

# Charles Harrison Mason

## A Sanctified Life

1864 – 1961

Spiritual Leader

Founding Bishop

Voice for Peace

Civil Rights Advocate



*C.H. Mason, Bishop and Founder, Church of God in Christ (c. 1930).*



# Visions of the Sacred



*Deacons' corner in the Church of God in Christ, Washington, D.C. Photo by Gordon Parks, November 1942.*

What does it mean for someone or something to be “holy” or “sanctified”?

When people gather to worship God, what kinds of things do they do?

How are the worship styles of different religions distinct? What do they have in common?

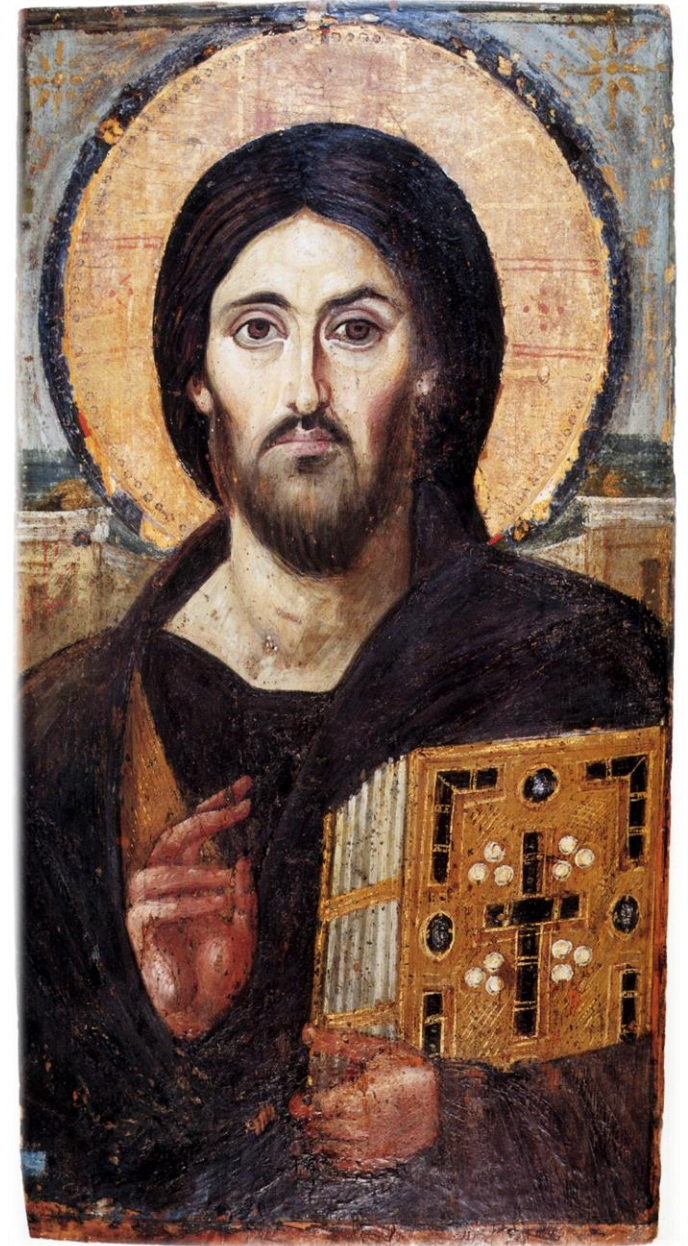
What roles does faith often play in a person's life? Can you think of some examples, either from history or your personal experience?

# Visions of the Sacred

The term “culture” — the values, customs, and works of art that are particular to a group of people — inevitably includes religious and spiritual beliefs.

The word “culture” itself is derived from the Latin word *cultus*, which can refer to both the act of tilling a field to make crops grow (“cultivation”) and an act of reverence, devotion, or worship.

*The Christ Pantocrator, a 6th-century icon at St. Catherine's Monastery in Sinai, Egypt.*





# Visions of the Sacred



Our ideas about the sacred are shaped by the religious and philosophical traditions in which we are raised and by the beliefs of the communities in which we live. It's very difficult to tell the story of humanity without also telling the story of faith and religion.

So, any picture of American culture generally, or Black American culture specifically, that doesn't include religion will be woefully incomplete.

