

# 9 Things You Should Know About the Black Church

FEBRUARY 19, 2021 **JOE CARTER** [www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/9-things-black-church/](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/9-things-black-church/)

“The black church is having a moment,” CNN’s John Blake says. He refers, in part, to the new PBS series *The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song*. The four-hour documentary series, produced and hosted by scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr., traces the 400-year story of the black church in America.

Here are nine facts you should know about one of the most formative institutions in African American history.

## 1. The catch-all “black church” is often sociological and theological shorthand.

C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya explain this development in *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Duke University Press, 1990). A PBS *American Experience* page says the phrase evolved from *The Negro Church*, a 1903 sociological study by W. E. B. Du Bois. While in general usage it may refer to any congregation predominantly comprising African Americans, it is most often associated with one of seven major denominations.

## 2. These are the black church’s primary denominations:

- [African Methodist Episcopal Church](#)
- [African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church](#)
- [Christian Methodist Episcopal Church](#)
- [Church of God in Christ](#)
- [National Baptist Convention of America](#)
- [National Baptist Convention USA](#)
- [Progressive National Baptist Convention](#)

## 3. Some enslaved Africans were brought to America as professing Christians, but most became Christians while enslaved.

White Methodists and Baptists made a concerted effort to convert their slaves. Nevertheless, they often abused these brothers and sisters in Christ.

During the First and Second Great Awakenings in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, thousands of slaves and free blacks converted and began to place their stamp on Christianity. “Three things characterized this religion of the slave—the Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy,” Du Bois wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

## 4. Black Methodists left their segregated congregation in 1794 and founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church was the first independent Protestant denomination founded by black people. In the 1820s, another group of black Methodists separated and founded the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Former Baptist ministers, who were expelled because they embraced Pentecostalism, founded the Church of God in Christ.

## 5. Black preachers have historically played a dominant role within their churches and broader communities.

“The Preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil,” Du Bois wrote more than a century ago. “A leader, a politician, an orator, a ‘boss,’ an intriguer, an idealist—all these he is.”

The multidimensionality of the role grew out of the church being the primary—and sometimes only—institution for black Americans during slavery. “In the slave community, the preacher arose as someone who could join the slave community with God and stand in the gap against the master in a certain sort of way,” says Anthea Butler, associate professor of religion at the University of Rochester. “Post-slavery, we see the preacher as being the figure that’s the one way in which an uneducated or an educated African American man can rise to power.”

## 6. Some black church preachers favor a homiletical style called “whooping.”

In *Teaching Preaching: Isaac Rufus Clark and Black Sacred Rhetoric* (Continuum, 2007), Katie Geneva Cannon shows that Clark identified the “essence of black preaching” as “substantially divine activity, wherein the Word of God is proclaimed or announced on contemporary issues, with a view towards ultimate response to our God.”

Whooping combines a musical cadence and interaction with congregation. The style is difficult to define because it can vary based on the preacher. But Albert Raboteau, retired professor of religion at Princeton, notes common characteristics:

The preacher begins calmly, speaking in conversational, if oratorical and occasionally grandiloquent, prose; he then gradually begins to speak more rapidly, excitedly, and to chant his words and time to a regular beat; finally, he reaches an emotional peak in which the chanted speech becomes tonal and merges with the singing, clapping, and shouting of the congregation.

Whooping remains popular, despite various criticisms in recent decades. “There is a legitimate place for whooping in preaching,” H. B. Charles Jr., says. “But the place of whooping in preaching is not central.”

## 7. Enslaved African Americans created the spiritual, a genre of folk music.

The spiritual draws from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians: “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19 KJV). Since slave states often forbade teaching slaves to read, music became a primary way of focusing on Scripture.

“The slaves transported to America sang the Bible before they could read it,” said William B. McClain, author of *Come Sunday: The Liturgy of Zion* (Abingdon, 1990). Spirituals were typically sung in call-and-response, a form that influenced almost every musical style in the black church, and many beyond it.

## 8. Historians often defined the black church as an invisible institution.

Many Christian slaves in the American South had to worship secretly. Their worship led to primary visible institutions that influenced and inspired other social institutions.

For instance, some historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were founded by denominations to train preachers and educate other African Americans. Black churches have also been at the forefront of providing social services to their communities and organizing political action, such as during the civil-rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

## 9. A recent Pew Research survey indicates that many older black Christians prefer to attend historic black churches.

About 60 percent of black adults who attend religious services, whether every week or a few times a year, say they favor places where most or all of the other members, as well as the senior clergy, are black. Young black adults are less engaged in those churches than older generations are. Roughly half of blacks in Gen Z (people born after 1996) who attend church or another house of worship say their congregations and clergy are mostly black, compared with two-thirds of black baby boomers and members of the silent generation who say this.

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