

"Correspondence"

Although Christian historian Milo T. Morrill dates the first black Christian Church (in Norfolk, Virginia) from 1854, records of this and other early black churches in the South are extremely rare, and representative theological documents of any sort are virtually nonexistent. It is likely that black churches first began to be gathered in significant numbers at the end of the Civil War, typically with the support of zealous white ministers from outside the region. The first "colored conference" was organized in North Carolina in 1866, suggesting that by this time a critical mass of churches was already in existence.

The Christian movement grew quite rapidly among southern blacks, though the number of Christian Churches never rivaled that of the Baptists or Methodists. No doubt the movement's fundamentally egalitarian spirit and emphasis on religious experience rather than doctrinal propositions appealed to former slaves who were conscious of their recent bondage and eager to seek new means for empowerment. Despite their limited education and lack of formal theological training, a cadre of competent and committed black leaders quickly began to gather churches and build or claim abandoned dwellings for worship. By the mid-1870s, three black Christian conferences had been formed, with a total membership of more than fifty churches. In general, these churches followed the principles and polity of their white counterparts, though in many instances they also shared the distinctive spirit and fervor of slave religion.

*In 1880, a former slave and ordained Christian pastor, George W. Dunn, wrote to the Herald of Gospel Liberty, appealing to northern Christians for financial aid to further the education of southern blacks. J. Taylor Stanley, in *A History of Black Congregational Christian Churches of the South* (New York: United Church Press, 1978), historian of the southern black Christian churches, credits Dunn with helping to secure funds for the permanent establishment of a school in Franklinton, North Carolina. This institution eventually became Franklinton Christian College.*

Equally important, Dunn's correspondence offers clues about the theological views held by black Christians. Dunn assures potential northern donors that he and his colleagues are faithful to basic Christian principles: Christ as the only head of the church, Christian as the only name, the Bible as the only creed, and Christian character as the only test of community and church membership. Dunn also notes that money for education is not available from eager Baptists and Methodists, unless Christians are willing to deny their own name and defect to a different denomination.

To the Censer—*Dear Sirs:*—Peace be unto you forever. I must first say it affords me much pleasure in undertaking to address you in these few lines. It has been my unfortunate lot once to have been a slave, but now, thank God, we are sitting under our own vine and fig-tree, and can worship God according to our own conscience. I am thirty years of age. I have been laboring in the church for twelve years. I have been trying to preach for five years.

I was at one of my churches in the latter part of last August, at Franklinton, and while sitting in the house of one of my brothers, I saw one of your papers, the *Golden Censer*. It was the first time I ever saw this blessed paper. Its words are sweeter to me than honeycomb; its truths are more precious than silver; its instructions are brighter than the sun; its value is far beyond rubies. Oh, that I could write all of them on the tablet of my heart, and bind them upon my finger. But I am thankful to say, in a few weeks after I had seen the paper, I found one in the post-office directed to such a one as I. G. W. Dunn.

Dear Sirs, please to hear me patiently. I belong to that denomination known as the Christian denomination. There are about the number of 2,000 in North Carolina that are known by this name, and about fifty churches. In Virginia there are one thousand, and about twenty-five churches.

Dear sirs, please to give ear to the pleading of my lips. It strikes me very forcibly that this paper is at the fountain-head of the Christian denomination. Let me give you our creed.

1. The Lord Jesus Christ is the only head of the church. 2. The name Christian is the only appellation by which we will be known to the exclusion of all party or sectarian names. 3. The holy Bible or the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are our only creed or confession of faith. 4. Christian character or vital piety is the one scriptural test of fellowship and church membership. Space will not allow me to say any more about the rules.

Dear sirs, please to hearken unto me and let me plead unto you. The Christian denomination in North Carolina and Virginia are behind all other denominations in education. Why are they behind? Because they have had no help since they were freed from bondage. The white people in the South are very agreeable and admire the prospect of industry, but do not desire the improvement or elevation and education among the colored people, and therefore they will not teach a colored school. I say that we are behind all others in schooling our ministers, and in educating our children.

The Baptist people, white teachers came from the North, and have built up schools for the colored Baptists. The Methodist white people have come from the North and built up schools for the Methodists, and are teaching the colored people. So with other sects. Therefore they are ahead of us in education. There is not one neither North nor South has ever come to relieve us of this state of poverty and ignorance. Our inducements are by other denominations saying, Come and join us and deny your name and take ours and we will educate you. We sometimes are almost about to cry out like the trembling jailor and say what must we do to be saved. And again the Spirit of the Lord speaks like thunder, and tells us to stand still and see the salvation of God. We have purchased a plat of ground at Franklinton, twenty-five miles from Raleigh, for the purpose of building a normal school; we also commenced the school in January last and taught a five month's session. We need teachers, we also need help. We sent out a minister some time ago, but he was like Noah's raven, he returned without accomplishing any good.

Dear sirs, consider our condition. If we had a teacher, if we had any assistance at all, we could improve ourselves in every respect whatever.

Dear sirs, please to give this letter your serious attention. If this letter of your humble servant has found favor in thy sight, please answer my letter. Peace be with thee forever. Amen. We pray thee remember us.

G. W. Dunn

Raleigh, N.C., Dec. 11, 1879.