Holiness as Wholeness in Afro-Pentecostal Tradition

A Theological Perspective

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Abstract

Using the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) as the exemplar, I explore the theological rationale that undergirds the COGIC priority of holiness as a prescription for human wholeness. By wholeness, I mean human flourishing of the total person. For the COGIC, “Salvation is a deliverance from dangers and enemies.” Through the democratization of what was historically reserved for spiritual heroes, namely the designation of “saint,” common people of little means were immediately uplifted. They grabbed ahold of this moniker, which redefined them and identified their new place of spiritual residence in Zion. By faith, they expected to experience a modicum of the blessing of Abraham, right now. Such personal and social uplift includes peace, provision, power, healing, deliverance, and victory over their natural and spiritual challenges and foes while in exile. As an exilic people, they created a way of being “in the world, but not of it.” This created a holy space where they were not despised outcasts, but “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people” (1 Pet 2:9, KJV). By inhabiting this space, their lowly status was washed away in the blood.

Introduction

Using the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) as the exemplar, I explore the theological rationale that undergirds the COGIC priority of holiness as a prescription for human wholeness. By wholeness, I mean human flourishing of the total person through spiritual, mental, emotional, material, and social prosperity. Since for the COGIC, “Salvation is a deliverance from dangers and enemies,” immediate separation from the world, the flesh, and the devil is normalized COGIC soteriology.¹

¹ O. T. Jones and J. E. Bryant, Manual of the Church of God in Christ (Memphis, TN: Church of God in Christ, 1940), 12.
Through the democratization of what had been historically reserved for spiritual heroes, namely the designation of “saint,” common people of little means were immediately uplifted. They grabbed ahold of this moniker, which identified their new place of spiritual residence in Zion. As the saints persevere in holiness, they live in a “now, not-yet” tension. By faith, they expected to experience a modicum of the blessing of Abraham, right now. Such personal and social uplift includes peace, provision, power, healing, deliverance, and victory over their natural and spiritual challenges and foes while in exile. Despite Pentecostal distinctives, the COGIC is known, not as a Pentecostal church, but as the “sanctified church.” According to Cheryl J. Sanders, members of this movement

follow the holiness mandate in worship, in personal morality, and in society, based on a dialectical identity characteristic of the tradition: “in the world, but not of it.” This dialectical identity reflects the social aspect of exilic consciousness, as manifested in the saints’ awareness of alienation or separation from the dominant culture, based on racial differences and religious practices.2

As an exilic people, they created a way of being “in the world, but not of it” by employing holiness codes and prohibitions that rejected worldly pleasures and practices. This created an alternate world, a holy space where they were not despised outcasts, but “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people” (1 Pet 2:9, KJV). By inhabiting this space, their lowly status was washed away in the blood.

To flesh out the notion of holiness as wholeness, I will review the historical development of holiness in the tradition as understood by the founder, C. H. Mason, as it relates to wholeness. Then, I will discuss how the complex historical distinctives and existential particularities of a marginalized people necessitated a quest for social resurrection. Next, I will engage Mason’s own theological understanding of holiness as wholeness. After that, I will engage and exegete aspects of the 1931/40 COGIC articles of religion, taught and practiced as lived religion up until 1973 for insights into this holiness/wholeness dynamic. Lastly, I will provide a theological summary of holiness as wholeness from this Afro-Pentecostal tradition and suggest ways in which the broader Christian community can benefit from this theological construction.

The Development of Holiness as Wholeness in C. H. Mason

In 1891 Mason married Alice Saxton. Unfortunately, Alice was opposed to Mason’s ministry pursuits and their marriage ended just two years later in 1893. The constant travel associated with the preaching lifestyle and lack of monetary gain were likely

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contributors to the divorce. This traumatic experience was so grievous to Mason that he contemplated suicide. Based on a 1994 interview of Mason’s daughter, Lelia Mason Byas, Mason separated from his first wife in 1893 due to his wife’s marital infidelity. According to Mason’s daughter, Julia, Mason explained that God sanctified him during the separation from his first wife and healed him of his mental and physical distress, which enabled him to overcome the separation. By his daughter Mary Mason’s account, the resistance of C. H. Mason’s first wife to his call to preach was the source of his problems as he moved further and further away from God. She compares C. H. Mason’s ordeal to that of Jonah and provides an insightful account. As a result of this transformative experience, Mason overcame moral compromise and felt revitalized for ministry. It was after this experience that he preached his first message on sanctification entitled, “Endure Hardness as a Good Soldier” (2 Tim 3:12–13). After developing a zeal for, and commitment to, the doctrine of sanctification broadly construed, through his own personal crisis, Mason believed that sanctification brought spiritual renewal and social liberation.

In November of 1893, Mason entered Arkansas Baptist College for the first time in search of help with his preaching. This was the first of two stints with Arkansas Baptist College. The second stint would be with the affiliated Minister’s Institute. However, according to Mason’s own testimony, during the first stint he was disillusioned with the school. Becoming suspicious of the curriculum, he believed that the institution had assimilated to the culture and its methods and would not be able to help him maintain the vitality of slave religion, albeit with the appropriate evangelical modifications:

I entered the Arkansas Baptist College November 1, 1893, and stayed about three months. I still entered the same so that an education would help me out in

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3 Calvin White, “In the Beginning, There Stood Two: Arkansas Roots of the Black Holiness Movement,” The Arkansas Historical Quarterly 68 (Spring 2009), 7.