*Annunciation, Ethiopien d'Abbadie 105, fol. 5, 15th century, Tigray, Ethiopia.*

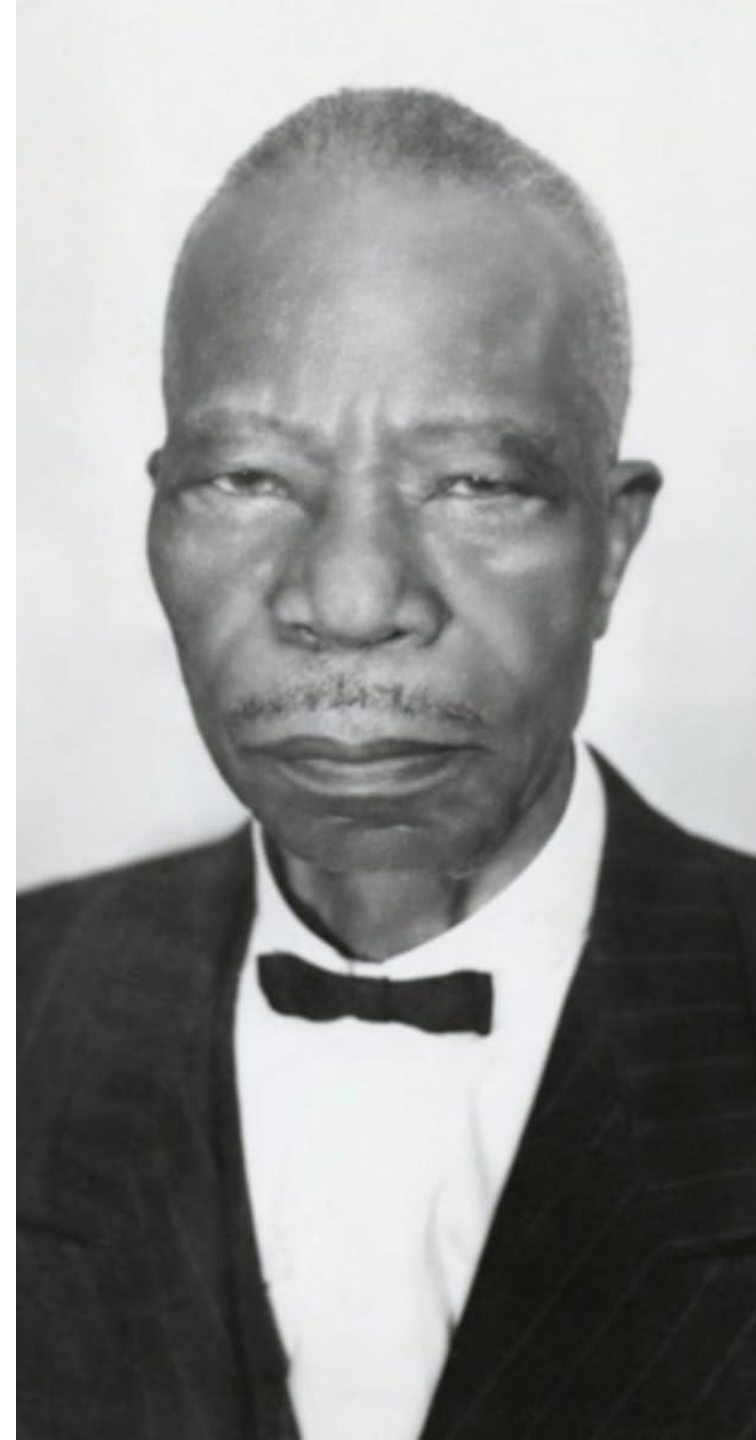


# Visions of the Sacred

One transformative Black American religious leader was Bishop Charles Harrison Mason (1864-1961), founder of the Church of God in Christ (COGIC).

The Christian movement he helped to lead and promote inspired millions of Black Americans — and Americans of all races — to pursue personal holiness, revive and expand religious institutions, and work for peace and justice.

*Bishop Charles Harrison Mason, c. 1950s.*





# The Church of God in Christ



*Seal of the Church of God in Christ*

C.H. Mason founded COGIC in 1907, after years of preaching and **evangelizing** as part of the growing charismatic Christian movement that became known as Pentecostalism.

While COGIC and most of the wider Pentecostal movement believe in the **tenants** of mainstream, orthodox Christianity, some of its teachings and practices are distinctive.





# Baptism of the Holy Ghost

Most prominently, COGIC believes in the **Baptism** of the Holy Ghost (or Spirit), an experience that takes place after conversion in which a sanctified person is filled with the Holy Ghost and begins **speaking in tongues** (languages) unknown to them.

This is seen as a continuation of what the Apostles and other early Christians experienced according to the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:4) and letters of the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 12:28; 14:2) in the Bible.

*“Pentecost” by Doménikos Theotokópoulos,  
known as “El Greco,” 1596.*



# A Spirited Form of Worship



*John Wesley, portrait by  
Nathaniel Hone, 1766.*

This belief, combined with influences from African traditions and the Holiness Movement that grew out of the preaching of British evangelist John Wesley (1703-1791), leads to an exuberant, open-ended style of worship.

During a COGIC service, believers may dance to spirited music, lift their hands in praise, kneel or lay prostrate on the floor, and spontaneously testify to the blessings from God they experience in their lives.





# From Rural Revival to Global Church

COGIC began with a dozen congregations in the rural South. Today, COGIC is the second-largest historically-Black church in the United States.

Globally, COGIC claims millions of members in over 13,000 congregations in more than 60 countries in North America, South America, Africa, Asia, and Europe.

*2024 service inside Mason Temple, the church's headquarters in Memphis, TN. The "Sunshine Band" is a youth ministry established in 1911.*





# From Rural Revival to Global Church



*“Camp meeting” revival prayer service in the woods. Harper’s Weekly, 1872.*

But the deeper history of COGIC begins long before its founding, even before the birth of its founder.

It emerged from the diverse world of the Black Church, rooted in the many spiritual traditions Africans brought to North America during the horrors of the slave trade, and in the Christian faith they encountered there and eventually embraced.



