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**The American Negro Academy.**

**OCCASIONAL PAPERS NO. 10.**

## **The Defects of the Negro Church.**

**BY ORISHATUKEH FADUMA.**

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## **The Defects of the Negro Church.**

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The writer does not undertake to point out all the defects of the Negro church. He does not lay any claim to omniscience.

The limits of time and the scope of the subject prevent him from discussing even what he knows in part. It is only some of the leading defects in the Negro Church which will be presented for discussion. It may be necessary to state at the onset that the writer is an optimist in his studies of questions relating to his race. If at any time he is compelled to use the surgeon's knife he will do so with the utmost sympathy and with a view to heal. It may also be necessary to state, in order to allay the fears of our friends and prevent the reckless criticism of our detractors, that the defects of the Negro church are found more or less in churches of other races. They are the same in kind but differ in degree, on account of difference in environment. They are not inherent in the race, but are found wherever the environments call for them. It may be laid down as an axiomatic truth that there has never

been and there is not a perfect church. Of the twelve men who formed the nucleus of the Christian church and who had the advantage of the personal teaching of the Christ, one was a doubter, another was worldly-minded, a betrayer, and a son of perdition who sought relief from the stings of conscience by self-destruction; a third was a deserter and vacillator, who drew from the great apostle of the Gentiles a stinging rebuke for stultifying his conscience during that exciting controversy which was to settle once for all whether Christianity was to be a racial or a universal religion. But because there never was a perfect church is no reason why we should speak lightly or condone the defects of the Negro Church. Our ideal of the Negro Church is one which will have as few defects as possible. If we expose these defects it is because our aim is to correct them so as to reach as near as possible our ideal. We hope we shall not be misunderstood if we submit for investigation the following defects in the Negro Church.

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## **I. THE TENDENCY TO LAY STRESS ON OUTWARDNESS RATHER THAN INWARDNESS.**

All life is known by its manifestations. The latter is the outcome, the effect of the former. The manifestations of life cannot by any means be more important than the life which makes them possible. Christianity is a religion of inwardness, it finds its root in the heart and soul of man, then effects the outward life. Whenever the inner or spiritual life is renewed, there follows from necessity a renewed exterior. There must be first life in the soul. Nor can there be any evolution of the soul or of society without a previous involution in them. The whole nature of man must be wrapped up in the image of God before any fruits of Godliness show themselves. The tendency in the Negro Church is to look for these manifestations rather than to work for the indwelling spirit who is the cause of such manifestations. Parallel with this tendency in the church, is the effort which is being made after expression of religious life when it should be directed along the line of impressing it. The church is in need of a deep spiritual life, nevertheless it is impossible to express what is not previously impressed in the mind.

There is a form of oratory prevalent among us, a mere jingle of sounds, an expression of nothing of much value. Under its spell the man of the world is caught, received into the church as a convert, but not being impressed with the divine life and ideal, he soon falls away. The mad rush after quantity rather than quality of converts is another indication of the outwardness of religion in the church. One of the most significant words spoken by Christ was, "Many are called but few chosen." The church seems to be carried away with the idea of the extension of God's Kingdom when it does not sufficiently grasp the idea of its intension. Because there is not depth in spiritual life, not intensiveness in the culture of souls, the church does not gain much in expansion. Again, the church is an organization, but an organization presupposes an organ. It is evident that if the organ—the instrument upon which all order and arrangement depend—is out of gear, the organization is valueless. All attempts to organize men without a spiritual organ must be a failure. The organization of a church is more than the putting together of bricks and other dead materials, it is the bringing together, in an orderly manner, of living souls possessed with spiritual power and renewed in the image of God. There is another form of outwardness to which the Negro church is tending at oneself and valuing oneself from appearance. It tends to make religion a puppet show. The growth of the church is estimated at number of dollars collected, number of churches built, and number of followers. The Negro is prone to fall into this error because of the many denials his critics make of his ability in self-government. It leads him to make a parade of his religion and a show of his capabilities. The purpose of religion is to deepen the spiritual life and help men to be in harmony with God and nature, not to satisfy critics and detractors. The work of the church is to lead men to have in full measure the life and light of the Spirit. It is in the nature of life and light whenever and wherever found to be active. They will assert themselves if they are in the church, not in a boastful spirit but with Christian modesty. Cause must precede effect. The foundation of the church must be securely laid before its superstructure is attempted. There must be a base of supply before the army marches to battle.