6 “During slavery Mason’s parents adhered to a set of religious beliefs that emerged out of a blending of African Traditional Religions with white protestant [sic] Christianity. Slave religion was a set of spiritual and cultural beliefs created by the slaves. The sacred world views Africans brought to the Americas came from West and Central Africa, and included beliefs in a supreme god, spiritual energy, a hierarchy of good and evil spirits, witchcraft, life after death in an upper and lower world. They believed in a world of the living and a world for the dead. Slave religion appealed to enslaved Africans because it incorporated ‘Africanisms’ (the continual flow of African cultural beliefs) like spirit possession, adherence to herbal specialist and sacred funeral rites and rituals to honor the dead.” Weaver, “Mark the Perfect Man,” 38.
preaching. The Lord showed me that there was no salvation in schools and colleges; for the way they were conducted grieved my very soul. I packed my books, arose and bade them a final farewell to follow Jesus with the Bible as my sacred guide. I began to lift up Christ by word, example and precept [sic], in my ministry, the word drew the people from the streets, roadsides, and from the utmost part of the country. Very soon the word of God began to sanctify the people everywhere He sent me. Bless His holy name. 

According to Lelia Mason Byas, her father had very specific concerns. “My father did not like how blacks were mimicking whites, wanting to be like them, socially, politically, and religiously. He was searching for knowledge about the God who had liberated black Americans, the God of the slaves, and the God that healed the poor and afflicted. That God papa said was never mentioned.” From this episode, it seems clear that Mason was not so much in search of theological clarification, but spiritual manifestation sufficient to change the trajectory of his people.

**Influence of William Christian**

One of the most influential people in Mason’s understanding of holiness was previously enslaved ex-slave William Christian with his restorationist theology. Having a similar trajectory to that of Mason, Christian started off as a Baptist preacher, but received a revelation that he was preaching the human doctrine instead of Christ. This changed his theology and message. Being accused of deviating from the Baptist faith, he withdrew from the Baptists to establish the Church of the Living God. Mason’s initial exposure to, and subsequent affiliation with, Christian and the Black Restorationist Movement coincides well with his personal pursuit of clean or holy living. While definitive documented evidence is lacking, circumstantial evidence suggests that Mason’s understanding of clean living was initially influenced by this movement in general, and William Christian in particular. Importantly, Mason’s yearning from his early childhood for the uplift of his people and the power of slave religion would imply that

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8 Weaver, “Mark the Perfect Man,” 63.
11 This assertion is based on Daniel’s commentary in “A More Excellent Way: The Theological Journey of Bishop Charles Harrison Mason in the Theological Formation of the Church of God in Christ,” in *With Signs Following: The Life and Ministry of Charles Harrison Mason*, ed. Raynard Smith (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2015), 114–15. Additional support for Christian’s influence upon Mason may possibly be found in the archives of the Church of God (Christian Workers for Fellowship). However, further confirmation is beyond the scope of this effort.
Mason had some personal sense of racial equality as a righteous pursuit. Christian’s polygenesis, appeal to Christianity, and love, certainly heightened Mason’s insights and would have provided some scriptural support for his thinking.

In this polygenesis (i.e., the theory that different races have different origins), the gentiles or Caucasian, Asians, and blacks, also referred to as Ethiopians or black Jews, all have different origins. Adam and Eve, patriarchs and prophets, even Christ and his family and certain apostles were black. Furthermore, the curse of Cain would have been an intra-black and not interracial issue, as was commonly taught. This subverted the popular Hamitic curse theory based on the subjugation of the black race. While Christian does not preach black superiority, according to his train of logic, with such a noble heritage, black folks need to open their eyes and recognize that they can be and are as good as any other people. Whether one is better than another is based upon how well one lives, as Christian explains: “No man on earth is better than I am, unless he beats me doing right and everybody in this world that beats me doing right is better than I am and nobody’s color or wealth makes them better than I am, and everybody in this world, regardless of their color or wealth, that I beat doing right, I am better than they are.” With holy living as the great equalizer, for Christian, social hierarchy was predicated upon how one lived before God, instead of economic or racial distinctives.

Although not a proponent of Christian’s polygenesis, Christian’s posture concerning his people resonated with Mason. Furthermore, Mason also preached and demonstrated a profound love for all people, as expressed in an account by his daughter, Mary Mason. While evidence reveals that Mason had a sense of racial parity and desire for social uplift before his exposure to the Black Restorationist Movement, it appears that William Christian’s impact upon Mason at least heightened Mason’s sensitivity to such matters, if not informed or taught him in some respects.

The Practical Theology of C. P. Jones

As practical theology for the social and political challenges of black people, holiness provided freedom from different types of bondage. This included not just immorality, but racism. Concerning the efficacy of the gospel for everyday life, C. P. Jones commented, “Mind that God did not teach Israel to have religion apart from a political hope. They were combined. Christ was to reign in their hearts and over their affairs.

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And so it is yet to be.”16 The realization of a better future for African Americans required a life of virtue, which would bestow “dignity, nobility, beauty, grace, and wisdom.” The hindrance to this achievement was sin defined in relational, cause and effect terminology. For example, sin destroys reputations, and hamstrings the wealthy and powerful through the production of shame; the vicious and arrogant have their lives shortened; vices create conspicuous consumption that hinders virtue, even infecting the innocent, producing death.17

Although African Americans were plagued with profound socio-economic and political challenges, Jones was convinced that great opportunities were ahead. As a pan-Africanist (i.e., one who affirms the solidarity of people of African descent), Jones affirmed the historical contributions and nobility of African people.18 Believing that nobility was oftentimes bestowed upon the marginalized by God, African Americans should have hope in the future. For Jones, character could overcome these challenges. Character was inclusive of self-respect and other virtues. In fact, character was developed through salvation and the teaching of Scripture.

Character was salvific or the means through which God’s redemption manifested to save black people. In this respect, Jones proffered a list of virtues shaped by truth, courage, and compassion.19 Key to social uplift were, “faith, indomitable will, dauntless courage, serpent-like wisdom, and dove-like disposition.” In support of these virtues were the pursuit of “truth, knowledge, discretion, honesty, honor, integrity.” These were integral to God’s wishes to elevate, instruct, and guide his people for the spiritual and social salvation of others.20 Jones’ explication of holiness as liberation affected by character provided a theological foundation for Mason’s own effort to preserve slave religion with his own view of holiness as freedom, and his efforts towards social uplift rooted in personal and communal sanctification.