# The “Black Church” in America



*Portrait of  
Dr. Carter G. Woodson, 1915.*

Carter G. Woodson (1875-1950), one of the earliest and most influential historians of Black America, identified the “Negro Church” as the central force in Black American life and culture.

Following Woodson’s lead, historians and social scientists still refer to the “Black Church” as a conventional and useful **shorthand** for the variety of historically-Black Protestant churches (or **denominations**) that emerged from the ordeals of slavery.





# The “Black Church” in America



The "Black Church" includes offshoots of British and European churches, like the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church, which began as an extension of the Methodist movement. Other denominations were founded independently by Black religious leaders.

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, these churches grew out of a desire to serve the distinct spiritual needs of Black Christians, especially the enslaved, and as a response to racial discrimination and segregation within White-led churches.

*Stained glass window of Rev. Absalom Jones, Methodist founder of the Free African Society. St. George Episcopal Church; Dayton, OH.*



# The “Black Church” in America

Throughout its history, the Black Church has been the central institution of what sociologist E. Franklin Frazier called the “nation within a nation” — a parallel society of Black-led schools, financial institutions, business districts, cultural arenas, and civic organizations that served Black Americans during slavery and segregation.

The most consequential Black mass movements, from Abolitionism to Civil Rights, were organized in and around the Black Church.



Download “The Origins of the Black Church” to read more about the context for this lesson.



*Engraving of Rev.  
Richard Allen, 1823.  
Library Company of  
Philadelphia.*



# Charles Harrison Mason

C.H. Mason's remarkable life saw radical changes in America — many of which he helped bring to **fruition**. Born to formerly enslaved parents in 1864, while the Civil War still raged, he died in 1961, when the Civil Rights movement was transforming life in the South and beyond.

From his earliest spiritual awakening to his passing at age 97, Mason was dedicated to the pursuit of holiness: in his personal life, in the life of the congregations he pastored, and in the life of the American nation itself.

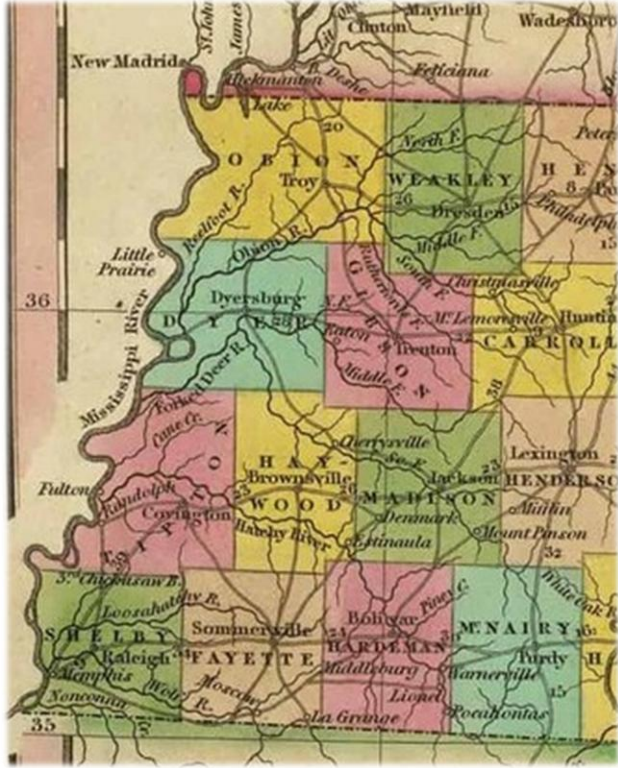
*Statue of Mason outside of Mason Temple in Memphis, TN.*







# Early Life and Conversion



*1833 map of Tennessee;  
Shelby County is in the  
southwest corner, bordering  
Arkansas and Mississippi.*

Mason was born to sharecroppers Jerry and Eliza Mason in rural Shelby County, Tennessee. Jerry and Eliza were ex-slaves and neither received any formal education.

His family worshipped in the Black Baptist tradition, where prayers for liberation from slavery to sin often mixed with sermons about the hope for political freedom in a world rife with racial injustice.

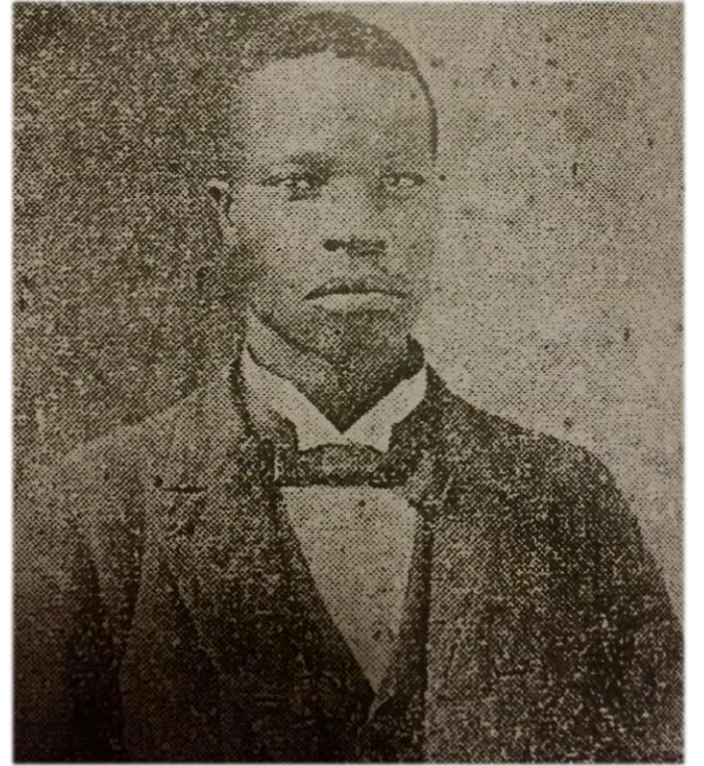
Eliza was known to be especially spiritual. Her devotion to God served as a model for Mason's own personal **piety** as he grew up.



