

# 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. 1950).*



# Visions of the Sacred



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

How are the ways different religions worship similar? How are they different?

Religion is a part of culture – the values, customs, and works of art that are particular to a group of people.

The story of America, and specifically Black American culture, is incomplete if we don't include the story of our religious beliefs and influences.

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

# The Black Church in America



The “Black Church” is a term used to identify the variety of historically Black Protestant churches (or **denominations**) that emerged from the ordeals of slavery.

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

Founded in 1700s and early 1800s, these churches helped Black Christians grow in their faith and deal with racial **segregation**.

The Black Church played an important part in social movements from **Abolitionism** to Civil Rights.



# The Church of God in Christ

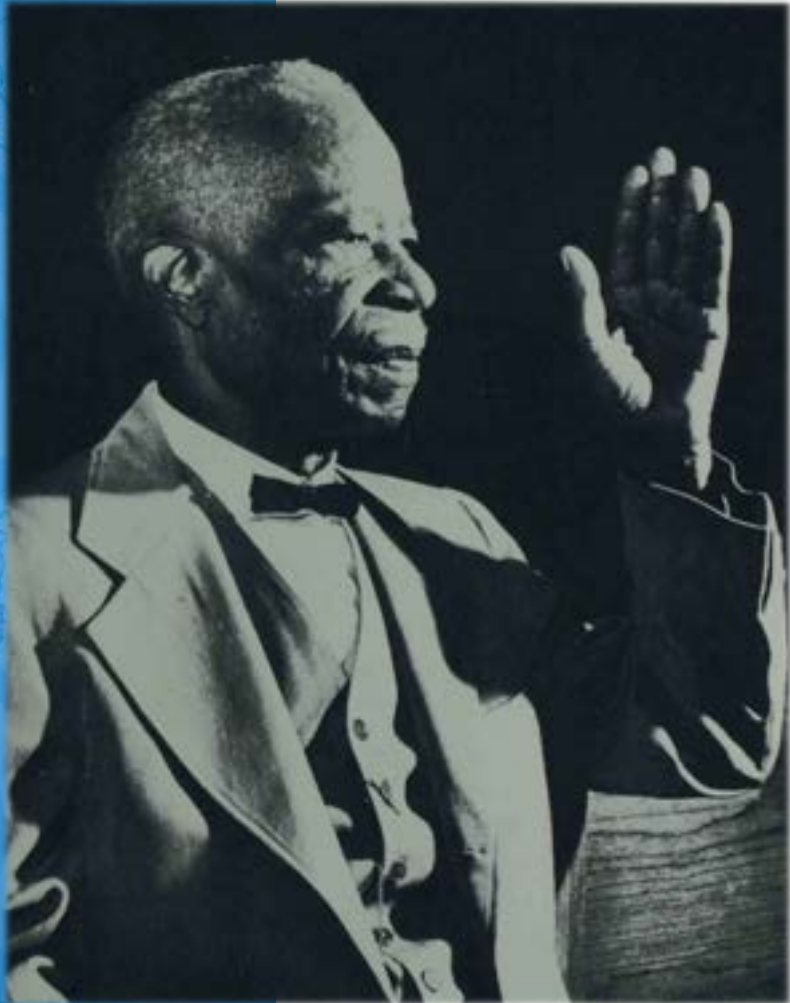
One Black American religious leader who had a big impact was Bishop Charles Harrison Mason (1864-1961), founder of the Church of God in Christ (COGIC).

The Christian movement he helped to lead and promote inspired millions of Americans, especially Black Americans, to pursue personal holiness, revive and expand religious institutions, and work for peace and justice across the nation.



*Seal of the Church of God in Christ.*

# Charles Harrison Mason



C.H. Mason's remarkable life saw many changes in America — many of which he helped bring to **fruition**.

Born to formerly enslaved parents in 1864, during the Civil War, he died in 1961, when the Civil Rights movement was transforming life in the South and beyond.

