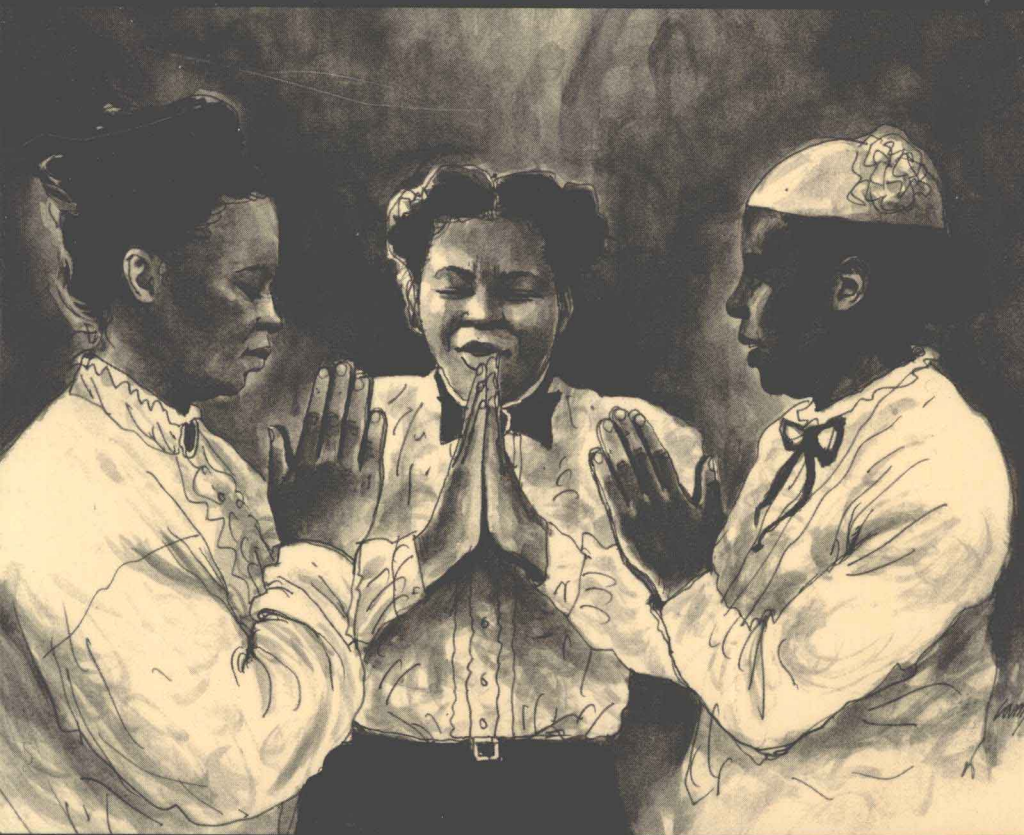


# RIGHTEOUS DISCONTENT

*The Women's Movement in the  
Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*



Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham

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# 1

## The Black Church: A Gender Perspective

As I look about me today in this veiled world of mine, despite the noisier and more spectacular advance of my brothers, I instinctively feel and know that it is the five million women of my race who really count. Black women (and women whose grandmothers were black) are . . . the main pillars of those social settlements which we call churches; and they have with small doubt raised three-fourths of our church property.

W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater* (1918)

Much has been written about the importance of the black church in the social and political life of black people. Much less has been written about black women's importance in the life of the church. This book is a study of women in the black church between 1880 and 1920—a period that has come to be known simultaneously as the “woman's era” and the “nadir” in American race relations. I argue that women were crucial to broadening the public arm of the church and making it the most powerful institution of racial self-help in the African American community. During these years, the church served as the most effective vehicle by which men and women alike, pushed down by racism and poverty, regrouped and rallied against emotional and physical defeat.

In some instances, church women contested racist ideology and institutions through demands for anti-lynching legislation and an end to segregation laws. They expressed their discontent with both racial and gender discrimination and demanded equal rights for blacks and women—advocating voting rights or equal employment and educa-

tional opportunities. Black women even drew upon the Bible, the most respected source within their community, to fight for women's rights in the church and society at large. During the late nineteenth century they developed a distinct discourse of resistance, a feminist theology. More often, however, their efforts represented not dramatic protest but everyday forms of resistance to oppression and demoralization. Largely through the fund-raising efforts of women, the black church built schools, provided clothes and food to poor people, established old folks' homes and orphanages, and made available a host of needed social welfare services.