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I have attempted to indicate briefly in what lines the church is exposed and is tending to outwardness. It lays greater stress on evolution of life; in eagerness for the expression of its life it neglects its impression; it emphasizes extensiveness rather than intensiveness, quantity rather than quality; it runs after the gewgaws of religion and does not look inward, deep down in the soul; its organization lacks an organ with a spiritual life deep enough to suppress worldliness.

## **II. NEGLECT OF RURAL COMMUNITIES.**

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Another defect of the Negro church is her neglect of rural communities. From eighty to eighty-five per cent of the race is to be found in our small towns where ignorance and superstition prevail to an alarming extent. Among the causes of this neglect are:

(1) The need of adequate funds for the support of churches.

(2) The need of suitable men for these churches.

(3) Discrimination made by church authorities in the sending of their best men to fill city churches on account of inadequate funds in the country churches.

(4) The poverty of country churches and their inability to provide for the support of their pastors, especially those who are needed most in cities.

(5) The repulsiveness of rural districts on account of inadequate protection and little justice given to the Negro.

Where there are supplementary grants or a reserve fund as aids to struggling churches, better work is done and suitable men are seen in the country churches. Suitable men are so rare that the city churches easily keep them by the offer of larger salaries. Even the city's need is not yet fully met. The demand is greater than the supply in both places but still greater in the country. For this neglect of country churches, a neglect by no means wilful, what are the results? We may mention a few.

(1) Country pastors are often compelled to take to other callings, their church work being supplementary and subsidiary. Hence energy needed for pastoral and pulpit work is dissipated in the effort to make a living.

(2) The paganization of Christianity. One of the saddest things that has happened to Negroes in our rural districts is the presentation to them of Christianity in a crude, uncouth, and distorted form. It is a form of Christianity with the Christ left out. The songs of the church, its prayers and experiences are there but in a mutilated form, divested of their spiritual significance. The "Big Meeting," or revival meeting often gives an opportunity for a revival of the latent paganism in the Negro. The weird songs, the wild excitement of the people followed by the unchaste exposures and hysteria of women, the physical agony and wallowing on the floor, and the violent physical gymnastics among both sexes is a species of voodooism imported from the religion of heathen Africa. It is deplorable because its after effects are demoralizing. The situation is grave and calls for rebuke, because it is deeply entrenched in our country churches and is encouraged by pastors who ought to point out a better way. In Africa Christianity is displacing paganism, in rural America paganism is displacing Christianity. Our rural population is confronted with a form of Christianity which does not civilize. Since the corruption of the best thing is the worst thing, it may be fairly stated that Christianity is receiving an unfair treatment in a professedly Christian country from a professedly Christian people.

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(3) Funds being inadequate to support country churches, and men qualified to fill them being few even if funds were at hand, there follows as a necessity the *employment of unqualified men* to fill vacancies. So pressing is the need for preachers that in many cases any kind of men rather than no men at all seems to be the best that can be done. Hence some men accept appointments for what they can get out of them. Fitness in any form is out of the question in many of these appointments. The country churches have therefore become the dumping ground where pastors sink or swim. There too may be found a host of immoral preachers. This fact in itself creates a prejudice in the minds of a class of preachers against accepting country appointments. It is only the few who are strongly imbued with a missionary spirit that are willing to labor and lift up the standard in the interest of God and fallen humanity. One of the surest ways of breaking down this prejudice is for the churches to send some of their best men to country churches and provide for their support. Missionary societies aiming at best results send some of their best men as pioneers and bishops to the heathen. It is only by a selective method of appointing men to our country churches that these places can be reclaimed from heathenism and immorality. It is only then that the "wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose."

