

# CLASS 9

## African-American Religious Experience

- New-Found Freedom
- Beginnings of the Pentecostal Movement
- Struggle for Civil Rights



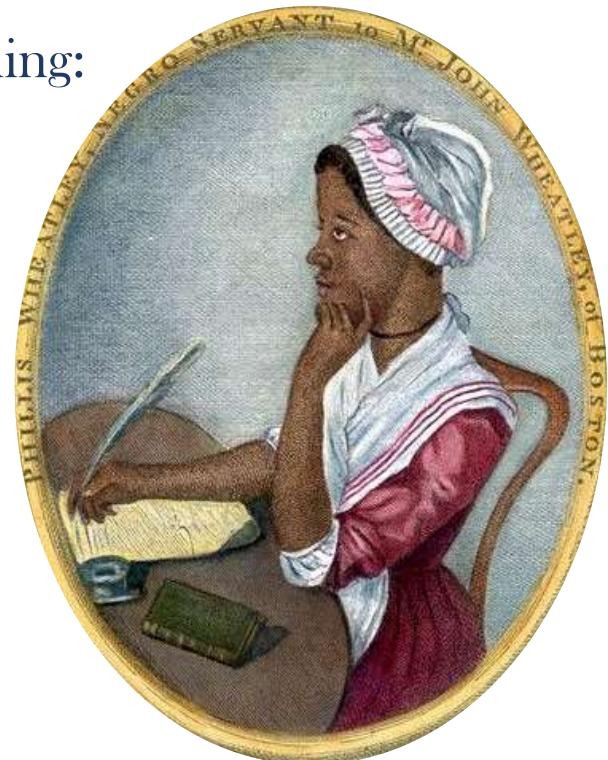
# Objectives

- Identify at least 2 distinguishing features of black Christian belief and practice
- Name at least 2 lasting contributions of black Christianity to mainstream American Christian practice



# Antebellum Years: Escapist Christianity

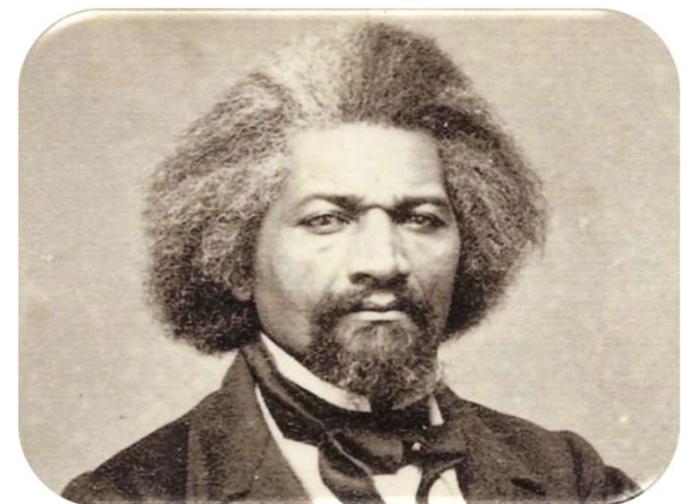
- In the fervor of the 1<sup>st</sup> Great Awakening, whites like Samuel Davies (1723-1761) preached to slaves and free blacks
- Blacks (especially slaves) found Calvinist doctrine appealing:
  - A personal relationship with God mattered more than church membership or race
  - Only God's grace could save you (not money or position or education)
- Converts combined Christian doctrine and worship with remnants of African rituals like the “ring shout” and African musical influences
- Phyllis Wheatley(1753?-1784), a freed slave, eulogized George Whitefield as one who offered hope to slaves with “the greatest gift that ev'n a God can give”



# Antebellum Years: Escapist Christianity

- The contradictions of being offered freedom while in slavery were obvious to all
  - Slave owners were immediately concerned about encouraging disobedience and rebellion
  - Some preachers made their black converts prove their “honest life and sober conversation,” and then promise not to seek their freedom (Le Jau)
  - After the Revolution (against the “slavery” of the British rule), the hypocrisy became even more obvious

“The church of this country is not only indifferent to the wrongs of the slave, it actually takes sides with the oppressors. It has made itself the bulwark of American slavery, and the shield of American slave-hunters. [...]The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretense, and your Christianity as a lie.” –Frederick Douglass, 1841



# Antebellum Years: Escapist Christianity

- In this context, black Christianity offered an escape (sometimes literally) from the harsh realities of everyday life
  - Churches and prayer meetings became the cultural centers of black life
    - Provided meaning to and release from the suffering slaves endured
    - Became an outlet for pent-up emotion
    - Served as social center, and therefore as a meeting place to plan escapes or aid runaways passing through
  - The spirituals and sermons focused on Biblical images of escape, release, and freedom
    - Moses leading the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery
    - Elijah being miraculously transported to Heaven
    - Prophecies of the great liberation through Christ and the church
  - Especially in Northern states where black churches were more common, some churches served as stops on the Underground Railroad
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Great Awakening (emphasis on individual worth and experiential religion) has been called the “central and defining event in the development of Afro-Christianity” (James H. Hutson)