This study attempts to rescue women from invisibility as historical actors in the drama of black empowerment. Since women have traditionally constituted the majority of every black denomination, I present the black church not as the exclusive product of a male ministry but as the product and process of male and female interaction. In offering a corrective to the near exclusion of women in most studies of the black church, my book departs from the more recent and positive discussion of exceptional women, the early women preachers.<sup>1</sup> Research on women preachers, while of great value, does not capture the more representative role of the majority of women church members. If taken alone, such discussion continues to render women's role as marginal. Left obscured is the interrelation between the rising black churches in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the indefatigable efforts of black women's organizations. Left unheard are women's voices within the public discourse of racial and gender self-determination. In short, the focus on the ministry fails to capture adequately the gender dimension of the church's racial mission. Ultimately, my study provides a vantage point for viewing the interplay of race, gender, and class consciousness, for it presents the church, like the black community it mirrors, as a social space of unifying and conflicting discourses.

I have focused my attention on the movement that brought into existence the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc. This movement represented and continues to represent the largest group—religious or secular—of black Americans. To persons not versed in church history, the term "convention" might bring to mind an annual meeting or tangential association. In the history of black Baptists, however, "convention" has almost the same meaning as "denomination." The

black Baptist convention is distinct from that of white Baptists and emerged only because otherwise autonomous black Baptist churches voluntarily and freely came together.<sup>2</sup> Their collective association, beginning first at the state level and eventually embracing a national constituency, effected an unprecedented arena for public discussion and mobilization of resources on the part of African Americans.

Although conventions did not originate with late nineteenth-century black Baptists, their profound importance rests in their deployment as vehicles of black identity and empowerment. Ironically, it was the issue of slavery in 1844 that divided white Baptists into northern and southern conventions.<sup>3</sup> The close of the Civil War did not heal the rift among white Baptists, but it did give black Baptists the opportunity to forge a national unity and identity of their own. The decision to form a black national convention was motivated by discriminatory policies on the part of white Baptists, as well as by the growing support among African Americans in general for racial self-determination.<sup>4</sup>

James Melvin Washington's *Frustrated Fellowship: The Black Baptist Quest for Social Power* (1985) remains the most comprehensive discussion of the racial tensions that spurred the evolution of the black Baptist movement. Washington and others have described its separatist, indeed nationalist character as informed by philosophies of racial self-help and racial self-determination. But in chronicling the events that led to the development of the black Baptist church as a potent national force, they have focused overwhelmingly on the contributions of outstanding ministers within male-dominated state and national conventions.<sup>5</sup>

Black Baptist churchmen certainly recognized the importance of women's active support for the denomination's efforts toward racial self-help and self-reliance. Yet male-biased traditions and rules of decorum sought to mute women's voices and accentuate their subordinate status vis-à-vis men. Thus tainted by the values of the larger American society, the black church sought to provide men with full manhood rights, while offering women a separate and unequal status. As we will see in the chapters that follow, however complex the black Baptist women's own ideas were concerning separate roles for men and women—or the appropriate sexual division of labor—they would not lightly accept their own subordination in the struggle of their people.

*The Black Church during the Nadir*

The nationalist consciousness of the black Baptist church came of age during the years of heightened racism that followed Reconstruction. In 1880, when black Baptists took the first step toward creating a permanent national structure, the halcyon days of voting and political ferment among southern blacks had given way to growing disillusionment.<sup>6</sup> By 1890, it had become preeminently clear that the black community would have to devise its own strategies of social and political advancement. In that year Mississippi adopted a disfranchisement plan that served as a model to the rest of the South. Disfranchisement formed part of the larger process of "depoliticalization": literacy tests, poll taxes, and other state election laws, along with social and psychological sanctions such as economic reprisal, violence, and threats of violence, effected the mass removal of blacks from the nation's political life. Political institutions and representative government became simply inaccessible and unaccountable to American citizens who happened to be black.<sup>7</sup>

Black men lost more than the ballot on election day. They lost many other rights, which theoretically the constitution and federal civil rights laws protected: the right to hold public office, sit on juries, allocate tax dollars for schools and other social services, protect their women and themselves from insult and victimization, and share in other basic human and citizenship rights. Black women, like all American women, had never shared political equality with their men. Once black men were denied the suffrage, however, black women became ever more powerless and vulnerable to southern racial hostility.<sup>8</sup>

