

## **A Brief History of the African-American Church**

Transcript of a Commentary by Ambrose I. Lane, Sr.  
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We're gonna begin a commentary because of what's happened in the political in discussing the Black Church. We need to have an understanding of what is the Black Church and why and how did it come into existence. Why was it necessary in this country to have a Black Church?

You see those who came to exploit this land came here, many of them, to escape religious persecution. And they came here to make certain that no one would ever have to be persecuted again because of their belief in a specific religion. They came here mostly as Christians. But after they got here they decided that since most of the males didn't want to work, they just wanted to have people to come here who -- who huh -- who would do the work for them without any cost to them. It made matters a bit difficult.

And then in 1619 Africans came here and they became indentured servants like most of the whites were. Now that's a term that people talk about but they don't tell you what it was. An Indentured Servant was nothing but a slave for a specified period of time in this country. So you had the development of the land in the beginning by white slaves for a specified period of time and after 1619 increasingly by Africans who - although the first Africans came here as indentured servants for a specific period of time - the boys knew that they had a good thing. So they changed the laws and they created new laws to make certain that every person born of a woman who happened to be African and who happened to be a slave would also be a slave, a slave for life. There were a few Christians who raised questions about how could you be a Christian and a slave. And they solved that problem even though there were serious problems with it back in their home country of England.

Now the Black Church or African-American Church refers specifically to those American Christian churches that minister to predominantly black congregations in the United States. There were some that began as the African-Methodist Episcopal Church, AME, with a specific kind of history. But many black churches were and continue to be part of white Christian denominations such as the United Church of Christ. And that's caused a lot of problems for Obama because United Church of Christ is a white church and his church specifically is a black church within that white denomination.

In the early days what happened was to make -- huh -- them easier to control, white slave owners systematically strip Africans of their cultural

heritage. They wouldn't allow them to speak their own language and they also did not allow them to practice what they believed to be their religion. And they even passed laws prohibiting African religious practices. But despite these efforts slaves managed to retain elements of their culture, elements that they kept for hundreds of years. And in the context of religion they kept that too. But they also saw the advantage of adopting the religion of their masters. How did they do that?

They often learned about Christianity by being organized by white preachers or supervised by a white person who was convinced that was the best thing to do with their slaves to teach them Christian religion, but to make certain that we in this country didn't follow what became the practice in England. Once you became a Christian you could no longer be a slave, but that didn't happen here.

In such settings as were created by the slave masters whites used bible stories that re-enforced a sense of place that each group had in society, urging slaves to be loyal and to obey their masters. During the late - later 19<sup>th</sup> century they used stories such as the curse of Ham to justify slavery. They promoted the idea that loyal and hard working slaves would be rewarded in the afterlife. Although there were some that believed there would be no reward for slaves even in the afterlife. So there was no reward in this life and there was no reward in the afterlife. That was part of the Christian response.

In the early 1800's there were slave revolts, often inspired by passages that slaves had heard had been in the bible promising delivery from slavery. As with the exodus out of Egypt or with black preachers who had learned to do the same thing that the whites were doing. And those slave revolts lead to southern states passing laws barring exclusively black churches, barring black preachers, and barring the assembly of blacks in groups unless whites supervised them.

Slaves organized underground churches however and had their own hidden religious meetings where slaves were free to express their religious beliefs and where they developed their own songs and hymns and their own spirituals. These underground churches provided psychological refuge from the white world. This was the way they treated their own psychology.

In 1831 Nat Turner, a slave and a Baptist preacher, killed about 50 white men, women, and children in an armed rebellion in Virginia. And that was disturbing to - in fact there was a petition by white females in the state of Virginia asking the men in the Assembly to end slavery. Where it was

possible, free blacks organized independent black churches to practice religion in their own ways.

In Philadelphia free blacks established churches before the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Along with white churches opposed to slavery they provided aid and comfort to slaves who escaped. After emancipation, northern churches – Christian churches – founded by free blacks as well as those of predominately white denominations sent missions to the South to minister to newly freed slaves, including teaching them to read and write. Leading the way were churches such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion churches. In 1970 southern-based Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, CME was founded. The National Baptist Convention, which is now the largest black religious organization in the United States, was founded in 1894.

These churches blended elements from the underground churches with elements from freely established black churches. Despite early efforts to integrate freed black slaves into society racial segregation quickly became the norm in many states. The black communities with the black churches as the focal points developed along lines partly independent of white communities. Black preachers provided leadership, encouraged education and economic growth, and were often the primary link between the black and white communities. The black church established and or maintained the first black schools and encouraged community members to fund these schools and other public services. It was a time of trying to enable the newly freed slaves to deal with the harsh reality they faced in this country.

