

The Black Church in America

It is certainly not hard to find wonderful prayers to use to begin this class. In fact, there is a recent book called *Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans*. It was difficult for me to select one of the prayers from that book because so many are wonderful prayers that could be used. I have chosen to use the prayer from a woman whose name was Maria Stewart. She was a member of the First African Baptist Church of Boston. As we begin this class, we will pray in the words of Maria W. Stewart. Let us pray.

“O Thou sin-forgiving God, they that are whole need not a physician but they that are sick. Lord, I am sick and full of diseases. If Thou wilt, thou canst make me clean. Though my sins have been as scarlet, Thou canst make them as wool. And though they be red like crimson, Thou canst make them whiter than snow. Were it not that there is a sufficiency in Thy blood to atone for the vilest, the view of my past sins and transgressions would sink me in despair. For Thou hast said, ‘Him that cometh to Thee, Thou will not cast out.’ Lord, I come pleading alone the merits of my Redeemer. Not only for myself do I plead but for the whole race of mankind and especially for the sons and daughters of Africa. Bless Thy churches throughout the world. Clothe Thy ministers with salvation, and cause Thy saints to shout for joy. Grant that the time may soon come that all may know Thee from the rising of the sun until the going down thereof. And now Lord, what wait I for? Dispel every gloomy fear that pervades my mind and enable me to hope in Thy mercy. To Thee will I ascribe praises everlasting, amen.”

As we have seen, the nineteenth century was the Great Century of missions. It was also the Great Century of the Black church in America. In 1619, one year before the Mayflower, a Dutch ship arrived in Jamestown, Virginia with 20 African slaves aboard. Actually, you may know there is a new museum of African-American history in Detroit that opened in April 1997. That museum contains a model of a typical slave ship with 40 life-size figures of slaves in its hold. That fateful day, in 1619, was the beginning of almost 250 years of slavery in America. There was some early opposition to slavery among American people and particularly American Christians. Samuel Seawell was a New England Puritan who wrote a book called *The Selling of Joseph*. It is a story of Joseph in the book of Genesis. That book was published in 1700. It was the first tract against slavery written in America. John Woolman and the Quakers were particularly opposed to slavery. Woolman’s journal is a great book that makes an eloquent plea for the end of slavery in America long before that actually took place. Jonathan Edwards, Jr. held the golden rule of Christ as the biblical answer to slavery.

There was some early ministry among the slaves in America. John Elliot and Cotton Mather in New England preached to the slaves. Unfortunately, there was some opposition to evangelizing the slaves, particularly from slave owners who were afraid that, as slaves became Christian, it would undermine the institution of slavery and require that slaves be set free. There were numerous colonial laws that were passed in various places in the American Colonies that stated explicitly that conversion to Christianity did not entitle slaves to freedom. But many slave owners suspected that Christianity would eventually undermine slavery, so they continued to oppose the evangelization of the slaves. Some of the slaves were Muslims. Some were even Christians who came to America from Africa. But most of the slaves who arrived in America on the slave ships adhered to native African religions. During the First Great Awakening, large numbers of African people converted to Christianity. Samuel Davies, the Great Awakening preacher in Virginia, was charmed by the singing of the slaves and attempted to do all that he could to reach them with the Gospel. George Whitefield, more than any other eighteenth-century figure, established Christian faith in the slave community.

Not long ago, I was looking at a book by Gary B. Nash called *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840*. This book dates the advent of black Christianity in Philadelphia to Whitefield's first preaching tour. Harry Stout in his book, *The Divine Dramatist*, summarizes Whitefield's contribution to this portion of history this way: "Whitefield's support of slavery remained a blot on his memory that has deprived him of heroic status in African-American history. But in 1770, the year Whitefield died, while many Americans continued to doubt that slaves had souls, Whitefield stood as the slaves' greatest champion. And at the time he was mourned as such." We saw that in the poem by young Phillis Wheatley, the African-American girl who wrote a tribute to George Whitefield upon his death.

Through Whitefield's preaching and the preaching of the First Great Awakening, the slaves were given the resources for constructing their own slave religion in evangelical terms that eventually led to the creation of the autonomous black church. Black preaching, the spirituals, and the rich resources of the black church come from the slaves' own genius in expressing Christian faith and truth in dramatic and moving ways. These elements in slave religion also owe something to Whitefield and the First Great Awakening. They heard Whitefield preach the simple Gospel message, and they began to preach it themselves and put it into memorable music. Gardner Taylor, pastor of Brooklyn's 14,000-member Concord Baptist Church and one of America's great preachers today, said, "Black preachers used to have a formula for delivering a sermon. 'Start low, go slow, get high, strike fire, retire.'" That is probably good advice for all of us. Some of that comes out of the tradition of the kind of preaching they heard in the First Great Awakening.

