

**Life under the "Peculiar Institution": Religion**

By the early nineteenth century, most slaves were at least nominally Christian. Some had converted voluntarily, while others had only done so under coercion by their masters. Many antebellum slaveowners apparently saw Christianity as a valuable mechanism of social control. By emphasizing the Christian virtues of meekness, patience, and conscientiousness, they hoped to encourage their slaves to become more submissive and docile workers. Although slaveowners may have wanted their slaves to attend Christian worship services, they did not want them to go on their own. Autonomous black churches were banned and slaves were expected to worship under the strict supervision of white ministers. Left to their own devices, slaveowners worried that their slaves would interpret the teachings of Jesus Christ as being in favor of equality. This is also one of the main reasons why most slaveowners did not want their slaves to learn how to read. As the following passages suggest, slaves were well aware of the hypocrisy exhibited by their pious, "Christian" masters.

Slaveholders hide themselves behind the church. A more praying, preaching, psalm-singing people cannot be found than the slaveholders [in] the south. The religion of the South is referred to everyday to prove that slaveholders are good, pious men. But with all their pretensions, and all the aid that they get from the Northern church, they cannot succeed in deceiving the Christian portion of the world. Their child-robbing, man-stealing, woman-whipping, chain-forging, marriage-destroying, slave-manufacturing, man-slaying religion, will not be [considered] genuine and the people of the free states cannot expect to live in union with slaveholders, without becoming contaminated with slavery.

The American slave trader, with the constitution in his hat and his license in his pocket, marches his gang of chained men and women under the very eaves of the nation's capitol. And this, too, in a country professing to be the freest nation in the world. They profess to be democrats, republicans, and to believe in the natural equality of men; that they are "all created with certain

inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." They call themselves a Christian nation; they rob three millions of their countrymen of their liberties, and then talk of their piety, their democracy, and their love of liberty.

**Source:** Brown, W.W. (1848). *Narrative of William W. Brown, a fugitive slave*. Boston: Anti-Slavery Office.

A clergyman who goes to the south, for the first time, has usually some feeling, however vague, that slavery is wrong. The slaveholder suspects this and plays his game accordingly. He makes himself as agreeable as possible: talks on theology and other kindred topics. The southerner invites him to talk with his slaves. He asks them if they want to be free, and they say, "O, no, massa." This is sufficient to satisfy [the clergyman]. He comes home to publish a "South-Side View of Slavery" and to complain of the exaggerations of abolitionists. He assures people that he has been to the south, and seen slavery for himself; that it is a beautiful "patriarchal institution;" that the slaves don't want their freedom; that they have hallelujah meetings and other religious privileges.

What does he know of the half-starved wretches toiling from dawn till dark on the plantations? Of mothers shrieking for their children, torn from their arms by slave traders? Of young girls dragged down into moral filth? Of pools of blood around the whipping post? Of hounds trained to tear human flesh? Of men screwed into cotton gins to die? The slaveholder showed him none of these things and the slaves dared not tell of them if he had asked them.

**Source:** Jacobs, H. (1861). *Incidents in the life of a slave girl*. Boston: Published for the author.

Some plantation owners built special buildings to hold Sunday services for their slaves and hired preachers, usually white men, to lead the worship. Former slaves generally found

these proceedings quite dull and reported that it was only later, when they held their own services in secret, that could they expect to hear some "real" preaching.

Despite their best efforts, southern whites were not able to prevent slaves from developing their own forms of Christianity. Although many African-Americans were forced to attend religious services with their masters, they often held their own secret meetings later at night. In many areas throughout the South, slaves merged aspects of Christianity with African religious traditions, such as voodoo. In other cases, they simply bent the religion to fit the special needs and circumstances of bondage. The African-American version of Christianity tended to be much more emotional and physical than its white counterparts, involving fervent singing, chanting, stomping, and dancing. It also tended to be more affirmative and joyful, emphasizing above all the dream of freedom and deliverance. Perhaps not surprisingly, religion proved to be a vital source of sustenance for slaves, providing them with a refuge from their daily miseries and keeping their hope alive that their suffering might one day come to an end. Most importantly, it helped many slaves realize that even if they were not free in body, they could be free in mind and in spirit. According to historian John Michael Vlach, "In this way slaves began to achieve a degree of liberation well before Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation and the Union soldiers arrived bringing them the news."

There is much superstition among the slaves. Many of them believe in what they call "conjunction" [another word for voodoo or black magic], tricking, and witchcraft; and some of them pretend to understand the art, and say that by it they can prevent their masters from exercising their will over their slaves. Such are often applied to by others, to give them power to prevent their masters from flogging them. The remedy is most generally some kind of bitter root; they are directed to chew it and spit towards their masters when they are angry with the slaves. At other times they prepare certain kinds of powders, to sprinkle about their masters dwellings. This is all done for the purpose of defending themselves in some peaceable manner, although I am satisfied that there is no virtue at all in it....

