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“The Lord Is the Maker of Them All”
Black Membership in White Baptist Churches in Antebellum Louisiana

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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the Upper Division Honors Program.

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Louisiana State University
& Agricultural and Mechanical College
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

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Introduction

The religious lives of the enslaved have often been shrouded in mystery, as have many aspects of the lives of the enslaved. In antebellum Louisiana, some worshipped in established Black churches and others attended the more abundant white churches. And undoubtedly many participated in invisible institutions, illegal gatherings to worship and hear preaching. The most common form of enslaved worship is unknown. Albert J. Raboteau, in his book about slave religion, argues that the invisible institutions were more prominent. He notes that some enslaved people did attend a local church and also “illicit, or at least informal, prayer meetings on weeknights in the slave cabins.”¹ This paper cannot answer which was the most prominent form of worship. Instead, it offers a glimpse into the enslaved involvement in established white churches. Baptist churches in Louisiana consistently had enslaved Black membership, although the number of Black congregants and the way they were treated within the church varied from congregation to congregation. Racial tensions and separation were common in antebellum Louisiana, and the ways that these tensions translated to the church setting provides a picture of how the smaller communities around the church acted.

Through the study of Baptist church documents, many aspects of the churches’ individual communities were revealed. The Baptist church was much less structured and ritualistic than the Catholic, Episcopal, and other denominations. Each of them, though similar in many ways, presented a unique picture of what racial tensions looked like in that community. Baptist churches were very involved in the personal lives of their members. They held meetings every week and

¹ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987), 212.

normally held an extra meeting once a month. When a member of the church slipped up and was caught drunk, sleeping around, stealing, or even spreading gossip, it was brought before the church.

The churches examined for this paper were integrated. Some only had a few black members, but a few had very mixed congregations, although that did not mean equal treatment or equal rights within the church. How was the Baptist antebellum church run and how did they treat their Black members? The enslaved members did not have the choice of where to live and therefore where to go to church. Thus, why the enslaved members chose to join a specific church may not be helpful, but the importance of studying these churches is the same. It is important that churches today understand the history of their involvement in slavery. The race relations within the church were unique to their time. When slavery ended, the number of Black churches increased exponentially as freed persons created their own church communities. Understanding why they were so eager to leave the white churches may help explain the racial divide that still exists today.

The treatment of Black members in each of the Baptist churches varied only slightly. There were differences in individual examples but the overarching methods of acceptance and place of Blacks in the church were mostly standard across the churches. In some ways, the Baptist church was far more welcoming than other denominations. Enslaved people were often considered members, either officially or unofficially, and they were welcomed into the church community. However, specific actions were taken by the church to keep the social hierarchy secure, and to make sure the Black members would never be as respected or have as much power in the church as the white members.

Methods

Before diving into the archives in search of church documents, I studied important works on enslaved religion: *Slave Religion* (1978) by Albert J. Raboteau, *House Upon a Rock* (1973) by Glen Lee Greene, *Religion in the Old South* (1977) by Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in Mississippi* (2001) by Randy J. Sparks, and *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord* (1988) by John B. Boles. All contributed to my foundational knowledge of the subject and to some of the more specific topics discussed in this paper. *House Upon a Rock: About Southern Baptists in Louisiana* provides an overview of the first Baptists and first established Baptist churches in Louisiana, two of which I used in this study. Greene describes the history of the first Baptist churches in Louisiana, as well as trends of Louisiana Baptists over time. Greene almost exclusively focuses on church leadership, obstacles in the way of founding or growing the churches, and the physical church buildings. Greene does not leave out information about Black members; he mentions them on occasion, such as a Black woman on one of the membership lists included in the book. However, Greene does not acknowledge the racial tensions or differences between a white man's and a Black man's experience in a Louisiana Baptist church.

Raboteau's *Slave Religion* focuses on the history of enslaved religion, and specifically analyzes the invisible institutions of the antebellum era. Raboteau discusses the prevalence of the invisible institutions and other secret meetings of worship held by the enslaved. He acknowledges enslaved involvement in white churches but emphasizes the enslaved peoples' own forms of worship. Boles' book, *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord*, is intended to examine "black participation in so-called white churches,"² not limited by location or denomination. Each chapter

² John B. Boles, *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South 1740-1870*, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 1.

is by a different author and provides an overview of a specific denomination, area, or period. The book has general presentations on several specific denominations and years. A chapter about antebellum Baptist churches by Larry M. James compares them with other denominations, and thus focuses on the fact that there was more racial equality in the Baptist church than in others. However, by focusing so much on the comparison, the author presents a dramatically and unrealistically positive picture of the biracial Baptist church.

In *Religion in the Old South*, Donald G. Matthews describes the ways that various religions took root in the South and how the denominations were similar or different. Matthews describes broad trends in views and structures of the various churches, including the denominations general opinions and justifications for slavery, as well as some of the rules implemented about slavery and religion over time. But the book does not comprehensively discuss Black membership in the churches. Randy J. Sparks' *Religion in Mississippi* covers Mississippi's religious history from the colonial era through the 1970s. Sparks discusses the evangelical movement with a focus on slavery and the established Black churches but does not dive into specific Black membership in white churches.

The works that do consider Black involvement in white churches neglect to meticulously analyze and acknowledge the ways that racial tensions translated to the church setting. Although some works note that Black members existed, and that they did in fact have some privileges, they tend to avoid discussions of the ways in which a white church exhibited its power over its Black members. In this thesis, I have more meticulously examined church records to find examples of what Black membership in a church actually meant and what Black involvement looked like.

One of the first things I attempted for this project was to acquire a list of churches established in Louisiana before 1860. There was no such list. However, thanks to the Works

Progress Administration, I was able to create a partial list, which was helpful in this study to examine how the churches were spread out and the different denominations in the state. The list only included the churches that were still around when the Works Progress Administration made the registry in the 1940s, but between the list from the WPA collection at Hill Memorial Library and the individual church minutes I examined, I compiled a list of one hundred and fifteen churches founded between 1813 and 1859. Having a list of church names was helpful as I searched for church records. Originally, the scope of this project was broader, and I was looking at records from several different denominations in Louisiana. However, I chose to focus on the Baptist church. There were enough church records for Baptist churches to take up the entire study, and they offered an opportunity to take a much closer look at a more narrowly defined topic.

I then examined minutes from eleven different Baptist churches in Louisiana: First Baptist Church in Homer, Old Union Baptist in Leton, Ebenezer Baptist in Jonesboro, Old Saline Baptist in Castor, First Baptist in Jackson, Hebron Baptist in Denham Springs, Bayou Rouge Baptist in Evergreen, Calvary Baptist in Ville Platte, Amiable Baptist in Glenmora, Fellowship Baptist in Dufferly, and Mt. Nebo Baptist in Washington Parish (now Tangipahoa Parish). The records for First Baptist in Homer stated that the minutes were from 1851 to 1903, but it was missing the first few pages and the few pages left available did not offer much helpful information. All references to First Baptist will all be to First Baptist in Jackson unless specified otherwise. Mt. Nebo Baptist was the oldest, with minutes going back to 1813, but most of the church minutes started in the 1830s or 40s, and I examined them up to 1860.

There were several questions posed at the start of this study, things that I wanted to look out for and find answers to. Was communion segregated or integrated? Could enslaved persons be members of the church? Was seating segregated? These were all questions I sought answers to

while examining the church minutes. Seating was not discussed in the church minute books and communion, although it did make it into this discussion, was not a major part of the minutes. Membership and what membership meant for a Black person was evident in the minutes and is a part of this paper. In looking at the church minutes I also noted other things that I wanted to discuss in this paper, leaving me with three chapters: Chapter 1: Membership, Chapter 2: Sacraments, and Chapter 3: Church Governance, each with multiple sections that discuss different topics.

Chapter One: Membership

The number of Black congregants in each church varied. Ebenezer Baptist, Fellowship Baptist, Mt. Nebo, and First Baptist in Homer each had at least one mention of a Black person in the church, but not more than two or three different enslaved members, and nothing revealing how they were treated by the church. From 1852 to 1860, Old Union Baptist had about a dozen Black members. Hebron Baptist had similar numbers. Calvary Church and Amiable Baptist each had about ten Black members. Old Saline Baptist and Bayou Rouge had more enslaved members. Each of them had between twenty and thirty members in the 1840s through 1860. Old Saline had just under thirty Black members between 1844 and 1860.