The spirituals are America's most important and authentic contribution to religious music. The slaves no doubt could attach double meanings to songs like "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Steal Away, Steal Away to Jesus." The primary message of the spirituals spoke of deliverance from sin and from hell through the blood of Christ. These songs, indeed they are spirituals, look forward to the time when we will all be done with troubles and trials. But if the beginning of the evangelization of the slaves took place in the First Great Awakening, it was late in the eighteenth century and in the nineteenth century that we have what Carter Woodson, the first trained black historian, in his book, *The History of the Negro Church*, has called "the dawn of a new day." It is the nineteenth century that is "the dawn of a new day" because in the nineteenth century we have the movement of large numbers of black people in America into Christianity. In fact, the significance of that new day is set forth in Latourette's statement: "This is the great century of missions." Latourette says that all the efforts to win people in Africa and Asia in this great century resulted in no greater numerical gains than were achieved among the African Americans of the United States in the same period. So, one of the greatest people-movements into the Christian church in history took place during the nineteenth century in America as black people were converted to Christianity. Now, how did that happen?

There are various phases and various ways in which this took place. I would like to talk about these different ministries and approaches to the blacks in America during the nineteenth century. First of all, there were white missions to blacks. They were white pastors and missionaries reaching out, particularly in the South, to the slaves and the free blacks. There was a great burst of missions to the slaves in the South in the early nineteenth century. Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians were doing this. I could talk about some of the other white missionaries to the slaves, but I will just mention two of the Presbyterian missionaries to the slaves. Charles Colcock Jones was born in Liberty County, Georgia. He was a Georgia slave owner, and he remained a slave owner throughout his entire life. He went to Princeton and Andover Seminaries in the North. But he decided to go back to the South to work within the institution of slavery to try to reach the slaves and to preach not only to the slaves on his own plantation but also to those on neighboring plantations as well. He is called "the apostle to the slaves."

He spent his life attempting to get people in the South concerned for ministry to the slaves. And he himself preached to the slaves until he died. Then there was John Lafayette Girardeau. Girardeau was born on James Island in South Carolina, an island near Charleston. He grew up with black people and could speak the Gullah dialect. So, as he began to preach to the slaves in Charleston, he became a very popular preacher. His sermons were dramatic, and he used Gullah at various places in the sermons. As a result, he was able to begin a church in Charleston called Zion Presbyterian Church. That building is no longer there, but in its day it had 1000 black members and 250 white members. It is the largest Presbyterian Church in the United States. Many black people worshiped in white churches before the Civil War, almost always in segregated seating. The slaves would sit in the balcony; the white people would sit in the lower level of the church. In this church, the slaves and blacks sat in the lower level, and the white members sat in the balcony. Girardeau preached in this church. Time and time again he declined calls from prominent white churches that he might, as he put it, “serve his brother in black.”

Let me say a word about these southern, white preachers. I think they really did love the blacks. They saw them as friends and as brothers and sisters. But unfortunately, they did not see them as equals. And they did not see clearly that evils were not only built into the system of slavery, which they did try to correct, but that the system itself was evil and contrary to the love that Christ commands toward our neighbor. They did a great thing in taking the Gospel to the slaves. But they should have also attempted to do another thing, and that is to bring earthly freedom and better conditions to the slaves.

Black Christianity came into being not only because of white missionaries and pastors but also in what historians have called the invisible institution—that is the secret, black, slave church in the South. It was hidden from the slave owners and almost hidden from historians. But we do know that along with the preaching of people like Jones and Girardeau, there were black churches—we could call them emerging—meeting out away from the eyes of the plantation owners. The slaves met to pray, shout and sing, exhort and encourage one another, and hold fast until the Lord’s return. Albert J. Raboteau, in his book, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*, has told that story with eloquence and power. As black people were being converted through white missions and carrying on their own religious life in secret in the South, black Christianity in America gradually began to take shape in separate black churches with black leaders. Slaves and free blacks were attracted mostly to the Methodist and Baptist churches. There were probably a number of reasons for that. The more lively worship styles of the Methodists and Baptists appealed to the slaves and free blacks more than the rather sedate and perhaps a bit dull Presbyterian services. The possibility within the Methodist and Baptist churches of spontaneous leadership was appealing. A person became a preacher because he could preach, not because he had been to seminary. So, as black people began to think of their own churches, the preachers who were gifted at preaching emerged, and Methodist and Baptist churches were born.

