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A Black Belt County, Georgia

(BY THE REV. W. H. HOLLOWAY)

Thomas county is situated in extreme southwest Georgia, within twenty miles of the northern boundary line of Florida. According to the census of 1900, the Negro population was 17,450. Among this population there are ninety-eight churches. These churches represent all denominations, Baptist predominating, there being only two Congregational and one Episcopal church. This number gives the actual churches which we have been able to learn of. It will be a safe estimate to affirm that about twenty per cent of this number may be added, of which we failed to learn.

This will give a church for every 150 persons, and here it might be said that, unlike much of our American population, the Negro is well-churched. It is his only institution and forms the center of his public life. He turns to it not only for his spiritual wants, but looks toward it as the center of his civilization. Here he learns the price of cotton or the date of the next circus; here is given the latest fashion plates or the announcement for candidates for justice of the peace. In fact, the white office seeker has long since learned that his campaign among the Negroes must be begun in the Negro church, and by a Negro preacher.

These ninety-eight institutions in Thomas county, like those of many other counties, have interesting histories. About half this number represent the churches whose beginning has been normal, the natural outgrowth of expansion. The other half's history is checkered. Their rise can almost invariably be traced to one or two methods. First, there is the proverbial "split." A careful study of the roll of membership in many of the churches will reveal the second method. Some brother is called to preach. This call is so thunderous, and the confidence that he can "make a better preach" than the present pastor so obtrusive, till he soon finds that there is little welcome in the sacred rostrum of the old church. He therefore takes his family and his

nearest relatives and moves away. Study the rolls, therefore, of many of the churches and you will find that they are largely family churches, and that the first preacher was some venerable patriarch. I think one will be perfectly safe in concluding that two-thirds of the growth in churches of the various denominations has been made in this way; and that little has been accomplished by the church executives as the result of direct effort at church extension.

It will be readily seen that churches having their origin in this way merely duplicate the old institution; often it is not a creditable duplicate. I know of no rural church in Thomas county whose inception had the careful nursing of an educated, cultured leader. Others have labored and we have entered into their labors. The largest churches and the biggest preachers in Thomas county do little home missionary work and organize no new churches.

The result, therefore, must necessarily be a constant propagation of the old regime. Standards of slavery time and directly after still prevail. It is impossible that it should be otherwise. Like begets like.

The supreme element in the old system was emotionalism, and, while we hate to confess it, truth demands that we affirm it as the predominating element today. The church which does not have its shouting, the church which does not measure the abilities of a preacher by the "rousement" of his sermons, and indeed which does not tacitly demand of its minister the shout-producing discourse, is an exception to the rule. This is true of the towns as well as the country. Of course we all understand that it has always occupied first place in the worship of the Negro church; it is a heritage of the past. In the absence of clearly defined doctrines, the great shout, accompanied with weird cries and shrieks and contortions and followed by a multi-varied "experience" which takes the candidate through the most heart-rending scenes—this today in Thomas county is accepted by the majority of the churches as unmistakable evidence of regeneration.

Now, the preachers who have had some advantages of study, who have come into contact with the learning of the schools, and have in their intelligence gotten above the ignorant preacher of the country, know that the old order of things is wrong. Talk with them and they all confess it. Confront them with the truth that it prevails in their own churches, and their reply puts the question upon the basis of supply and demand. They say: "My people have been used to it, my predecessor was thought to be the embodiment of perfection, and this was his standard; therefore, if I would succeed, if I would hold my people, I must supply this demand; and if I would make the record of my success more enduring than my predecessor I must supply this demand in greater quantities and more acceptable quality than he."