First Baptist Church had the largest number of Black members of all the churches in this study. It was founded by all white members, and commonly accepted new white members into the body. The preacher was a white man and the men in charge of other church business were also white. There is not another list of members for fifteen years after the Church minutes began, and that list, written in 1850, stated that there were eighteen white members and seventy-five Black members in the church. In 1856 the church had forty white members and 128 Black members. In 1857, the number of Black members was the same, but the church had added eight more white members.³ There may have been some personal or community reasons why First Baptist had such a large group of Black members, and the way they ran the church certainly seemed kinder to the Black congregants than the other churches, which will be further addressed in chapter three. However, one simple reason for the much larger number of Black attendees than the other churches is location. First Baptist Church was located in Jackson, Louisiana, in East Feliciana Parish. In

³ Minutes of First Baptist Church, 21 September 1850, 13 September 1856, and 12 August 1857, Pub. No. 263, microfilm, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives.

1860, about 72% of the population of East Feliciana Parish was enslaved.⁴ First Baptist was in an area more densely populated by slaves than any of the other churches in this study by about 30 percent. First Baptist had a larger number of Black congregants than the other churches in this study. Whether that was simply because the population that had access to First Baptist, or if other factors also affected the demographics of the church, the church minutes provided many examples of the treatment of Black persons in the church.

The Reception of Members

“And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”⁵

A normal Baptist church service was described in almost exactly the same way in each of the church minute books examined in this study. First the members were seated, then any visitors were also invited to sit. The congregation then engaged in singing, prayer, and normally a sermon from the pastor. In addition to the regular Sunday services, each church held a monthly or quarterly business meeting, normally on a Saturday. At these meetings they would often sing, but sometimes simply open with a prayer and begin the meeting. In these meetings the congregation conducted church business and church discipline. It was also when the church would normally accept new members. After the time of worship, the first order of business was that “the door of the Church was opened for the reception of members.”⁶

⁴ “Map showing the distribution of the slave population of the southern states of the United States,” www.loc.gov, Library of Congress, accessed 14 February 2022, [Map showing the distribution of the slave population of the southern states of the United States. Compiled from the census of 1860 - Copy 1 | Library of Congress \(loc.gov\)](#).

⁵ Acts 2:47, English Standard Version.

⁶ Minutes of Amiable Baptist Church, June 1849, MF 5471, microfilm, Hill Memorial Library.

It happened at every monthly meeting unless some event, such as the weather, caused the doors to stay closed. If it was storming, it was assumed that no one would be waiting in the rain to join the church, so the doors stayed closed to keep the church dry. The process of worshipping then opening the doors was consistent and a formal event, even written into some church rules. The first two rules of decorum of First Baptist Church in Jackson covered the order of the business meetings: “1. Our conference meetings shall be opened with singing and prayer. 2. A door shall be opened for the reception of members.”⁷ Old Saline Church had a similar entry in its rules of decorum, “to open the doors for the reception of members at each conference immediately after it is organized.”⁸ The reception of members happened directly after the singing or sermon and before any other type of church business was initiated. This tradition occasionally varied, such as Old Union Baptist Church in Leton that opened their doors for receiving new members every Sunday as well as at the monthly business meeting. In any situation, when the doors were opened at these churches and prospective members came forward, they were hardly, if ever, turned away.

There were three ways that a new person might be accepted into the church. If they had previously been a member at a different church and had left on good terms, that church would have sent them off with a letter of dismissal. It recommended them to their new church and vouched for their good behavior and genuine faith. In the language of the church minutes, such a person “joined by letter.”⁹ When a member of a congregation moved away, they were “granted a letter of dismissal.”¹⁰ On occasion, someone would ask to join a church after leaving another, but for some reason did not have their letter of dismissal; this was somewhat common for the enslaved. An

⁷ Undated Minutes of First Baptist Church.

⁸ Undated Minutes of Old Saline Baptist Church, MF 2132, microfilm, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives.

⁹ Minutes of Old Union Baptist Church, 3 August 1853, MF 7124, microfilm, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives.

¹⁰ Old Union Baptist, August 1854.

enslaved person's movement and location were controlled by their white owners and overseers. At the whim of their masters, they could be sold away to a neighboring plantation or across state lines. In situations where they were suddenly moved, they often did not have the time or freedom to go to their church and ask for a letter of dismissal. In one such case, an enslaved man wishing to join Old Saline Church "was taken under the watchcare of the Church until a letter could be obtained from the church of which he was formerly a member."¹¹ When the letter was received on the next Sabbath, he was received into the church.

Very few white men and women came forward as already converted Christians unless they had a letter from their previous church. In some cases, enslaved people were able to receive a letter before departing for a new church, such as "Toney a servant of Brother John [illegible] received by letter" or "Lewis, a servant of Thomas Graves by letter."¹² Generally, the church offered some grace to enslaved people if they did not have their letter. In some cases, such as the one mentioned previously, the enslaved person was invited to stay at the church until their letter could be attained.

A second, very common way to be accepted into a church was through experience. Someone accepted by experience had either fallen away from the Christian life and had found their way back to the faith, or they were new to the faith and had recently been baptized but were looking for a home church. In the church minutes, it was noted that a person was accepted into the church "by experience," and sometimes with an additional statement like the experience "of all that the Lord had done for them." At Fellowship Baptist, "Lucinda, a woman of color, the property of Bro. A.J. Colbert came forward and related her experience and was received into the fellowship of the church."¹³ At Hebron Baptist in Denham Springs, four Black men were received when they "told

¹¹ Old Saline Baptist, 8 February 1845.

¹² Minutes of Fellowship Baptist Church, 5 August 1850 and 30 March 1854, MF 5468, microfilm, Hill Memorial Library.

¹³ Fellowship Baptist, 3 December 1854.

what the Lord had done for them.”¹⁴ In some cases, when an enslaved person did not have a letter from their old congregation, the church chose to hear their story of experience instead. One such example was John, owned by a Mrs. Winnifred Vincent, who was accepted into Hebron Baptist through experience because he did not have his letter of dismissal.¹⁵

Based on the wording in the notes, it seems that they did share their story with the congregants, but the minutes did not record the exact nature of their experience. It is probable that such things were more intimately shared with the body and the clerk refrained from adding it to the notes, or it may have been a logistical issue. The reception by experience was recorded in the same short way for both Black and white incoming members. Often, multiple people joined the congregation at once and noting their story of experience would have taken up more space on the page than the clerk had available. Sometimes those accepted by experience were also baptized but were accepted specifically based on experience.

The third way to be received into a church was by baptism. Sometimes one joined the church by experience and was also baptized; other times they were just listed as received by baptism. Although the reception for either reason was similar, it was always noted specifically in the church minutes. Some were received by experience, some by baptism, and some by both experience and baptism together.¹⁶ In 1846, “a black woman named Mina belonging to Sister Coker was received by experience and baptism”¹⁷ into a new church. To the men who took notes for the church, it was an important distinction, but the differences were never thoroughly explained in the church minutes or constitutions. The time of salvation and when someone new joined the

¹⁴ Hebron Baptist, 24 November 1853.

¹⁵ Minutes of Hebron Baptist Church, July 1838, MF 6812, microfilm, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives.

¹⁶ For example: Minutes of Bayou Rouge Baptist Church, July 1842, MF 7028, microfilm, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives; Minutes of Calvary Baptist Church, 14 November 1846, MF 5459, microfilm, Hill Memorial Library; Old Union Baptist, 4 September 1860.

¹⁷ Calvary Baptist, 14 November 1846.

church were important, but the personal experience of the new member may have been less so, or their experience may have been a more personal story shared with the congregation that did not belong in the church business minutes.

Whether by letter, experience, or baptism, all the churches in this paper received enslaved people into their congregations. Hebron Baptist, Calvary Baptist, Amiable Baptist, Mt. Nebo Baptist, and Fellowship Baptist accepted Black members in smaller numbers, especially compared to the number of whites who joined the congregation over the same stretch of time. Bayou Rouge, First Baptist, and Old Saline Baptist received larger numbers of enslaved people. First Baptist Church received a group of twenty-one enslaved people received at once in 1858, the largest example of the reception of enslaved members in these sources:

persons of color rec'd by experience and baptism viz. Baker, John, Daniel, Little Sam, Philis, big Sam, Martha Ann, Ellis, Harriot, Bill [illegible], Elisa, big Margaret, Nancy, Issac, little Margaret, rec for baptism and Delphine, Judy, and Cely was received on a profession of their faith they having been baptized in Virginia and came off without their letters all the above were servants of Sister Dupree. Tony, Lear, and Henry was rec'd for baptism and all baptized.¹⁸

All of the Black members in the eleven churches studied were enslaved. They were labeled in different ways, but always in ways that revealed their position. Sometimes it was their name and position as servants, such as an entry from Old Saline Baptist mentioning the first and last names of a family joining the church as well as “servants, Sam, Celia, and Rose.”¹⁹ Servants who came to join the church either with their owners or simply at the same time as other white people were often in the church minutes almost as an afterthought, such as in August of 1845 at Old Saline Church when “Madison Mobley was received by experience also Matilda a servant.”²⁰ Or at Hebron Baptist, “The following members came forward and united with the church they having

¹⁸ First Baptist, 1858.