As southern state after state during the 1880s and 1890s set in motion a barrage of discriminatory laws that routinized the separate and inferior status of blacks, violence and intimidation solidified the "Negro's place" in the New South. Between 1884 and 1900 more than 2,500 lynchings of blacks were recorded. American race relations reached an all-time low—the "nadir," as Rayford Logan termed the disquieting times.<sup>9</sup> Jim Crow, as segregation was called, quickly pervaded every part of life and made itself felt even in death. In employment, housing, places of amusement, public transportation, schools,

hospitals, and cemeteries, segregation daily produced and reproduced racial identities, power, and disempowerment. During the "nadir," black communities turned increasingly inward. They struggled without the aid or protection of the federal government; worse yet, they suffered its policies of betrayal. In 1883 the Supreme Court had declared unconstitutional the federal Civil Rights Act of 1875, a law prohibiting racial discrimination in places of public accommodation. In 1896 the Court announced its sanction of the "separate but equal" doctrine.<sup>10</sup>

Powerless to avert the mounting tide of racist public opinion, black people struggled to maintain family and community cohesiveness in an environment that sought to tear both asunder. African Americans, looking now to themselves to educate the masses of their people, care for the needy, facilitate economic development, and address political concerns, tapped their greatest strength from the tradition of their churches.<sup>11</sup> From the early days of slavery, the black church had constituted the backbone of the black community. Truly African American in its origins, it provided a spiritual cohesiveness that permitted its people to absorb, interpret, and practice the Christian faith—to make it their own. As the "invisible institution" of the slaves, the church had long promoted a sense of individual and collective worth and perpetuated a belief in human dignity that countered the racist preachings of the master class.<sup>12</sup> In the decades following Reconstruction, the church's autonomy and financial strength made it the most logical institution for the pursuit of racial self-help. It functioned not only as the house of worship but as an agency of social control, forum of discussion and debate, promoter of education and economic cooperation, and arena for the development and assertion of leadership.

Recognizing its diverse roles, E. Franklin Frazier termed the black church a veritable "nation within a nation."<sup>13</sup> At the individual level, but especially when collectively joined in association, black churches represented not an escapist and other-worldly orientation but the only viable bastion of a community under assault. If for many of its members the black church remained a focus for the perpetuation of community identity, for many of its leaders it became the vehicle for consolidating every existing strength into a concerted campaign for racial self-reli-

ance. Those who sought to make the church the flagship of black dignity espoused strong race-conscious views concerning the preservation of the black community, and, just as important, they sought to shape the community so that preservation could become progress.

Race consciousness reached its apogee with the creation of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. in 1895. Determined to create a forum through which black people could voice their spiritual, economic, political, and social concerns, the convention's leaders equated racial self-determination with black denominational hegemony. These ideas were not unique to the black Baptist church. The African Methodist Episcopal Church had emerged as a separate denomination during the dawning years of the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries all the black denominations had established community institutions and advanced the philosophy of racial self-help. But it was in the black Baptist church where this philosophy found its largest following.

Black Baptists constituted the most numerically significant attempt to counter the debilitating intent and effects of American racial exclusivism, and thus their story broadly characterizes the black church and black community. The National Baptist Convention, which existed apart from the powerful white Northern Baptist Convention and Southern Baptist Convention, constituted the largest and most representative sample of the black churchgoing population. In 1906 it had 2,261,607 members, while the second largest denominational membership, African Methodist Episcopal, had only 494,777. The National Baptist Convention included 61.4 percent of all black church members in the United States.<sup>15</sup> By 1916 National Baptists numbered 2,938,579. The convention was larger than any other black religious group and larger than either of the two major white Baptist groups, namely, the Northern Baptist Convention with 1,232,135 or the Southern Baptist Convention with 2,708,870.<sup>16</sup> The numerical power of the black Baptist convention appears even more dramatic when compared against the other white denominations. In 1916 it ranked as the third largest religious body in the United States—trailing only the Roman Catholic and Methodist Episcopal churches.

The great majority of the convention's members, like the great majority of blacks themselves, lived in the South and in areas with populations under 25,000. But its leaders hailed from towns and cities,

and thus the bulk of its programs were there. The convention's urban presence steadily increased as blacks began to migrate in larger and larger numbers to southern and northern cities. In 1906 the National Baptist Convention constituted the largest denomination, black or white, in Atlanta, Memphis, and Richmond. By 1916 it took the lead in Birmingham and Nashville, while continuing to dominate in Memphis and Richmond. In Louisville, Washington, D.C., and New Orleans, it was second only to the Catholic church, while its numbers grew exponentially in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Chicago.<sup>17</sup> By sheer size alone, the black Baptist church formed a microcosm of the black population in America and included men and women from all social classes and geographic regions.