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### III. THE NEGRO MINISTRY.

One of the defects of the Negro Church is the defect in the culture of its ministry. In spite of all that has been said and done to create prejudice against the higher education of the Negro, statistics have failed everywhere to show that our schools have turned out a large percentage of College or University graduates. There are a few College or University graduates in the ranks of our ministry. A larger percentage has failed even to get through a High School course. The defect in scholarship and culture constitutes a grave problem in our church life. The leader of a people must be a man of broad culture, wide sympathies, and in touch with all the varied interests of the people. It is not enough to be able to read the Bible or pass an examination in denominational theology. The modern teacher and preacher of today must be acquainted with the humanities. If not a scientist he must know the trend of scientific thought and its relation to the Bible. The best poetry of nations should be at his command on account of the refining influence which it has always exercised on mankind in all ages. The masterpieces of the world's best prose writers, the history of art, the study of the philosophy of history, and the too neglected study of the history of ethnic religions must be in his possession, not simply in the library of his home but in the library of his mind. Most if not all of these studies may be prosecuted outside the college, but the college curriculum

has the advantage of system which the average preacher does not have. College and University courses are excellent, not so much for what one can remember out of the many things studied in them, but for the system and mental discipline as well as the social culture through which one passes. The interests of the church demand that the pulpit shall lead the pew. Considering the influence which the Negro ministry has over its laity, the demand becomes more and more imperative. It is not a learned ministry but a cultured ministry, a ministry with higher tastes and aspirations, a ministry which in spite of the materialism of the times will make the time to study and see the beautiful, the good, and the true, in God's handiwork. It is this lack of culture which makes many a preacher narrow-minded. To them the beauties of nature are dead. To their barren minds nature is a barren wilderness.

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(2) From being uncultured the Negro ministry finds it an easy descent to being immoral. It must be borne in mind that all the defects enumerated of the ministry or laity are defects not of the whole ministry or laity, but are defects found among them to a large extent. The salvation of the church and the race is due to the faithful few, pure and noble men and women among us. They are the salt of the race and are growing in numbers as years increase. The future is full of hope. It is painful nevertheless to know that there is still a large number of immoral preachers, though not as large as there used to be. Churches and church authorities, and the educated sentiment of the race are on the alert and are quickly displacing these men whenever they are found. In the conflict of the church with the Titan of immorality, the church needs as helpers, men with a hundred hands like Briareus to hold down this elusive monster. The term immorality may include all kinds of conduct which the custom of our times supported by enlightened sentiment disapproves. But the object of the writer is not to charge the Negro ministry with all kinds of misdemeanors. There is only one kind of conduct which is so far-reaching in its results because it is fundamentally subversive of and destructive to the best interests of society, that the writer wishes to bring up as a defect of our ministry. It is sexual unchastity. There are causes for this depravity among a certain class of Negro ministers. It is not a constitutional disease in the Negro as many of the detractors of the race have affirmed. Acquaintance with the ancestral life of the African shows without the shadow of a doubt that the morality of the heathen as relates to sexes is part of the religion of most African tribes before they are brought into contact with a foreign civilization. Plantation life in American society where illicit sexual intercourse was the rule and not the exception, fostered and encouraged by white masters of the past, and still practised though less extensively by white men, is a product of Anglo-Saxon civilization. The environments of country life encourage illicit living, and to men already reared among them are a snare. Some of these environments are found in the log-cabin in which families are crowded together like cattle, and sexual privacy and decorum are impossible. The plantation log-cabin finds its counterpart in the slums of cities with their crowded alleys. The landlord in both cases is at the bottom of these evils. It is but fair to state that these environments when found in the cities or among the peasantry of Europe, as in France and Russia, reveal social evils even worse than those found among Negroes in the United States. But the point we wish to emphasize is this, that environments help to make the man, and the man helps to make his environments. There is a class of men among Negro preachers whose environments have not been other than those in the plantations, these are the men who are unfit to be the leaders of the people. When on account of their natural ability and gift of speech they are set aside as preachers, it only gives them a larger opportunity to demoralize themselves and those with whom they come into contact. It will always take men of the strongest moral fibre in any race to elevate those who live either in the slums of cities or in the cabin life of plantations, otherwise the gain to Christian missions will be in quantity rather than quality. Hence the need of specific training of the best kind in schools where students of the race will find healthy environments to inspire them to higher and nobler living. Hence the need of higher education for the race because it subjects the recipient to an atmosphere of healthy environments long enough to saturate his life. For his own interest the Negro preacher should do his utmost to improve the social condition of his people in city or farm, since that condition reflects for good or evil upon his own character.