¹⁹ Old Saline Baptist, 10 January 1846.

²⁰ Old Saline Baptist, 9 August 1845.

been baptized on a profession of their faith in Christ (viz) Mary Bond, [illegible] Ellen [Brighman], and Sarah Ann Cookerham also Tina, Washington and Betty three colored persons.”²¹

Some churches went through periods of time when their clerk was particular about noting the owners of each enslaved person who was received, and in groups of one or two enslaved members joining, wrote who they belonged to clearly, “Caroline coloured woman belonging to Randal Tanner.”²² When a much larger number of enslaved people joined the church, the clerks would often use a quicker system of the first names of the enslaved with their owner’s name following in parenthesis: “Luisa (B Clark), Mary and Sam (Mrs. Scott), Clara (G Taylor), Hannah (M Ants), Harriot (R Perry), [illegible] (Mrs. Scott).”²³ Sometimes the minutes did not mention the enslaved status of the incoming congregants, but they noted the new members were Black, listed only by their first name, “Rec’d Calib man of color for baptism.”²⁴

Sometimes minutes recorded neither the status nor the skin color of a new member, but the way in which they were listed implied that they were Black, and the comparison between their name and the others gave away their status. Old Saline Church in Castor “received by experience Jesse Mobley, Lucinda Elliott, Martha Mobley, Philip Kooney, Joseph Murphy, Robinson Murphy, Madison Elliott, Elizabeth Murphy, Mary Ann Murphy, Hannah Murphy, Caroline Riddlehouse, Susan Brown, Joseph [Wollons], Solomon Mabry, and Tom.”²⁵ In church minutes, names of incoming white members were meticulously noted; there was always a first and last name, sometimes middle names, and often special attention paid to titles of “Brother” and “Sister.” They even noted which women were widows. As seen in the list from Old Saline Church, the full names

²¹ Hebron Baptist, 8 September 1850.

²² Bayou Rouge Baptist, 20 September 1856.

²³ Minutes of First Baptist Church, 17 September 1854.

²⁴ First Baptist Church, October 1838.

²⁵ Old Saline Baptist, 9 November 1844.

are listed carefully then “Tom” was added at the very end. Tom’s separation from the people stated before him was clear in the minutes. Tom was most likely an enslaved man. Every mention of a Black person joining a church was either listed as a slave, servant, or simply listed by their first name.

The reception of members was an important part of church tradition. Each church in this study had a similar procedure for the opening of doors to receive new members, and by all appearances, the churches took this procedure very seriously. Accepting new people into the body of the church was necessary to keep the church alive but it was also an important spiritual moment as these new people joined in the community of the church. But being received did not mean membership for the enslaved, and even when it did, it did not mean rights to the same respect and privileges that the white congregants received.

“The Right Hand of Fellowship”

“That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us”²⁶

When a new person was accepted into the church, the person was received, then “the right hand of fellowship” was extended to them by a church leader, or the pastor recommended that the congregation do so. The specific action and the meaning of it for the individual congregations was never recorded, but “the right hand of fellowship” was very common in many of the church minutes, and in some cases, it was written into the rules of decorum. First Baptist Church’s fourth rule of decorum stated that, “On the reception of members the minister shall give the right hand of

²⁶ 1 John 1:3, ESV.

fellowship first” and the deacons were to give the right hand of fellowship after the minister.²⁷ Article eight of Old Saline’s rules of decorum stated that immediately after opening the doors and receiving new members “to give the right hand of fellowship to all who are received by the church” with no stipulations.²⁸

“The right hand of fellowship” could have had several meanings and implications. Because of the way First Baptist’s rule of decorum is worded, it appears that it was a physical extending of the hand first by the minister and then afterwards by the deacons. The notation in the church minutes that the right hand of fellowship was extended happened often for incoming Black members. For the Baptist churches to have physical contact between a white person and an enslaved person written into church tradition was highly unusual. Any friendly contact, especially a handshake which implies a level of equality, between an enslaved person and a free white person was rare and generally socially unacceptable. It could have been simply a symbol of welcoming the new member into the church body, or it may have been a more meaningful event. It was written into the church rules as a formality but it also appeared to be a special tradition that brought the new member into the more intimate community of the church. Randy Sparks describes it as “a symbolic rite welcoming new members into the spiritual community.”²⁹ Not all the churches in this study used the phrase more than once or twice, but the churches that did used it often. The “right hand of fellowship” was scattered throughout the church minutes.

The origin of the biblical phrase is in Galatians 2:9, “when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and [Paul]” as they prepared to join the disciples in their mission of

²⁷ First Baptist, undated Rules of Decorum.

²⁸ Old Saline, undated Rules of Decorum.

²⁹ Randy J. Sparks, *Religion in Mississippi* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 87.

ministry. Martin Luther examined this event and described the act of the disciples extending right hand of fellowship as saying

We are companions in doctrine and have fellowship with each other in it; that is, we all have one doctrine, for we preach one Gospel, one baptism, one Christ, and one faith ... there is mutual agreement between us in everything. We do not teach anything different or better than what you teach; the same gifts we have, we see are in you as well ... it is one Gospel that we both preach.³⁰

The men in the passage who extended the right hand of fellowship were part of an intimate community of believers who knew Christ while he was alive and were committed to sharing the gospel. When they extended the right hand of fellowship, they invited Paul and Barnabas into that special community and into their joined mission.

Offering the right hand of fellowship was prominent in some church minutes. First Baptist Church in Jackson had a meeting in April of 1847 during which they received and baptized ten people of color: Nelly, Jack, Anny, Jude, Rachel, Linda, Jinnet, Dave, Adam, and Lynn. In this entry there was no mention of the right hand of fellowship, but in a later entry, the church received Nelly, Maria, Juno, Hester, Nancy, Frederick, Ben, Dublin, Abrum, Caroline, and Jemima, who were baptized and “received the right hand of fellowship.” In a meeting between the two above, a white man was accepted, and he received the “right hand of fellowship.”³¹ The right hand of fellowship was to be extended with no exceptions. First, it was to be extended by the minister, then the deacons. Some churches did it in other ways, but no church listed limitations on the rule. For First Baptist, sometimes it was listed in individual meeting notes as having been extended both for Black members and for white members joining the congregation at different times. Reuben, Miles, and James, all enslaved men, were received by Bayou Rouge and all received the “right hand of

³⁰ Martin Luther, *Galatians*, eds. Alister McGrath and J.I. Packer, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 77-78.

³¹ First Baptist Church April 1847, unknown date 1847, and May 1847.

fellowship,”³² and at Calvary Church, “Susan (servant of wdw [illegible] rec’d Jan 29) was baptized and rec’d the right hand of fellowship.”³³

Bayou Rouge and First Baptist used right hand of fellowship in reference to the Black congregants, even though they did not include Black members on their membership lists. The extension may not have meant the privileges and powers of membership, but it may have meant a welcome into the community of the members of the church. If the phrase was not included when a reception was mentioned in the minutes, it was still likely extended. When it was noted, it was a simple addition that may not have made sense when trying to take quick and precise notes. Sometimes it was absent, but it was absent somewhat equally for Black and white members. For the Black congregants of a church, receiving the right hand of fellowship likely meant an acceptance into the community of that body of believers, or at the very least, an understanding with them that they all believed the same thing and lived based on the same faith.

When the leaders of the church or the members of the church offered the right hand of fellowship, it was a way of leveling with the new members. It could have been a way of saying, as Martin Luther explained, that the new members were one with the current members, united under one faith, and working towards the same goal. That act being specifically laid out in some church rules displays that it held great meaning for the church as it did for the disciples and Paul as they shook hands and united together under one cause. It was also a sign of uniting into one specific community of believers. When Paul received the right hand of fellowship, he was symbolically adopted into the community of the disciples. In offering the right hand of fellowship, the antebellum Baptist churches were inviting the Black members into the community of the church, even if it came with certain restrictions.

³² Bayou Rouge Baptist, 2 July 1843

³³ Calvary Baptist, 28 March 1859.

Membership

“So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another”³⁴

The founding members of a Baptist church were normally listed somewhere early in the minutes, through their signatures on the church constitution or an original members list. The founding members of each of the churches used in this study were all white. Information about later members was less consistent. The member lists of these Baptist churches, when they had one, were often missing people who appeared in other events recorded in church minutes.³⁵ A membership list was created at one time and added to or changed through the years before a new, updated list was started, although many of these churches did not have more than one membership list before the Civil War. When they only had one, names were added and crossed out, people were listed as accepted then dismissed for various reasons, and some were listed as dead without a year of death. There was also consistent damage to the membership list pages because the record keeper or note taker of the church referred to that page to add members, remove them, and change their status. Because of the damage and the inconsistency, the membership lists of the Baptist churches were often unhelpful and unreliable.