Since the male hierarchy denied them opportunities for ordination, middle class women in the black church organized missionary societies to address social issues. These missionary societies provided job training and reading education, worked for better living conditions, raised money for African missions, wrote religious periodicals, and promoted Victorian ideals of womanhood, respectability and racial uplift.

Now the African Methodist Episcopal churches of course had their own peculiar history. What happened was that the – that the – it's the first major religious denomination in the Western world that had it's origin over sociological rather than theological beliefs and differences. And it was the first African-American organized and incorporated denomination in United States. The AME church is also the church that sponsored the first independent historical black college, Wilbur-Force University.

Now the church was born in protest over slavery, against dehumanization of

African people brought to the American continent as free labor. This fit well with the Methodist church's philosophy since its founder, John Wesley, had once called the slave trade "that execrable sum of all villainies."

"The African Methodist Episcopal church grew out of the Free African Society that Richard Adams, Absalom Jones and others establish in Philadelphia in 1787. The church was organized by African-American members of St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church organized the church." <sup>1</sup>

There was an incident that led – well what happened was church members of the St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church –huh – got tired of Africans worshipping with them and so they removed Absalom Jones from the church. The trustees removed him while he was down on his knees praying. And of course the congregation supported the act of the trustees. And Allen and Jones lead the African-American members out of St. George's as a body. Allen went on to form the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1793. It still exists in the city of Baltimore.

In General they adopted the doctrines and form of government of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the white Methodist Episcopal Church. Jones affiliated with the Protestant Episcopal Church and would go on to become the first African-American priest in the Episcopal Church.

"When officials at St. George's pulled African-American's off their knees while praying members discovered just how far America Methodists would go to enforce racial discrimination against African-Americans. Hence these members of St George's made plans to transform their mutual aid society into an African congregation. Although most wanted to affiliate with the Protestant Episcopal Church, Allen lead a small group who resolved to remain Methodist. And in 1794 Bethel, AME was dedicated with Allen as pastor. To establish Bethel's independence from interfering white Methodists, Allen, a former Delaware slave, successfully sued in the Pennsylvania Courts in 1807 and 1815 for the right of his congregation to exist as an independent institution. Because black Methodists in other middle Atlantic communities encountered racism and desired to religious autonomy Allen called them to

meet in Philadelphia to form a new Wesleyan denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal.

While the AME is doctrinally Methodist, clergy, scholars and laypersons have written important works that demonstrate the distinctive theology and practice which have defined this Wesleyan body. Bishop Benjamin, W. Arnett in an address to the 1893 World Parliaments of Religions reminded the audience of the presence of blacks in the formation of Christianity. And Bishop Benjamin Tanner wrote in 1895 in *The Color of Solomon – What?* that Biblical scholars wrongly portrayed the son of David as a white man.

In the post-Civil Rights Era African theologians such as James Cone, Cecil Cone, and Jacqueline Grant, who came out of the AME tradition, criticized Euro-centric Christianity and African-American churches for their short comings in fully impacting the plight of those oppressed by racism, sexism, and economic disadvantage.”<sup>2</sup>

Now the AME motto, which is “God of Our Father, Christ Our Redeemer, Man Our Brother” reflects the basic beliefs of the AME. The basic foundation and belief of the church can be summarized in the Apostle’s Creed and the 25 Articles of Religion. The mission of the AME is the minister to the spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional and environmental needs of all peoples by spreading Christ’s liberating gospel through word and deed. At every level of the connection and in every local church the African Methodist Episcopal Church shall engage in carrying out the spirit of the original Free African Society out of which the AME church evolved. That is; to seek out and save the lost and serve the needy through a continuing program of 1) preaching the gospel, 2) feeding the hungry, 3) clothing the naked 4) housing the homeless 5) cheering the fallen, 6) providing jobs for the jobless, and 7) administer to the needs of those in prison, hospitals, nursing homes, asylums, mental institutions, senior citizens homes, caring for the sick, the shut-in, the mentally and socially disturbed and encouraging thrift and economic advancement.

That gives you a brief history of the African Methodist or Black Church.

**Commentary Notes:**

1. *About Us – Our history – The African Methodist Episcopal Church*,  
<http://www.ame-church.com/about-us/history.php> (2005)
2. Ibid.