Let me talk first about the black Baptist churches in the South. Two black Baptist leaders were George Liele and Andrew Bryan. George Liele was born in Virginia but came to Georgia as a child. He was converted in 1773 at the age of 23 while listening to a sermon in a Baptist church, the Baptist church of his master. He was baptized and received into membership in that church and then began to preach. Soon he began a church of black people. It was a black Baptist church in Silver Bluff, South Carolina near Aiken, South Carolina. As far as we know, it was the first independent black church in America. George Liele was granted his freedom; he went to Savannah and founded the First African Baptist Church in Savannah. Liele later moved to Jamaica in 1783 to do missionary work there. He started Baptist churches, usually called Ethiopian Baptist, in Jamaica. If you think about that, that is 10 years before William Carey went to India and about 30 years before the ordination of the first American foreign missionaries whom I talked about last time. This man, Liele, was perhaps the first Protestant missionary to go from the United States. Andrew Bryan carried on his ministry in the church in

Savannah, Georgia. Liele baptized Andrew Bryan. Bryan was of the old Calvinistic order. I have not been able to find out anything else about Bryan's theology. I wish that I could locate some of his writings or sermons. He became a great preacher in Savannah and continued the ministry of the African Baptist church in Savannah. If you go to Savannah today, there are two black Baptist churches that claim Andrew Bryan as their founder. One of the encyclopedias of black American history says, "Bryan's life well represented the complex predicament faced by African-American leaders in the antebellum South." In the early years of his ministry, Bryan was whipped and twice imprisoned by whites who feared him. He bought his freedom, prospered, and eventually came to own much property, including eight black slaves. It is an ironical development that did happen. His death in 1812 was mourned by blacks and whites alike.

Another famous black Baptist preacher was John Jasper. Jasper was born in Virginia during the slave period and became a great preacher. He began preaching at his master's urging. His master was a Baptist layman. Before long, John Jasper was preaching to governors, judges, legislators, and distinguished ministers, all of whom were moved under the power of his preaching. He not only preached to the blacks, but he also preached to many of the white leaders of Virginia. After emancipation he became pastor of a regular congregation, eventually becoming pastor of Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church in Richmond.

Black Baptist churches began in the South and gradually spread to the North. Black Methodist denominations began in the North and gradually spread to the South. One of the most important figures in nineteenth-century black history is Richard Allen, who was the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). It was the first black denomination in America, founded in Philadelphia in 1816. Richard Allen was born a slave in Philadelphia. He was sold to a slave owner in Delaware. He was converted at the age of 20 and immediately began preaching the Gospel. One of the people converted through Allen's teaching was his own master. That happened more than once. That master gave Allen the opportunity to purchase his freedom. Richard Allen and a small group of blacks attended Saint George Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, but they experienced racism and prejudice in the church. On one occasion, reported in his autobiography, he and his friends were forced to abandon some seats they had taken in the white section of the church after the pastoral prayer had begun. They were not even allowed to sit there until the prayer ended. They got up as a body and went out. Richard Allen said, "By this time, the prayer was over and we all went out of the church in a body, and they were no more plagued with us." But Bishop Asbury, who was a man who very much opposed slavery, was a friend of Richard Allen's. He encouraged Allen to carry on. Richard Allen began the African-American Episcopal Church in 1794. It is now called Old Mother Bethel in the city of Philadelphia. If you go there to visit, it is well worth a visit to that church, to take a tour of the church, and to hear the history of the AME explained. Allen was ordained by Bishop Asbury in 1799 and organized the AME denomination. In 1816, he became the first Bishop of the AME.

Daniel A. Payne was an AME Bishop who became president of Wilberforce University in Ohio, the first African-American institution of higher learning in the United States. Payne was born to free parents in Charleston, South Carolina in 1811. He studied at a Lutheran theological seminary in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. He was licensed as a Lutheran, served for two years as a Presbyterian pastor, and then settled into the AME in 1841. It is Bishop Daniel Payne's work that led to the expansion of the AME in the South following the Civil War. I was intrigued to read Bishop Payne's autobiography, called *Recollections of 70 Years*, and I was particularly interested to find this sentence. This took place in 1877 when Bishop Payne was 66 years old. He wrote, "In August I visited Princeton. In my opinion, Dr. Charles Hodge, professor of theology, was the greatest theologian which America has yet produced."

So, the Baptist Andrew Bryan was a Calvinist. The Methodist Daniel Payne thought Charles Hodge was the greatest American theologian.