# Early Life and Conversion

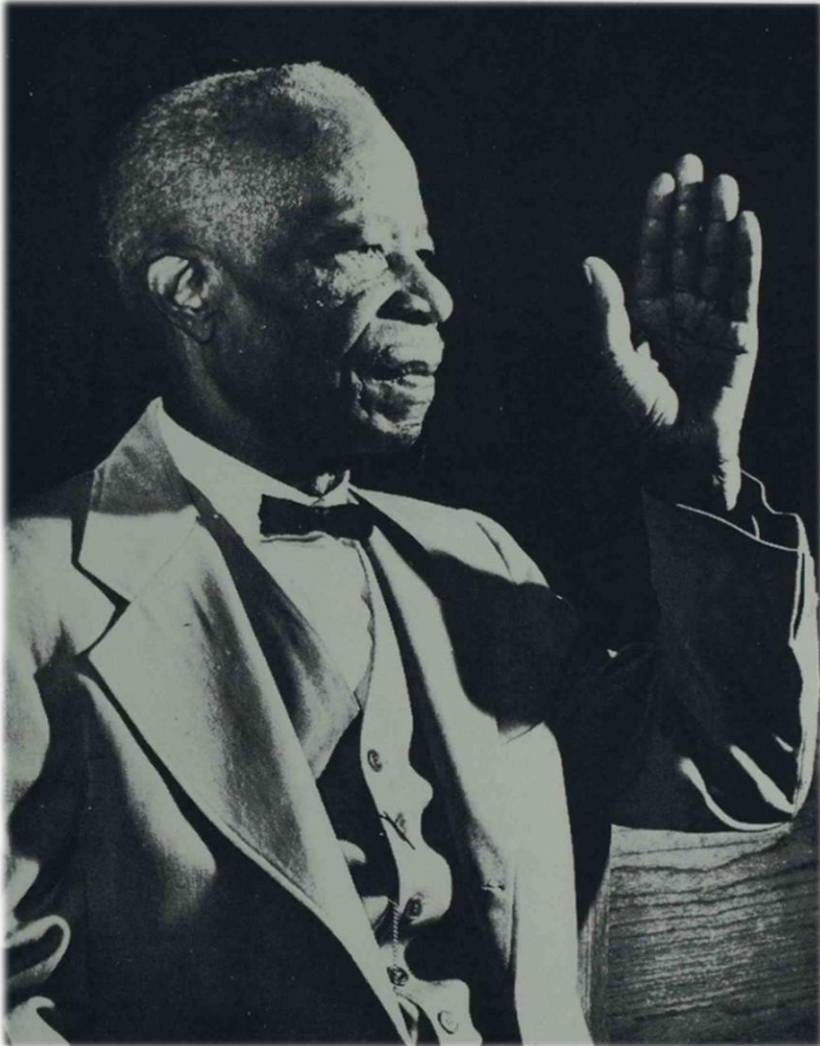
In 1878, when Mason was a teenager, an **epidemic** of yellow fever swept through the South, forcing the Mason family to flee west to Arkansas. But they could not escape the disease; Jerry was among its more than 20,000 victims that year.

A few years later, Mason himself was struck by **tuberculosis**. Few meaningful healthcare options were available to anyone in 1880, much less impoverished Black people. But his mother and family prayed over Mason, and on September 5, he suddenly recovered from his illness.



*Young C.H. Mason; date unknown, likely 1890s.*

# Early Life and Conversion



Mason praised God for what he considered a miraculous healing and resolved to dedicate his life to serving Him.

The young Mason was baptized at Mount Olive Missionary Baptist Church by his half-brother, Rev. Israel S. Nelson, and begin to preach as a **lay** minister.

*C.H. Mason offering a blessing in this COGIC portrait from the later years of his decades-long ministry, c. 1950s.*





# Rough Road to Ministry

Around 1890, Mason received his license to minister from Mount Gale Missionary Baptist Church in Preston, Arkansas.

But the next few years were painful.

In 1891, he married a woman named Alice Sexton, only to divorce in 1893.

His young wife had refused to adapt to the demands of life in ministry. Mason was ashamed of his inability to live the values he preached and fell into a period of depression.

But he persevered, refusing to set aside a **vocation** he believed came from God.



*Mason, as pictured in a church biography in 1920.*



# Rough Road to Ministry



*Arkansas Baptist College as it stands today.*

Despite his lack of formal education, Mason had learned to read and write as a child and had a deep knowledge of the Bible.