However, through meticulous examination of the damaged membership lists and other sections of the church minutes, important information came to light about the membership of the Black congregants. Entries in the church minutes held other ways to identify who was a member, as well as if that person received the full privileges of the position. Enslaved Black people were

³⁴ Romans 12:5, ESV.

³⁵ For example: Amiable Baptist Church had the list of founding members on the church constitution, but no full membership list.

accepted into these churches that were founded and run by white people. The doors were opened and both enslaved and free were received. But for a person of color, reception into the church did not always mean membership in the church. Historian Larry M. James discusses enslaved membership in Baptist Churches and concludes that “white and black members received essentially the same treatment and met the same basic requirements when requesting the privilege of membership.”³⁶ The enslaved person was received into the body based on the same requirements and rules, but they were not often added to the list of members. The reception was equal, but the position of membership came with rights and power within the church that was withheld from Black members. There was a line between being received into the body of the church and being given the privileges of being a member. Some churches allowed Black persons to be members, and some did not. Some were referred to in the same way as members but were not on the membership lists. Most commonly, even if Black persons were listed as members, they were not afforded the same respect or privileges.

Some churches’ membership lists did not include any of the Black persons who were received into the church over the years. In the case of the churches with much smaller numbers of Black members, their absence may not be meaningful information, because sometimes the names of white members received around the same time were also missing. It is possible that, in those cases, it was simply a recording error. However, some membership lists that were updated with new member names were still free of any of the Black congregants of that church. Ebenezer Baptist and Calvary Baptist did not have membership lists recorded. Old Saline Baptist, First Baptist Church, and Bayou Rouge Baptist had membership lists that did not include Black congregants. Hebron Baptist, Old Union Baptist, Amiable Baptist, Mt. Nebo Baptist, and Fellowship Baptist

³⁶ Larry M. James, “Biracial Fellowship in Antebellum Baptist Churches,” in *Masters and Slaves*, 46.

had either membership lists or membership counts – the number of white members and number of Black members that was updated periodically but did not name individuals – that included the Black attendees of the church.

For some of the churches that did not have membership lists or only had lists of the founding members of the church, the minutes still sometimes referred to large groups of Black congregants as members. Bayou Rouge Baptist, located in Evergreen, when preparing for a special meeting, “resolved that the clerk furnish a list of the names of the coloured members with the names of their masters and overseers” to notify the enslaved congregants that they should attend the church on a certain day. At another time, a number of “coloured members” were excluded from the church.³⁷ Old Saline, during a revival stated that

the following members were received and baptized, Lewis, serv’t Jas. Prothro, Maria serv’t of WM [Boylston], Maria serv’t of Bro Malone, Henry Tyler, Charity Weaver, Jackson Kooner, Franklin Shirely, Simeon Riddlehover, [illegible] Fair, Samuel Gibbs, Burnell Hudson, and Mary a servant of Joshua Prothro, Jessop servt of Jas. Prothro and Sela a servt of Isaac Rushing.³⁸

Old Saline received many Black people into the congregation between 1844 and 1854, but the membership list only included the white congregants, making the exact number of Black members at any one time hazy between new people joining the church, deaths, and people leaving the church. However, in the example above from Old Saline, there is no separation between the incoming white members and the incoming Black members. During this revival, even though the Black congregants were not included on the official membership lists, they were included in the mixed list of new members received into Old Saline Church. They may not have had the same respect and rights within the church as free white members had, but they were considered, at least by the church notetaker, to be members in some sense.

³⁷ Bayou Rouge, 16 August 1856 and 20 September 1856.

³⁸ Old Saline, 7 September 1850.

The churches that had membership lists but did not include Black attendees on the lists, such as Old Saline in Castor, still often included them in other church business, scattered throughout the entries in the church minutes. The Black congregants were sometimes referred to as members and were involved in church discipline and sometimes other church business, but they were left off the membership list. For the churches that did include Black members on the list, there were still differences between what it meant to be a Black member and what it meant to be a white member. The privileges offered to white members did not all extend to Black members, even when they were included in the membership list.

Whether or not enslaved people were on the membership list, the status of Black membership was evident in the minutes and church entries. One of the biggest giveaways of the status of the Black congregants in the eyes of the white clerks was whether their names were noted on their own or with the title of “brother” or “sister.” Most of the churches were meticulous about respectfully referring to members of the body. One church believed it so important to refer to each other in the proper way that they included it in the rules of decorum: “Every member in speaking to or of each other shall use the title of Brother or Sister as the case may require.”³⁹ The congregations almost always followed this rule, with different definitions of what “the case may require” meant. The white members of a church were almost always referred to with “brother” or “sister” before their names, the only major exception being when there was a large group of new members joining at once, when they were listed by their full names. Even after being found guilty of intemperance, a man from Old Saline Baptist was still referred to as “Bro. Isaac Rushing.”⁴⁰

The Baptist churches very inconsistently called Black members “brother” or “sister.” In the churches where they were considered members, it was used sometimes, but not always in the

³⁹ Undated Old Saline Baptist.

⁴⁰ Old Saline Baptist, 10 May 1845.

same respectful manner as for the white members of the church. In situations where titles of “brother” or “sister” were used in one case and not used in the next, the absence was striking. In September of 1844, Old Saline Baptist “received by experience Sister Mary Ann Brown, Sister Eliza [Wolloms], and Bro. Absolom [Wolloms].” Each new member was addressed with a title, and each was called by their full name. The very next day, Old Saline received “Ben and Dolly.”⁴¹ No titles, no last names, and no mention of whether these new congregants were enslaved or even if they were Black. In some entries throughout the church minutes, Black members or attendees were referred to in casual ways when in other situations, the white members were very carefully titled. Sometimes the title of “brother” or “sister” was used but it came across differently. Mt. Nebo Baptist in Tangipahoa often included the title but put it after the name and race of the enslaved members. “Martin, a black brother belonging to [illegible]” was received by baptism and when an enslaved woman named Molly was involved in church discipline, the notes first referred to her as “Molly, the black sister.” This Molly was listed on the original members list for Mt. Nebo, but still referred to in a slightly different way.⁴² In these cases of using “brother” or “sister” in reference to a Black member, the title did not give any particular respect to the member.

Other examples of the “black brother” or “black sister” occurred in Mt. Nebo Church’s minutes, but at other times there was no difference in the way the Black members were titled. Molly, on a separate occasion, was simply called “sister Molly.”⁴³ Old Union Church accepted “Sister [Jizar], Servt” when she joined by letter. However, through the rest of the church minutes, the Christian titles are mostly missing for the Black members of the church. Old Saline, Mt. Nebo, and Old Union each had examples of using “brother” or “sister” in reference to Black members,

⁴¹ Old Saline, 7 September 1844, and 8 September 1844.

⁴² Minutes of Mt. Nebo Baptist Church, 30 October 1830 and 2 September 1815 and undated membership list, MF 5466, microfilm, Hill Memorial Library.

⁴³ Mt. Nebo Baptist, 3 August 1845.

but at other times called Black members by just their first names with no title other than one of servitude. Other churches consistently called Black attendees by their names with no titles, even when using the proper respectful title was written into the rules of decorum for the church. First Baptist Church had examples of various ways of labelling the Black members, but most of the time listed them in groups by first name with no title or with a group descriptor labelling them all as “persons of color.” However, in some situations, when referring to a large group, the formal Christian title was used. Early in the Church’s life, First Baptist created a committee for “examining and reporting in the church the standing of several brethren of color”⁴⁴ who were interested in joining the church, and other examples of referring to the Black members as “brethren” were scattered throughout the church minutes.

Old Saline Church never referred to the Black congregants as “brother” or “sister.” The only times those words appeared were in reference to individual white members, or at the beginning of a large group of people being received into the church when the incoming Black persons were on the list but separated at the end. Old Saline “received by experience Servt John,”⁴⁵ and at other times received enslaved persons who were noted with their masters’ names, “Jessop a servt of Has. Prothro and Sela a servt of Isaac Rushing,”⁴⁶ even in some cases when the owner of that person was not a member of that church.

Hebron Baptist, Calvary Baptist, and Amiable Baptist also never referred to the Black congregants with Christian titles. A few of the churches had one or two mentions of Black “brethren” joining but no titles given to individual Black congregants. Bayou Rouge was one such church. Old Union Baptist, First Baptist, and Mt. Nebo all referred to some Black congregants

⁴⁴ First Baptist, 25 July 1835.

⁴⁵ Old Saline, 8 March 1845.

⁴⁶ Old Saline, 7 September 1850.

with a title or referred to the whole group of Black members as the “coloured brethren”⁴⁷ or something similar. Each church was different in their use of the titles. Depending on how each church treated the Black congregants in other areas also makes the use or misuse of the Christian titles hold different levels of significance. However, many of the church minutes were meticulous about how they referred to the white members; it was even written into the rules of decorum for some churches. The thoughtlessness with which the Black members were referred to in the minutes displays one of the many ways that they did not receive the respect that white members did.