Now I would like to speak briefly about some Congregationalists and Presbyterians and black leaders in these groups as well. The Congregationalist, Lemuel Haynes, was sometimes called a black Puritan on the northern frontier. He was an illegitimate child, deserted by his parents—a black father and a white mother. He was taken in by a Christian family. This pious farmer and his wife named him Lemuel and reared him. *Lemuel* is a word in the Old Testament that means belonging to God. This young boy poured over Scripture, memorized lots of psalms and hymns, and devoured the writings of the Puritans. He studied theology with two Congregational clergymen and was ordained in 1785. He was the first African American to be ordained by any church in America. In 1788, he was called to a church in Rutland, Vermont, where he served for over 30 years. It was a white church with Lemuel Haynes as pastor. He was active in the revival in Vermont during the days of the Second Great Awakening. He includes this entry in his journal: “August 31, 1804: I set out on a mission for five weeks. During that time I delivered 30 sermons, gave the Lord’s Supper three times, and assisted in the formation of one church. In general, I had full reception and in many places the Word seemed to take effect.” Lemuel Haynes was certainly a Calvinist. He preached a sermon entitled “The Divine Decrees,” which is one of the finest sermons I have read on that topic. In 1804 he was given an honorary Master’s Degree by Middlebury College. He was, perhaps, the first American black to be so recognized. But, this is not an entirely happy story. In 1818 Haynes was dismissed from his church. We do not know all of the details, but sadly, racism and prejudice seem to have been factors. His farewell sermon, “The Suffering Support and Reward of Faithful Ministers,” is in many ways a kind of parallel to Jonathan Edwards’ farewell sermon at Northampton 100 years before. One of the older books on Lemuel Haynes says this, “He seemed to maintain habitual communion with the Father of spirits. He forgot himself while the glory of the Lord and the interest of Zion lay near his heart.” A new book, *Black Preacher to White America*, published in 1990, has the collective writings of Lemuel Haynes.

I do not have time to tell the stories of these other black ministers, the Presbyterians John Chavis, Samuel Cornish, and Theodore Wright in as much detail. But let me say a few words about each one. Chavis studied at Washington Academy. (It later became Washington and Lee University in Virginia.) Then he studied privately under John Witherspoon at Princeton in New Jersey. In 1801, the Presbyterian General Assembly appointed John Chavis as a missionary to the slaves in Virginia and North Carolina. He was a man who knew the classical languages. He was an able teacher, and he opened a school for whites in North Carolina. He believed that slavery was evil, but Chavis was a very conservative man who opposed immediate abolition. He considered himself a Federalist, but he regarded Andrew Jackson as a “backwoods hick without benefit of blood or training.” He had a very effective ministry both in Virginia and in North Carolina during the slave period.

Samuel Eli Cornish was a Presbyterian pastor in Maryland, Pennsylvania, and New York. He established the first independent black Presbyterian congregations. He founded the first black newspaper in the United States called “Freedom’s Journal.” And he was a social reformer who assisted numerous missionary societies in the Netherlands.

I was particularly interested in Theodore Wright when I was writing my “History of Princeton Seminary” because Theodore Wright graduated from Princeton Seminary in 1828. That is astounding when you think about it. Princeton Seminary was always open to black students, and there was a black graduate in 1828. Princeton University did not have a black graduate until 1947, and that was true of most of the schools in the Ivy League. But in 1828, Theodore Wright graduated from Princeton. He studied with Alexander Miller, Charles Hodge, and the others who taught there. Wright succeeded

Samuel Cornish as pastor of Shiloh Presbyterian Church in New York City. He served that church for 20 years. He was drawn to the New School side of things because of the abolitionist sentiment that was stronger in the New School than in the Old School. He constantly spoke out about the immorality and injustice of racism that blacks were forced to endure in the antebellum North as well as in the South.