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3. One of the best results of the Protestant reformation is the diffusion of God's word among the people. Through the reformation the Bible ceased to be tongue-tied. Its history, poetry of war and love, its tragedy, its simple gospel stories of the Christ comprise a literature that is unsurpassed, and a revelation of God that is unique. But the Bible can only be intelligently understood by the people when the mind of the people is prepared to receive it. One of the worst results growing indirectly out of the Protestant reformation, is the creation of an ignorant priesthood and the reducing of the Bible to a fetich. It follows as a matter of course that where the ministry is uncultured, the interpretation of the word of God suffers. The spirit of God can not do what man is intended to do. He can only illumine where the mind is prepared to pass through the process. Revelation requires a medium, otherwise it is powerless. To understand the mind of God in the Bible presupposes a mind to comprehend His mind. With the Negro's deficient ministry, religion becomes irreligion. He believes too much in the non-essentials of religion, his heaven and hell are too much in the distant future, he prays that after death he may go to heaven but sees no heaven on earth. The new heaven and the new earth which John saw and the new Jerusalem coming down from God to man are antipodal to his conceptions. His God is seen going up to some cloudless region instead of coming down to tabernacle with men. His sermons feed the feelings but neglect the intellect and will, they tickle the ear and subordinate truth to eloquence. The greater emphasis he puts on churchianity is a loss to Christianity. The contribution which modern

thought is making to Biblical interpretation is sealed to him. He pursues his beaten path along the old ruts of ecclesiasticism. He believes in a revelation which is non-progressive and whose distinctive feature is sameness for all times. He is painfully liberal in the construction of the Bible. He thinks he is a curse himself according to the prophet Noah, for he has not yet discovered the distinctive and conditional element in prophecy. His theology is in the main denominational and is like the laws of the Medes and Persians which admit of no change. His mind does not discriminate between the *ipse dixit* of the Almighty and external authority in matters relating to dogma. In the pulpit he lacks decorum, deep spirituality, and contemplation. His oratory is thunderous, too physical, and lacks grace and beauty.

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Much praise is due to those denominations whose forethought has led them to spend considerable time and pains to prepare men for the gospel ministry. In quality of preaching and teaching, and in results already achieved, the race owes much to this as yet small band of workers. Like the leaven hidden in the meal its influence is being felt in the church, in the farm, and in the firesides of the people, and is destined to overthrow ignorance, immorality, and superstition. With the continued aid of well-equipped mission schools which must be the base of supply for our churches, and the training of a new type of men such as the modern church demands, the moral change so much hoped for will be hastened.

4. The world-spirit is in the churches and has taken hold of our ministry. A large part of church duties which should be performed by laymen is shirked and placed upon the minister's shoulders. The result is that the minister is often overburdened with secular matters, is forced to leave the word and serve tables and loses much spirituality. When a minister's success depends largely and primarily upon amount of dollars raised by him his spiritual decline is rapid. Worldliness follows when desire for position or recognition in the church overcomes the desire to save men, and when the ordinary tricks of politics are resorted to in order to gain church distinctions. It is a reversal of Christ's order, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you." These other things are eagerly desired in place of the "first" things. The more elaborate the organization of a church is, the larger is the number of preferments to offices, and greater the opportunity given to office seekers to make these the first things. The best men in any church are not always those who hold its highest offices. Too much organization in the church leads to too much officialism and worldliness, for "where the carcass is, there will the vultures be gathered together."