Instead of the title of “brother” or “sister,” the church note taker almost always labelled the incoming Black person as a servant, slave, or person of color. Often, the enslaved members were simply referred to as Black. First Baptist Church “Recd S W Newport and black man Peter for baptism,” “received in conference two black women Clarissa and Elisa,” “received 4 black men Almer, Simon, Alberto, James and woman Tener for baptism.”⁴⁸ Hebron Baptist “Received Ellen, a black girl by experience” and at one point, when “four black men came and told what the Lord had done for them, they were rec’d.”⁴⁹ A more common way of identifying the race or status of the new congregants and the members was the use of “man of color,” “colored members,” and “persons of color.” First Baptist had some examples of using Black as a descriptor, but more often used “person of color” or other similar phrases, such as “Calib man of color,” who was received for baptism.⁵⁰ Often, longer lists of Black persons received into the church would use the same descriptor, “persons of color: Daniel, Nelly, Emilia, Sealy, Tilda.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ Bayou Rouge, December 1842.

⁴⁸ First Baptist, November 1838, January 1839, and Unknown date 1839.

⁴⁹ Hebron Baptist, 24 November 1843.

⁵⁰ First Baptist, October 1838.

⁵¹ First Baptist, 1 December 1836.

The Old Union Baptist membership list included the Black members, but each enslaved member was labelled as a servant. In the 1852 membership list, “Hester (servt)” was listed, with Isaac and Madison listed under her, all noted to be servants as well. Other enslaved people were also listed throughout the membership list, although not grouped together with each other, but each of them was listed by a first name and with the notation of “servt.”⁵² Beyond membership lists, the title of “servant” replaced the Christian titles of “brother” and “sister” in many church minutes, displaying the status of the enslaved in the church to be less than the white members who were referred to by full names and a proper title.

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, there was a movement to convert the enslaved to Christianity. Efforts were made by different denominations to send plantation missions out to reach the enslaved.⁵³ However, as displayed by the status of Black congregants as members or as respected persons in the church community, the conversion did not mean equality. Slave owners worried that “Christian fellowship between master and slave, unless carefully regulated, would corrode the proper social hierarchy—the essential inferiority of blacks and superiority of whites.”⁵⁴ Some Black congregants of these churches were included in the list of members, and on occasion they were afforded the title of “brother” or “sister,” although normally without a noted last name. The inconsistency of titles and membership in the church minutes speaks to the way they were thought of by the church and the larger community. When they were given proper titles of a member, it often appeared as an afterthought. The privileges of membership support what Clarence L. Mohr states that “the status of blacks in racially mixed congregations was always a subordinate one, but the subordination was seldom rigid or total.”⁵⁵ In some cases, the enslaved in a church

⁵² Undated Old Union, “Names of Members from 1852”.

⁵³ See Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 152-154.

⁵⁴ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 168-169.

⁵⁵ Clarence L. Mohr, “Slaves and White Churches in Confederate Georgia,” in *Masters and Slaves*, 156.

were considered members and addressed with some level of respect in the church minute book, but that was uncommon. However, there was leniency in accepting new Black members into a church when they did not have a letter, and the right hand of fellowship was extended to both enslaved and free. There was a tension between white members trying to stay true both to their faith and to the societal norms of enforcing the power of white people over the enslaved. In some cases, faith won out, and workarounds were used to consider enslaved people members of the church, to accept them into the community, and to baptize them into the church. Other times, white power shone through, and enslaved congregants were not given the same privileges as the white members.

Chapter 2: Sacraments

The Baptist church only recognized two sacraments: baptism and communion. Both baptism and communion had strong implications about the unity of the church with Christ and the unity of the members with each other as a community. They were important parts of a church service, although communion was not mentioned as often in the church minutes as baptism was, likely because communion was not administered very often. While membership had some clearer signs of separation or togetherness, baptism and communion were more vague in the church minutes. However, even if baptisms or communion were segregated only slightly, it was in a stark contrast to the purpose of communion and baptism for unity within the church.

Baptism

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁶

In the minutes of a church, the way that one was saved or welcomed into the church was very important. Baptism was understood to be the act that incorporated someone into the body of Christ. It was symbolic of the New Testament baptism of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. Baptist churches also generally saw baptism as the thing that joined a new believer to the local church fellowship. It was a unifying and incorporating act. Baptism was one of the three ways one could become a part of a new church, and baptisms were very well documented in the church minutes examined for this paper. The scholarship on the topic suggests that generally, Baptist churches had segregated seating; however, baptisms were a different story.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Matthew 28:19, ESV.

⁵⁷ For example: Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 137 and Blake Touchstone, “Planters and Slave Religion in the Deep South,” in *Masters and Slaves*, 120.

The smaller churches tended to have one or two baptisms at a time, so there was not much in those church notes regarding baptisms in reference to shared space or interracial involvement. The larger churches, especially First Baptist and Old Saline, as well as Bayou Rouge, received more members at a time and often baptized large groups of people at one meeting. Sometimes the groups were all white, and often the groups were all Black, but on occasion the groups were mixed. In many other aspects of the notes, there is an extreme separation between the Black and white congregants, but for some churches, baptism was the exception and in it there was little or no separation between the two. New members of the church were Baptized in groups together, not always in order with white members first, but mixed. The separation that appeared in membership and in other places blurred during the process of baptism.

The mixing of white and Black persons wishing to be baptized could have simply been logistical. The church may have had only one baptistry or even no baptistry and just one creek, river, or other body of water close enough to the church to make sense for baptisms. They could have baptized white members and Black members on different days, but it could have been risky to delay a baptism to separate the white and Black persons because they risked them leaving for another church and losing those members. However, there is no reason why they could not have let the white men and women go first in the line and then the enslaved at the end. There were ways to continue the separation and the subjugation of the Black persons wanting to be baptized as they did with membership or Christian titles. In some cases, Black and white members were baptized in the same group, but the Black members were all listed together at the end. But for most large baptisms, the process was entirely integrated. The joy of salvation and adding members to the body overruled the differences.

Hebron Baptist in Denham Springs was a smaller church and normally did not have more than one or two people come forward at a time. But in one entry, some white women and three enslaved persons were received and baptized in the same group.⁵⁸ In the other small churches, which did not accept more than one or two new members at once, there was at least no indication of a different location of baptism for the Black congregants and no indication that the process was any different. The larger churches offered more abundant information about the relationship between Black baptisms and white baptisms.

Bayou Rouge sometimes baptized groups of just enslaved persons, but when both enslaved and white people came forward to be baptized, they were baptized at the same time. In August of 1842, one enslaved man and several white men and women were baptized together.⁵⁹ Old Saline Baptist in Castor had several large baptisms with both white and Black members coming forward. In 1850, “the following members were received, and Baptized Lewis, servt Jas. Prothro, Maria servt of WM Boylston, Maria servt of Bro Malone, Henty Tyler, Charity Weaver, Jackson Kooner, Franklin Shively, Simeon Riddlehover, Hames Fair, Samuel Gibbs, Burnell Hudson, and Mary a servant of Joshua Prothro, Jessop a servt of Jas. Prothro and Sela a servt of Isaac Rushing,” with enslaved men and women at the beginning and at the end of the list, and white men and women in the middle. One Sunday, an enslaved woman named Luisa was baptized at the same time as a white man. During a revival at the church there was another large group of twenty-seven white people and six enslaved Black people baptized together, and all placed on the same list.⁶⁰

First Baptist also had many examples of large mixed baptisms. Some listed the white members then the Black members at the end but in the same group: “the following persons were

⁵⁸ Hebron Baptist, 8 September 1850.

⁵⁹ Bayou Rouge, August 1842.

⁶⁰ Old Saline, 7 September 1850, 9 October 1852, and 19 July 1856.

baptized Mary Sowell, Sarah Burnet, Nancy Fugan, Miss July Lee, Miss Caroline Gordis, Abel J [illegible], Virgil white, John Woods, [illegible] Whitehead, Jackson Spencer (Persons of color) Anny, Minder, Winny, Cain, Prince, Cuffy, Issac.” The next month, a large group of white people was baptized and at the same time six persons of color were baptized as well. Even when fewer people came forward to be baptized the Black and white members were on the same list and baptized at the same time. In November of 1848 First Baptist “Recd S W Newport and black man Peter for baptism.”