He enrolled at Arkansas Baptist College, founded in 1884 to train Black ministers, in November 1893.

After three months, Mason quit, unimpressed by what he saw as the insufficiently spiritual atmosphere and curriculum.



# Rough Road to Ministry

“The Lord showed me that there was no salvation in schools or colleges, for the way they conducted themselves grieved my soul,” he later said.

“I packed my books, arose, and bade them a final farewell to follow Jesus, with the Bible as my sacred guide.”

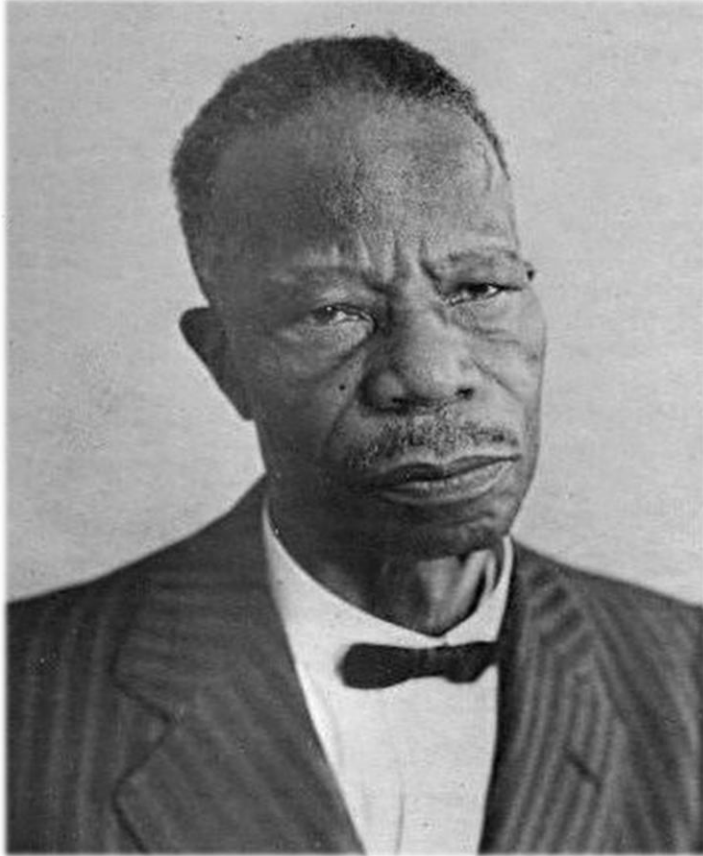
*Mason holding a Bible later in life, c. 1940s.*







# Rough Road to Ministry



*C.H. Mason, c. 1950s.*

Having rejected the conventional path, Mason travelled throughout the South preaching the doctrine of sanctification.

He had come to believe that the Baptist view of salvation — sometimes summarized as “once saved, always saved” — was too lax and un-Biblical.

Mason argued that only a life of personal holiness, including abstinence from sex outside of marriage, alcohol, smoking, gambling, and all other sins and vices, could ensure a Christian’s salvation.

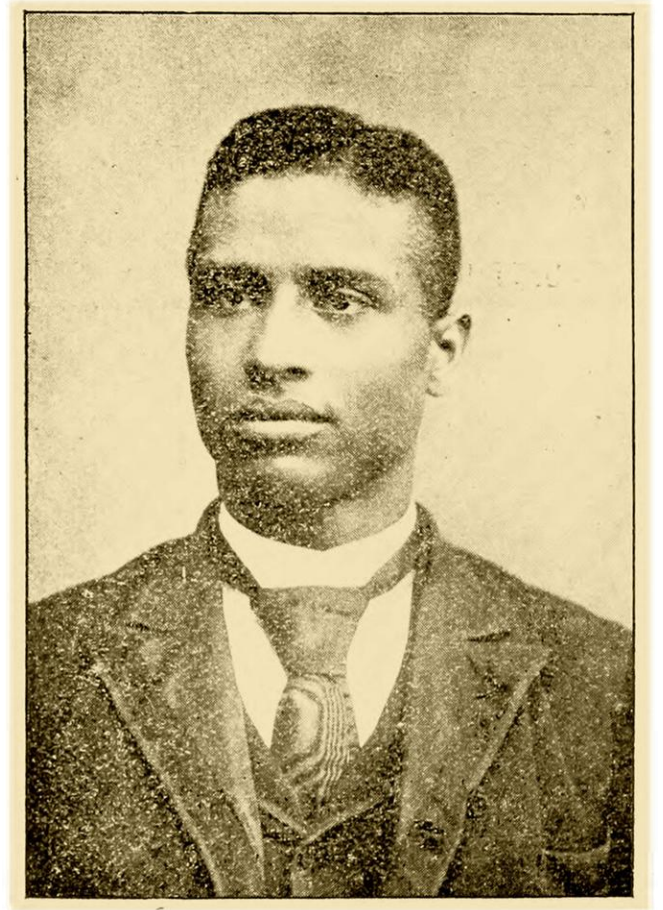


# Preaching and Planting Churches

This rigorous focus on personal holiness did not sit well with many Baptists, and Mason often faced opposition when he preached.

