

“New Light” on “Old Zion”

A Study of the Names of White and Negro Baptist Churches
in New Orleans

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AMONG THE LEAST EXPLORED REGIONS which lie open to students of American names is that of organized religion. Research in the names of American churches has been limited to one anonymous pamphlet published in the nineteenth century and a few remarks in Mencken's monumental study of American English.¹ This paper makes no claim to cover any great extent of this onomastic *terra incognita*. It is an examination of the names of congregations belonging to a single Protestant group and located in a small geographical area. Yet within this restricted compass may be found some interesting indications of the part which ethnic factors play in the naming of churches, as well as a picture, in miniature and with local variations, of trends in church naming which operate throughout American Protestantism.

New Orleans was selected as the locale for this study because it is the largest American city to list white and Negro churches under separate headings in its telephone directory. The principal reference work used was the New Orleans Telephone Directory for 1959, published in January of that year by the Southern Bell Telephone Company. Occasionally during the investigation it was helpful and interesting to check the naming pattern of New Orleans Baptist churches prior to World War II. For this purpose a 1941 publication

¹ The pamphlet, published in Cambridge in 1891, dealt only with Protestant Episcopal churches and bore this imposing title: “On the Dedications of American Churches: An Enquiry into the Naming of Churches in the United States, Some Account of English Dedications, and Suggestions for Future Dedications in the American Church.” Mencken summarized its findings and remarked on naming tendencies of other groups in *The American Language, Supplement Two* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936), pp. 589–591.

of the Work Projects Administration's Historical Records Survey, entitled *Directory of Churches and Religious Organizations in New Orleans*, was used.

The Baptist denominations belong to the great group of "free churches," Protestant sects without a tradition of state support or strong centralized authority. Baptists in the South are especially proud of the degree of autonomy which their local congregations enjoy. Among the many activities in which the individual church is subject to little or no regulation or supervision is the choice of a congregational name. The presence of this liberty of choice, assuring a variety of names for study, was the reason why I chose to investigate Baptist names.

In New Orleans this right of free choice has certainly been exercised. The common reader of telephone directories might well be content, after reading more than five columns of Baptist church names, merely to borrow Dryden's phrase and say, "Here is God's plenty." However, a closer consideration reveals an abundance of naming pattern: the pattern followed by each of the two races, and the Baptist pattern of the city as a whole and its relation to a nation-wide Protestant system of name categories.

All names borne by Christian churches in the United States can be placed in one of three classes: religious, secular, and a combination of the first two.² Among Protestants, the greatest number of religious church names are taken from the Bible. Most of these are personal or place names, with the word *Saint* prefixed to many New Testament personal names. A special subclass of personal names comprises those dedicated to an aspect of the Deity — *Christ, Our Saviour's, Messiah, Trinity, Divine Paternity* (this last is a

² The conclusions about a national pattern of Protestant church naming which are stated in this and several succeeding paragraphs were formulated after a study of about two dozen W. P. A. publications and current telephone directories, as well as some fairly extensive personal reconnaissance. The W. P. A. directories included *Directory of Churches and Religious Organizations of Rhode Island* (1939); *Directory of Churches in New Jersey*, vol. 16, "Passaic County" (1941); *Directory of Churches and Religious Organizations: Greater Detroit* (1941); *Directory of Churches, Missions, and Religious Institutions of Tennessee*, no. 33, "Hamilton County," and no. 79, "Shelby County" (1941). Some of the current classified telephone directories checked were those for New York (Manhattan), Chicago, Los Angeles, Baltimore, St. Louis, Nashville, Scranton, Duluth, Lincoln (Nebr.), and Waterloo (Iowa). I attempted to examine cities of various sizes, in as many sections of the country as possible.

historic Universalist congregation in Manhattan). Also used are the names of Biblical events (*Transfiguration*), Biblical edifices (*Temple*), and spiritual characteristics emphasized by Biblical writers (*Grace*). Occasionally, and almost always as the designation of a group proud of its fundamentalist approach to doctrine, the word *Bible* itself is used as a congregational name.