However, First Baptist’s shared baptisms between Black and white congregants did not last forever. In the 1840s many months had missing entries, but for the months available, the numbers of Black persons baptized with white persons dropped dramatically. After 1846, there was no instance of both Black and white people baptized in the same group. Large groups of enslaved people were baptized, and smaller groups of white people were baptized, but they were no longer on the same list or baptized at the same time. After 1846, and especially into the early 1850s, there was more and more separation between the Black and white members of First Baptist.⁶¹

First Baptist’s trends changed over time, but the other churches generally stayed the same. This is likely because of the larger number of enslaved members of First Baptist. Ulrich B. Phillips stated that “the greater the proportion of negroes in a district or a church connection, the greater the segregation in worship.”⁶² As the number of Black members grew, the separation between Black and white also grew at First Baptist. Because First Baptist was in an area that was so highly populated by enslaved people, any tensions rising between the white and Black members would have likely shown earlier and stronger than at the other churches, and this shows in other areas of

⁶¹ First Baptist, November 1836, 1 December 1836, November 1838.

⁶² Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York, NY: D. Appleton and Company, 1918), 318.

the church as well. First Baptist was an outlier of this study in the way it treated baptism of enslaved congregants. Most of the churches in this study had no recorded qualms about baptizing Black converts the same way as they baptized white converts.

Communion

“On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread...”⁶³

Communion in the Baptist church was meant to be a constant reminder of Jesus, specifically the Passover right before his death. It was meant to be a reminder of the crucifixion, of the current community of Christ, and of the promise of Christ’s return. Communion also served to encourage and emphasize unity among the body of believers. Although an important part of the church service and an important religious sacrament for Baptist churches, it was not often mentioned in church minutes. The minutes sometimes mentioned communion more formally, when a church would change the day it was offered or postpone it for some reason, but most of the church minutes did not mention the way in which communion was administered. Some of the notes mention that it was given at the Sunday meeting, and it was not likely administered at the Saturday business meetings. There were very few examples of communion being mentioned at all, even fewer involving racial separation. However, the few examples available of communion in the Baptist churches examined for this study offer some insight into the way that racial differences affected its administration.

Old Saline Baptist mentioned communion one time in its church minutes. At a Saturday business meeting, the church moved to delay communion for one week. The church business that

⁶³ Acts 20:7, ESV.

day was lively and multiple problems had to be dealt with, so it was likely that the congregation had to use part of Sunday's meeting to deal with some of these problems and they postponed communion until after these conflicts could be resolved, either for logistical reasons or so that the church could administer communion while the members were at peace with one another.⁶⁴ Similar examples of postponing or rescheduling communion for various reasons appeared in various church minutes but there was no indication that race played any part in the decisions.

The more intriguing mentions of communion were in First Baptist's church minutes. In the first ten years of minutes for First Baptist, there was no meaningful reference to communion. However, in the summer of 1847, the minutes noted that "the sacrament was administered also to the coloured brethren in the evening,"⁶⁵ implying that communion had been administered to the white members either that morning or the previous Sunday. This is the first time the minutes referred to communion regarding the Black members of the congregation. After that, the minutes periodically brought up communion, and years later another entry directly discussed the Black members. In June of 1854, after a list of new people welcomed into the church, the minutes added that the "Lord's supper was administered to the colored brethren."⁶⁶ It is possible that communion was not administered to the Black members at all, which was a common practice among multi-racial Baptist and Methodist churches.⁶⁷ However, the first mention of communion being administered to the Black members exclusively was around the same time that separation between the Black and white members started to intensify. At First Baptist starting in 1846, baptisms were almost exclusively segregated, and the next year had the first mention of the Lord's Supper

⁶⁴ Old Saline, 11 July 1846.

⁶⁵ First Baptist, Unknown date 1847.

⁶⁶ First Baptist, 18 June 1854.

⁶⁷ Touchstone, "Planters and Slave Religion the Deep South" in *Masters and Slaves*, 123.

administered to the Black brethren on their own. The separation of races for baptism quickly translated to separation for communion as well.

For most of the churches, communion was not an issue in the minutes. There was little to no mention of it, and none with regard to the Black congregants. But First Baptist provided a unique example of communion as it did for baptism. Many of the other churches had few members and only a small part of the membership was Black. It is possible that they also went through a similar shift in the 1840s or 50s when they administered communion separately or baptized separately, but they were small enough that it would have been more tedious to do things separately, and if they did it would not have been a large enough difference to note in the church minutes. It is also possible that they did not separate the administration of communion by race. While many churches across the South started segregating communion in the 1820s, it may not have made sense to do so for some of the smaller town churches.⁶⁸ For First Baptist, with such a large population of enslaved people both in the church and in the parish, these events were meaningful. The way First Baptist's traditions changed over the years regarding baptism and the administration of communion offers a glimpse into changes that were happening in their community at the same time.

The desire in the Baptist churches to stay true to the Bible was also strong, but the desire to keep separation between whites and Blacks was strong. First Baptist went against the core idea of communion. Communion was meant to remind the church of unity with Christ and unity with each other in the church, despite other differences. However, First Baptist still went out of their way to administer communion to the Black members, even if it was separately. They worked around both the social norms and the church rules to take communion in the way that they did.

⁶⁸ Sparks, *Religion in Mississippi*, 96.

Baptism was similar as it brought someone into the local church body. Both baptism and communion were important parts of Baptist theology and they had unity at their center. A member of a Baptist church would take communion with that church, likely have been baptized at that church, and would take part in welcoming new members who had been baptized. These things were privileges of membership. Baptism should have been an all-unifying practice, but sometimes the churches baptized Black and white people separately. First Baptist also held communion separately when racial tensions started to rise before the Civil War. Segregation in baptism and communion in these churches was another way to separate the Black members from the white members.

Chapter 3: Church Governance

Church governance included all the members of the church, whether white or Black, official or unofficial. Very few positions of leadership were filled by Black men, but all members were subject to church governance. Other than being received into the church, the most mentions of people of color in the church minutes occurred during events of church discipline. The minutes presented no examples of Black members being involved in church votes, giving, or planning for various events. But enslaved members of the churches were involved in church discipline just as often as the white members were. The church did not seem to consider any time when a Black person had a problem with a white member, but any time a white member brought up a charge against a Black member, the church examined it. One's position in the church, if they could stay, stay with fewer rights, or were excluded, was up to the committee examining them. The cases were laid out at the business meetings, and the member's fate was decided. However, sometimes the Black members were excluded without a recorded trial from the church.

Church Leadership

“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ”⁶⁹

Even in the churches where enslaved congregants were considered members, positions of Black church leadership were very rare. The founders of the churches were all white, and their preachers were all white as well. In the words of Raboteau, as far back as Protestant religion had been in America, “Black church members were generally not allowed to participate in church

⁶⁹ Ephesians 4:11-12, ESV.

government.” Raboteau goes on to say that enslaved members of white churches still preached, with or without license, and that “more than any other denomination the Baptists gave leeway to their black members to preach.”⁷⁰ However, in the Louisiana Baptist churches there were very few Black preachers recorded in the church minutes.

The only examples in the churches of this study of approved Black preachers were in First Baptist’s minutes. There were a few Black men preaching, and there was one position, a sort of information gatherer, that was held by a Black man. One of the first actions of the newly founded church was to form a committee for “examining and reporting in the church the standing of several brethren of color who wish to join this church and cannot come to church on Saturdays (conference days).”⁷¹ First Baptist in Jackson had a large enslaved membership, and most enslaved members would not have been able to make the monthly business meeting. The committee provided someone to check in on the enslaved members on their various plantations. This committee was originally comprised of three white members, but at some point, the duty was passed on to a Black member of the church. It is unclear when this switch happened, but in 1839, a Black man named Jesse was excluded from the church because he was taking “disorderly” notes from the Black members for the committee reports.⁷²

The committee may have still been in place to make decisions, but a Black man was the one visiting the Black members at their various homes to gather information relevant to the church. And this role was taken seriously. Jesse was not only removed from his position for taking poor notes, but he was also excluded from the church. The notes from the enslaved members of the church were also taken seriously. Multiple times, a note was sent to the church leader from the

⁷⁰ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 110 and 155-156.

⁷¹ First Baptist, 25 July 1835.

⁷² First Baptist, May 1839.

committee or the person meeting with the Black members who could not attend the monthly meetings, and swift action was taken to resolve problems. In 1842, based on a letter sent, four enslaved members of the church were excluded. First Baptist also recognized enslaved men who entered the church as preachers, even if they were not currently serving as members of the church. In 1856, First Baptist, after receiving some new white members, accepted “Man Isaas a preacher and man of color was recd by letter servant of Mrs Boil.”⁷³ There is no evidence of Isaas preaching to members of First Baptist, but his experience in preaching was good enough for him to be noted as such in the church minutes.