**Pentecostal Distinctives and Racial Diversity at Azusa**

Inspired by the Welsh Revival of 1904, William J. Seymour, a black Holiness preacher from Louisiana, led a group of 100 “prayer warriors” into a ten-day fast for revival on Bonnie Brae Street in Los Angeles, California. Within three days, participants were being baptized in the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues, reminiscent of the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2:4. This resulted in an unprecedented and

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unimaginable display of Christian unity. The revival would grow to include as many as twenty different races and nationalities from a myriad of ecclesiastical backgrounds worshipping together. The work grew so quickly, and the worship was so loud and lively, that Seymour decided to move into the old Stevens African Methodist Episcopal Church on 312 Azusa Street. This abandoned building with sawdust floors was more like a barn than a church. In egalitarian worship and fellowship, blacks and whites prayed for each other; men and women participated freely and preached in the services. From 1906 to 1909, the ministry conducted three services a day. These were non-liturgical gatherings designed to be Spirit-led. As a result of this newfound freedom, meetings were filled with fervent prayers, songs, testimonies, preaching, conversions, Spirit baptism, exorcisms, and healings. Despite these miraculous effects, the violation of social conventions concerning race and gender, along with the raucous worship experience, evoked condemnation by the media and others. Undisturbed by the rigorous schedule or social convention, those desperate to experience Spirit baptism headed upstairs to the Upper Room, reminiscent of Acts 2. This multicultural, multi-ethnic melting pot of people included blacks, whites, immigrants, and Mexicans, who also played an early role in the revival, along with Swedish, Irish, English, Russian, Armenian, Chinese, and people of South Asian descent. These seekers would spend additional time, even days, in prayer and supplication for a divine touch.21

In 1907, at the request of C. P. Jones, Mason, D. J. Young, and J. A. Jeter, Mason went to the Azusa Street Revival to inquire into the new teaching on Spirit baptism.22 Initially, Mason was concerned about what he saw upon his visit. However, on the second night of his visit he received Spirit baptism, and later recalled the event with keen specificity.23 After this life changing experience, Mason stayed in Los Angeles to learn the doctrine taught by Seymour. After leaving Azusa, he did not go directly home, but visited Virginia where he preached the message of Pentecost and shared his testimony. He preached in churches and in the open air to crowds as large as 6,000, comprised of black and white supplicants who responded to his message of salvation, sanctification, and Spirit baptism. During this itinerant thrust, Mason even managed to
establish the C. H. Mason Memorial Church of God in Christ.\textsuperscript{24} It is this pneumatological experience that represents the final stage in Mason’s theological evolution— bringing together sanctification and power in a manner that produced spiritual and material deliverance. Mason’s Azusa Street experience had a profound impact on his ministry and theology.

According to Weaver, Seymour encouraged Mason and his team to experience a spiritual metamorphosis through Spirit baptism, and that tongues are a sign that follows the experience. Like Seymour, who was the son of slaves, so was Mason. Both experienced slave religion and were products of the Baptist church. In addition, Seymour believed that spiritually transformed African Americans would be supernaturally empowered to love their enemies and overcome racism. Mason also believed that this power would enable his people to overcome both racism and classism. Theologically, while C. P. Jones and the Holiness Movement envisioned the baptism of the Spirit as a “second blessing,” or a second work of grace, Seymour understood this experience as a third work of grace accompanied by glossolalia (i.e., speaking in tongues). What Seymour said publicly and in private counsel resonated with Mason. So impactful was the experience that Mason stayed at Azusa for five weeks to undoubtedly learn and absorb as much from Seymour and the revival as possible.\textsuperscript{25}

The Quest for Social Resurrection

Mason’s ministry began in 1893, after the optimistic Reconstruction (1867–1877) came to a grinding halt under the presidential administration of Rutherford B. Hayes. As a result, Southern revenge moved quickly to dismantle the political, economic, and social gains of former slaves and their progeny. The system of Jim Crow guaranteed that blacks would suffer persistently as a permanent underclass to be exploited and discarded. In this cultural milieu, slave religion offered Mason a framework through which to interpret the sweltering socio-economic violence perpetrated against his people without recourse. According to Raynard Smith, “In their desire to seek relief from their oppressive conditions, the slaves sought the comfort of their religion. Slave religion provided African Americans with the ability to interpret their world events from a liberationist perspective.”\textsuperscript{26}

Key to Mason’s strategy for spiritual uplift was the practice of slave religion. Emerging out of slavery, black Baptists in Mississippi began without ordained clergy,

\begin{itemize}
  \item Weaver, “Mark the Perfect Man,” 124–34.
  \item Raynard D. Smith, “Seeking the Just Society: Charles Harrison Mason’s Quest for Social Equality,” in With Signs Following, 97–99.
\end{itemize}
formal structures, or educational programming. This situation was complicated by conflicting religious culture, polity, and organization. For Mason and others, the goal was the transformation of slave religion by eliminating practices deemed heathen by evangelicals. In slave religion, the ring-shout captured the essence of the tradition. While there were various configurations, after the main service, the congregants would gather in a circle around several supplicants. Those who were encircled and those in the circle began clapping, singing, and praising God until the experience would heighten into a frenzy of praise, shouting, weeping, and laughing. The goal could be to convert supplicating sinners, while creating an atmosphere for an encounter with God. The essence of the ring-shout was reconstituted through more powerful charismatic, New Testament forms. From the early days of the COGIC, Elton Weaver notes this phenomenon:

Members who got physically sick but could not afford medical doctors were anointed with oil. Hands were placed on their bodies to heal them. Many who recovered testified that they had been healed by Mason’s touch. He used unconventional techniques like positive speaking to counter negative thinking, protest prayers, prophecy, laying on of hands, blessed oils and handkerchiefs, spiritual singing, praise music, dancing and shouting, speaking in tongues, and other cultural expressions as therapeutic release mechanisms. . . . Blacks who attended his church felt safe from danger, expressed themselves freely, and were always told they were important. Mason’s religions, techniques, and ideas of black progress and equality were a healing catharsis.