*C.H. Mason towards the end of his decades-long ministry, c. 1950s.*

# Early Life and Conversion

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

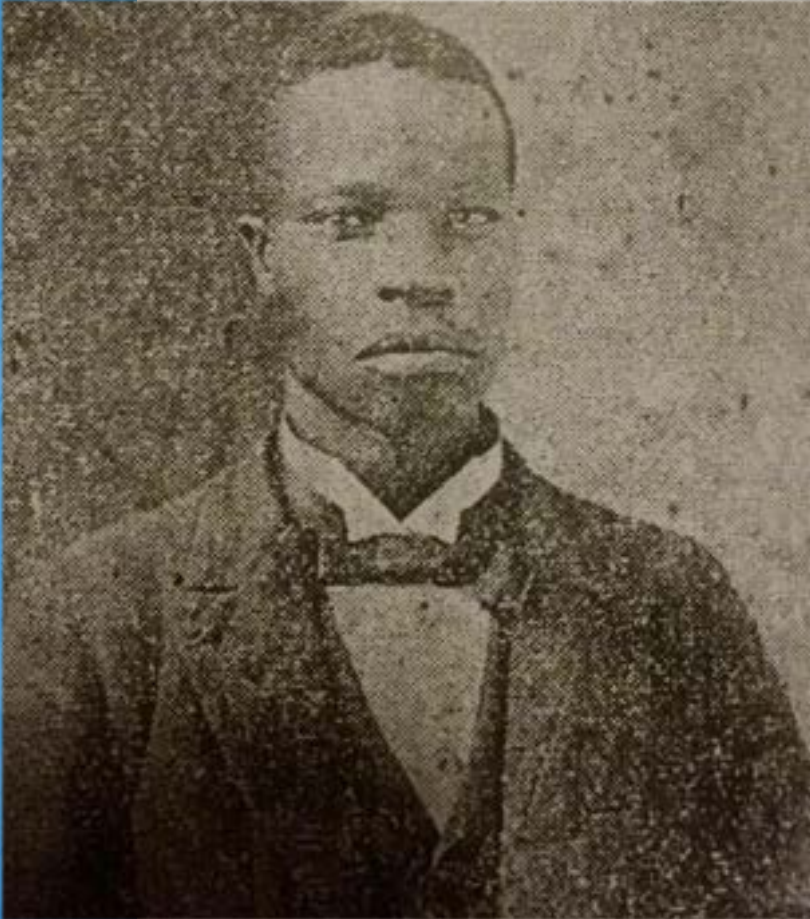
His family worshipped in the Black Baptist tradition.

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





# Early Life and Conversion



*Young C.H. Mason; date unknown, likely 1880s.*

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.

# Early Life and Conversion

A few years later, Mason was struck by **tuberculosis**. Back in 1880, there were few healthcare options, especially for poor Black people. But his mother and family prayed over Mason, and on September 5, he suddenly recovered from his illness.

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

*Mason statue in Memphis.*





# Rough Road to Ministry



Mason was soon baptized and began to preach as a **lay** minister.

Around 1890, Mason was officially licensed as a minister by Mount Gale Missionary Baptist Church in Preston, Arkansas.

But the next few years were painful: in 1891, he got married, only to divorce in 1893.

Mason felt great shame at 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 pictured in a church biography in 1920.*

# Rough Road to Ministry

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

He enrolled at Arkansas Baptist College but quit after only three months.



*Arkansas Baptist College  
as it stands today.*

# Rough Road to Ministry

Mason was disappointed with the lack of **piety** at the school. He left, determined, as he said, "to follow Jesus, with the Bible as my sacred guide."

Mason began travelling throughout the South preaching that salvation required sanctification – living a life of personal holiness, dedicated to avoiding sins and **vices**.



*Mason in the 1950s.*



# Preaching and Establishing Churches

Many Baptists disagreed with Mason's focus on personal holiness, while he felt that their view of salvation was too **lax**.

His preaching attracted those who were not satisfied 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 Establishing Churches

The two men preached to meetings in Lexington, Mississippi, in 1897, in an abandoned cotton gin house.

They hosted large, multiracial services and revival meetings — a series of meetings meant to inspire Christians to renew their dedication to God and to draw new convert into the faith.

Though it would be several years before the denomination was formally organized, this building, St. Paul COGIC, is still today known as the COGIC “mother church.”



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

# Preaching and Establishing Churches



*Stained glass window of C.H. Mason  
in Mason Temple, Memphis, TN.*

As the twentieth century started, Mason and Jones expanded their network of like-minded preachers and congregations.

Mason emphasized the signs, healings, and miracles that many believed accompanied these early COGIC services.