But his preaching also attracted those who were disillusioned with mainstream church life; Mason drew mixed-race crowds of thousands.

In 1895 he met Charles Price Jones, another Baptist minister who shared Mason's views on holiness and sanctification.



*Charles Price Jones, 1898.*



# Preaching and Planting Churches

The two men preached to meetings in Lexington, Mississippi, in 1897, first at the home of a supporter, then in an abandoned cotton gin house.

This building hosted large, multiracial services and revival meetings, and became the first Church of God in Christ.

Though it predates the formal founding of the denomination by several years, St. Paul COGIC in Lexington is still today known as the COGIC “mother church.”



*“Mother Church”  
sign on St. Paul  
COGIC in  
Lexington, MS.*





# Preaching and Planting Churches

In the early 20th century, Mason and Jones expanded their network of like-minded preachers and congregations, preaching the doctrine of holiness and sanctification. Mason put particular emphasis on signs, healings, and miracles that many believed accompanied these early COGIC services.

By 1904, he pastored four congregations: one in Lexington; two in Memphis, Tennessee; and one in Conway, Arkansas.

In 1905, Mason remarried, happily this time, to Lelia Washington. They went on to have nine children together.



*Lelia W. Mason, the  
“First Lady” of  
COGIC, c. 1920s.*



# The Azusa Street Revival

In 1906, far away in Los Angeles, California, a new religious movement was taking shape that would transform Mason's life and rupture his relationship with Jones and other leaders of the growing Church of God in Christ.

A new offshoot of the holiness movement, Pentecostalism, was being born — one that would spread like wildfire throughout the Christian world in the twentieth century and continues to grow in the present day.



*Azusa Street Apostolic Faith Mission in downtown Los Angeles, c. 1910.*



# The Azusa Street Revival

A Black minister from Louisiana, William J. Seymour, had come to Los Angeles on what was supposed to be a one-month speaking engagement.

While Seymour led a racially integrated prayer service in the home of a supporter, some attendees began shouting praises to God and speaking in unknown languages. Others soon followed.

*William J. Seymour during the revival.*



Download “Tongues of Fire” to find out more about the Azusa Street Revival and its global impact.







# The Azusa Street Revival



*Leaders of the Azusa Street revival, c. 1908. Seymour is seated center right, with his future wife Jennie Evans standing third from left.*

News of these spiritual experiences spread throughout L.A., and Seymour and his supporters soon set up a revival in an abandoned building on Azusa Street.

Throughout the following decade, huge revival meetings of Black, White, and Latino worshippers filled the Azusa Street hall and engaged in **ecstatic** forms of prayer and worship, including speaking in tongues.



# West to Los Angeles

Word of the revival spread throughout the nation, and in 1907 Jones and the other elders sent Mason to investigate.

Mason stayed in Los Angeles about six weeks and emerged convinced that the Holy Ghost was truly at work in the revival.

He believed he had received the Baptism of the Holy Ghost and spoken in tongues as a sign of the presence of God's glory in him.

*Historical marker on Azusa Street, 2023.*





# West to Los Angeles

Mason later described his experience:

“The Spirit came upon the saints and upon me ... there came a light which enveloped my entire being above the brightness of the sun.

When I opened my mouth to say Glory, a flame touched my tongue which ran down me. My language changed and no word could I speak in my own tongue.”

*Mason with a group of COGIC members, c. 1950s.*







# Splitting Over the Spirit

But when Mason returned to the South with his testimony, Jones and the other elders rejected the new teaching. After over a decade of preaching together, Mason and Jones split, and Mason struck out on his own to preach the Baptism of the Holy Ghost.

Mason gathered eleven sympathetic pastors and founded the first Pentecostal General Assembly of COGIC. After a contentious legal battle with Jones, Mason won the rights to the name “Church of God in Christ.”



*Mason with some unusual natural objects he collected throughout his life and used as props and illustrations in preaching, c. 1930s.*



# Growth and Controversy



*Mason blessing a crowd, c. 1940s.*

Mason spent the next decade building up COGIC from its headquarters in Memphis.

Under his leadership, the church established Sunday schools, youth ministries, an extensive Women's Department, and global missionary efforts.

But when the US entered WWI in 1917, Mason stirred up controversy by advocating for pacifism and telling young men to seek **conscientious objector** status.

