

THE PRESENT RELIGIOUS CONDITION OF THE NEGRO IN THE UNITED STATES.

BY REV. A. F. BEARD, D.D., CORRESPONDING SECRETARY OF THE AMERICAN MISSIONARY ASSOCIATION.

The present condition of the negro people is a part of their past history. To-day is the child of yesterday. The heirs of two hundred years of slavery, following uncounted centuries of African heathenism, were four millions in number twenty-seven years ago.

At the close of a desolating civil war they were suddenly freed from bondage. Unable to read, they were ignorant of the world in which they lived. As a class they had no intelligent knowledge of the Scriptures. A few of the more highly favored in Christian families had by their contact come into the possession of certain truths of Christianity, which nevertheless they held in darkened minds. For the most part, the truths which had been told them, and which in some degree they had received, were mingled with the grossest superstitions and held without regard to the verities of the Ten Commandments. The overwhelming majority of the negro population, however, had no such privileges as these. They were in the rural districts as now. The few negroes who lived in cities and who could hope to get some worthy ideas of Christian truth were too few to be counted in the general condition.

The negro preachers—so called—were parrots. They repeated after a fashion what they thought they had heard as they had remembered it. Integrity and purity were not considered. Stealing, lying, and licentiousness were no hindrances to good and regular standing in their religious fellowship. Of chastity they did not know the meaning.

There was not enough of true Christianity to expel the African heathenism which those who were stolen from the jungle had brought with them. Transplanting did not change the tree, nor the mere succession of years its bitter fruit. Their whole life was pervaded by the belief in, and embittered by the terror of, sorcery. Voodooism and fetichism were common. Their intellectual faculties were obtuse and circumscribed beyond a few local associations; their childish ideas were rich soil for every variety of superstition.

Among the negroes it is true in towns and cities, and especially among house servants, there were exceptions, and of the more highly favored many were earnest and sincere, as well as fervent Christians. At the same time, speaking of the many and not of the few, practical heathenism was "on every plantation, in every hamlet, among the sands of the Atlantic coast, in the forests of the Carolinas; all through the black belt of Alabama and Mississippi, in swamps of Louisiana, and the bottoms of Arkansas and Tennessee." Slavery gave the African heathen a nominal Christianity, but it did not expel paganism. It did not add to faith, virtue, and to virtue, knowledge.

In the providence of God, twenty-seven years ago this lawful degradation of man came to an end. This is a short time in the history of a race.