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The spirit of rivalry also has much to do with the continuance of this emotional feature. Two churches in the same community—one presided over by an educated minister, with lofty ideals and correct standards, and to whose better nature the old order is repulsive, and the other presided over by a typical representative of the old school: the educated minister will often preach unseen and waste his eloquence of the desert air. He soon finds that not only is his church losing its pristine prominence, not only is his own reputation as a representative clergyman waning, but that there is soon a very perceptible diminution in the loaves and fishes. It is a problem and it is forcing young preachers who would otherwise do good work in the ministry into the old rut which, while their better natures condemn it, they have not the power to resist. Any system which robs the man of his individuality and makes him less than a man, finds itself early bereft of its power for the highest service. Another effect is, that it is driving out of the work the young men of ability whom the work most needs. I know one promising young man in my county who is driven to desperation and vows, for none other cause than this of which we have been speaking, that he will leave the work at the next annual conference. And, too, the young men in our schools turn their faces toward other vocations.

Under this old system, which prevails in Thomas county, the question arises, is the moral condition of the people being raised?

Of the blanks which we had returned, while some said openly “No,” the majority left the question in doubt.

We would conclude, however, that the moral standard of the Negroes in Thomas county is being bettered; but I seriously raise the question whether the church is the great factor in this improvement. Speaking especially now of the towns, whose condition has been studied more carefully and at first hand, the conclusion is almost inevitable that there are other factors equally potent, doubtless more so, than the church.

This question of better morals must affect not so much the older generation, who still occupy a large place in the church, as it does the newer and younger people.

If this is true, then we find certain conditions in many of the churches which give credence to the foregoing assertion.

I beg you to note that I am giving what is true of the majority of the churches of Thomas county as insinuated in the answers to the questions sent out, supplemented by my own knowledge upon the subject.

The first condition I would speak of is the relation of the church to the popular amusements. The supreme end of the church is spiritual: the bringing of the individual up to the higher ideals as exemplified in the life and teachings of Christ. When, therefore, the institution subordinates, even for a moment, this supreme end

to a lower one, there can but be a perceptible lessening of the moral force of the institution. Now this is just what the church is doing. They vie with each other so strongly, the rivalry in new inventions and performances is so intense, till it has lead them into the realm of the questionable.

To a great extent the church has so entered into this business that the young people look to it more as a bureau whose object is to provide amusement than they do toward it as a holy institution whose high privilege it is to deal with eternal realities and interpret the weightier matters of the law.

Inordinate rivalries among the denomination is another condition. Rivalry is no mean motive and to its stimulating influence is traceable much of the world's progress; but when the church, in its ambition to excel, stoops to petty meannesses, then she need not complain if her moral dynamic becomes a doubtful quantity. We shall not mention examples here, for this is a condition which prevails in other churches than the Negro's.

The prominent place in church circles taken by characters whose lives in the community are a constant contradiction to the creed prescribed to when they entered the church, is another condition which lessens the moral force of the church.

True, as a race, we have had neither time nor training to establish that caste which marks the higher development in the moral code, and whose logical sequence is closer moral discrimination and segregation; yet the church, whose very motto is separation from the world, should have itself on record as being the most discriminating in this respect.

The fact is, however, that some of the churches are too lax in this matter. It is true in Thomas county that some of the secret societies, especially among women, are more vigilant as to their constituencies than the church. I am personally acquainted with people who occupy first place in all the affairs in the church whose applications to the societies have been repeatedly turned down.

The fact that their monied connections and their popularity are sufficient guarantees for the success of any church enterprise, seem to make their fitness for church membership unquestioned. Their lives may be black but no notice is paid to it.

Now what is the effect of all this? Nothing other than that the young people, and the older people who do their own thinking, lose regard for the moral standards of the church. The preacher may discourse frequently on purity of life, but if he shuts his eyes to the impurity of some of his own members, and seems to insist that they be placed at the forefront of the church's activities, then his precepts become sounding brass and tinkling cymbals; and his example, weightier by far than his precepts, becomes a barrier to the highest usefulness of his institution as a moulder of the community's morality.

