

BLACK BAPTIST LEADERS IN BALTIMORE

(An Examination of the History and Leadership Among
Black Baptist 1836-1936)

a research in
Church History

Dr. Henry Ferry, Instructor

by

Olin P. Moyd
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Thanks to the Reverend Dr. Auther J. Payne, the Reverend Dr. Baxter L. Matthew, the Reverend Dr. George A. Crawley, Jr., and the Reverend William H. Hall all of whom were very kind and helpful in regards to this investigation.

The Reverend Dr. Crawley, in addition to discussing the subject with me, allowed me to borrow some important documents which were the possessions of his late father, the Reverend Dr. George A. Crawley, Sr., who was president of the United Baptist Missionary Convention for eleven years. These documents were very helpful. Dr. Payne and the Reverend William H. Hall are the only two surviving active pastors who were on the scene in the early 1920's--a crucial period in this study.

*Mr. Koger has had a successful career as a lawyer. He is now around four-scores in age and are still concerned with the recording of the history of the Black Baptists in the state of Maryland. This gentleman is the only person who has published anything of importance which is extant concerning Blacks in the state of Maryland. He says his interest in publishing the history of activities of Black Baptists in the state was aroused as he stumbled upon information while examining deeds and records in the Court House and elsewhere, when he was active in his practice of law. Without him all would be lost in an oral tradition.

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Olin P. Moyd

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Introduction

Purpose. The purpose of this study is to briefly examine the history of the Black Baptist movement in Baltimore and to determine whether the Black Baptist preachers were agents of liberation for the Black people. When the word "history" is used, one must keep in mind the fact that most of what have taken place among the Black Baptists in Baltimore is, like an iceberg, submerged in the sea of an oral tradition.

This investigator hopes that someone will soon assume the task of examining our oral tradition, review the scarce materials, and record the rich heritage and legacy of our ancestors and predecessors. If this paper, does, in any way, arouse interest in this subject, it will have served a purpose.

Presupposition. Historically, though virtually oral, there is a high degree of correlation between the social and political involvement of the Black Baptist preachers and the dignity and freedom--liberation--of the Black community during the period covered. Reference to Black Baptist preachers does not intend to deny that the same may be true of Black preachers of other denominations. It only intends to affirm a position concerning Black Baptist preachers.

Period Covered. This investigation will refer to Black Baptist activities covering the span of about one century. The focus of this investigation, however, will span a period of one-half century (1872-1923). This period covers the active ministry of the greatest Black Baptist leader and liberator in the history

of the state of Maryland. One realizes that justice could not be done to issues, nor individuals in covering such a span, but the life and ministry of Dr. Harvey Johnson was so interesting ^{, the writer,} he could not resist the temptation of delving into this long period.

Methods of Investigation. Review of literature, interviews, and discussions are the methods of investigation.

Background

An Oral Tradition. Little has been committed to writing concerning the struggles, defeats, and successes of Black Baptist preachers in Baltimore. As in other matters, the white historians did not believe that there was anything in the Black Baptist experiences which was worth recording. The few Black Baptist preachers who could read and write could not afford the luxury of engaging in writing history; they were too busy struggling for survival.

Since the depression, however, Black Baptists have earned the ability and opportunity to research and record the history of the movement among the Black Baptists in Baltimore. But having been systematically brainwashed by white institutional racism, not one of our Black ministers has undertaken the task of reducing our oral history to academic terms. Thanks to Attorney A. B. Koger, a Baptist layman, who, without the full cooperation of the black Baptist ministers, has provided, organized, and recorded ^{the only} history that we have. So much is still submerged in the sea of an oral tradition; there is imminent danger that much will be lost to posterity.

Mr. Koger says:

It is sincerely hoped that some ministers in the future will give this phase of work an exhaustive study and give the world the benefit of their findings.¹

That was his wish in 1946 when several of the ministers who were active in the early 1920's were still on the scene. Today nothing further of significance has been written and only two of the ministers who were active in the early 1920's are still on the scene. They are the Reverends A. J. Payne and W. H. Hall.

Emerging Black Baptists. Mr. Koger thinks it is safe to assume that because of the great influx of "Free Negroes" into Maryland prior to the Emancipation there were numerous "Negro" Baptist converts in Maryland "before there were organized churches to receive them."² The delay in establishing Black Baptist churches was directly linked to the fear of uprisings and insurrections. Whites were bitterly against the assembling of Blacks for religious worship. As far back as 1723 harsh laws were passed prohibiting the "assembling of Negroes for religious purposes without a white person being present."³ The severe penalties included lashing, branding, selling and cropping of ears.