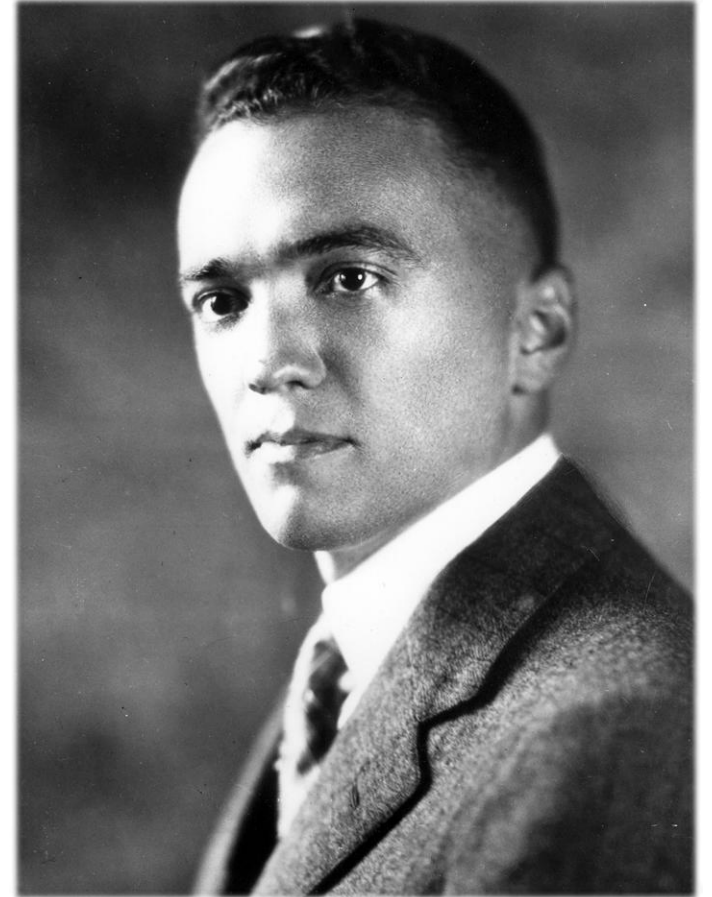


## Growth and Controversy

Mason found himself under investigation by the Department of Justice's Bureau of Investigation (later the FBI), led by a young J. Edgar Hoover.

The Bureau was also suspicious of the integrated audience of many COGIC revivals, associating racial integration with political radicalism.

According to Bureau informants, Mason had preached that the conflict was a "rich man's war" and that Black Americans had no real enemy in Germany.



*J. Edgar Hoover, c. 1920s.*





# Growth and Controversy



*Kaiser Wilhelm II*

By Mason's own account, he insisted on loyalty to the United States and denounced the Kaiser as a tyrant, but declared that Christians drafted into the armed services should seek non-combat roles.

In June 1918, Mason was arrested in Mississippi and narrowly avoided a lynch mob of Whites who believed Mason was advocating treason. But in October, a grand jury declined to indict Mason after witnesses against him failed to testify. By that point, wartime anxieties were passing, at it was clear Germany would be defeated.

# Becoming a National Church



After WWI, the Great Migration brought millions of Black Americans out of the rural South and into major industrial cities of the North.

Despite its roots in the fields and country chapels of Tennessee and Mississippi, COGIC quickly became an urban church.

In the decades between the world wars, Mason travelled extensively in the North to see that churches were built and congregations established in these new centers of Black America.

*COGIC congregants in Washington, D.C., 1942. Gordan Parks / Library of Congress.*



# Becoming a National Church

In 1943, after the death of his second wife, Lelia, Mason married Elsie Washington (no relation), who worked as editor for COGIC's newspaper, *The Whole Truth*, and helped organize missions and women's ministries.

In the years after Mason's death, Elsie helped support the Civil Rights struggle in Memphis, and served as a COGIC missionary in Haiti. She died in 2006, aged 98.

*C.H. Mason and Elsie W. Mason in 1943.*







# A House of God



*Mason Temple in Memphis,  
TN, c. 2020.*

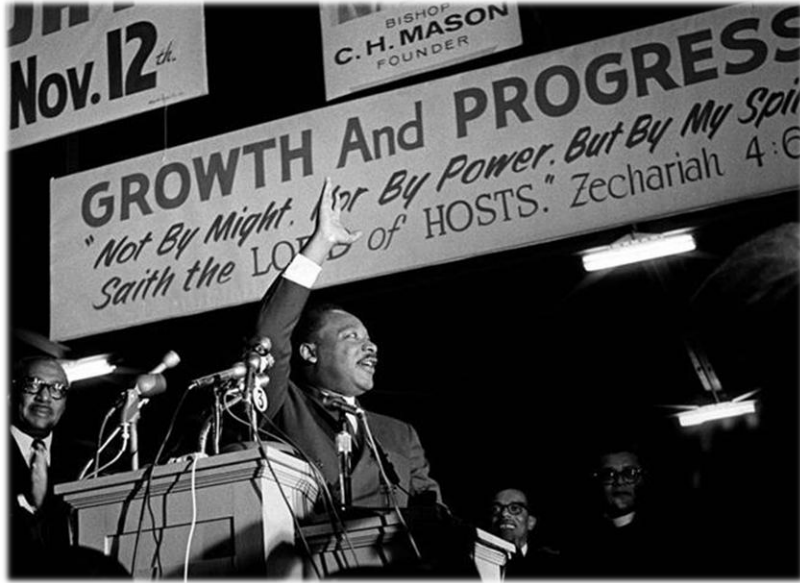
The crowning achievement of Mason and COGIC's midcentury leadership was the construction of Mason Temple in Memphis — the largest Black-owned, Black-built structure in the world at the time.

Begun in 1940, the funds for the construction were raised through donations from church members.

A three-story complex of concrete and steel, its auditorium seats over 3,700 people, and served as the meeting place for the annual COGIC gathering, the Holy Convocation, until the 1990s.



# A House of God



*Dr. King at Mason Temple the night before his assassination, 1968. Banner of Mason hangs above his right hand.*



Download “Cementing a Legacy” to read more about Mason Temple.