In the throes of social death, the Exodus became the paradigmatic narrative for black existence. Existential continuity and solidarity with the Israelites provided an interpretive lens through which to see God as Liberator. While embracing the liberation motif in Scripture, Mason was convinced that social equality was the divine intent. To complement a tempered social activism, Mason called for patient humility in prayer as a strategy of active non-violent resistance. He was convinced that through supplication, God would gradually, but certainly, ameliorate the situation. In effect, this provided the downtrodden with hope, while modulating black activism and the inevitable retaliation of angry whites. Mason’s sentiments are well represented in a piece published in the Truth, a paper produced earlier on during Mason’s affiliation and collaboration with C. P. Jones. The article was entitled, “A Message of Hope for the Black Man: How He May Get Thro [sic] This Awful Time.” While temperate on social activism, Mason holds out

29 Weaver, “Mark the Perfect Man,” 142–43.
hope for divine intervention. At this juncture, despite the lived realities of his people, he maintained a remarkable confidence in God’s ability and willingness to act on behalf of oppressed people as they persist in prayer:

We must not tire in prayer. We must groan and bear, grin and endure, love our enemies, bless them that curse us, do good to them that hate us, make the best of everything and be all the while looking to God. . . . The colored people need to do this that [sic] now, neither ought there be delay. Nineveh did it. Are we better than they? . . . O if our leaders would humbly consider this! We could then change sentiment in America. God would do it.31

Since Mason was convinced from Scripture that everyone came from one blood and was therefore equal before God, he strove to embody this conviction. Despite Jim Crow, Mason routinely fellowshipped with white believers, and accepted invitations to preach in white churches. Not only were whites welcome to full participation in the COGIC, but they also held leadership roles and even had a conference of white churches within the denomination. Other white ministers were allowed to use the COGIC charter for ministry credentialing and savings on railroad travel. When a group of white clergy left to establish the Assemblies of God, Mason attended the meeting and blessed them, although he was not formally invited. Alas, the power of segregation was too formidable to resist. In the 1930s the conference of white churches was dissolved, as it was believed that the whites were attempting to start a separate denomination. So ended the vision of an inclusive community that had been initially birthed by William Seymour.32

Local Church Structure

At the local level, church polity was ordered like a family. The pastor modeled the role of a father, and the church mother, the role of a mother. The church mother operated as the church disciplinarian, teacher, and enforcer of COGIC standards of conduct. On the other hand, the church father or pastor legitimized the mother’s instructions, by officially endorsing and reinforcing the teachings based on his pastoral authority. While the pastor and church mother were not normally married to each other, together they modeled gender relationships to a bedraggled people surrounded by instability from social, economic, and racial disparities.33 Many church mothers were spiritual trailblazers who preached on street corners, conducted revivals, and laid the foundations for new church plants. At times, their spiritual authority and charismatic leadership

rivaled the authority of the male leadership in the church.\textsuperscript{34} With church mothers as the primary enforcers of the sanctified life, Anthea Butler argues that in this context, COGIC women became the exemplars or models for the sanctified life.\textsuperscript{35} As a result, the proliferation and expression of sanctification as the fundamental COGIC distinctive would not have been possible without the tireless, selfless, and oftentimes unheralded labors of both named and unnamed COGIC women.

**Early Church Growth**

As a result of being surveilled by the government during World War I under suspicion of subverting the war efforts, Mason gained publicity as his name was bandied about in major newspapers. In the 1920s and 1930s his popularity grew as COGIC adherents who migrated from the South established COGIC churches in major urban centers. During these challenging economic times, Mason and his churches ministered to the needs of the poor by not only preaching the gospel, but by clothing, feeding, and healing them.\textsuperscript{36} Mason used his influence and holiness as a weapon of nonconformity to combat racial stereotypes and oppression. By the time of Mason’s death in 1961, holiness as a way of life had effectively challenged the religious status quo and dominant culture to carve out a vibrant, lived religious tradition, as the COGIC touted one million members worldwide.\textsuperscript{37} By reformulating and institutionalizing slave religion, Mason effectively radicalized and weaponized holiness as a lived religious form for higher spiritual, economic, and social development. Through the service, piety, morality, and modesty of COGIC women, sanctified living was effectively concretized as the religious distinctive of the movement.

**Social Context**

As unlikely as Mason and the COGIC story may be, understanding the brutal social milieu within which both emerged exposes the remarkable resilience and persistence of both the man and the movement buoyed by an exilic vitality. The end of Reconstruction in 1877 brought the end of black political and social progress. Southern Democrats regained control of government and implemented a brutal social order of submission and exploitation of black people. Sharecropping replaced slavery as the next iteration of systemic oppression and economic servitude.\textsuperscript{38} Fearing the machinations of

\textsuperscript{34} Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ*, 50–52.
\textsuperscript{35} Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ*, 76.
\textsuperscript{36} Weaver, “Mark the Perfect Man,” 243–50.
\textsuperscript{37} Weaver, “Mark the Perfect Man,” 288.
\textsuperscript{38} White, *The Rise of Respectability*, 12.
black holiness worshippers, whites reacted violently to all-night services like the ones promoted by Mason. Shootings and severe beatings were not unusual. Whites felt that their laborers were unable to adequately perform their duties after such events. In Holmes County, Mississippi, where Mason experienced much ministry success, blacks represented the majority, but were confined to farm and domestic work. From 1870 to 1897, in Holmes County, the illiteracy rate among blacks was dismal, ranging from 35 to 41 percent. At the same time, upwardly mobile blacks, striving for racial uplift, disdained the emotional displays by ignorant, uneducated religious fanatics, like Mason. In fact, the famous Ida B. Wells railed against uneducated and unseemly ministers, advocating for an educated clergy poised to teach morals and values. Contra Wells, according to Mason, it was this Baptist preoccupation with education, social, and political empowerment that at the same time neglected the spiritual needs of the people.