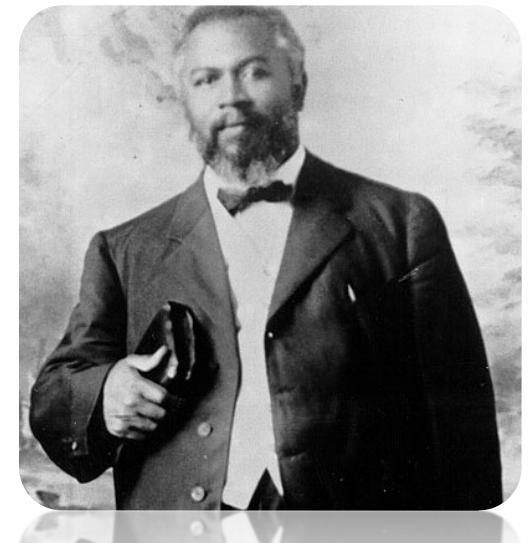
# 1865-1950: New-Found Freedom

- When the slaves were freed and Reconstruction collapsed, blacks were left without support and help in a hostile world, but they were (theoretically) free to establish churches
  - Black churches became centers and sources of social life, politics, business, education, medicine, and benevolence for black communities
  - A measure of control not granted them in public life after Reconstruction
  - Continued to provide a shelter from the abuse and hardship of life, especially under Jim Crow laws
- Two main approaches to living in a racist world:
  - Booker T. Washington—renew the inner life through religion and self-improvement, and cooperate with whites to earn their approval
  - Bishop Henry McNeal Turner (AME)—work for external social reform through confrontation



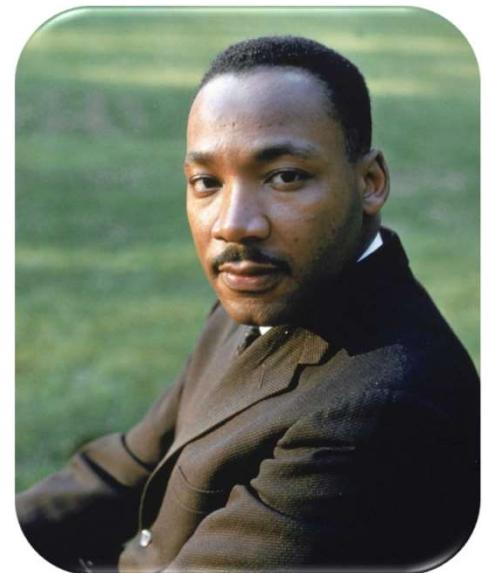
# Beginnings of the Pentecostal Movement

- Rose out of the “holiness” movement in the Methodist churches
  - Emphasized perfection of life (attainable by direct action of the Holy Spirit)
  - Eventually required a “second work of grace”— “pouring out of the Holy Spirit”
    - Manifested by ecstatic experiences, miracles, and (in some groups) speaking in tongues
- In 1906, William J. Seymour founded the *Apostolic Faith Gospel Mission* to emphasize the work of the Holy Spirit in holiness
  - Nightly mixed services soon spread the message of the necessity of a second work of grace
  - Theology and practice spread rapidly among black and white lower-middle class conservatives
  - The origin of all the major Pentecostal traditions
    - Segregated in the south in the 1920s
    - Preserves many of the ecstatic worship practices prevalent in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Great Awakening and slave worship (dancing, falling, running, call and response), and adds “miraculous manifestations of the Spirit”



# Struggle for Civil Rights

- Civil Rights movement applied Social Gospel principles to America's most obvious problem: racism against blacks
  - Social Gospel: the church has a responsibility to fix the world's problems through political or economic action
  - Churches and preachers emerged as the leaders because the church was still the center of black life
  - Leaders of the Civil Rights movement were seen (and viewed themselves) as Old Testament prophets speaking for God
- Most successful civil rights leaders were inclusive, and called on whites and white churches to abandon hypocrisy and join the fight or lose their claim to truth
- Post-Civil Rights Act (1964), black churches began to lose their centrality in the community, and their theology became more insular



# Objectives

- Identify at least 2 distinguishing features of black Christian belief and practice
  - Strong institutional focus on social and human rights issues (either escaping or fighting them)
  - Charismatic preaching and ecstatic worship
  - Musical innovations (spirituals, gospel music)
- Name at least 2 lasting contributions of black Christianity to mainstream American Christian practice
  - Belief in the church's role as a key agent for human rights advocacy
  - The re-emergence of charismatic/ecstatic-influenced worship
  - Broadening influence on styles of worship music