

Introduction

No one can say when or where the first African-American was converted to a Baptist faith. That event is lost to history. It is known that by 1772 at least nineteen African-Americans belonged to the First Baptist Church of Providence, Rhode Island, and that the First Baptist Church of Boston was also receiving African-Americans into its membership. There is evidence of evangelistic activity among Southern slaves well before that date, but names, places, and more definitive dates are lost.

The identification of the first African-American Baptist church is also problematic, though several clear candidates emerge. Mechal Sobel has dated the Bluestone Church of Lunenburg (now Mecklenburg), Virginia, as a distinct African-American church as early as 1758. This church was located on the plantation of William Byrd III on the Bluestone River. Others, among them Leroy Fitts, identify the First Colored Baptist Church of Savannah, Georgia, as the first African-American Baptist church. Established in 1788, this church had a membership of eight hundred by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Most often the first church is identified as the Silver Bluff Church located in South Carolina across the Savannah River from Savannah. The Silver Bluff Church was organized about the year 1778 by David George, who had been converted through the ministry of George Liele. Liele himself is regarded as one of the pioneer figures among African-American Baptists. A slave converted in 1772, he is generally regarded as the first formally ordained African-American. His powerful preaching won many on the slave plantations in South Carolina and Georgia. He later ministered as a free man in Jamaica following the American Revolution.

Dates and places are intractably difficult to confirm. What is indisputable is that the Baptist expressions of Christianity became the strongest and most attractive for African Americans. In part, this appeal can be explained by reference to the individual and congregational freedom that Baptists historically have practiced. Baptists historically have not held creeds but the experience of salvation as authority, and Baptists historically have not invested ecclesiastical authority in bishops or presbyteries but in individual congregations. Thus, even while African Americans were enslaved and disenfranchised, they were self-determining men and women within a Baptist church.

Mechal Sobel (cf. *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith*) argues that even that does not wholly explain what attracted such numbers of African Americans to Baptist expressions of Christianity. Sobel sees in the Baptist expressions a world capable of interacting positively with the experiences, African in their origins, that African Americans brought to their religious faith. Baptist sensibilities, Sobel believes, were more fertile soil for African sensibilities. The prioritizing of "You must be born again!" over recitation of creed, for example, resonated with African initiation experiences of rebirth. Certainly such emphasis held attraction to the slave eager to cast off the old form of life. In such interaction between Baptist expressions and African experiences, a new sacred cosmos was born and found many converts.

Following Emancipation, wider institutional expressions of this faith multiplied. Certainly African-American churches, and even some associations, predated the Civil War, but the abolishment of slavery produced a veritable explosion of growth for such institutional expressions.

Like their white counterparts, African-American Baptists built from the ground up. The local congregation served as the foundational institution. Each congregation was autonomous. Each chose its own minister, ordered its own affairs, and, at its own discretion, associated with like-minded congregations.

These associations were not comparable to dioceses or presbyteries of other communions. Baptist associations, black and white, existed for fellowship, for mutual encouragement and inspiration, and for promotion of common mission. Although churches commonly referred problematic matters to the association for its counsel, the association never exercised authority over the beliefs and practices of the congregations. Even where matters of discipline and doctrine were brought to the association, the only authority the association exercised was the authority of moral persuasion. An association could, it is true, expel a church from its fellowship, but it could not enforce its decisions within the boundaries of a congregation's life. Even an expelled church remained ever autonomous.

Baptist associations and state conventions (which were merely the expanding of the associational principle to a broader geographical area) customarily met at least once a year, and customarily they published the minutes of their annual meetings. Because Baptist associations and conventions are self-determining in the same way as Baptist congregations, these published minutes display considerable variety. They can be expected, at a minimum, to record the business of the association or convention. Business matters may range from the election of officers to the hearing from representatives of various mission agencies the association or convention may wish to support to the adoption of resolutions regarding a number of religious and social concerns. Where churches have submitted controversies or questions to the association or convention for its counsel, that too, along with the response, will be published. Statistics from member churches detailing membership figures, mission giving, and the like are generally published, as are ministerial lists. A sermon preached before the assembled body may be included as well. As such, these annuals hold a wealth of material for historical, religious, and sociological research.

The American Baptist-Samuel Colgate Historical Library, operated by the American Baptist Historical Society and located on the campus of the Colgate Rochester Divinity School in Rochester, New York, holds by a conservative estimate well over a quarter of a million such Baptist annuals. No other collection is known to hold as many annuals total or as many annuals of African-American associations and conventions. James R. Lynch, former Director of the Library for the Society, recognized the immense value of this unique collection. He secured a grant from the Booth Ferris Foundation of New York City to microfilm the African-American annuals in the collection. In all, some 4,379 annuals representing 1,039 associations and conventions located in 27 states and regions have been microfilmed and made available in this project.

The annuals have been filmed as they are shelved at the Library. Annuals are arranged alphabetically by state. All state level annuals are grouped alphabetically at the first of each state's holdings, with local associational annuals being arranged alphabetically following the state-wide annuals. Targets for each state's materials are placed at the beginning of the reel; these targets contain a complete inventory of that state's materials. Individual targets are placed before the beginning of each association's or each convention's annuals; these targets list the year and anniversary of each booklet filmed. If a booklet had been mutilated in some way prior to filming,

this is noted on the target. If alternative titles appear for an association or a convention, this too is noted on the target. In some cases, minutes for auxiliary bodies (such as women's societies or young people's conventions) are included in the annual; in that case, these will be noted on the target.

Perhaps the single most important decade for African-American Baptists, certainly for the nineteenth century, was the 1890s. That decade saw the coalescence of the first truly national African-American Baptist body. Various missionary bodies had arisen following the Civil War, but no one body had a national scope. Either it was limited geographically, or it was restricted in its mission to a single phase of ministry. At least as early as the 1880s, Baptists felt an increasing need for such a national body that would unite all African-American Baptists. In 1895, three bodies, viz., the Foreign Mission Convention, the National Baptist Educational Convention, and the American National Baptist Convention, merged to form the National Baptist Convention of the United States of America.

Reporting these developments and other contemporary events affecting Baptists was the *National Baptist Magazine*. From its first issue in January, 1894, until its closing in 1901, the *National Baptist Magazine* addressed a constituency of Baptists throughout the country, not just residents of a given state or supporters of a given agency. Its first issue declared its intent.

It is the organ of Negro Baptists in the United States, the peculiar possession of no section, the instrument of no particular class, the representative of no exclusive school of thought, but the common property of all the people, the palladium of those principles and practices which differentiate the Baptists from all the world and which have made them the "sect everywhere spoken against."

The *National Baptist Magazine* was edited by William Bishop Johnson, a gifted pastor and journalist. He was born in Toronto, Canada, but spent most of his youth in Buffalo, New York. Johnson graduated with honors from Wayland Seminary in the class of 1879. He served first as pastor of the First Baptist Church of Frederick, Maryland. Later he served as a general missionary for Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia. His 1887 paper "Religious Status of the Negro" brought him national acclaim and led to his appointment as editor of the new magazine.

The late historian James M. Washington decried the fact that the *National Baptist Magazine* has rarely been used by historians. He ranked it in importance with the *African Methodist Episcopal Review* and the *African Zion Methodist Episcopal Quarterly*. The American Baptist Historical Society's collection of the *National Baptist Magazine* is the most complete collection of this periodical known to exist. Its microfilm version (sold separately by Scholarly Resources) should help correct the neglect which it has received.

Dana Martin
Director of the Library
American Baptist Historical Society