When racial separation became stricter at First Baptist, Black leadership started to appear in the church. Multiple Black men were allowed to preach to other enslaved people. This was a slow transition. The first mention in the minutes of a Black man preaching appeared in 1852, when George, a man of color and enslaved, was permitted to preach to the Black people “in and near Jackson church.”⁷⁴ The “Jackson Church” referenced was either Jackson Baptist or Jackson Methodist, both nearby churches in the same parish.⁷⁵ Because it was referenced simply as “Jackson Church” it is more likely to be Jackson Baptist. Other Baptist churches are almost exclusively the only other churches mentioned in any of the minutes examined, and a reference to a Methodist church would have likely been labelled as such. Why George was given permission to preach specifically to the people in that area is not explained in the minutes. He could have lived closer to that church, so that was the area to which he had access. It may have simply been that there were a lot of enslaved people who were not part of a church in that area. First Baptist may have been looking to grow their congregation, or it may have had problems with Jackson church

⁷³ First Baptist, 12 July 1856.

⁷⁴ First Baptist, 9 July 1852.

⁷⁵ W.P.A. Collection, Historical Records Survey Inventories of Church Archives, ca. 1941, Box 1, Folder 2, Hill Memorial Library.

in the past and wanted to bring its members back to the straight and narrow path. It does not appear that Jackson Baptist had any say in George's permission to preach in the area, and no specific explanation was in the church documents. Whatever the reason, George, who had joined the church in 1846, was given permission to preach outside the church building.

First Baptist had other Black preachers who ministered either to the Black members or others in surrounding areas. In the 1850s, two men, John and Harry, were also preachers for the enslaved people around First Baptist, the two of them together with George all standing as appointed preachers for at least part of 1857. John, however, before 1857, was ministering but had not received approval to do so from the church. The Black preachers never taught at the main congregational meetings or to the white members of the church. However, the church did not lose sight of the Black preachers simply because they were preaching away from the campus of the church. George, Harry, and John were each brought before the church in February of 1857 on charges of lying or "conduct unbecoming of a Christian." What "conduct unbecoming of a Christian" actually meant was not explained. Each of them had a slightly different accusation, and the decisions made for each of them were all different.⁷⁶

Church Discipline

"If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him"⁷⁷

One of the main reasons for the monthly church business meetings was "to discuss and adjudicate breaches of church discipline."⁷⁸ Members of the church, always watching out for the other brethren, could bring up a charge against another member for a sinful action. Some of the

⁷⁶ First Baptist, 7 February 1857.

⁷⁷ Luke 17:3, ESV.

⁷⁸ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 180.

most common were drunkenness, lying, and foul language. Normally, the accused would admit, apologize, and ask for forgiveness, and the church would then decide on their sincerity.

Church discipline at the Baptist churches in Louisiana came in many different forms. Some members were excluded, some were forgiven, and some were made to apologize or pay for their wrongdoing in some way. Both Black and white members were brought before the churches on various occasions and on various charges. Enslaved members were generally treated the same way when examined by the church as the white members were. This similar treatment, however, did not always mean equality. A white man would likely have been excluded for missing too many church services, and so would an enslaved person, but the enslaved often had no choice about where they could and could not go. There was also no example of a Black member bringing up charges against another person in the church, Black or white. The Black men who were brought up for preaching were the only examples of church discipline against men for preaching without permission. White men were plausibly allowed to preach the Bible whenever they so desired.

Harry, George, and John of First Baptist, mentioned in the previous section, were each brought before the church for discipline on the same day. On February 7, 1857, “George a man of color and a minister having charged against him was put on trial and the church decided that he had been guilty of conduct unbecoming of a Christian and that he should be reprovved by the pastor which was done forth with.” Directly after George’s charges, the church addressed “Harry a man of color and a minister having charges against him was put on trial and after hearing all the evidence in the case he was acquitted.” Harry’s offence was not listed, and George’s was vague. The accuser was also not listed. Their offences must not have been serious, as they were both let off with little fuss, but it appears that their privileges to preach were postponed while the church was deliberating and administering the punishment. At the next monthly business meeting, a

resolution was passed “allowing George and Harry to preach” even though George had been previously allowed by the church to preach in certain areas. From the script of the case brought against Harry, it appears that he was also previously allowed to preach. Their time on trial with the church was short and came to very little, but the person or people who brought up problems with them also brought up problems with a different Black man preaching who went through a much more difficult process.⁷⁹

On the same day, “charges being brought against John man of color a minister too from the evidence before the church it appeared that the accused was guilty of lying but he meaning some [illegible] that was not present his case was [illegible] to the next church meeting” and a committee was created to review the case. John had apparently been preaching without permission from the church, but the bigger issue was that he had been accused of lying. Because of some missing evidence, the case was postponed until the next church meeting on March 8. At this monthly business meeting, “John Hamilton’s case came up and it appeared from all the evidence before the church that he was guilty of lying and was excluded.”⁸⁰ Two months later, at the May meeting, John arrived at the church and applied for restoration, but he was dismissed. In June, John returned again but his application was postponed until the next meeting. At the next meeting, this one in July, “Johns case came up again he was restored to the church again but not to preach yet.” Finally, in the fall of 1857, the church “Resolved that John be restored to his ministerial gift as a preacher amongst the colored members.”⁸¹ John, accused of lying by an unlisted person, was kicked out of the church, and was denied reentry two times before the church allowed him back into the congregation. Even then, he was not yet allowed to preach.

⁷⁹ First Baptist 7 February 1857 and 8 March 1857.

⁸⁰ First Baptist, 7 February 1857 and 8 March 1857.

⁸¹ First Baptist, 9 May 1857, 19 June 1857, 11 July 1857, and Undated 1857.

Who was allowed to bring up problems with other members in the church was unclear in the church minutes. The minutes laid out no specific rules that described the difference in white complaints and Black complaints, but the only examples of church discipline appeared to be initiated by white members of the church. For the most part, church discipline involving an enslaved person in the church was no different than discipline involving a free white man or woman. Most of the time, the offender apologized or made amends some other way and the church forgave them. The most common offences, such as drunkenness, foul language, or gossip, were not particularly harmful to others. The three preachers at First Baptist were accused of lying and poor conduct, and there were many similar accusations recorded in the church minute books.

At Mt. Nebo Baptist in Tangipahoa, a charge was brought against an enslaved woman named Molly. The accusation was brought up by her owner, who was also a member of the church. She was charged for “her disobedience to her husband.” A committee was formed to review the case, and their report being “dissatisfactory,” Molly was restored to the fellowship.⁸² The situation surrounding the charge against Molly was peculiar. Her owner, whose name was Brothers Hughes, was the one who brought it up in the church. If it were an offence that bothered him as her owner, he was within his rights to personally punish her. However, disobeying her husband did not mean Molly’s work was lacking in any way. Brothers Hughes was a teacher in Washington Parish, not a large planter, so he was probably closer and more involved with his enslaved persons than someone who owned hundreds of people would have been. Religious affairs seemed to be important to Brothers Hughes, so a more likely explanation was that he saw the disobedience and brought up the charges because it was his duty as a member of the church. Another peculiarity was that Brothers Hughes brought up problems relating to Molly and her husband, even though legally,

⁸² Mt. Nebo, 4 June 1814.

enslaved marriages were not recognized. The committee report on Molly's supposed transgression did not have enough to prove her wrong. This may have been because there was not enough evidence of her transgression, although in many other cases of church discipline all it took was one member to testify against them. It may have been that the church did not recognize Molly's marriage, so dismissed the case as she was not disobeying a husband she could not technically have.⁸³

Molly was restored to the fellowship without having to apologize for any negative action, but her time at Mt. Nebo Baptist was not long-term. The year after the charges were brought against her, "Molly the Black Sister was excluded from the Church."⁸⁴ There was no explanation of why she was excluded. There was no note of action taken against her by the church because of something she had done. She may have been excluded for missing several church services. Thirty years later in 1845, "old Sister Molly (Black woman) presented herself for Restoration which was granted and recd the right hand of fellowship."⁸⁵ Because she was away from the church for so long, she was most likely sold away, or her owner moved away and brought Molly with him. When Molly was let back into the church, there was no record of debate or extended consideration because she had not necessarily committed any wrongdoing when she was excluded. On the membership list recorded after Molly's return, she was listed, but Brothers Hughes was not. Molly was also not specifically labeled as enslaved upon her return. She had been gone for an extended period, returned without her old owner, and was not noted as enslaved in the minutes or the

⁸³ Letter from Brothers Hughes to Sophia Hunt, 1836. Collection Number: 02779, Subseries 1.3, Folder 11, Hughes Family Papers, 1790-1910, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, The Southern Historical Collection. Scanned copy in possession of author.

⁸⁴ Mt. Nebo, 2 September 1815.

⁸⁵ Mt. Nebo, 3 August 1845.

membership list. Though unlikely, Molly might have gained her freedom and chose to return to her old church community.