The confluence of these circumstances placed Mason’s followers in the social, economic, political, and religious margins, helping to forge a distinctive exilic identity. However, for these people, Mason’s ministry offered hope. Women could more readily participate in services with unrestrained emotive worship and testimonies of God’s grace. Uneducated men could gain respectability as spiritual leaders, despite being dismissed by the outside world. Those in need of healthcare, but who had no means to secure it, were attracted to Mason’s faith in God’s power to heal, which according to a myriad of testimonials, produced both material and cathartic results. Birthed in the Mississippi Delta, the COGIC was born in the crucible of lynch mobs, Klansman, and withering white oppression. At the end of the nineteenth century, thousands of blacks, men and women, had been lynched and burned. This helped to fuel the black migration to the North and West. Between 1910 and 1960, more than 4 million blacks fled the South in hopes of a better life. During this same time, the COGIC grew nationally and missionally into many of the urban centers populated by blacks. As in the South, the COGIC catered to the poor, which was part of its missional strategy and genius to socially uplift through Christian holiness. Early in the movement, the church enjoyed a strong contingent of white members. Initially known for its multicultural appeal, over time, the pressures of social stratification, along with the rise of white-led

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Pentecostal denominations, such as the Assemblies of God and the Foursquare Church, resulted in whites leaving the COGIC to attend predominantly white fellowships.43

**Church Culture**

Unlike other denominations at the time, the COGIC created a revolutionary ministry model and church culture that effectively leveraged the gifts, talents, resources, and passion of women to grow and sustain the church. Women were not only instrumental, but influential in helping to plant, build, and sustain ministry. Furthermore, the COGIC resisted acquiescing to white religious practices and standards. According to Clemmons, the confluence of a number of factors contributed to the work of women being essential to the organization.44 First, the holiness movement of which C. H. Mason had been a part featured women leading, preaching, and pastoring. This egalitarian spirit manifested at Azusa, carried over into the Pentecostal Movement, where both male and female leadership were common. Second, with the end of Reconstruction, blacks suffered intense economic exploitation with few paths for upward mobility. Recognizing education as the key to upward mobility, the black community focused on educating women. In turn, these women became catalysts for community activism and organizational support for the church. Third, during the women’s suffrage movement, African American men were more likely to support women having the right to vote than were white men. While these historical factors were crucial, Mason’s personal investment in female leadership was decisive.45

In slave tradition, there were two important principles that probably informed Mason’s commitment to women in ministry: (1) the spiritual equality of women, which promoted the use of their spiritual gifts; and (2) the shared responsibility of men and women in community and the field. While slave women functioned authoritatively in spiritual and civil spaces, they were still subject to male leadership. Furthermore, this model appears to be an adaptation of West African society, in which women wielded power in certain domains and had political representation. For example, in the “dual-sex” system, a man functioned as the overall head, while a woman was responsible for overseeing the concerns of the women. In Mason’s model, women could teach, but not hold the title of preacher or pastor. At the local level, the church mother was the head of women’s ministry under pastoral oversight. This model was perpetuated at the jurisdictional and national levels. The term “mother” was used for the head of women’s

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44 Clemmons, Bishop C. H. Mason and the Roots of the Church of God in Christ, 100–103.
ministry and faithful senior women who comprised the mothers board. When the pastor was absent, the church mother was in charge. By harnessing the power of women, maintaining slave worship, and the preeminence of prayer, Mason was able to effectively preserve and translate the spiritual power and essence of slave religion into a vibrant religious tradition.  

**Social Engagement**

As he traveled throughout the South, Mason would preach to diverse crowds. On many of these occasions, he used his pulpit to comment on racial injustice. Due to his renunciation of racism, Mason called for a national boycott of bus companies that offered poor treatment of black customers. In 1931, through his *Whole Truth* newsletter, he lauded the railroad for hiring blacks and providing better service to the black community. He encouraged his followers to support the railroads because in doing so, they were protecting thousands of jobs for African American workers. Mason supported the National Council of Negro Women founded by the renowned Mary McLeod Bethune. Bethune’s affiliation with Lillian Brooks Coffey, the second national head of the COGIC Women’s Department, gave COGIC women greater influence and exposure. Anthea Butler makes important connections between the social engagement of COGIC women in civic matters, and the overall shift of the tradition from a more interior focus on sanctification, to taking sanctification to the world. She notes that political and social realities of the 1940s and 1950s brought this shift. The work was couched in sanctified language to normalize the work. External alliances and relationships were pursued with the intent to transform the world through a sanctified lifestyle. This brought civic, social, and political capital to the movement, enabling expansion beyond its more parochial roots.

As Mason’s success grew in Memphis, Tennessee, so did his opposition. Progressive blacks strove to refine the black community to accommodate and win the approval of whites. Instead of refined liturgies and well-ordered services, Mason’s services were critiqued as fanatical and chaotic, unleashing uncouth “holy rollers.” Interpreting these events, progressive blacks saw Mason’s services, which catered to uncultured poor folks, as an impediment to social progress. Furthermore, it was believed that Mason’s other-worldly focus and message left him without a response to the pressing social issues of the day. Nevertheless, as oppressed people yearned for relief

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46 Israel, “Mothers Roberson and Coffey,” 105–110.
from their existence, the COGIC provided a cathartic approach to faith that attracted many. Mason’s spiritual demonstrations, including exorcising demons and interpreting unknown tongues, convinced other poor blacks, steeped in slave religion, that Mason exercised control over the spirit realm.50