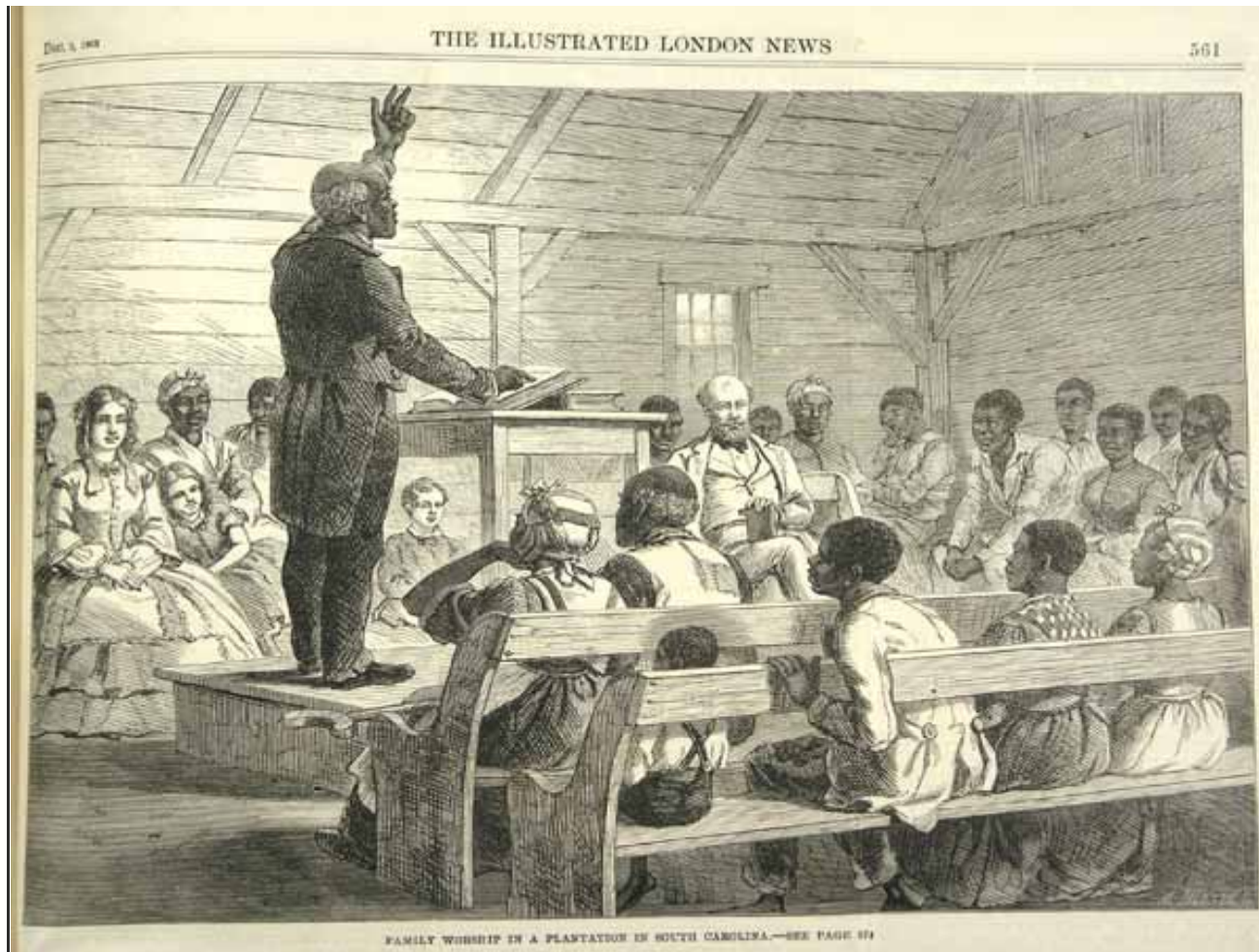
**Source:** Bibb, H. (1849). *Narrative of the life and adventures of Henry Bibb: An American slave*. New York: Published by the author.

Not being allowed to hold meetings on the plantation, the slaves assemble in the swamps, out of reach of the patrols. They have an understanding among themselves as to the time and place of getting together. This is often done by the first one arriving breaking boughs from the trees, and bending them in the direction of the selected spot. Arrangements are then made for conducting the exercises. They first ask each other how they feel, the state of their minds, etc. The male members then select a certain space, in separate groups, for their division of the meeting. Preaching in order, by the brethren; then praying and singing all round, until they generally feel quite happy. The speaker usually commences by calling himself unworthy, and talks very slowly, until, feeling the spirit, he grows excited, and in a short time, there fall to the ground twenty or thirty men and women under its influence. Enlightened people call it excitement; but I wish the same was felt by everybody, so far as they are sincere.

The slave forgets all his sufferings, except to remind others of the trials during the past week, exclaiming: "Thank God, I shall not live here always!" Then they pass from one to another, shaking hands, and bidding each other farewell, promising, should they meet no more on earth, to strive and meet in heaven, where all is joy, happiness and liberty. As they separate, they sing a parting hymn of praise.

**Source:** Randolph, P. (1893). *From slave cabin to the pulpit*. Boston: J.H. Earle.

### **Slaves attending Sunday worship**



This drawing was first published in the *Illustrated London News* on December 5, 1863. It is particularly striking because it features a black man preaching to an audience consisting of slaves *and* their white masters and mistresses.

**Source:** *Illustrated London News*, (5 December 1863).

### Slaves attending Sunday worship



Compare this image with the one on the previous page. What differences do you notice? As you can see, African-American religious services tended to be much less restrained when white people were not present, which is one of the main reasons why many formed their own (predominantly black) churches after the Civil War.

**Source:** University of Virginia. (1998). *American slave narratives: An online anthology*. Retrieved July 14, 2004, from <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/JACOBS/hj-live2.htm>.

#### Additional Resources:

- The complete digital forms of some of the above texts are available from the Library of Congress American Memory Project: <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem>>and at the University of North Carolina's "Documenting the American South" project: <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/>>