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#### **IV. THE LAITY.**

The laity lack much consecration. The things of this world and the desire for them press more heavily upon their minds than the extension of God's cause. Their Christian consciousness is not trained, hence their sense of duty is not high. They depend too much on spasms of effort and frequent appeals to the emotions in the performance of duty. Their idea of the gospel is too confined to hearing sermons on Sunday. Their gospel does not touch the many interests of life. Their virtues are not concrete. Holiness, purity, love, truth, beauty, justice, goodness are metaphysical abstractions. Too much self-centred and self-seeking, they make little or no sacrifice for others. Many self-supporting churches do not shelter weaker ones and have no thought for the heathen. There are churches that are fortunate in having in their official boards men of culture, piety, and business experience, but these are virtues very rarely found in the same men. Business methods are often low in churches because of the difficulty of finding strictly business men among the laity. In the erection of churches the spirit of ostentation rather than worship is dominant. The immorality of debt not being known, churches are very often built without regard to the financial inability of the people, and deceive by suggesting rich parishioners when the people are very poor and live from hand to mouth. Many disruptions between pastors and churches could have been avoided were church finances not kept in a confused state. Pastor's salaries and other church obligations are not raised and met in a systematic way, but are left to appeals to the feelings of the people whose ethical sense has not been cultivated. We have thus enumerated among the defects of the laity, worldliness, untrained Christian consciousness, restricted meaning of the gospel, the non-concreteness of the Christian virtues, and the lack of a missionary spirit and of business methods.

#### **V. EXCESSIVE EMOTIONALISM IN WORSHIP.**

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Paradoxical as it may seem, in religion the Negro's emotions constitute his strongest as well as his weakest point. The fact that he is largely developed in the emotional side of his nature would, other things being equal, give him a vantage ground in matters of religion. His defect is not that he is emotional, but that he is excessively so. Like other races in their childhood, he is a bundle of feelings. He does not think after God, he does not will after God, but he feels after God. He is not driven to action because he is impelled by a moral imperative, the law of duty, but he is controlled by his nerves which are his thermometer. With the nerves as his guide it is impossible to tell where he stands on many moral questions. Neurotic environments appeal quickly to him, and are fostered by the church in sermons which

appeal largely to the imagination, in weird pictures of the unseen, in apocalyptic sermons, and by mystic preachers known as mourners, shouters and visioners. As a subject of experimentation in physco-physics, the most fitting time is in seasons of revival in religion when his emotion is keyed to the highest point.

The following stages may be noticed:

- (1) Violent physical commotion followed by physical exhaustion.
- (2) Loss of physical control.
- (3) Loss of moral control. At this stage there is a feeling of abandon leading often to unchaste exposure of the person, wild cries as if demented, and all kinds of extravagances.
- (4) Mental infection as well as emotional panic. At this stage there is pandemonium. Many obtain religion by the process of infection.

(5) A lowered physical as well as moral vitality. At the last meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, a thoughtful paper by Dr. Graham of Ireland showed that there was less insanity among Roman Catholics than Protestants in Ireland, due to difference in type of religion, Protestants of Ireland being intensely morbid and ascetic in their Calvinism. (Congregationalist, Nov. 29, 1902, p. 781.) I should not be surprised, if investigation was made, that similar results would be seen in America not only between Protestants and Roman Catholics, but among Protestants themselves. I should not be surprised that there were fewer maniacs among Presbyterians and Congregationalists than among Baptists and Methodists. May not students of physco-physics make this a study for the benefit of religion? To the use of emotions in religion the writer has no objections, he is heartily in favor, but he seriously objects to excessive emotionalism for the following reasons:

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- (1) It fails to recognize the moral and ethical judgment.
- (2) It fails to recognize the volitional side of human nature. "With a man's will-power dormant, undeveloped, unknown, all attempt at really training and moulding the character is foolish because impossible. Man sometimes attempts it; God never does. He calls into activity first of all a man's will. He seeks to know what a man's own free choice is. Then he knows what course to follow in his schooling of the soul."<sup>[1]</sup>
- (3) It fails to recognize the rational side of human nature.
- (4) It is at variance with our concrete experience of life. In our daily experience we think, feel and will for action.
- (5) It is sickly feminine and appeals to neurotics.

There are some general facts in connection with the philosophy of religion which are often overlooked in the study of the Negro religion. Two stages may be noticed in the history of the religious development of peoples, the primitive and the rational. The primitive stage is poetical and imaginative, in fact religion is then in its barbaric state. In its rational stage we see the religious man under a developed rule of conduct. He still feels but his feelings are controlled by reason. There is nothing new in the religion of the Negro. He is by no means a peculiar man from a religious standpoint. The physical contortions and gyrations noticed in his Christian worship are as old as the history of religion itself, if not older than it. In his worship we may see things which are found in the heathen rites of the native African, in the which are found in the heathen rites of the native African, in the Bacchanalia of the Greeks, among the Sali or dancing priests of the Romans, and among the Corybantes. The same effect which is produced on the feelings of the Negro has been produced on the feelings of the American Indian, as well as on the ancient bards of Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and Germany. Lord Macaulay, describing the Puritan, says: "In his devotional retirement he prayed with convulsions, and groans, and tears. He was half maddened by glorious or terrible illusions. He heard the lyres of angels or the tempting whispers of friends. He caught a gleam of the Beautiful Vision, or woke screaming from dreams of everlasting fire." In the girlhood days of the late Elizabeth Cady Stanton her sensitive mind was nearly overbalanced, and she suffered terribly from the too vivid description of future punishment by the emotional Finney. The imagery of the Book of Revelation has a peculiar effect on the feelings of the Negro. Its mysticism acts like a spell over him. Says Macaulay, "The Greek Rhapsodists, according to Plato, could not recite Homer without almost falling into convulsions." The Mohawk hardly feels the scalping knife while he shouts his death song. The Dijazerti in the region of the Sahara believe that communication with Allah is only possible in a state of trance, and accordingly they work themselves into a religious frenzy, while the ignorant among them repeat the name of Allah many thousand times till they fall into a state of unconsciousness.

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We do not wonder, considering the primitive state of religion, why men were spell-bound under its influence. It is all the more conspicuous in tropical natures, for there youth is exuberant. In all primitive states of religion we notice the same abandonment, the same illusions produced on the imagination, the contortions of the body, the child-like credulity, the superstition, the depression, and exaltations of the feelings, "the agony, the ecstasy, the plentitude of belief." They are the complement of barbaric faith, and not a peculiarity of the

Negro. If in these primitive conditions we see the Negro tickled by a straw, or frightened by a ghost, or in moments of ecstasy spreading out his hands in an attempt to fly up to heaven without dying, these are the natural concomitants of such conditions. We pity, rather than censure him, more especially when we remember that for two hundred years in the house of bondage, his wild, primitive nature was left untrained.

What is needed for the proper religious development of the Negro is education, not repression or subjugation of his feelings. We cannot emphasize this fact too much. There is the danger, in the zeal of preserving the holy ark, of defiling it by unholy contact. The Negro needs more thought in his religion, but religion is not all thought. To have a proper balance in religion as in every-day life, the faculties of thought, feeling, and volition must be present, distributed in fair proportions. When reason is overfed in the exercise of religion, the result is a dry and barren rationalism. When the emotions are overfed the result is a wild and sickly sentimentalism, a neurotic religion.

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**Footnote:**

[1] The divine method of Inquiry. Biblical World. Dec. 1902, p. 450.

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