"Right, Equity, and Justice": Rev. Henry McNeal Turner and Black Chaplaincy in the Civil War Era

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On the eve of the Emancipation Proclamation, Reverend Henry McNeal Turner issued a proclamation of his own. "A new era, a new dispensation of things, is now upon us – *to action, to action*, is the cry," he wrote, "We must now begin to think, to plan, and to legislate for ourselves."[1] Turner embodied this call to action as the first African American chaplain appointed in the Union Army. The Reverend prayed, preached, and perspired alongside thousands of Black soldiers of the First Regiment of United States Colored Troops from 1863 to 1865. In this role, he fought for the preservation of the Union and the relegation of slavery to "an eternal nonentity" with hope for a future of universal equality.[2]

As an African American chaplain, Turner represented a small but significant subset. Only twelve of the 2,300 chaplains in the armed forces were Black.[3] Assigned exclusively to Black regiments, Black chaplains served alongside both freeborn and formerly enslaved men, taking on outsized risk when entering the Confederate-controlled South. Their experiences, therefore, reflect the complex intersections of race, gender, and military service. Turner's chaplaincy combined his spiritual, community, abolitionist, political, and civil rights advocacy to support the Union war effort. In addition, as the "Washington correspondent" for *The Christian Recorder*, Turner's ministry magnified beyond the troops directly under his purview.

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[1] Henry McNeal Turner, "A Call to Action," *The Christian Recorder*, October 4, 1862.
[2] Henry McNeal Turner, "Our Washington Correspondent," *The Christian Recorder*, November 1, 1862.
[3] Ed. Jean Lee Cole, *Freedom's Witness: The Civil War Correspondence of Henry McNeal Turner* (West Virginia University Press, 2013), 10; Herman A. Norton, *Struggling for Recognition: The United States Army Chaplaincy, 1791-1865.* Vol. 2 (Office of the Chief of Chaplains Department of the Army, 1977), 94-95.

The radicalism, significance, and far-reaching impact of Black chaplains has not received appropriate scholarly attention. In contrast to white chaplains, African American spiritual leaders took on outsized risk in their service, faced sometimes violent racial discrimination, and performed a range of additional duties that included educating formerly enslaved men. The experiences of Black enlisted men like Turner shed light on African American soldiers who struggled to define, justify, and make sense of their service to a country that failed to recognize their full humanity.

Born free in South Carolina in 1834, Henry McNeal Turner spent his youth living in conditions similar to those of enslaved African Americans. Denied formal schooling, he crafted an ad-hoc education while employed at a law firm in Abbeville.[4] Turner obtained his preaching license at age nineteen, preaching throughout the South.[5] Joining the African Methodist Episcopal (A. M. E.) Church in 1858, he took the pastorate of several churches before relocating to Washington D. C., where, in 1860 as pastor of Israel Church, he achieved the rank of deacon.[6]

Like many African Americans, Turner reflected on the centrality of abolition and universal freedom in the coming of the Civil War. Writing to the *Recorder* in August of 1862, he declared, "Many of us have now concluded that the judgement of God will never cease its plagues upon this nation, till slavery and oppression shall be foiled, and right, equity, and justice shall be seen in all its grand regalia."[7] Turner drew on prophetic tradition to view the death,

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[4] M. M. Ponton, *Life and Times of Henry M. Turner: The Antecedent and Preliminary History of the Life and Times of Bishop H. M. Turner. His Boyhood, Education, and Public Career, and His Relation to His Associates, Colleagues, and Contemporaries* (Negro Universities Press, 1970), 34-35; Stephen Ward Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and African-American Religion in the South* (The University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 10. Ponton suggests Turner pursued his education through free access to books, lectures, and intellectual culture, Angell states his employers, as a result of his aptitude, educated him in arithmetic history, law, and theology.
[5] Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner*, 23-25.
[6] Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner*, 35.
[7] Henry McNeal Turner, "Washington Correspondence," *The Christian Recorder,* August 30, 1862.

destruction, and disorder of the war as Biblical retribution.[8] He criticized the overly cautious and often ineffective polices of Lincoln's administration. "They will have a hard time raising negro regiments to place in front of the battle or anywhere else," Turner wrote, "unless freedom, eternal freedom, is guaranteed to them, their children, and their brethren."[9] He continued, "I suppose no colored man in the nation would have any objection to going anywhere, if this government pay them for their two hundred and forty years' work."[10]

However, following Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, Turner emerged as a top military recruiter. "The proclamation of President Lincoln has banished the fog, and silenced the doubt," he declared.[11] The First Regiment of United States Colored Troops organized largely due to his efforts, using Israel Church as de-facto recruiting station.[12] Initial optimism that Black enlisted men would be treated fairly and equally were soon disproven.[13] African American soldiers faced unsanitary conditions, subpar uniforms and equipment, inequitable pay, insufficient medical care, were assigned to less desirable campaigns, and barred from the ranks of commissioned officers.[14] Despite this, Black men enlisted at higher rates than white Americans

On January 4, 1863, Turner wrote, "I would not be surprised to see myself carrying a musket before long."[15] Soon after, Lincoln appointed Turner chaplain of the First Regiment of