Church discipline of enslaved members over vague charges was common. Disorderly conduct, conduct unbecoming a Christian, and exclusion with no mention of reasons were standard. At First Baptist, based on information gathered by the man in charge of attending to the Black members, the church decided that the enslaved members “Tener, Emily, Lisa, and Simon were in disorder,” and they were excluded from the church.⁸⁶ At Bayou Rouge Baptist, two enslaved congregants, Matilda and William, were brought up on charges of “disorderly conduct” at the same time. William was expelled from the body, but Matilda was allowed to stay. The reasoning behind the decision was not given in the church minutes, nor was the exact offence.⁸⁷

Most of the time, exclusion from the church followed church discipline but sometimes enslaved members were excluded from the church with no explanation at all. Noted in between two other church business items, First Baptist “Excluded Grig a man of color,” with no explanation. The same thing happened to an enslaved man named Bryon in 1854. It was noted that he was excluded in the middle of other church business without any listed reason. However, Bryon was accepted back into the church the next year with little fuss.⁸⁸ The seemingly random exclusion of enslaved members was not uncommon. Many of them were likely sold away so they could not ask for a letter of dismissal and the church simply wanted to remove them from the roll. In 1855 at First Baptist, “Georg was excluded [illegible], Linda was excluded (Alser Kellan) Mina was excluded (Ww Fishburn).”⁸⁹ Later, after receiving a number of new members and listing some

⁸⁶ First Baptist, Undated 1842.

⁸⁷ Bayou Rouge, 7 August 1844.

⁸⁸ First Baptist, 27 September 1851, 17 September 1854, and 11 August 1855.

⁸⁹ First Baptist, 25 August 1855.

members who had died, “the following were excluded Louisa, Margret, Minder, [illegible], Fredonia,”⁹⁰ and there was again no explanation for their exclusion.

The longest list of enslaved persons excluded from a church was in an entry from Bayou Rouge’s minutes in 1856. At the Saturday business meeting in August, the church “resolved that the clerk furnish a list of the names of the coloured members with the names of their masters and overseers and request them to notify said members to attend church on the first sabbath in September next.” At the business meeting in September, which took place after the first sabbath day of the month, a few people were received into the church and “the following coloured members excluded: Matilda, Miles, Harriet, Peter, Jackson, Joshua. The following members were dropped: John G Oliver and wife, white persons and Frederick, Rebecca, Emaline, Mariah, Betsey, Robert, George, Jinny, Jeff, Lena coloured persons.”⁹¹ There was no mention of why so many were dropped, and no explanation of why some were excluded and some were dropped. Because of the previous decision to request all enslaved members’ presence at the first church meeting in September, at least a few of the members dropped must have missed some services and missing the one specifically requested was enough for the church to officially exclude them.

These exclusions with no explanations may have been church discipline events that were not written down in the minutes, but generally the minutes held detailed accounts of church discipline. The white people on the list from Bayou Rouge were all “dropped.” None of them were associated with an “exclusion” from the church that most often went along with some wrongdoing and church discipline. Dropping a member was most likely a more routine clearing of the membership list. Some people moved away or simply stopped attending, and at some point, they were dropped from the role. However, someone who was excluded had to go through a rigorous

⁹⁰ First Baptist, June 1858.

⁹¹ Bayou Rouge, 16 August 1856 and 20 September 1856.

process to rejoin the church if they wanted to. The exclusion of Black people from the church likely came without a proper hearing for the reasons of exclusion. Perhaps the Black person was not available at the time for the discussion of their discipline, or perhaps they were excluded for some other reason that the church deemed unnecessary to discuss.

Beyond the vague and unexplained examples of Baptist churches excluding Black congregants, more drastic and dramatic events of church discipline against enslaved members also occurred. At Old Saline Church in 1847, “Bro Brown reported Matilda, a servant of Mr. Burk, as being guilty of adultery. On motion the case was taken up and considered and she excluded from the fellowship of the church.”⁹² Matilda had joined the church in 1845, then almost ten years after her exclusion from the church, applied for readmission. In 1856, after an unusually large group of people were baptized and accepted into the church, Matilda, along with a white man, was restored to the fellowship of the church.⁹³ The restoration of excluded members to the church was not uncommon. Sometimes it was after a long period away, so any old resentment or anger were likely gone, and for Matilda it would have been especially helpful that so many people were baptized that day and the congregation was likely focused on the joy of accepting so many new members into the body to bring up the severity of the charges against her.

Perhaps the most dramatic case of church discipline in the minute books took place at Amiable Baptist. Amiable Baptist did not have many mentions of enslaved people at the church, and most mentions of enslaved people in the minutes were about reception and baptism. An enslaved woman named Moholy joined the church in May of 1842. At the Saturday business meeting in August, Moholy was examined by the church:

A Charge was then brought against Moholy a coloured woman belonging to Sister Rhodes for burning a dress in order to conceal it which she was accused of having stolen before

⁹² Old Saline, June 1847.

⁹³ Old Saline, 9 August 1845 and 19 July 1856.

she was baptized – and when asked about it denied it (although the proof against her was strong) and said she preferred to be excluded from the church as she had seen no peace since she had been a member – She is therefore excluded.⁹⁴

Moholy, a new member of the church, was brought up on charges of theft. An important distinction was provided, that she had stolen the dress before she was baptized. It is likely that if she had admitted and asked for forgiveness, the church would have granted it because they believed the transgression took place before she became a Christian. The “strong” proof against Moholy was not described in the church notes, but it appears that the congregation was supportive of the charge brought against Moholy. There was no indication that a committee was gathered to investigate the claim as happened in other situations of church discipline. The proof against her, though unavailable today, was enough to convince the congregation at the church meeting. Moholy, however, denied the accusation. The evidence was not recorded in the church minute book, so it is unclear whether Moholy did steal and burn the dress. Either way, Moholy, declaring that there had been no peace in her time with the congregation, chose not to lower herself to admit and ask for forgiveness to stay at Amiable Baptist. She was excluded, and the church continued to the next business item for the day.

The circumstances of Moholy’s experience with church discipline were dramatic to say the least. The offense brought against her was aggressive and personal. Even though the dress had been burned, the church was unified against her under the “strong” evidence. Perhaps the most dramatic part of the story was Moholy’s response to the accusations. She vehemently denied them, and when the church would not let up, she declared that there had been no peace, and chose to leave. Moholy’s declaration revealed that there had been tension in the church. The woman who brought the charges against Moholy was unnamed, but that woman being a part of the same church

⁹⁴ Amiable Baptist, May 1842 and 20 August 1842.

undoubtedly created friction. Either the woman believed Moholy stole the dress or had some other problem with her and made the story up. The conflict between the white woman and Moholy had been going on for a while, and Moholy's statement seemed to imply that she had been feeling pressure constantly since she joined the church.

Sometimes churches in this study were quick to forgive. It kept the peace, and it kept the church numbers up, but, in some situations, what they charged the enslaved persons with did not make sense or the admission of guilt was demeaning. Many examples of church discipline of white members ended with a simple apology and the congregation moved on, especially for cases of drunkenness, gossip, or similar offenses.⁹⁵ For the enslaved who had charges brought against them, it was often unclear what exactly they had done wrong. Enslaved members who came from their owner's homes to the church, where God supposedly loved all equally, may not have wanted to lower themselves before the church in an apology, and they often took the fall and left the church or tried to rejoin later. Church governance was guarded carefully against Black members. The few men who held positions of church leadership were in precarious positions and any power that they did have was over other enslaved persons. Church discipline, though sometimes fair, was used against Black members, sometimes without explanation.

⁹⁵ For Example: Amiable Baptist, 21 August 1830.

Conclusion

The Louisiana Baptist churches, though all different, treated the Black congregants in similar ways. Most of the time, they were treated as members but not quite members. They had some of the privileges of the white members, but they were limited. Enslaved members in the church, although sometimes referred to as “brother” or “sister,” were not given the same respect in the title as their white counterparts. Black members could not vote in church business, and it appeared as though they could not bring accusations against whites to the church for disciplinary action. However, church discipline was used freely against the Black members, and exclusions with or without reason were common. In some rare instances, enslaved congregants had permission from the church to preach to other enslaved people, but never to white people, and that privilege could have been taken away at any time. Black members were received and baptized the same way and they were also sometimes offered communion, but their life in the church was much different than the white members.

The Baptist church was generally much more open to enslaved persons joining than other denominations, but there was still an effort to retain white power within the church. Sometimes, such as with reception and baptism, the white members’ faith prevailed, and Black people were welcomed equally. Other times, the need to suppress the enslaved members to keep the social hierarchy intact surpassed the church rules and the desire for equality. In such cases, many of the rights of membership were withheld from the enslaved. In some ways, the Baptist church was a haven from racial division, as the right hand of fellowship was extended to Black people and white people, but, ultimately, the Black congregants never had the full rights and privileges of membership.

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