The names of saints who are of later than Scriptural date are used frequently by Episcopal churches but are otherwise quite uncommon. Protestants other than Episcopalians sometimes name their churches for what might be called their own saints, persons prominent in the history of the denomination. Detroit and West Lincoln, Nebraska, are two of many American communities containing Methodist churches named *Asbury*, after Francis Asbury, the first American Methodist bishop. Occasionally churches will be named for places connected with the lives of denominational saints. Examples are *City Road Methodist Chapel* (Madison, Tennessee), commemorating a London thoroughfare where John Wesley lived in his later years and whose Methodist graveyard is the place of his burial, and *Epworth Methodist Church* (Lincoln, Nebraska, and several other cities), named for the English village where John and Charles Wesley were born. Such non-Biblical but clearly religious place names do not seem to be used by other than Methodist congregations.

Purely secular names, understandably, manifest a greater variety. One large category, used by most American denominations but virtually unknown among Protestants in other countries, is that of numerical designations (*First, Second*, etc.). Place names bulk even larger and are of several kinds. Sometimes the name of the town will serve as the church's name; this usage is confined to small towns and villages where each denomination is represented by only one church,³ and in larger cities to the one congregation of a particular faith to be found there. A church located in the central business area of a city may be called *Downtown, Central*, or *Mid-City* (e.g., the *Central Methodist Church* in the heart of Detroit). Outlying neighborhoods which, although part of a larger city, are cohesive enough

³ In recent years, some congregations in this situation have experimented with numerical designations. The chief deterrent to this practice is that members of other sects usually regard the *First Methodist Church*, in a community of 500 people, as a manifestation of the sin of pride.

to have a local identity and a name, usually give that name to at least one of the Protestant churches in the area. The Havelock section of northeast Lincoln, Nebraska, has a *Havelock Methodist Church*, a *Havelock Church of the Christian and Missionary Alliance*, and a *Havelock Assembly of God*.⁴ Most particularized of all the locality names are the street names which many Protestant churches bear. Usually they are the names of the streets on which the churches front; rarely, they are taken from nearby streets of more importance. The *Fifth Avenue-State Street Methodist Church* of Troy, New York, uses the names of both the streets which form its intersection, but in speech it is universally referred to as the "State Street Methodist Church."

Some secular place names are more general than those in the last two subclasses, yet somewhat more imaginative than the *Central* or *Downtown* group. These names have as their referent a nearby landmark of some kind, natural or man-made, and they usually allude to it with a kind of elegant vagueness. An example is the *Lake Shore Presbyterian Church* of St. Clair Shores, Michigan, which is located within a few blocks of Lake St. Clair.

A final subclass of secular place names for churches, though comparatively small, deserves mention for its miscellaneous nature. This is the group of place names without any local reference. A number of American congregations seem to have been guided in their choice of name by no more precise criteria than euphony and pictorial connotation. The *Belle Vista Methodist Church* of Clifton, New Jersey, and the *Pleasant Green Baptist Church* of St. Louis are examples.

Secular personal names are not so frequently used as secular place names, but in some localities they form a fairly sizable group. They are almost always the names of deceased persons who have been

⁴ Before 1930 this section of Lincoln was an independent village. The *Havelock Methodist Church* was founded prior to Lincoln's annexation of Havelock, and might consequently be considered (historically, at least) as the bearer of a town rather than a neighborhood name, and as originally belonging to the first rather than the second subclass of secular place names. The other two congregations, established since Havelock lost its municipal identity, ought clearly to be considered as bearers of a neighborhood name; and in the interest of simplicity I have so classified *Havelock Methodist Church* as well. When Havelock ceased to be a city and became a neighborhood, the church's name, in my opinion, became a neighborhood name also.

prominent in the affairs of the local congregation. Churches named for local people usually add the word *Memorial* to their names. Scranton, Pennsylvania, furnishes a good example of such commemoration in the *Dr. Jones Memorial Congregational Church*.