Where there were Black converts, whites were reluctant to accept them into their congregation. This is the kind of condition which existed when one Moses Crane (white), a leather merchant, found when he moved to Baltimore to establish a branch store of his leather business. He came from Richmond, Virginia, in 1834. Having been interested in mission among the Negroes all of his life, and seeing the neglect of Maryland Baptists in mission among the Negroes, he became busy in bringing about changes. He sent back to Virginia and encouraged one Moses Clayton (Black) to come to Baltimore.

Reverend Clayton was an ex-slave; he was also an old friend of William Crane. He agreed to come to Baltimore to work among his people. On February 20, 1836, as a result of the efforts of Mr. Crane and Reverend Clayton, the First Colored People's Baptist Church was organized with eight or ten people. The church was incorporated in March, 1837.

Though poorly prepared for the ministry, the Reverend Mr. Clayton was pious and sincere in his endeavors. His followers were poor and illiterate; thus, progress was slow but it signaled the breaking of day for Black Baptist in Baltimore. By 1841, Mr. Crane had persuaded the Maryland Baptist Union Association (white) to accept the First Colored People's Baptist Church into its membership. The Union Association provided a small salary for the minister as a missionary among the colored people. It was that same year that First Colored People's Baptist Church began construction of its first edifice. Up to that time it had been meeting in an old dilapidated frame school building in the vicinity of Belair Market.

Mr. Crane pushed forward in urging the Union Association and the Southern Baptist Convention (white) to bring the Reverend Noah Davis to Baltimore as a missionary in 1848. A slave in Fredericksburg, Virginia, arrangements had to be made for the purchase of Davis before he could be brought to Baltimore. Upon his coming, the Second Colored People's Baptist Church was formed in 1848.

From these beginnings, the Black Baptist movement in Baltimore grew. Schools "for our folks" and improved facilities were among the early projects of the Black Baptists. Unrests and upheavals

took their toll among the early Black Baptists in Baltimore. But a fire had begun in 1836 which was not to be extinguished. Mr. Koger credits Mr. William Crane (white) with being "the greatest benefactor and friend" of the Black Baptist movement in Maryland.⁴

During a period of thirty-five years (1836-1871) Black Baptists were in ferment in the state of Maryland. Four congregations emerged in Baltimore and one of them had become extinct--the Second Colored People's Baptist Church. Three or four other missions emerged in the countries. Amid the ignorance, mistrust, and superstition the Black Baptist pioneers performed a noble task, leaving a great impression and challenge for their successors. According to the report, their otherworldliness was tempered with this worldliness "for our people." Education was at the base of their this worldly thrust.

Appearing on the stage at this time was one Harvey Johnson, the star in the drama of the Black Baptist movement in Baltimore for the succeeding half century. He was the messiah of Black liberation of his generation.

Harvey Johnson (1843-1923)

The Foundation in Black Baptist Movement in Baltimore

Dr. Harvey Johnson was born a slave in Fauquire County, Virginia, on August 4, 1843. His parents Thomas and Harriett Johnson were slaves. Little is known of his parents but it is assumed from the life of Harvey Johnson that his parents were deeply religious and left a profound impression upon their son. He once said "I was in a quandry to know whether to make a break for the

North and freedom, or to go on the warpath where I was."

He received some meager schooling in Alexandria, Virginia, in a Quaker School; his teacher was a Quaker named Gladden. It is reported also that he attended a Quaker school in Philadelphia for a short period of time. When he was about twenty he expressed a burning desire to preach, and upon the counsel of his pastor entered the Wayland Seminary in 1868. He was graduated with honors June, 1872.

In October of that year he was called to the Union Baptist Church in Baltimore where he remained as an able leader for a half century. In May, 1888, Virginia, Richmond Theological Seminary conferred the degree of Doctor of Divinity upon him. In April, 1877, he married one Amelia A. Hall, a very talented Canadian. To this union were born three children. Dr. Johnson is credited with having baptized over 4000 and having performed more than 2000 marriage ceremonies. He was the greatest civic leader Baltimore has ever known.

New Thrust Among Black Baptists. With the coming of Harvey Johnson old things passed away and all things became new--not overnight but in the process of time. Mr. Koger says Baltimore saw "a change from the 'chair-back' variety ante bellum preacher to the college-trained preacher and civic leader." He continues:

This period if any must be termed our Golden Age: Golden in that no period may boast of greater deeds of sacrifice on the part of our leaders; no period may sing of a greater constructive program; no age may note wiser planning and sincere efforts to carry such plans into effect, and no time may be recalled when there was greater zeal and fever in

working out a race's destiny. Nor has there ever been a finer missionary spirit manifested within our state's confines.⁵

Because of Harvey Johnson's leadership and ability a missionary spirit among Blacks enveloped the city. New congregations sprang up everywhere. There was no parish big enough to contain him and his views for the enlightenment and advancement of his people. Ignorance, superstition, unrest and narrowness met him at every corner. There was little room for success, but he was the messiah for the hour. He was overwhelmed in tact and ability in handling problems and finding solutions.