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[8] For more on Turner's prophetic persona, see: Andre E. Johnson, *The Forgotten Prophet: Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and the African American Prophetic Tradition* (Lexington Books, 2012), 16-17.
[9] Turner, "For the Christian Recorder," *The Christian Recorder*, July 19, 1862.
[10] Turner, "Washington Correspondence," *The Christian Recorder*, August 30, 1862.
[11] Turner, "A Call to Action," *The Christian Recorder*, October 4, 1862.
[12] Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner*, 52.
[13] Brian Taylor, *Fighting for Citizenship: Black Northerners and the Debate over Military Service in the Civil War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 69-78.
[14] John David Smith, *Lincoln and the U. S. Colored Troops* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2013), 55-59. African American soldiers received $10 per month, with $3 deducted for clothing, compared to the $13 per month salary offered to white soldiers. African Americans soldiers also did not receive the $100 bounty awarded to white soldiers. Inequitable pay would not be rectified until Congress passed an order granting all African American enlisted men (formerly enslaved and free born) retroactive pay in March of 1865.
[15] Turner, "Washington Correspondence," *The Christian Recorder,* January 10, 1863.

United States Colored Troops.[16] Turner spent the remainder of the war traveling and fighting side-by-side with his regiment. In July of 1864, he reminded his readers, "I am actually on the field of battle." When stationed in North Carolina, Turner administered medicine, distributed foodstuffs, and even bestowed his "surgical skill" on injured men.[17] Turner described the war as "a contest of blood and carnage … which was destined to crimson acres of land with human gore, and cover hundreds of battlefields with putrescent carcasses and bleaching bones."[18] It was in this environment that he ministered the centrality of piety, racial uplift, and education.

Turner's prime responsibility was the spiritual wellbeing of his troops. He praised frequent of religious services and reported the partial organization of an AME church in Virginia.[19] By late 1864, Turner recruited an additional preacher to assist him with his duties. The first A. M. E. church in North Carolina organized under Turner's charge.[20] Several men requested baptism by immersion, representing both a literal and figurative cleansing, one that symbolized the birth of the new nation many Black soldiers fought to create.[21]

Turner also linked military service to political equality, believing enlistment allowed "the negro [to] engrave his bravery so deep in the rock of history, that the most corroding elements of time will never efface it." Black men would prove their honor, effectiveness, and competence through bloodshed. He closely tied notions of African American manhood to citizenship claims. "Let me front my enemy and then demand my courage," Turner wrote.[22] When praising formerly

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[16] As he immediately contracted small pox, he did not rejoin until the spring of 1864 (Cole, *Freedom's Witness*, 119).
[17] Turner, "Army Correspondence," *The Christian Recorder,* March 4, 1865.
[18] Turner, *Fifteenth Amendment: A Speech on the Benefits Accruing from the Ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, and its Incorporation into the United States Constitution. Delivered at the Celebration Held in Macon, Ga., April 19, 1870, by Hon. Henry M. Turner*. N.p., 1870.
[19] Turner, "Army Correspondence," *The Christian Recorder,* September 24, 1864; "Army Correspondence," *The Christian Recorder,* October 8, 1864. In October, he wrote "a glorious revival is going on in our regiments, and stronger appeals for mercy were never heard from human lips."
[20] Turner, "Army Correspondence," *The Christian Recorder,* March 4, 1865.
[21] Turner, "Army Correspondence," *The Christian Recorder,* September 24, 1864.
[22] Turner, "Washington Correspondence," *The Christian Recorder,* January 31, 1863.

enslaved men, he argued freedom immediately "infuse[d] into [them] all the manhood and energy necessary for any purpose of life."[23]

Perhaps his most important contribution was education. Turner distributed spelling books, newspapers, and religious pamphlets. He also requested copies of the Emancipation Proclamation, Congressional enactments, and legal documents to educate men on their rights in freedom.[24] "There never was such an anxiety to learn to read and write as there is now in the colored regiments," he wrote.[25] Leisure hours combined spiritual and educational pursuits, bringing men together "in mutual benefit."[26] Turner declared the men eager "to prepare for whatever position the future may offer them."[27] He viewed his chaplaincy as critical to intellectual achievement and political consciousness. "I still hope to leave my regiment with every man in it reading and writing. If I can accomplish that, I shall say to myself, well done!" he wrote in July of 1865 after the war's close.[28]

Turner speculated about the significance of the Civil War, emancipation, and promises for a united future. Although praising the bravery of Black regiments, he cautioned against idleness. "There is a broad arena of work still lying before us," he wrote, "Theoretical, if not practical, freedom has been secured to the colored race, and the nation pledged to its maintenance." Referring to emancipation as a "superficial freedom," Turner recognized that political equality would require hard-fought battles.[29] As the first Black chaplain in the Union Army, Turner's ministry extended beyond the spiritual to prepare enlisted men for a future as

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[23] Turner, "From Chaplain Turner," *The Christian Recorder*, June 25, 1864.
[24] Turner, "Army Correspondence," *The Christian Recorder,* May 6, 1865
[25] Turner, "Army Correspondence," *The Christian Recorder,* October 8, 1864.
[26] Turner, "Army Correspondence," *The Christian Recorder,* September 3, 1864
[27] Turner, "Army Correspondence," *The Christian Recorder*, December 17, 1864.
[28] Turner, "Army Correspondence," *The Christian Recorder*, July 22, 1865.
[29] Turner, "Army Correspondence," *The Christian Recorder*, August 5, 1865.

citizens. He harnessed spiritual tradition, piety, manhood, racial uplift, and education as pathways for African American political equality. Exploring the intersections of religion, gender, race, and civil rights activism within the experiences of Black chaplains provides an important framework for considering the role of spiritual ministry in the post-war period.

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