

Bishop Charles Mason Essay



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BUSTER**

Along with his mother he attended the Mt. Olive Baptist Church near Plumerville where the pastor, Mason's half-brother, the Reverend I. S. Nelson, baptized him in an atmosphere of praise and thanksgiving. From that point in his life, Mason went throughout the area of southern Arkansas as a lay preacher, giving his testimony and working with souls on the mourners' bench, especially during the summer camp meetings.

Mason was licensed and ordained in 1891 at Preston, Arkansas, but held back from full-time ministry to marry Alice Saxton, the beautiful daughter of his mother's closest friend. To his greatest disappointment and distress, his wife bitterly opposed his ministerial plans. Alice divorced him after 2-years of marriage and later remarried. Mason refused to marry as long as Mrs. Alice Saxton-Mason lived.

Mason's determination to get an education was a crucial turning point after his divorce. In November 1893, Mason entered Arkansas Baptist College, founded by Dr. E. C. Morris - pastor of Centennial Baptist Church at Helena, Arkansas, and president of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention.

From 1896-99, the Holiness conventions, revivals, and periodicals inspired by Mason and Jones split the Baptists and, in a few cases, the Methodist churches, birthing the development of independent "sanctified" or "holiness" congregations and associations. Mason, Jones, and their colleagues were vehemently opposed and eventually expelled from Baptist churches via the National Baptist Convention.

Mason, while walking along a street in Little Rock, Arkansas, received the revelation of the name, Church Of God In Christ (COGIC) (1 Thess 2: 14; 2

Thess 1: 1). Thus in 1897, a major new black denomination was born. After days and nights of intensive debating over the Baptism of the Holy Ghost with initial evidence of speaking in tongues, Mason and Jones separated, and the church split. Those who agreed with Mason met in September 1907 to legally organize the COGIC. They elected C. H. Mason as general overseer and appointed D. J. Young, Mason's constant companion, as editor of the new periodical, *The Whole Truth*.

By ordaining ministers of all races, Mason performed an unusually important service to the early twentieth-century Pentecostal movement. He appears to have been the only early convert who came from a legally incorporated church body and who could thus ordain persons whose status as clergymen was recognized by civil authorities. This recognition allowed clergy to perform marriages, to carry out other ministerial functions having legal consequences, and thus entitling them to certain economic advantages such as the right to obtain reduced clergy rates on railroads. As a result, scores of white ministers' south ordination at the hand of Mason. Large numbers obtained credentials carrying the name COGIC.

Bishop Mason personally carried the holiness doctrine far beyond the mid-south. In 1907, for example, he traveled to Norfolk, Virginia, holding a three-week revival that planted the seed of Pentecost on the east coast. Thus, when blacks began their migration north during the first World War, Church Of God In Christ evangelists would travel with them, preaching holiness, telling the simple stories of the Bible, and offering religious joy and warmth not found in the established northern churches.

There were as many white Church Of God In Christ ministers as there were black ministers in the years of 1909-1914, all carrying Mason's credentials and incorporation. On December 20, 1913, elders E. N. Bell and H. A. Goss issued a call to convene a general council of "all Pentecostal saints and Church Of God In Christ followers," to meet the following April at Hot Springs, Arkansas. This invitation went only to the white saints.

On the first week of April 1914, Mason traveled to the Hot Springs convention to invoke God's blessings on the newly formed General Council of the Assemblies of God. He preached to more than four hundred white Pentecostal preachers.

By 1917 Church Of God In Christ congregations were organized in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and Brooklyn. Evangelists were also at work in Harlem. In 1935 a storefront church was opened at 137th and Lenox Avenue, placing Bishop Mason's message before the largest urban black population in America.

Despite this new racial separation, Mason maintained a warm fellowship with the white Pentecostals. He preached in their conventions and maintained a strong fellowship with two prominent white Pentecostal leaders: A. J.

Thomlinson of the Church of God (CG, Cleveland, Tennessee) and J. H. King of the Pentecostal Holiness Church (PHC, Franklin Springs, Georgia). In 1952, Mason was the elder statesman attending the Pentecostal world Conference at London, England.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) developed a file on C. H. Mason because of his pacifism and interracialism. In 1918 some white followers of Mason in Los Angeles were identified as being of German extraction. Mason

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was jailed at Lexington, Mississippi, for allegedly preaching against the war, although he sold bonds to help the war efforts. William B. Holt, one of the white brethren targeted by the FBI for suspicion, was a lawyer and former Nazarene preacher. He traveled to Lexington to post a two-thousand dollar cash bond for Mason's release.

Later scholars have echoed the same conclusion as the FBI report. Dr. Gayraud Wilmore, a most careful and respected scholar, says, " This movement, begun by C. H. Mason and W. J. Seymour at the turn of the century, has been one of the most powerful expressions of Black religion in the world".

Wilmore's assessment is supported by Yale historian supported by Yale historian Sidney Ahlstrom, who observed that the lives of W. J. Seymour and C. H. Mason personified a process by which black piety exerted its greatest direct influence on American religious history.

Mason led the Church Of God In Christ until his death in 1961. Under his leadership the church experienced phenomenal growth. Thousands of Mason's followers, migrating from south to north and southwest to far west, carried his teachings and evangelistic spirit to virtually every major city in America. Upon his death in 1961, the Church Of God In Christ, which had begun in a gin house in Lexington, Mississippi, claimed some 5, 500 congregations and 482, 679 members. At least ten other church bodies owed their origins to Mason's church.

Since his death the Church Of God In Christ has continued its rapid growth. Mason stamped his personality on his church far more emphatically than any

other Holiness leader. He lived to see the Church Of God In Christ become a major denomination and one of the largest Pentecostal bodies in the world. Bishop Mason died at age ninety-five in Harper's Hospital, Detroit, Michigan, on November 17, 1961. His remains are entombed in the Mason Temple, headquarters of the Church Of God In Christ at Memphis, Tennessee.

Worldwide, there are thousands of congregations of Church Of God In Christ, totaling several million members. There are small congregations, consisting of just a few members - and large ones made up of several thousand members, like West Angeles Church Of God In Christ, characterized as a multi-cultural church with more than 15, 000 members.

Bishop Charles Harrison Mason encouraged interracial cooperation, like West Angeles Church, as early as the 1900's. Mason was jailed more than once for preaching on the streets with a white minister. The FBI created a file on him during World War I because of his personal view and interracial cooperation.

The Church Of God In Christ has grown rapidly. Growth in the Church Of God In Christ is also credited to many of its leaders since the death of Bishop Mason in 1961. In the early sixties, Bishop O. T. Jones, Sr. served as Senior Bishop. In 1968 Bishop J. O. Patterson, Sr. was elected the Presiding Bishop. He was followed by Bishop L. H. Ford in 1989. Contributions of these leaders are legendary in every respect. They earned this respect by doing, not being, and that is a big difference!