Self-respect and Dignity. One of the first major moves by Harvey Johnson was that which proposed to bring self-respect and dignity to his people. The Union Association (white) was one of the early underwriters of the Black Baptist Movement in Maryland. Johnson knew that financial aid meant control of Blacks by whites. In spite of the fact that most of his members were poor and unlearned, he taught them that the only way to self-respect and self-pride was through independence. He taught that the church could only become self-respecting and independent if it was self-supporting.

Thus as early as 1874 the Union Baptist Church began rejecting aid from the Union Association. Retardation of her progress was only temporary if any retardation took place at all. By 1876 the membership of the Church had outgrown its facilities and they bought and dedicated a new church building on January 23, 1876. Only two Black churches had the boldness to break with the Union Association at that early period in history. It is important to note that during the half-century tenure of Harvey Johnson a

majority of the Black churches maintained some sort of alliance with Union Association and their activities were somewhat controlled by white Baptists. Many of the new churches which emerged in the latter quarter of the nineteenth century became allied with the Johnson movement. And by 1892 the total break between Harvey Johnson and the Union Association was complete.

By 1898, Johnson had enough following among the churches to form the Colored Baptist Convention. Mutual aid among one another, mission, education "for our people," justice, and self-pride characterize the tone and undergirded the thrust of the convention.

Two incidents in the ministry of Dr. Johnson exemplifies his ministry in general. The writer does not hold that these are the two most important incidents in his life; they were selected for convenience and because they were striking incidents in ^{the writers} ~~his~~ opinion. The first incident grew out of the fact that Dr. Johnson never stopped calling for the separation of Blacks and whites in the Baptist movement. He was fed up with the evil system which required Black Baptists including himself, to sit at separate tables at social functions of the Union Association. In 1892 he addressed a letter to the Union Association pointing out the evils of the system; he said in fact:

There must be shown the Negroe ministry the same recognition and respect; her ministers must not be just humored and tolerated, they must be respected and appreciated with absolute equality.

His appeals fell on, if not deaf, untransforming ears. So as the issue gained national attention, he was the invited speaker at the Northern Baptist Convention (white) in Boston on September 14,

1897. The scathing effects of his speech set the nation ablaze.

The title of his speech was "A Plea for work ^{of} ~~x~~ Colored Baptists
Apart from the Whites." Excerpts follow:

"That the time has fully come when we as Colored Baptists should establish and maintain our own denominational institutions as Colored Baptists, is the true, deep and solemn conviction of many of the brethren, and I am of the same conviction. The following are a few of the reasons:

"First--Because we are organically a distinct, separate denomination. We are the "Colored Baptists' denomination.

"Second--Because we, being a separate organization, have all the functions, duties, responsibilities and obligations attaching to the same to fulfill.

"Third--Because it is a physical and moral impossibility for us, as a denomination, to fulfill with honor and credit to ourselves the obligations devolved upon us so long as we serve simply as the means to an end for the white man's greater and stronger organizations.

"Fourth--Because the white man's race pride and race prejudice so entirely and completely unfits him to accord to us in his organizations those offices and positions that are so necessary to our development into the best leadership, and because the facts prove that we can get such opportunities nowhere else but in an organization of our own.

"Fifth--Because so long as we retain any organic relationship with the white man, in a co-operative sense, he is sure to take the honor to himself for whatever we do and are.

"Sixth--That if we are ever to do and be anything to ourselves and among ourselves, the logic of the facts teaches that we must do it ourselves.

"Seventh--We owe a proper race and denominational legacy to the generations that are to follow.