Nationality designations, such as *Filipino Methodist Church* (Oakland, California), require little explanation. Most Protestant churches so named are missions which direct a special evangelistic effort at the group specified.

A last category, which tends to blend into one of religious church-naming, consists of what I call “secular grace names.” These are names of mental or spiritual characteristics and other abstractions whose source, or at any rate whose principal source, is not the Bible. Such a name as *Liberty Baptist Church* is more apt to be assumed from a vague patriotic sentiment than from a desire to allude to “the perfect law of liberty” (James 1: 25).⁵ *Union* is a similar secular grace name (*Unity* is its rather rare religious equivalent);⁶ it is particularly useful to designate a congregation formed by the amalgamation of two or more others, and perhaps to indicate the presence of spiritual oneness among the members of the merged groups. The most charming name that I know of in this classification is the *Amicable Congregational Church* of North Tiverton, Rhode Island.

The third main category of church names, composed of religious and secular elements combined, is noticeably the smallest. It is also the most marked by efflorescent and untrammelled fancy. In New Orleans, names of this third category are borne by an unusually large percentage of the total number of Baptist churches, and are entirely the property of the Negro Baptists.

White Baptist congregations in New Orleans are distinguished today, as they were in 1941, by a definite predilection for secular names, and particularly for secular place names. In 1941 there

⁵ The *Liberty Presbyterian Church* of Troy, New York, is a case apart. Originally it was located at First and Liberty Streets and was called *Liberty Street Presbyterian Church*. It is now on State Street near Sixth Avenue, almost half a mile from Liberty Street. When the move was made, the word *Street* was dropped, and a place name became a grace name.

⁶ Non-Trinitarian denominations can find in *Unity* an adequate Deific name to substitute for *Trinity*. A combined Unitarian-Universalist congregation in Springfield, Massachusetts, is called the *Church of the Unity*.

were twenty-one white Baptist churches in New Orleans; sixteen bore secular names, and twelve of those were place names. Today the number of white churches is thirty-one; twenty-one have secular names, of which seventeen are the names of places. Street names are the most popular; there are churches named *Canal Boulevard*, *Carrollton Avenue*, *Coliseum Place*, *Franklin Avenue*, *Napoleon Avenue*, *St. Charles Avenue*, *Third Street*, and *Valence Street*. With these should be included the *Elysian Fields Baptist Church*, for although the complete thoroughfare name is not used, the church is located on Elysian Fields Avenue. Six congregations have neighborhood names: *Central*, *Mid-City*, *Gentilly*, *Lakeview*, *French Quarter Chapel*, and *Oak Park*. Three have numerical designations; one has a combined numerical and nationality designation — *First Spanish-American Baptist Church*. *Edgewater Baptist Church*, although honoring no specific neighborhood, bears witness to its location near Lake Pontchartrain. One name, *Golden Gate*, belongs to the class of place names without local reference.

The ten white churches which bear religious names all commemorate Biblical persons, places, and things. In only one, *St. Paul*, does the word *Saint* appear. Two congregations, *Trinity* and *Emmanuel*, bear names which express certain aspects of the nature of the Christian Deity; another, *Grace*, is named for an attribute which is both God-possessed and God-bestowed. Biblical places contribute *Bethany* and *Calvary*; Biblical edifices provide *Tabernacle* and *Temple*. One group commemorates an important event chronicled in the second chapter of Acts by calling itself *Pentecostal*; this name may also indicate participation in or approval of the "pentecostal" techniques of worship which characterize a fairly large segment of American Protestantism. And one congregation calls itself the *Bible Baptist Church*, to make known its more than ordinary fidelity to the precepts of that Book.