Mason Temple also served as a gathering place for Black-led political activism within and beyond COGIC.

In the 1950s, Mason supported efforts to desegregate schools and housing, defending the **nascent** Civil Rights Movement from the pulpit.

On April 3, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his final sermon the night before his assassination at Mason Temple, speaking to a voter registration drive “Freedom Rally.”



# COGIC and Civil Rights

Mason always sought to build a racially integrated Holiness movement in America, but he also founded a powerful, respected, well-organized institution that empowered the wider Black community beyond COGIC's membership, especially in the cause of Civil Rights.

Though a multiracial church, COGIC has strong ties to the Black community that transcend theology.



*L.H. Ford (1914-1995), Civil Rights activist, third Presiding Bishop of COGIC.*





# COGIC and Civil Rights



*Emmett Till's funeral at Roberts Temple, 1955.*

One important leader, Bishop Louis Henry Ford of Roberts Temple in Chicago, rose to national prominence when he delivered the eulogy for Emmett Till, a Black 14-year-old who was kidnapped and lynched in Mississippi in 1955.

Till's mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, was a COGIC member, and her anguish and advocacy after her son's killing spurred on the Civil Rights movement. Ford would later become Mason's third successor, serving as Presiding Bishop from 1990-1995.

# COGIC and Civil Rights



*Muslim prayer during Malcolm X's funeral at Faith Temple, 1965.*

At times, COGIC has extended its hospitality even when other Black institutions would not.

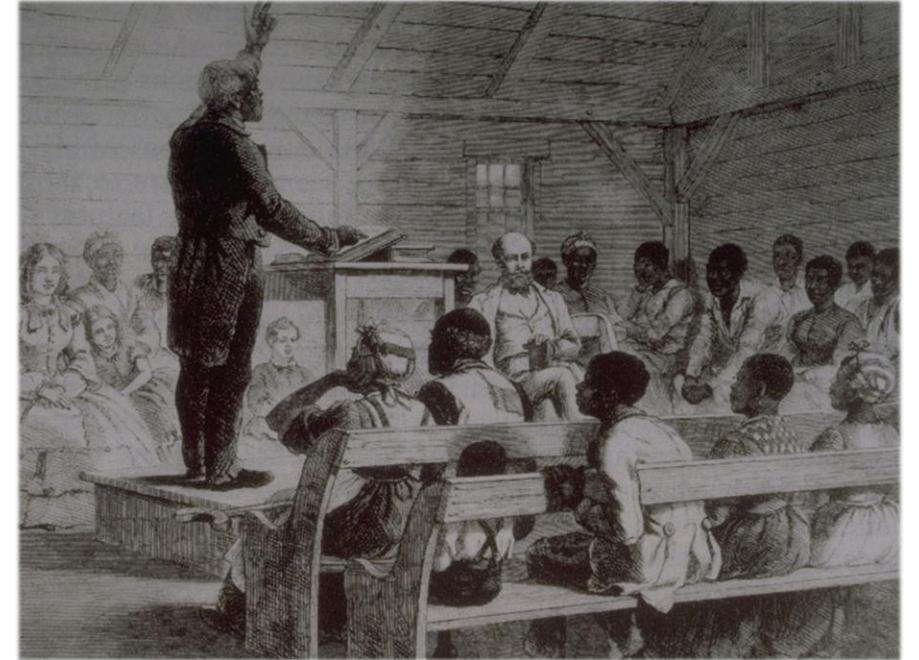
For example, Faith Temple COGIC in Harlem hosted a Muslim funeral for Malcolm X after his assassination in February 1965. No other venue was willing to accommodate this event for fear of further violence.



# An Uplifting Legacy

“Bishop Mason was one who lifted African Americans who were former slaves and the children of slaves, lifted them up from the degradation of slavery, ex-slavery, the brokenness of poverty ... He through this church gave them esteem, position, status, and encouraged their education.”

- *Bishop David Hall Sr., prelate of the Tennessee headquarters of the Church of God in Christ*



*Black minister preaching to a congregation in South Carolina during slavery. The London News, 1863.*



# An Uplifting Legacy

Bishop C.H. Mason died peacefully in Detroit in 1961, at age 97.

After nearly a century of life, he had built a small gathering of renegade Pentecostal preachers and congregations into one of the largest Black churches in America, with over a million members.



*Bishop Mason's funeral in Mason Temple, 1961.*

Today, the church is international, with over five million members.



# An Uplifting Legacy



*Stained glass window in Mason Temple.*

Above all, Mason lived to serve God. From the perspective of Christian believers of all races, nations, and denominations throughout the world, his work in spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ is his most profound legacy.

“If there is anything in my life’s work that will be helpful to anyone, passing along this Christian highway,” he wrote in 1920, “that may serve to give them a greater religious zeal or to help them to more patiently consider and bear the burdens of a Christian life, I shall have accomplished my aim.”



## Vocabulary

baptism  
denominations  
ecstatic  
epidemic  
evangelizing  
fruition  
lay  
nascent  
piety

sanctified  
shorthand  
“speaking in  
tongues”  
tenants  
tuberculosis  
vices  
vocation

*Bishop Mason and some  
“wonders of nature” he used  
as illustrations in his  
sermons, c. 1950s.*







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