"And now, because of the reasons just stated, I hold that continued co-operation with our white brethren in our denominational work simply means that we, as a race and denomination, are to continue to be hampered and fettered in the fullest development of our own individual capacities as leaders and directors of the denomination and its interests.....and we are cringing and cowardly submitting to it; but thank God! not as a whole, for, there are some who have been and are still making a bold, persistent protest, while others are fawning, bowing, scraping, begging at the white man's feet for a few crumbs from his table. And my plea is

that we continue to protest against being made 'braves and sucklin's' when we should be men and acting the part thereof."⁶

A second incident which captured my attention is the fact he met with fifty men from throughout the nation in Canada in 1901 to form what was later called the Niagra Movement.⁷ Dr. Johnson went to this meeting with national acclaim and it is believed that he was one of the leading voices. His past experiences and activities would certainly have qualified him as a leading spokesman. The third successor to Dr. Johnson at the Union Baptist Church, Dr. Baxter L. Matthews, says Dr. Johnson deserves the credit for the organization of the NAACP. He thinks giving all of the credit to Dr. DuBois is an error in history. At that time, says Dr. Matthews, Dr. Johnson was one of the most effective Black leaders in the nation.

Other Ventures and Accomplishments. Dr. Johnson was active in every aspect of the drive for Black liberation. His ventures and accomplishments are too numerous to mention in this paper, but here are a few: He led the fight to get Black lawyers admitted to the bar; he campaigned the fight for desegregation on a Steamship upon which several of his members experienced gross discrimination and segregation as they traveled by Bay Steamer to Virginia. He fought to change the names of allies to streets since the streets on which many Negroes lived were named allies. He said this was a means of dehumanization of the Negroes. It was he who led the protest against the injustices of not having Negro teachers in the public schools. His concerns spanned the entire spectrum of the Black man's problems.

A Review of His Church's Growth. On January 23, 1876 they dedicated a new building which cost \$20,000.00, an enormous sum in those days. A second new edifice (the present location) was dedicated December 17, 1905. It cost \$51,256.00. They purchased the ground in 1921 at an additional cost of \$6,500.00. (Note: In Maryland, to this day, the ground is not always sold with the improvements thereon.) Membership growth: 1872, 268 members; 1877, 1368; 1885, 2000 and by 1914 it had reached the peak of 3028 members. Offspring: On September 29, 1874, sixteen members were granted letters to organize Macedonia Baptist Church. In 1879, another twenty-seven members were set apart as the Perkins Square Baptist Church. Both of these are among the influential churches in our city today.

The writer found that the degree of cooperation between Black and white Baptist churches in Baltimore during those years was proportionate to the amount of money whites spent among Black Baptist churches and the loyalty of Black churches of their benefactors. Thus, the cooperation was not based on true Christianity--brotherhood. It was based upon the acceptance of dehumanization on the part of Black Christians.

Dr. Harvey Johnson proved that Blacks could not gain respect and equality among whites by capitulation to ~~the~~ will ^{of whites}. If respect and equality were to come, they had to come through the Black man's own assertion of his manhood. This is true even to this day.

In 1922, Union Baptist Church celebrated Dr. Johnson's half-century anniversary, and the following January this Ecclesiastial statesman and Black liberator--messiah went to be with his Maker.

Each of our respondents credits him with being the greatest

Black Baptist preacher in Baltimore's history.

Junius Gray (1872-1946)
The Man of Two Eras

The Colorful Junius Gray. If Dr. Harvey Johnson was the greatest Christian Statesman among the Blacks in Baltimore city, the Reverend Dr. Junius Gray was the most colorful preacher of our past. He was born in the year which Dr. Johnson became the pastor in Baltimore (1872).

He was born in Chesterfield County, Virginia, to Thomas and Sarah Gray on December 16, 1872. He worked in factories in Virginia until he came to Baltimore in 1893. In 1890 he was married to Martha Venerable of Cumberland County, Virginia. He was converted in 1888. Before becoming a preacher he worked on the railroads in the Baltimore Area.

It was in 1899 that he felt called to preach the gospel and was licensed to preach by the late Reverend Allen Carter, pastor of Salem Baptist Church; which he joined upon coming to Baltimore. It was located in the 1100 block of Vincent Alley. He later joined the Social Baptist Church of which the late Reverend C. A. Belt, D.D. was pastor. It was located on Montgomery Street and Plum Alley.

In the same year, 1899, he organized a group known as the R.I.F.B. Church. This is reported to have been a Free Will Baptist Church. The church moved from its originating location in 1901 to a two story house at 1101 Parish Alley. Dr. Gray was able to amass a large amount of money for his ventures.

Realizing that his church did not represent the regular Baptist denomination, he changed the name to Psalmist Baptist Church, (still existing in Baltimore today).

His Beginning Era. Dr. Gray was brought up in the Harvey Johnson movement and the movements undergirded by the Union Associations and Organizations among the Black Baptists in Baltimore. He enjoyed the best of all worlds. This is not to say that he was not sincere. It is to say that he was not only a preacher but an astute politician, as will be seen later. His political activities brought many benefits to his people.