The names of most white Baptist churches in New Orleans follow a quite conservative secular pattern. They are oriented to specific realities in the here-and-now world rather than to emblems of a religious past. The minority of churches which bear religious names is equally conservative; all names are taken from the Bible, all are simple in form (one or two words), most commemorate *things* as do the secular names, and only one refers to a Biblical personage

other than God. The avoidance of all but the most common and well-known religious names probably signifies, in a city so heavily Roman Catholic in population, a desire to appear as unlike the Catholics as possible.

Such a desire does not seem to affect the Negro Baptists of the city much, if at all. The 1959 telephone directory lists 131 Negro Baptist congregations, and purely secular names are borne by only twelve of them — less than ten per cent. Six are numerical designations combined with some other term; in three of the names, the second half is the nationality term *African*. Two combine numerals with a geographical location which is itself numbered: *First African Baptist Church of the Sixth District* and *Second Baptist Church of the Sixth District*. One joins a numeral to a secular grace name — *Sixth Union Baptist Church*; and one prefixes its numeral with a somewhat pretentious adjective — *Historic Second Baptist Church*. Of the six remaining secular names, three are street names and three refer to non-local places: *Law Street* is a representative example of the former, *Plymouth Rock* of the latter. (This last is almost certainly intended to allude to the faith and virtue of the Pilgrim Fathers, even more than to the mere geographic locality.)

Negro churches with religious names number 52, slightly more than a third of the total. Neither the name nor the idea of sainthood is avoided; ten of these churches commemorate saints. Nine saints are New Testament personages, but one, *Saint Rose*, is post-Biblical. In 1941 there were two Negro Baptist churches named *Saint Mary's*, a name which, although Scriptural, is rarely used by American Protestants because of their abhorrence of anything like Mariolatry.

Biblical place names total nineteen, most of which are taken from the Old Testament. The names of physical eminences are apparently considered peculiarly appropriate to churches, which represent human attempts to reach spiritual heights. Seven congregations are named for Biblical mountains: *Mount Ararat*, *Mount Carmel*, *Mount Hermon*, *Mount Moriah*, *Mount Zion*, *Olivet*, and *Zion Hill*.⁷ Biblical nations are another popular source, providing

⁷ The 1941 list contains interesting variant spellings for two of these names (Mount Herman, Mount Mariah), as well as a *Mount Parin* (properly Paran—Deuteronomy 33:2) and a *Mount Corinth*. This last shows a certain unfamiliarity with Scriptural record, as does a present-day Mount Salem, since Corinth and Salem (Jerusalem) are Biblical cities.

Galatia, Israel,⁸ and *Macedonia*, as well as *Beulah* and *Beulah Land* on a more spiritual plane. ("Thou shalt be called Hephzi-bah, and thy land Beulah: for the Lord delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married." — Isa. 62: 4.) Biblical cities supply *Antioch* and *Bethsaida*. Ebenezer is the name of a stone set up by the prophet Samuel to commemorate an Israelite victory (I Sam. 7: 12), and as such carries a symbolic significance far greater than its importance as a geographical name. Perhaps the most obscure Biblical place to be adopted in the designation of a church is *Stone Ezal* (*sic*). Its source is I Samuel 20: 19, in Jonathan's speech to David: "thou shalt go down quickly, . . . and shalt remain by the stone Ezel." A marginal gloss translates Ezel as "that sheweth the way."

Several names contain the word *Star*; several others come only indirectly from the Bible. Two churches are named *Morning Star* and *Bright Morning Star*; these are Scriptural enough, being used to describe Jesus in Revelation 22: 16. By analogy with these, two other churches have been named *Evening Star* and *Rising Star*. There is also a *Star Bethel*, an interesting compound. Bethel was the place where Jacob dreamed, as recounted in Genesis 28: 10–19; there is, however, no star involved in the episode. It seems probable that the name was originally conceived as a parallel to the familiar phrase "star of Bethlehem," which is itself not found in the Bible. Even further from specific Biblical language, although clearly religious in connotation, are such names as *New Birth*, *New Hope*, and *New Light*. The first, although not a Biblical term, expresses one of the most fundamental ideas of New Testament Christianity (cf. John 3: 3, I Peter 1: 23). The second has no such evident source, but a glance at Hebrews 6: 18–20 shows its fitness for use as the name of a Christian church. *New Light* has been a fairly common term among Protestants since the days of the Old Light and New Light Burghers in eighteenth century Scotland. Light is throughout the Bible and in all later Christian literature a symbol of spiritual understanding; when it is prefixed by *New* it generally indicates the possession, by those who use it, of a special illumination which outsiders have not yet achieved. Finally, a religious tract and a hymn

