



FRUSTRATED FELLOWSHIP

James Melvin Washington

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Between 1788 and 1834 black Baptists formed their first distinctively black congregations and organized regional associations. By 1831, when an enslaved Baptist preacher named Nat Turner inspired an insurrection against slave-holders in Virginia, black Baptists had acquired "a peculiar and precarious religious freedom." Turner's rebellion and the black Baptist role in ending slavery in Jamaica brought restrictions on the movements of black preachers, but black Baptists continued to preach and to claim the freedom to worship as communities of believers. As James Melvin Washington demonstrates in this pathmaking study, the black Baptist struggle for religious freedom was also a quest for identity and community. From the beginning the black Baptists battled "the perverse trusteeship of the slave regime." At every stage their striving was complicated by their relationships with white Baptists. Biracial congregations, formed in the enthusiasm of mission efforts among the slaves, dissolved as Christian doubt and rationalization about slavery increased. White Baptists divided along sectional lines and fought bitterly about missions among slaves and, later, among freed blacks. Even the most sympathetic white Baptists saw blacks as "part of that heathen element that was supposed to "be saved and civilized: it was difficult ... to see how blacks could save themselves." By 1895, when the National Baptist Convention was organized, most black Baptist leaders had chosen the path of racial and ecclesiastical separatism. As Professor Washington notes, "fear of duplicating the racial dominance so prevalent in American society at large encouraged African-American Baptists to be fierce opponents of anyform of ecclesiastical dominance...black Baptist pastors tend to be exceptionally strong and independent leaders, and their churches tend to be more militantly congregational than those of other kind of Baptists." The black Baptist movement, Professor Washington writes, is a "frustrated fellowship' because it is an expression of "social identity and a quest for "social power."

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