During the Great Depression, challenging social and economic conditions created a space for the organization to grow, as poor blacks left their rural surroundings and migrated to Memphis. Soaring unemployment and squalid living conditions bred outbreaks of diseases such as typhoid. While progressives perceived Mason’s message as ethereal, the poor flocked to Mason for the promise of divine healing. In fact, Mason’s revivals during this period were known as “emergency rooms of the soul.”51 Testimonials of God’s healing power were abundant. In addition to healing services, the church started to teach the poor about health and hygiene. As alcoholism and domestic problems exploded among both blacks and whites, the COGIC holiness stance prohibited its members from consuming alcohol, while providing support to men looking to abandon their families. Because of these priorities, COGIC members were sought out by employers for being a dependable labor pool. Mason garnered support among whites, as they perceived his message as a helpful social control for blacks.52

**Mason’s Vision of Holiness as Wholeness**

For Mason, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts meant to live a “clean life.”53 Thus, clean living, while made possible by God’s grace and not human effort, was the responsibility of the believer to pursue. This clean life included freedom from vices such as smoking, drugs, sexual immorality, and some alleviation of social oppression. As an adept folk theologian, Mason drew out implications relevant to the embodied reality of his own dispossessed people.

His is not a repudiation of culture *in toto*, but a much needed “higher development,” informed by an exilic, non-Evangelican54 vision of holiness, as he never

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54 Evangelical (Evangelical faith + the priority of Americanism) is a term that I chose as it is readily confounded with the term Evangelicals, just as this belief system is often confused with true evangelical faith. *What is an Evangelical?* Following Mark Noll, evangelicalism is not a static construct, but a coalescing of movements, alliances, and influential individuals towards what has been discerned as “evangelical” trajectories or impulses stemming from the mid-eighteenth-century revivalism in Northern Europe and North America. According to historian David Bebbington, these include being born-again or a conversion experience, the ultimate authority of the Bible for faith and praxis, evangelism, activism, and the centrality of Christ’s work on the cross. Yet, these alone have not yielded a cohesive, well-defined sect of Christians (Mark Noll, *The Scandal*.
taught his followers to abandon culture or society. Instead, he taught that through Spirit baptism and holy pursuit, poor black folks could rise out of sin, poverty, relegation to the bottom of society, and lighten the scourge of racial injustice. Sanctification was the key for black folks to progress and gain strength as a people. To live holy in the context of this Holiness-Pentecostal context meant to overcome the things that hindered moral and natural progress. It divinely enabled self-control and moderation over passions and destructive patterns of behavior. Holy Spirit-empowered living would not only bring moral and material success but self-empowerment and self-reliance that were not dependent upon societal uplift.

In a message preached circa 1924, entitled, “God’s Oath,” Mason asserts the universality of sanctification and declared, “All are to be righteous.” His religious affections are circumscribed by holiness and sanctification. He references Isaiah 60:21, which states, “Thy people also shall be all righteous: they shall inherit the land for ever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I may be glorified.” In the context of Isaiah 60, the writer describes the future eschatological kingdom of God. During this time of enormous prosperity and spiritual transformation, those in Zion will all be holy and righteous. This will include all the nations of the world who have come to serve Yahweh. At this time, the promise to Abram, namely making him a great nation (Gen 12:2); the eternal bequeathing of the land to his descendants who will multiply as the dust of the earth (Gen 13:15–16); the multiplication of Abram’s descendants like the stars of heaven (Gen 15:5); the innumerable multiplication of

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56 Frederick L Ware, “Charles Harrison Mason as Sign Reader and Interpreter,” in With Signs Following: The Life and Ministry of Charles Harrison Mason, ed. Raynard Smith (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2015), 48–49.
Abram’s descendants (Gen 16:10); and the multiplication of his descendants as the sand of the sea with victory over their enemies (Gen 22:17), will all be completely and ultimately fulfilled. God’s oath to Abraham, referenced in Luke 1:73–75, will culminate in the eschatological kingdom where righteousness dwells. This end time reality is defined by the ethical righteousness and justice demanded by Yahweh but historically sporadic and elusive to the nation of Israel (cf. Isa 48:1–22; 59:1–21). In this passage, it is not just Israel, but the whole world that has embraced holiness and righteousness. Mason understands holiness as the path or highway to the fulfillment of God’s oath to Abraham and God’s redemptive purpose through Abraham.

Therefore, holiness and righteousness are the prerequisites for the fulfillment of God’s covenantal promises to Abraham. While this passage is eschatological, Mason effectively holds to a realized eschatology, where there is a clear “now and not yet” tension. As the saints await the eschaton, or the coming of the Lord, they enjoy a modicum of the blessing of Abraham, including peace, provision, power, healing, deliverance, and victory over natural and spiritual enemies. There is no strict promise/fulfillment hermeneutic established between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Mason’s canonical approach envisions all of Scripture as the inspired, infallible word of God and creates continuity between the testaments. While affirming material blessings, Mason’s sense of continuity emphasizes spiritual benefits, with both material and spiritual blessings being covenantal and conditional. In general, this promotes a cumulative effect where the New Testament revelation does not entirely supplant that of the Old Testament. The Old Testament themes regarding divine retribution upon the wicked, with material healing and prosperity for the righteous, are united with the spiritual blessings of the New Testament. This more capacious perspective makes ample room for both spiritual and material blessing and thereby provides a robust theological perspective suited for the situatedness and lived realities of Mason and his oppressed people. Scripture is not interpreted through some abstract philosophical lens, but in the context of their location and adopted in response to the complexity of their lived reality.