⁸ This might be regarded as a personal name, for such it originally was (cf. Genesis 32:28); however, the great majority of Biblical references to Israel are to the nation.

which have been Protestant favorites for more than two centuries are honored by churches named *Pilgrim Progress (sic)* and *Rock of Ages*.

The remaining 67 Negro Baptist congregations have names of the mixed type. Here are most of the seemingly extravagant coinages, such as the *Greater King Solomon Baptist Church*, the *Mount Pilgrim Fourth Baptist Church*, and the *Second Zion Baptist Church No. 1*. Even here, however, some elements of pattern may be isolated and described. The usual sequence of terms in mixed names consists of a numeral followed by a religious name, preceded by an adjective of size (*Greater, Lesser*) or of age (*Old, New*). Occasionally, as in the second example in this paragraph, the order is reversed.

In considering the elaborateness of such names and the large number of Negro groups which bear them, it is important to keep in mind the manner in which Negro free churches proliferate. Many are “store-front” congregations, with little formality in their services or in their organizations. Secessions are frequent. A splinter group may pay its respects to the parent congregation by adopting its name with a qualifying word (*New, Second, Greater*) added. These qualifying words may also be added simply to distinguish a new church from a totally unrelated older one which happens to bear a popular name. A large number of post office names in the United States have undergone a similar alteration. Among the Negro Baptists of New Orleans, *Zion* is the basic element in no fewer than eleven names of the mixed type: *First Zion, Greater Mount Zion, Little Zion* (two of these), *Little Zion No. 2, New Zion, Old Zion, Pleasant Zion, Second New Pleasant Zion, Second Zion, Second Zion No. 1*, and *Zion Travelers First. Pilgrim* has bred *First Pilgrim, Pilgrim Rest*, and *Mount Pilgrim Fourth*.

A few churches have names, compound and otherwise, which are the products of such elaborate or arcane mental processes that it is difficult to deal with them unaided. Attempts at correspondence with the clergymen in charge were fruitless. I can offer only conjectures regarding such names as *Amozion Baptist Church* and *Gloryland Mount Gillion Baptist Church*. In the 1941 directory an *Amazon Baptist Church* was listed, with the same street address as the present *Amozion*. During the intervening years the process of verbal corruption has evidently been at work, changing a non-local

place name to a nonce name with Biblical connotations (note the last four letters of the new version). The reason for the choice of the original name remains unknown to me. *Gloryland Mount Gillion* is the result of the merger of two congregations. *Gloryland* is clearly a non-Biblical religious place name, a common synonym for "Heaven"; *Mount Gillion*, however, is impossible to locate in either sacred or secular geography. It has been suggested to me that the name may be a portmanteau term. "Mount Gilead" appears in the seventh chapter of the book of Judges, which recounts the story of Gideon's battle with the Midianites. The first syllable of *Gilead* and the last two of *Gideon*, combined, result in the blend *Gillion*. This remains no more than a possibility. On the other hand, such a name as *Crescent Straight Life Missionary Baptist Church* may be analyzed with comparative ease, despite its unusual length and complexity. *Crescent* is a secular place name, referring to the bend in the Mississippi River at New Orleans and to that part of the city adjacent to it; *Straight Life*, for all its echoes of the insurance policy, is here evidently a secular grace name suggestive of a morally upright existence; *Missionary*, found as an element of many Baptist church names in the South, shows approval and support of evangelistic activities, as opposed to "Hard Shell" or anti-missionary congregations.