No Black preacher in the history of the state of Maryland has commanded the attention and respect of governors, legislators, mayors, councilmen, police officials, and other officials to the extent which Junius Gray did. (see appendixes 1, 2, 3). He was not a trained preacher, and, therefore, the reports are that his sermons were not of the refined nature. On the other hand, his preaching attracted many people and he had the ability to hold attention and to motivate people to action.

He is credited with bringing the National Baptist Convention to the state of Maryland, organizing two state conventions, holding positions of power in several ecclesiastical bodies, being business manager of the Maryland Voice, and published several pamphlets. He is also credited with holding several political offices and being the instrument through which many ministers and individual secured political and civil appointments. He is reputed to have been the first Black Baptist preacher to own a car, (see appendixes 4, 5).

Dr. Gray was not the type of civil rights advocate which characterized the life of Dr. Johnson but the sum total of his efforts paid equal dividends in material and social gains. As a matter of self-respect and pride for the Blacks, he comes up short.

When Dr. Johnson passed off the scene, Dr. Gray was at a high peak in his career. Therefore he had the privilege of ^{the} influence of Dr. Johnson and of influencing Dr. Johnson's successors.

The Standard Bearers

A Crucial Period. When Dr. Johnson passed on (1923) conditions in the country and in Baltimore were in a crucial state. World War I had just ended. There was a great influx of migrant from the deep south coming into Baltimore city. Black areas were much over crowded; poverty was rampant. Several Black Baptist conventions and groups existed, and rivalry among these Black Baptists was at its peak. One respondent said that if a minister from one group preached in the church of a minister of another group he was ostricised by his group. The Union Association was cutting its support to the many Black groups. The Golden Age was over! There was no leader with the ability to bring unity.

It is here pointed out that there were prominent Black Baptist preachers who stayed under the banner of the Union Association all along although they had their own predominately Black Conventions and Associations. In 1902 these several groups, excluding Harvey Johnson's group, formed what was referred to as the Co-Operative Convention. At the death of Dr. Johnson the major contension was

between his group and the majority--Co-Operative--group.

The reason given for the retention of affiliation with the Union Association on the part of a large segment of the prominent Black ministers was that it was through the Union Association that they had obtained their mortgages. And it was the Union Association which held their mortgages, in many instances. In any case, it was these ministers who were members of the Co-Operative Convention under the banner of the Union Association who held the balance of power.

As the Union Association began to cut off support in the early 20's these ministers became freer and freer to work against injustices and for the good of their people. Without a leader and organizer of the calibre of Harvey Johnson, the effective Black thrust took a nose dive never to again reach its former height.

Final Unity. It was in 1926, a preacher from the National Baptist Convention came to Baltimore and attempted to bring about a union of all Black Baptist churches. What we could ascertain up to this point was that his name was Moses. What is known, however, is that he literally preached a half day on the necessity of union among the Black Baptist in the state of Maryland.

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see list
of UBMCP, p. 12

The result of that meeting was the birth of the United Baptist Missionary Convention of Maryland. Its first president was Dr. D. H. Mack who served for two one-year terms. He was a member of the Co-Operative group supported by the Union Association.

In 1929, Dr. Auther J. Payne became its second president and served for seven years. His church was a member of the Harvey Johnson's group and persuasion.

When this investigator asked Dr. Payne what does he see as his greatest achievement, his response was very enlightening. He said

he came to the presidency at the beginning of the depression. He was the leader of men who were united by resolution but not in heart. He was resented by the older men because of his youth (in the past the conventions were led by older men). When he assumed the pastorate of the Enon Baptist Church in 1923 it was after a split. He said that the report is that 2000 members left that church before he came and he found only 150 members there by actual count.

By 1929 the wound had not been healed. He thinks, along with the other respondents, that his greatest contribution while president of the United Baptist Missionary Convention of Maryland was holding these churches together while holding his church together in one of the most crucial periods in history. Today at age 76 he is still the active pastor at Enon Baptist Church.

The Passing of the Responsibility for Liberation. With the close of what Mr. Koger calls the Golden Age, 1923, the flag of liberation passed to hands of civil rights leaders and organizations. The ministers and the Black Baptist churches in our town had either given up or lost their leadership in the movement. From that time forward the ministers and the churches have been supporters rather than initiators in the field of liberation for Black folks.

Finally the writer feels that the results of his study sustains his presupposition that, historically, there is a high degree of correlation between the social and political involvement of the Black Baptist preachers and the dignity and freedom--liberation--of the Black community. Our study also shows that white finance means white control.

Implications

Black Baptist preachers could be effective instruments of liberation through involvement in social and political activities. They may need to forego white finance when it is accompanied by white control.