There are many books on black Christianity—its genius, its meaning, its significance. I am not going to talk about those books, but I would like to recommend one in particular and that is *Slavery and Theology: The Emergence of Black Christian Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America*, written by Timothy Smith, the professor of history at Johns Hopkins University. In his book, Smith stresses that neither revolt nor submission and acquiescence were the central themes of nineteenth-century black Christianity, but forgiveness, ecstasy, self-respect, ethical earnestness, and hope were the central themes. In 1996, the Southern Baptist Convention officially apologized to African Americans for the sin of slavery. Some people have considered that just a gesture, but I think it was an important gesture because institutional apologies not only say, “We are sorry,” but they could mark a new beginning of the dawn of another new day. The nineteenth century was the dawn of a new day for black Christians of America. We can pray that at this time there will be the dawn of another new day. That apology for slavery is being repeated in local communities across the South, across America, and even in our Covenant Seminary chapel. In some of our Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) churches, Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) churches, and others, relationships are being forged with African-American churches even across denominational lines. Just about a year ago, it was my privilege to go to Miami to preach the ordination of Michael Campbell, an African-American graduate of Covenant Seminary. He is married to the daughter of my good friend, Walter Thompson. And Mike was ordained in the PCA church to be the senior pastor at Pinelands Presbyterian Church, a largely white church in Miami. I was thrilled to be part of that because I considered that a very historic moment in the history of the PCA when a white church would call a black senior pastor.

We have come a long way, and we have a long way to go. But I have to end this lesson in the words of a spiritual: “Shout, shout, we are gaining ground. Glory, hallelujah.”

I have been asked a question about the Covenanters and their attitude toward slavery. They were really the one consistent anti-slavery Presbyterian denomination in America. Some of those people settled in the South, and until about 1830 there was a considerable movement toward abolition in the South. It is still an open issue. It was not until about 1830 that the lines began to harden, so much so that many of the Covenanters then left the South to go to other places where they could continue their fight against slavery. But the Covenanters, the Reformed Presbyterian Church, do have a great record in being opposed to slavery. Professor Barrs’ son, Philip, recently wrote his thesis on that topic at Washington University. It is interesting to see the Covenanter opposition to slavery. The English, and particularly the Scottish, Presbyterians were also opposed to it. And relations between American Old School Presbyterians, who were the moderates on this issue, and their Scottish friends and allies became strained during this time. We will look at the issue again in the next lesson or two when we come to Wilberforce and the abolition of slavery in the British Empire.

The question has been asked, “What happened to the independent black churches?” The Presbyterians tried the longest and hardest to keep the church together. Even after the Civil War in the South, there was still a desire for Presbyterians—black and white—to worship in the same church. But, it did not happen. I think it did not happen for two reasons. First, blacks sensed that there was still white prejudice against them in the churches. Second, there was a black initiative—black people, understandably, wanted to have their own pastors, their own churches, and go their own way. So, black and white churches came apart. It is really ironical to think that the period in American history when blacks and

whites worshiped together the most consistently was during the slave period before the Civil War. After the Civil War you get the division that begins to take place. I am not sure what happened to those individual churches of Cornish, Wright, and the others. I do not know if they remained Presbyterian churches in later years or perhaps died away. The Zion Presbyterian Church in Charleston no longer exists. In fact, the building is not even there. I had trouble trying to find the site. (I discovered that it was actually on Calhoun Street.) There is a little marker there that says, "This is the site of Zion Presbyterian Church." I was particularly interested in trying to find that church. Maybe someday there will be a new Mount Zion Presbyterian Church in the low country of South Carolina. The story is that after the Civil War, Girardeau left to go to Columbia to teach in the seminary. He had two careers: preacher to the black people in Charleston and seminary professor at Columbia Theological Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina. When he left after the war, the black people in Zion ran their own church. They had their own pastor and their own session. When they rebuilt that church some years later, they had the apostles and Girardeau as figures in stained glass windows. Those windows have apparently been lost. I did go to a black Presbyterian church in Charleston that is part of the Presbyterian Church (USA), which claims some descent from Mount Zion. I talked to the pastor about the windows, but he did not know where they were.

I have been asked, "Who was first involved in slave trading?" The first slave ship that came to America was Dutch. So the Dutch and the English were involved in the slave trade. It did not take the New Englanders long to become involved as well. Newport, Rhode Island has great houses there that can be traced back to the wealth that was earned by American slave traders. There may have been a lag because America, at first, was not an economic power and was not able to compete with the Dutch and the English. But, the triangle began as ships would go to the West Indies and take sugar back to England and Holland and then back to Africa and back to New England. So, it was New England (Jamestown) that was first involved in slave trading and not the South. Eventually, slavery proved to be uneconomical in the North, and it became the economic basis for life on the plantations in the South. I was just reading this morning about the life of John Newton, the English slave trader who wrote "Amazing Grace." He traveled to Africa and was involved in the slave trade there. Then he traveled to America and the West Indies and back to England.

Well, it certainly is a sad story. It is not an easy lesson to give, but with all that we regret and need to apologize for, we could still rejoice that the black people did overcome. Many of them did embrace Christ, and the black church became a very prominent part of American church life in the nineteenth century, and it continues to be strong, right down to the present.