Although a number of sociological treatises deal with the Christian religion as practiced by American Negroes,⁹ the manner in which church naming reflects differences between white and Negro religion has been discussed only incidentally. The names which have been studied are those of independent and "cult" congregations, rather than those found in denominations to which a great number of Negroes belong, and are consequently not truly representative.

The differences between white and Negro Baptists in New Orleans.— between their attitudes toward the religion they practice and the world they live in — are probably mirrored quite accurately in the striking divergences of their church-naming patterns. The white congregations take their names primarily from "this present world,"

⁹ Most important of these is Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph W. Nicholson, *The Negro's Church* (New York: Institute of Social and Religious Research, 1933). Other accounts include Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington: Associated Publishers, Inc., 1921) and Maurice R. Davis, *Negroes in American Society* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1949), ch. 7, "The Negro and Religion."

and particularly from their own immediate neighborhoods. This would seem to indicate a primary concern with what religion can do in this world and for its people, rather than with the best way to prepare men for another world. In contrast, the names of almost all the Negro churches contain some religious element, although by no means all are strictly religious, and several have no direct Biblical derivation. The great popularity of definitely religious words and phrases in church names indicates that the religious life of New Orleans Negro Baptists is otherworldly in its orientation, directed toward a consideration of a better life which is not here but to come. The individual names which are most used, singly and in compounds, go far toward substantiating this contention. *Morning Star* is not only an Apocalyptic name for Jesus; it is, even within its Biblical context, a term of hope and aspiration. The star, indeed, is a symbol of aspiration in our most common proverbs. *Pilgrim* is no less a term of search and spiritual desire. “These all . . . confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they say that such things declare plainly that they seek a country” (Hebr. 11: 13, 14). *Zion* has become, in Christian history, a synonym for the Christian church and the New Jerusalem as well as the Old Testament mountain of God. Such hymns as John Newton’s “Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God,” and Thomas Kelly’s “Zion stands with hills surrounded” extol the wonders of the heavenly city and its colony upon earth. The Negro Baptists of New Orleans, if the names of their churches are any criterion, still think of themselves as seekers after a more desirable habitation, as did those other temporally handicapped people, the early Christians. Their extensive use of elaborate mixed names shows a willingness to use not only faith, but imagination and inventiveness, in the search.¹⁰

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¹⁰ As a sort of check upon the study described in this paper, I classified the white and Negro Baptist congregations of two medium-sized Midwest cities which I know well — Lincoln, Nebraska, and Waterloo, Iowa. These cities have far fewer Baptist churches than New Orleans (eight in Lincoln, seven in Waterloo); but both provide confirmation, on a smaller scale, of the basic trend noted in the Southern city: whites favoring secular names, Negroes preferring religious.

Below are tabulations of the names of Baptist churches in these cities, under the heading *Religious* and *Secular*. The appropriate subclass is indicated by words in parentheses following the name of each church. Negro congregations are identified by the letter "N" in parentheses placed before the name.

*RELIGIOUS**SECULAR*

LINCOLN

Immanuel (personal)	Belmont (neighborhood)
(N) Mount Zion (place)	First (numerical)
Temple (place)	First (Southern (numerical))
	Second (numerical)
	Sheridan Boulevard (street)

WATERLOO

(N) Antioch (place)	Burton Avenue (street)
(N) Mount Carmel (place)	First (numerical)
	Hagerman (neighborhood)
	(N) Union (secular grace name)
	Walnut Street (street)

ADDENDUM:

In a communication of June 23, 1960, Professor Kemp Malone wrote as follows: "The Amo- of the church name Amo-Zion certainly has nothing to do with Amazon. Theo o is not clear to me but the Am means African Methodist, I feel pretty sure. Perhaps the name was really Ame-Zion. If so, Ame- is not a true part of the name; it merely indicates that this particular Zion church belonged to the African Methodist Episcopal denomination."