# Preaching and Establishing Churches

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

In 1905, Mason remarried, happily this time, to Lelia Washington.

They would go 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 forming that would transform Mason's life.

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 into the present day.



*Azusa Street Apostolic Faith Mission, c.1907*

# The Azusa Street Revival

A Black minister from Louisiana, William J. Seymour, had come to Los Angeles to preach.

He had planned to only stay a month, but one day at a racially integrated prayer service led by Seymour, some of the people began shouting praises to God and **speaking in tongues** (unknown languages). Others soon followed.

*William J. Seymour during the revival.*





# The Azusa Street Revival



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

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

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

# West to Los Angeles

Word of the revival spread throughout the nation. In 1907, Jones and the other elders sent Mason to investigate. Mason stayed in Los Angeles about six weeks, and left believing that the Holy Ghost was truly at work in the revival.

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



*Historical marker on  
Azusa Street, 2023.*

# West to Los Angeles



But when Mason told Jones and the other elders about his experience, they 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 with some unusual natural objects he collected throughout his life and used as props and illustrations in preaching, c. 1930s.*



# Growth and Controversy

Mason gathered twelve pastors who embraced this teaching and founded a new, Pentecostal denomination.

After a legal battle with Jones, Mason won the rights to the name “Church of God in Christ.”



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

While still a part of mainstream Christianity some distinct practices of COGIC include:

# Growth and Controversy



- A belief in the speaking in tongues (languages) unknown to speaker, just as the Apostles and other early Christians did according to the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:4, 11) and letters of the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 12:10; 14:2) in the Bible.
- An **exuberant**, open-ended style of worship, where believers may dance to spirited music, lift their hands in prayer, kneel or lay prostrate on the floor.
- A belief in the need for personal holiness or “sanctification.”

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

# Growth and Controversy



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

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

Under his leadership, the church built a Women's Department, youth ministries, national and international missions, and Sunday schools.



# Growth and Controversy



*Kaiser Wilhelm II*

But when the US entered WWI in 1917, Mason encouraged **pacifism** and told young men to avoid fighting in the war. According to federal investigators, Mason had declared that WWI was a “rich man’s war.”

In June 1918, Mason was arrested in Mississippi and narrowly avoided a White lynch mob who believed Mason was advocating treason. But in October, a grand jury decided not to indict Mason after witnesses against him failed to testify. By that point, wartime fears were passing, as it was clear Germany would be defeated.

# Taking COGIC Nationwide



After WWI, the Great Migration brought millions of Black Americans out of the rural South and into industrial cities of the North. Despite its roots in the fields and country chapels of Tennessee and Mississippi, COGIC quickly became an urban church.

*COGIC congregants in Washington, D.C., 1942.  
Source: Library of Congress.*

In the decades between the world wars, Mason travelled throughout Northern cities to see that churches were built and congregations established in these new centers of Black American life.

# Taking COGIC Nationwide

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

After Mason's death, Elsie supported the Civil Rights struggle in Memphis, and served as a missionary in Haiti. She died in 2006, aged 98.



*C.H. Mason and Elsie Mason  
sometime after their marriage in 1943.*



# Taking COGIC Nationwide



One of Mason's crowning achievements 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.

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

# Taking COGIC Nationwide



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.

*Dr. King at Mason Temple the night before his assassination, 1968. Banner of C.H. Mason is right above his hand for Founder's Day.*

On April 3, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his final sermon at Mason Temple the night before his assassination.

# 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*

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



# Legacy



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

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

The once small gathering of renegade Pentecostal preachers and congregations has become an international denomination, with over 5 million members in more than 60 countries.

# Legacy

Mason's vision for COGIC empower the wider Black community in many ways.

For example, in 1965, Faith Temple COGIC in Harlem hosted a Muslim funeral of Malcom X after no other venue would, fearing more violence.

But clearly his greatest desire was to serve God wholeheartedly and leave a legacy of faith and obedience.



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

# Legacy



“If there is anything in my life’s work that will be helpful to anyone, passing along this Christian highway 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.”

*C.H. Mason, 1920*

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



# Vocabulary

abolitionism

denominations

epidemic

exuberant

fruition

lax

lay

nascent

pacifism

piety

sanctified

segregation

“speaking in  
tongues”

tuberculosis

vices

vocation

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





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# BLACK *History* *and* EXCELLENCE

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