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Another condition which gives rise to our assertion that the church is not exercising its highest moral influence, is seen in its lax business methods. Let us give one example, which we dare assert is true of nine-tenths of the churches in Thomas county and in the South: A contract is made with every incoming minister. They promise him a stipulated sum for his year's service and when the year ends, he goes to conference with only about two-thirds of the pledge fulfilled. If he is sent back to the same field, the second year finds the church still deeper on the debit side of the ledger. If he is sent to another field the debt is considered settled, a new contract is made with the new preacher, and the same form is gone through.

As far as I have been able to learn fully 75 percent of the churches in the county are in debt to their former preachers, and what is worse, there seems never to arise a question as to the honesty of the religious body.

Now, this may seem a too minute selection of ecclesiastical faults, but when it is remembered that the simple virtues of honesty, truthfulness, and business promptness are the qualities most needed by the race, then that institution which represents the embodiment of all that is perfect in its precepts loses its moral force by the laxity of its example, and this laxity which is characteristic of the body must find counterpart in the individuals who compose the body.

We ventured the assertion that the church in this county is not too potent a factor in the moral betterment of the race; and we went further and raised the question as to whether there were not other factors equally potent, perhaps more so than the church.

You will notice that I have not said that the church is doing nothing toward this betterment. Some of them are, and some of the denominations more than others; but what we are talking about is the weight of the combined influence of all the churches; and we still claim that its power is small, smaller to be sure than it should be, when it has such exalted example of all that is good to draw from in the enforcement of its teachings.

We have been able to learn of about 120 preachers in the county. Of this number fully seventy-five are either ordained or licensed. The most of their names appear in the minutes of the various denominations. Now this number may be almost doubled if we search for all those who call themselves preachers and fill the function of interpreters of the word of God. This number moulds as great a sentiment for or against the church as those who hold license.

You will get some idea of the vast host who belong to this class when I tell you that the records of the last conference of the Southwest Georgia District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church show that there were forty-three applicants for admission to the conference. Note that this is only one of the four or five conferences

of this church in the state. Be it said to the lasting credit of the conference that it in unmistakable terms put the stamp of condemnation upon the presumption of about thirty-five of them and sent them back to their homes disappointed men. And yet, while it sent them back home unadmitted, it did not make them less determined to preach, for in their several communities you will find them still exercising themselves in the holy calling.

Now of this vast number, so far as I have been able to learn, only four of them hold diplomas from any institution giving record of previous fitness. Only about one percent of them can point to any considerable time spent in school.

The course of study prescribed in the African Methodist Episcopal Church has helped some, but after all this, it can be truthfully said that for real fitness, fitness in the truest sense of the word, there is little to be found among the ministers of the county.

Putting this another way is to say, that the majority of the ministers are unlearned or ignorant men, ignorant in the sense of fitness for leadership; for, learned or unlearned, the Negro preacher is today the leader of the race. If they are ignorant, then this ignorance manifests itself in any number of ways:

1st. His home life as a general rule is on no higher level than that of his neighbor. In most cases he married before he began to preach and his wife is ignorant. Here, then, is no toning example for the community which he serves. I beg you to note that the pulpit is not the only place where the minister is to do powerful and eloquent preaching.

2d. In morality he has much to learn. Morality as it affects: (1) Temperance; (2) debt paying and business honesty; (3) sexual morality.

I have presented a gloomy picture. I have one consolation, however, that it is true, if it is black.

Your criticism will be that I have not brightened the picture a particle. But your conclusion will be erroneous if you decide that there is no brightness in it.

First. The greatest hope lies in the young people who go out to these darkened places and sacrifice themselves for the betterment of the people. Thomas county is dotted with these young people from the schools.

Second. Young men are seeing the need and are responding to it by entering the ministry.

Third. In every community there is a body of older men, men indeed of the old school; but during the years their ideas of the function of the church, the qualifications and requirements of the minister have all undergone a very radical change. They are thoroughly disgusted with the old order of things and besides withdrawing their own support they give their children no encouragement to support it.