In this same sermon, it is significant that out of all the superlatives applied to believers in 1 Peter 2:9, Mason focuses on “holy nation.” In general, the focus of


58 This notion is captured in COGIC hymnody. An example is the congregation song entitled, “There’s A Highway to Heaven.” The chorus is insightful: “It’s a highway to Heaven/None can walk up there but the pure in heart/It’s a highway to heaven/I am walking up the King’s highway.” Clemmons, Bishop C. H. Mason and the Roots of the Church of God in Christ, 164.

holiness is to create a community in which the character of God as exemplified by
the people of God overflows in love for neighbor and alien residents as themselves.
By covenantal observance, Israel was to be a community sanctified by God’s gracious
righteousness. This was to enable their response to the divine call as a holy nation and as
a kingdom of priests, set aside as agents of redemptive grace in the world.\textsuperscript{60}
In living out their calling, not only did Mason and the COGIC create a distinct community and
way of being in the world that undermined the religious, social, and cultural power
structures of the day, but as noted, they created an alternate reality. In this alternate
universe, those who were marginalized in their natural location and vocation were
welcomed and invited to hold power, position, and prestige in their spiritual location
and vocation. In Zion, they thrived as bishops, pastors, church mothers, missionaries
(i.e., leading women), teachers, ministers, deacons, brothers, and sisters in a world
structured around the place where God’s presence dwelt.\textsuperscript{61} Indeed, despite the
downward pull of daily life, living this type of life created a self-understanding
maintained by the saints as a “peculiar people” (KJV), “a people for his own” (NET),
“God’s very own possession” (NLT), and “a people for his possession” (ESV).

\section*{COGIC Articles of Religion on Holiness as Wholeness}

An example of the holistic dimensions of sanctification is demonstrated in the narrative
of God’s deliverance of the Hebrew boys in Daniel 3. This text was included in the
article of religion on salvation because it demonstrates God’s power and ability to
deliver. “Salvation comes from God through Christ. He is our strong deliverance.
Daniel 3:17: ‘If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning
fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, Oh, King. By grace are we saved
through faith and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.’ Eph 2:8. ‘It comes to us

\textsuperscript{60} Burgess and McGee, \textit{Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements}, 430.

\textsuperscript{61} In redemptive history, Zion develops as the dwelling place of God. Here, God is in the midst of his
people. The Lord loved and chose Zion (Ps 78:68; 132:13) where his glorious presence rested (Ps 50:1, 2). His
fire was in Zion, where he was enthroned (Ps 9:11; 99:1, 2) and ruled over the nations (Isa 24:23). Zion as the
city of God is the object of all who thirst for the presence of God (Ps 42:1, 2; 63:1, 2). The Lord is the
strength of Zion. Therefore, it will never fall (Ps 46:5). All who hate Zion will be put to shame (Ps 129:5)
[Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988], 2202–2204). For Mason and the COGIC, the Zion motif
carried significant freight, and represented their affinity with the ancient people of God, and more
importantly, being a dwelling place for the presence of God. An excerpt from an early COGIC publication
concerning the annual convocation is instructive of their self-understanding: “Blow the Trumpet in Zion,
sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly. To sanctify means to set apart for God—a fast to consecrate ourselves for
the work He has given us to do, to humble ourselves before God, and to repent of all sin and disobedience in
our lives” (Butler, \textit{Women in the Church of God in Christ}, 72).
According to Weaver, Mason indeed saw deliverance encompassing spiritual and social liberation. In this context, the marginalized could overcome both personal and social encumbrances. Mason even contended that his own experience of sanctification produced his religious transformation. This is true because the gospel not only removes corruption, but regenerates a person, making all things new. This regeneration impacts both the spiritual and social trajectory of a person. In fact, sanctification held the promise of transformation for both individuals and communities. While salvation and sanctification may be theologically distinct, in the lived theology of the “sanctified church,” sanctification is the goal of salvation. The terms are almost interchangeable.

It is noteworthy that deliverance is connected to Daniel 3:17. In the third chapter of Daniel, three young Hebrew exiles, under the threat of death, refuse to worship the graven image of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. While resisting the seduction of state induced idolatry, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are exposed to the overwhelming power of the state via the king. They refuse to bow down and are cast into a blazing furnace that is stoked to be seven times hotter to express the king’s anger at their perceived insolence. Not only does God miraculously deliver them from the fiery furnace, but they emerge completely unscathed, and are also promoted to positions of prominence in Babylon.

Most importantly, Yahweh is glorified. Laws are even changed to revere Yahweh as a unique and powerful god. In addition, both the king and the state are transformed as a result of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s sanctification and commitment to Yahweh. Clearly, this passage holds promise for both spiritual and social transformation, as personal faithfulness in the face of persecution can lead to radical individual, communal, and political change through the power of God. Not only were the young men delivered from the “enemy” of death, but also experienced social uplift by being promoted to positions of prominence in Babylon. The exilic consciousness or being “in Babylon, but not of Babylon” created space for them to live and even serve in Babylon, while not succumbing to the pagan and godless practices of the king or the state. Furthermore, the concept of salvation is couched in the language of liberation or being made free, as stated below:

Salvation comes when a man believes the truth of the Gospel. “Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.” St. John 8:32 . . . “Because it is written, Be ye holy: for I am holy.” 1st Peter 1:16. Salvation is deliverance from dangers and enemies. In its ordinary use, the word is used to denote deliverance from sin through faith in Christ by the Power of God. The Gospel of Jesus Christ through

62 Jones and Bryant, Manual of the Church of God in Christ, 7.
63 Weaver, “Mark the Perfect Man,” 60.
faith in the believer is salvation from sin, shame, and disgrace. Ex. 14:13; Luke 1:69.64

Salvation demands believing the truth of the gospel and imitating the holiness of God. Using the language of deliverance, salvation is deliverance from dangers, enemies, sin, shame, and disgrace through faith in Christ by the power of God. The biblical references in support of this position are also instructive. Exodus 14:13 states, “And Moses said unto the people, Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will shew to you today: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen today, ye shall see them again no more forever.” According to theologian James Evans, African Americans read the Bible with “new eyes” informed by their oppression and desire for liberation. He argues that

The Exodus experience was an archetypal myth that, while drawn from Scripture, became the lens through which the Bible was read. . . . The Exodus account reflected in a striking way the experience of the slaves. It required no stretch of the imagination to see the trials of the Israelites as paralleling the trials of the slaves, Pharaoh and his army as oppressors, and Egyptland as the South.65

Following this train of thought, Raynard Smith contends that God as liberator emerged from the slaves’ reading of Exodus. This hermeneutic influenced Mason as he recognized that just as divine intervention ended slavery, the same would be required to bring racial justice and equality after slavery.66 Given this framework, for Mason and the COGIC, salvation expands beyond mere spiritual redemption and freedom from sin. It now includes social and political liberation and uplift. In Exodus 14:13, God will bring a permanent deliverance from every Pharaoh, the archetypal oppressor, and freedom from the associated shame and disgrace. In this context, oppression is inclusive of both material and spiritual encumbrances.