### *The Black Church as Public Sphere*

By law, blacks were denied access to public space, such as parks, libraries, restaurants, meeting halls, and other public accommodations. In time the black church—open to both secular and religious groups in the community—came to signify public space. It housed a diversity of programs including schools, circulating libraries, concerts, restaurants, insurance companies, vocational training, athletic clubs—all catering to a population much broader than the membership of individual churches. The church served as meeting hall for virtually every large gathering. It held political rallies, clubwomen's conferences, and school graduations. It was the one space truly accessible to the black community, and it was this characteristic that led W. E. B. Du Bois, long before E. Franklin Frazier, to identify the black church as a multiple site—at once being a place of worship, theater, publishing house, school, and lodge.<sup>18</sup>

The church also functioned as a discursive, critical arena—a public sphere in which values and issues were aired, debated, and disseminated throughout the larger black community. The black Baptist convention movement facilitated the sharing and distribution of information through periodic statewide and national meetings, where thousands gathered and discussed issues of civic concern. Since black women constituted two-thirds of this movement, they had a crucial role in the formation of public sentiment and in the expression of a black collective will. Particularly through women's efforts, black com-

munities with very limited income raised funds sufficient to build and sustain churches, schools, and social welfare services. At times in concert and at times in conflict with their men, black women initiated race-conscious programs of self-help.

The very nationalist discourse that unified black men and women betrayed inherent gender conflict. As a deliberative arena, the National Baptist Convention sought to speak for both men and women, but it did not encourage expression from men and women as equals. The convention's masculine bias was evident in its institutional structures and discourses. Positions of authority and power were monopolized by men. Thus women sought to develop their own voice and pursue their own interests, which at times overlapped and at other times contested the men's. Rising gender consciousness was part of a complex of ideas that informed black Baptist denominational work as a whole.

In 1900 women succeeded in forming an alternate sphere of deliberation within the larger denominational context of the National Baptist Convention. The Woman's Convention, defined as an auxiliary to the NBC, summoned a sisterhood more than one million strong and culminated nearly three decades of work by women's organizations at the local and state levels. Through their convention, black women shared knowledge of their state and local activities. They governed their own members, initiated their own agenda, elected their own leaders, and developed criteria that won respect and emulation from other women. In 1909 the convention boasted of having established the first school for black women that black women themselves owned. Through their school and their national convention, black Baptist women challenged many of the real and symbolic barriers that others—white Americans in general and even black men—sought to impose upon them in the church and larger society.<sup>19</sup> Rather than diminishing racial solidarity, rising gender consciousness made possible the effective drive toward a national black Baptist identity.

Through a racial and gender-based movement, black women confronted and influenced their social and political milieu, and they did so through the mediating influence of the church. According to Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus, "mediating structures" constitute part of the public realm. They stand between private citizens and the large, impersonal institutions of public life, such as the government, and



produce meaningful value systems as well as concrete mechanisms for ordering people's lives and addressing needs.<sup>20</sup> More effectively than any other institution, the church stood between individual blacks, on the one hand, and the state with its racially alienating institutions, on the other. The church's ability to sustain numerous newspapers, schools, social welfare services, jobs, and recreational facilities mitigated the dominant society's denial of these resources to black communities. And it was primarily the fund-raising activity of black women that undergirded the church's mediating function.

In characterizing the black church as a public sphere, my analysis moves in a different direction from such conceptual models as "civil religion" or "public religion." The concept of civil religion, made popular and controversial by Robert N. Bellah, calls attention to the character and role of religious symbolism in American political life. It locates religious symbols outside the confines of the church and asserts their life and meaning in expressions of patriotism, the general understanding and articulation of American national identity, and in public rituals and ceremonies such as holidays and presidential inaugurations.<sup>21</sup> Instead, my book stresses the public character and role of the black church. This is no small difference. The religious symbolism of the nation's public life—its collective thanksgivings and civic piety—held problematic and contradictory meanings for African Americans.<sup>22</sup> Frederick Douglass conveyed this point eloquently before a crowd of white Americans on the Fourth of July in 1852. Contrasting their celebration of liberty with the enslavement of his own people, Douglass called the Independence Day festivities "sacrilegious" and proceeded with his jeremiad: "Your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to Him [God], mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy."<sup>23</sup>

For African Americans, long excluded from political institutions and denied presence, even relevance, in the dominant society's myths about its heritage and national community, the church itself became the domain for the expression, celebration, and pursuit of a black collective will and identity. At issue here is the public dimension of the black church, not the religious dimension of the public realm. The question is not how religious symbols and values were promoted in American politics, but how public space, both physical and discursive, was interpolated within black religious institutions. Indeed, scholars