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Fourth. There is also a strong tendency in my county toward the newer denominations. This tendency will have two results: These newer denominations will continue to draw the young people and will continue to push the crusade for religious education. Second, this growth and popularity of the newer denominations will stimulate the older ones to greater efforts and to more intelligent worship.

In these and other ways the race is gradually coming out of the darkness into the light, and the next generation will see all of the denominations of the South exerting a stronger religious and moral influence upon the Negro than they are today doing.

Statistics of Three Churches, Thomas County

	C.M.E	A.M.E	Episcopal
Membership	120	72	149
Active Membership	110	28	22
Value of Church.....	\$800.00	\$700.00	\$2,500.00
Expenses			
Salaries	240.00	259.10	.....
On debt .....	.00	.00	.....
Running expenses.....	12.00	23.80	.....
Charity, etc.....	2.00	4.90	.....
Missions.....	2.50	6.00	.....
Support of connection .	50.00	31.00	.....
Other expenses	10.00	3.20	.....
Total.....	\$316.50	\$328.00	.....

Negro Baptist Churches, Thomas County, Ga.

NAME.	Membership.		Value of Church Property.	
	1901.	1902.	1901.	1902.
Spring Hill	95	95	\$ 750	\$ 500
St. Mary.....	17	25	250	125
Evergreen.....	28	28	100	200
Ocklochnee.....	125	80	100	150
St.Paul.....	161	157	1,000	150
N.O. Grove	240	250	1,000	1,500
Centennial	35	30	322	275
Bethel	329	325	500	350
Paradise.....	51	54	100	100
Walnut Hill	109	112	.....	.....
New Hope.....	.....	38	.....	75
Aucilla	202	169	1,000	500
Centenary	150	159	.....	100
A.B.C., Thomasville				
.....	500	500	10,000	12,000

NAME.	Membership.		Value of Church Property.	
Richland.....	38	37	150	200
Mt. Pilgrim	43	48	.....	200
Friendship.....	150	140	.....	200
Antioch	83	75	85	100
St. Luke.....	10	15	100	100
Beulah Road	13	14	100	100
Piney Grove.....	65	70	500	250
Silver Hill.....	87	88	250	250
Mt. Olive.....	80	80	350	380
Mt. Calvary.....	113	68	600	600
Magnolia.....	16	19	30	600
Shady Grove	77	65	700	250
Mt. Moriah	50	44	1,500	300
Midway	50	48	250	300
Rebecca .....	.....	38	.....	150
County Line.....	30	30	200	200
Oaky Grove	19	22	50	50
Turner Grove.....	.....	12	.....	75
Jerusalem	120	.....	150	...
Total.....	3,086	3,035	\$17,465	\$20,320

Opinions of Intelligent Colored Laymen on Thomas County Churches

1. Condition of the churches.

"Well attended." "More centers for amusement than for worship." "Little spiritual life." "Half are in debt." "Not what they should be." "Lack competent leaders."

2. Influence of Churches.

"Influence good." "Influence bad." "Good on the whole." "Ten percent of the membership is honest, pure, and upright." "Influence is bad, but there are some earnest folks."

3. Are the ministers good?

"No." "Out of ten, three are sexually immoral, one drinks, three are careless in money matters." "Weak in morals." "One is sexually impure and frequents disreputable places." "Lack intellect." "They fairly represent those whom they lead." "Some of them are good men."

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4. Charity work.

"Nine-tenths believe there is but one object of charity—the minister; give all you've got to the minister and if any one is sick or in prison, give him one-half of what is left."

5. The young people.

"The church amuses the young people, and they pay for the amusement." "Young people join slowly." "Church support comes largely from non-members."

6. Are moral standards being raised?

"Cannot say; much laxity." "Standard never lower." "Raised by presence of a score or more of graduates of city schools." "Being raised." "In six years I note a change for the better." "Reaching high moral standards." "In some cases standards are being raised, in others, not." "There are fewer separations of man and wife, and fewer illegitimate children."