

OUR CHURCHES Yesterday and Today - PART III

The GATHERING

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

To Blacks, Jubilee generally is used in reference to the year of Emancipation. It was in 1863 that that event occurred. Each year since then, there have been celebrations throughout the United States in commemoration of it. This year, in Las Vegas, Jubilee has to do with the 75th anniversary of the founding of the town. Blacks are also celebrating that event. Both are occasions for thanksgiving and the spiritual frame of reference is dominant.

Although the debate waxes and wanes, most historians do agree that there are certain criteria which must be met before a civilization may be defined as such. Among the "marks" of a civilization can be found such things as: written language, monumental architecture, well defined within each civilization or culture, evidences of religion. Perhaps this is so because of the delicate nature of the universe and the perplexities the human race has had in social order, trade and a cosmic view or religion.

For most of recorded history, there appears comprehending it. Stone Age peoples had ill defined religions. They worshipped, for the most

part, the elements. Those elements most prevalent from one place to the next gained precedence. In some places it was the Sun. In others it might have been lightning, wind, rain or fire. Each group, nonetheless, worshipped something -- some force which they could not understand.

Diodorus Siculus, the Greek historian wrote nearly a century before the birth of Christ, that the Ethiopians "supposed themselves to be the inventors of worship, of festivals, of solemn assemblies, or sacrifices and every religious practice." Those rituals included not only the elements but also animal worship.

It is significant that the above is written, because scientific research tells us that the human race had its beginning in Africa near a place called Olduvai Gorge. It is possible that people migrated from there, in the vicinity of Lake Victoria, down the Nile (which runs north) to ancient Sheba, Ethiopia, Kush and Egypt.

Throughout Africa there can be found creation myths. Among the Ivory Coast we hear of the "Two Gueles" and in Gabon, the creator was known as Nzame. Africans had not waited for Europeans to bring religion to them. The history of Africa is replete with a religious tradition.

The European brought monotheism, the belief in one God, with Christianity. The Middle Easterner brought the same with Judaism and Islam.

When Africans came to America their beliefs also came. The missionary zeal of the Europeans sought to Christianize all disbelievers. Blacks were a captive audience. Once they became slaves they also became Christians. Initially, they paid homage in the places of worship of the owners of the plantations. That practice was soon discontinued because of the conflicts between realities and theology which it generated. White Christians had difficulties participating in services pertaining to the "universal brotherhood of man" while simultaneously enslaving their fellow man.

Separate services were initiated for slaves. A new litany was presented to them with its main thrust being simple: "slaves obey your masters." Blacks who had become free, prior to the introduction of formal slavery, had established their own churches. In rare instances, they pastored predominantly white churches. Joshua Bishop of Virginia and Lemuel Haynes of Connecticut are the two best

known.

Even though the different denominations opposed slavery, they determined that they did not have the power to abolish it. Northern congregations and southern congregations were diametrically opposed on the question of slavery. Some northern ministers spent their lives denouncing it. Some of the abolitionists came from among the ranks of northern ministers.

A schism existed and it necessitated the establishment of Black churches. The effort was pioneered by Richard Allen, who established the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Another Black man, Prince Hall, organized the first Black Masonic Lodge.

These men did not wish separate organizations. Had their spiritual and social needs been met with the predominant white churches and organizations, there would not have been a need to establish black counterparts. Those needs, obviously, were not met. Arnold Toynbee, the English historian's theory of history is that of "Challenge and Response." In short, he felt that since the beginning of

time, man has been confronted with numerous challenges. His mere survival has been determined by his responses to those challenges. Such were the religious circumstances in which people of color found themselves. Their response was to establish Black churches.

Segregation, which has long been standard procedure in the United States, was prevalent in early Nevada. Seventy-five years ago, when Las Vegas was founded, the people who settled here brought their attitudes with them. They did not manifest themselves quite as blatantly as they had in other places. The reason for that had to do with the small number of Blacks and other minorities among them.

The Methodist Episcopal Church was started here in 1905. It was the only church and all Christians, regardless of their persuasion, worshipped there. The few blacks living here conducted whatever worshipping they did in very private, usually one-to-one with the Deity, surroundings. By 1916, church activity had expanded. The Methodists had been joined by the presence of the Christian Scientists, L.D.S., Christ Church Mission and a Catholic Church was under construction.

In 1916, Rev. J.L. Collins, of Goldfield, arrived at Las Vegas. He was to replace Rev. Frank Summers as pastor of the First Methodist Church which had previously been the Methodist Episcopal Church. The

population of Las Vegas was approximately 1500.

Following his introduction, by Dr. Murtaugh, he said that "he did not want to be regarded as just the pastor of the Methodist Church but rather as a minister to the people and stood ready to help in any way that his services might be needed." Less than three months later, he "assisted in the organization of Zion Rest Mission of the M.E. Church for the benefit of the colored people of Las Vegas." It can be inferred that, prior to its establishment, Blacks did not have a formal place of worship.

The Pilgrim Church of Christ had opened its doors during the latter 1930's. Rev. George Strong was pastor. The church presented a special program honoring Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. The Minister delivered an address on the subject "Lincoln and Douglass, God's Emancipating Instruments." At its second Sunday services of February 1940, the first steps toward political involvements, within Black churches,

mission was put to the test. It was faced with a challenge and it survived. Because of the slow rate of increase of the Black population, there was not much need for religious diversification. Just as the white community, during its population infancy, had managed with an interdenominational church. Blacks did the same. For the following sixteen years that remained the case.

The second major religious activity for Blacks was initiated by the Catholic Church. Close on the heels of the beginning of the Boulder Dam project, with its impact on population increases, Father Van Skee, the assistant pastor of St. Joan of Arch, initiated religious training for Black children. Black children would go to St. Joan's for instruction and, as the Black Catholic population grew, it became increasingly necessary to conduct Mass in private

homes within the Black community as the Methodists had done.

It would not be until 1940 that the first structure of St. James Catholic Church would be erected. The makeup of the congregation was predominantly Spanish. Father Flahive, for the first two years, would come from St. Joan's for Sunday Mass. However, in 1942, Father Van Skee became the first full-time pastor of St. James Catholic Church.

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were taken that Sunday morning.

By 1942 the needs of Black Protestants and Black Catholics were being met. A new zeal came to the fore. The decade of the 1940's is marked by the beginnings of numerous churches in the Black community. Population numbers continued to be an influence. In 1940, there were only 178 Blacks in Las Vegas. As World War II got underway and with the opening of military installations and Basic Magnesium, the Black population began to increase considerably.

Rev. Booker T. Mayfield, President of the Nevada Baptist State Convention, upon realizing that there was not a single Black Baptist edifice in the state on Nevada, initiated a series of prayer meetings at the home of sister S.M. Nettles. Soon thereafter he organized the Second Baptist Church which was located on the corner of "E" and Madison Streets. He served as its first pastor for three and a half years. Illness forced him to leave. Upon his recovery, he organized the St. James Baptist Church.

The late 1940's witnessed a series of revivals in most of the Churches. Obviously, one of the purposes was to rekindle the faith and to seek new converts. In addition to those, the churches began to become more cognizant of the economic and political needs of their members. The awareness of the lack of civil rights guarantees was often the subject of

sermons. The churches, which had historically not been politically motivated, began to take a different stance. Church leaders approached the "city fathers" request that the needs of the Black community be met. The political strength of the community was limited. Elected officials realized that. They recognized that due to the limited number of Black registered voters, that they could promise the Black community anything and not necessarily follow through.

During those years, it was common for ministers to encourage their congregations to support political aspirants.



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