christianity emerged from slavery and the Civil War to become the dominant faith among African Americans. §


3. In American Slavery, Peter Kolchin suggested that the reaction to Phillips and Elkins led historians to overstate evidence for the “slaves’ resiliency and autonomy” and subsequently he pointed to the need for “modifications” in the interpretation of slave life. Kolchin, American Slavery, 1619-1877 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 137-38.


6. Ibid., 55-89.


20. Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 6, series 1, Alabama & Indiana, 416. (Mingo White)


22. Rawick, TheAmerican Slave, vol. 3, series 1, South Carolina Pt. 3 & 4, 260. (Victoria Perry) See also, ibid., vol. 5, suppl. series 1, Indiana & Ohio, 142-43 (John Moore); ibid., vol. 15, series 2, North Carolina Pt. 2, 130. (Fannie Moore)

23. Rawick TheAmerican Slave, vol. 12, series 2, Georgia Pt. 1 & 2, 26. (Mary Gladdy) See also ibid., vol. 17, series 2, Florida, 291 (William Sherman); ibid., vol. 7, suppl. series 1, Mississippi Pt. 2, 785. (Dora Franks)


25. Ibid., vol. 6, suppl series 1, Mississippi Pt. 1, 249. (Ebenzer Brown)

26. Ibid., vol. 15, series 2, North Carolina Pt. 2, 56. (Channa Littlejohn)
Virginia and the sea islands of South Carolina shortly after
the Union Army occupied those portions of the Confederate
coastline in 1861.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid., 43.

52. Ibid., 53.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid., 54. See also “Anecdote and Incidents of a Visit to
Freedmen,” The Freedmen’s Record (October 1865): 158.

55. At least two former slaves who left narratives attributed
their conversion to the efforts of missionaries sent to the
South during or after the Civil War. Rev. L. R. Ferebee, A
Brief History of the Slave Life of Rev. L. R. Ferebee, and
the Battles of Life, and Four Years of His Ministerial Life
(Raleigh: Edwards, Broughton & Co., 1882), 10;
Blassingame, Slave Testimony, 610. (Harry Jarvis)

Teachers During the Civil War (New York: Arno Press,
1969), 80. See also, Elizabeth Ware Pearson, ed., Letters
From Port Royal 1862-1868 (New York: Arno Press,
1969), 145.

57. Seventeenth Annual Report of the American Missionary
Association (New York: American Missionary Association,
1863), 40-41.

58. Ibid., 47. See also ibid., 37-39. Entries for Fortress
Monroe, Newport News, Portsmouth.

59. Eighteenth Annual Report of the American Missionary
Association (New York: American Missionary Association,
1864), 14.

60. Ibid., 12, 21, 22. For evidence of frequent conversions and
revivals among African Americans, see also ibid., 42-43.
(See entries for South Carolina, Missouri); Nineteenth
Annual Report of the American Missionary Association
(New York: American Missionary Association, 1865), 17,
26, 27-28, 33. (See entries for Washington D.C., Florida,
Kans County, Post hud, Mississippi); Twentieth Annual
Report of the American Missionary Association
(New York: American Missionary Association, 1866), 22,
26, 39. (See entries for Fortress Monroe, Roanoke Island,
Kentucky); “Work of a Colored Chaplain in North
Carolina,” The Independent, 1 June 1865: 4. (Goldboro,
NC); “Letter from Charleston,” The Christian Advocate,
11 January 1866: 1.

61. “Letter to George Whipple from Rev. A.D. Olds, June 7th?,
1863,” American Missionary Association Manuscripts from
the Amistad Collection (Microfilm), Mississippi Roll #1,
Manuscript # 71551.

Association (New York: American Missionary Association,
1865), 33.

63. Ibid.

64. Ibid., 54-55.

65. Ibid., 70.

66. Ibid., 129.

67. “M. E. Church South,” The Christian Advocate, 11 January
1866: 1

68. Twentieth Annual Report of the American Missionary
Association (New York: American Missionary Association,
1866), 22.

69. Ibid., 39.

70. Twenty First Annual Report of the American Missionary
Association (New York: American Missionary Association,
1867), 43.

71. Gardiner H. Shattuck, Jr., A Shield and Hiding Place: The
Religious Life of the Civil War Armies (Macon: Mercer
University Press, 1987), 73-110; Sydney E. Ahlstrom, A
72. Shattuck, A Shield and Hiding Place, 92; Ashstrom, A Religious History of the American People, 677.

73. Shattuck, A Shield and Hiding Place, 81, 89.

74. Harris, In the Country, 171. (Entry for May 12, 1863)


76. Ibid., 256.


82. Ibid., 59-71.


84. Henry Bibb, Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave (New York: Published by the Author, 1850), 24.


86. Ibid.

87. Stowell, Rebuilding Zion, 90.


92. Christian aid societies like the AMA attempted to provide all families with copies of the Bible. For example, in 1863 the AMA mission at Fortress Monroe reported, “The children have all been supplied with Testaments, and all the families have nearly all been visited and presented with Bibles.” Seventeenth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association (New York: American Missionary Association, 1863), 37.

93. Sobel, Trabelin’ On, 182.


98. Owen, The Sacred Flame of Love, 190 (Appendix 2); Stowell, Rebuilding Zion, 80-83, 90.


101. Glen Lee Greene, House Upon a Rock: About Southern Baptists in Louisiana (Alexandria, Louisiana: Executive Board of the Louisiana Baptist Convention, 1973), 176. See also, William Hicks, History of Louisiana Negro Baptists and Early American Beginnings from 1804-1914 (Lafayette, Louisiana: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1998), 53-55. Hicks’ research found that Louisiana’s African American Baptists grew from 5,000 in 1867 to 125,000 by 1902.


103. Bethel Baptist Institutional Church, Souvenir Centennial Celebration Bethel Baptist Institutional Church, Golden Jubilee (Jacksonville, Florida, 1938), 5.

104. Edisto’s membership dropped from 1098 in 1868 to 500 in 1869. This suggests the church probably split into two congregations. Still, the church rolls grew to 786 in 1870 and 930 in 1871.


106. Hicks, History of Louisiana Negro Baptists and Early American Beginnings from 1804-1914, 53-54.

107. Rawick, The American Slave, vol. 6, series 1, Alabama & Indiana, 188. (Barney Stone) In listing his reasons for becoming a preacher, Stone acknowledged his “gratefulness to God for my deliverance and my salvation.”