The last example comes from Luke 1:69, where the Scripture says, “And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.”67 This messianic reference to Jesus as “an horn of salvation” metaphorically speaks of his saving power, as horns in Scripture represent power (Ps 75:4–5, 10; 148:14; 2 Sam 22:3). So, the motifs of God’s salvific liberation and power are prominent themes in COGIC soteriology. The “new eyes” of Mason and the COGIC can see God’s liberating power not just in Exodus, but wherever it is to be found in Scripture, while manifesting in the lives of believers.

64 Jones and Bryant, Manual of the Church of God in Christ, 12.
66 Smith, “Seeking the Just Society,” 100.
67 Smith, “Seeking the Just Society,” 100.
Theological Summary

Through affiliations with men such as William Christian, C. P. Jones, and William J. Seymour, Mason cultivated a theological basis for racial equality, political and social uplift. While resisting cultural assimilation, COGIC leaders and members fought to improve the opportunities and promote racial and social uplift in their communities. COGIC scholar, Raynard Smith, contends that God as liberator emerged from the slaves’ reading of Exodus. This hermeneutic influenced Mason and others as they recognized that just as divine intervention ended slavery, the same would be required to bring racial justice and equality after slavery. Nevertheless, in this quest for economic, social, and political justice, the holiness ethic was never lost to the fierce urgency of self-preservation. To the contrary, holiness was the catalyst to upward mobility and dogged self-determination in worship and the world.

Furthermore, as demonstrated through the existential realities of this renewal movement, exilic existence is fraught with many challenges related to social marginality, including poverty. During the Great Migration, the COGIC focused expansion on the large, poor urban centers in the North and West, beyond the Jim Crow South. The movement reached a cross-section of people with the gospel. However, understanding that the socially sick, not the socially whole, were in need of a physician, evangelizing the poor and marginalized was strategic and fundamental to COGIC existence. Daniel Smith-Christopher argues that to be exilic is to be missional, as influence is not based on the wielding of worldly, even violent, power, but spiritual integrity. He argues that Scripture has too often been misread to confine social marginality to spiritual matters. Instead, diasporic people present real material and social alternatives over against the dominant cultural mythologies and ideologies. To this point, Cone’s argument for liberation speaks of God’s preference for the poor:

If we take seriously the objective reality of divine liberation as a precondition for reconciliation, then it becomes clear that God’s salvation is intended for the poor and the helpless, and it is identical with their liberation from oppression. That is why salvation is defined in political terms in the Old Testament and why the prophets take their stand on the side of the poor within the community of Israel. As we have demonstrated, throughout the biblical story, God stands with the weak and against the strong. Thus fellowship with God is made possible by God’s righteous activity in the world to set right the conditions for reconciliation. God’s setting right the conditions for divine-human fellowship is liberation, without

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68 Smith, “Seeking the Just Society,” 100.
which fellowship would be impossible. To speak of reconciliation apart from God’s liberating activity is to ignore the divine basis of the divine-human fellowship.71

Consistent with what Cone advocates, Mason took his stance “with the weak and against the strong.” This was not white against black, but with the powerless against the powerful. As has been discussed earlier, Mason gave voice, place, and space to the poor. His movement was built on poor people consigned to the social margins of society. According to Clemmons, “Mason always held in tension and balance the dynamic of holiness, spiritual encounter and spiritual empowerment, and prophetic Christian social consciousness.”72 Mason’s prophetic witness was not confined to spiritual matters. He greatly helped to meet the spiritual, relational, and material needs of people. While feeding, healing, and clothing the poor, he affirmed the poor by telling them that God loved them but was against their oppressor. He instructed his hearers that God would use natural disaster to devour the rich.73 By offering creative strategies for spiritual renewal and social equality, Mason’s and the COGIC’s impact and imprint upon black religious life in America are indelible. I submit that the COGIC posture of radicalizing holiness as the path to wholeness offers a rationale and a calculus that values both spiritual and embodied existence and is thereby worthy of consideration by the broader Christian tradition.

**Considerations for the Broader Church**

To this point, social location matters in the interpretive process and the creation of meaning, especially theological meaning. Consequently, the world, the word, and worship are experienced through a different set of lenses for those in exile and on the margins. Due to human creatureliness and fallenness, our knowledge is partial, perspectival, finite, and thus fallible, but not altogether skeptical. Although we are all located in bodies with features and frailties that shape our cognitive capabilities, culturally and linguistically, we are all located with ingrained narratives, culturally shaped values, and biases.74 This understanding should not only encourage interpretive humility, but hopefully promote the active engagement of Afro-Pentecostal and other Christian diasporas and their exilic members as teachers of diasporic strategies for the church to survive and thrive. In the opinion of this author, critical to evangelical renewal is a level of humility that hears and recognizes that the oppressed and exilic communities have something important to say about their lived religious experience.

73 Weaver, “Mark the Perfect Man,” 248–49.
74 Amos Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community*, 175–84.
Finally, the COGIC has demonstrated through a Pentecostal Holiness theology and a vibrant lived religion that holistic salvation is inclusive of every dimension of human existence. The testimony of Scripture is that salvation brings the *shalom* of God to every aspect of our lived experience (John 10:10). This is inclusive of the spiritual, socio-economic, emotional, and relational aspects of life. As discussed, these aspects of existence were not excluded from Mason’s or the COGIC’s pursuit of Christian holiness in every dimension of life.

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