

Sketches in Color Elizabeth Kilham (1870)

Elizabeth Kilham is the pen name of an otherwise anonymous white woman from somewhere in the northern states, who, following the Civil War, worked in Virginia as a schoolteacher for emancipated African Americans (“freedmen”). She was one of several hundred white women recruited by northern missionary or aid societies to do such work in southern states during Reconstruction. Kilham published essays and stories about her experiences in the south for magazines published in the north. In the essay excerpted here, she describes a visit she made, with other white northerners, to a charismatic worship service held by an independent black congregation, whose preacher she calls “Old Billy.” Having been disillusioned in her expectations about the spirituality of the formerly enslaved, Kilham now aims to undeceive her readers as well.

Billy announced his text. I have forgotten chapter and verse, but almost anything would answer the purpose, being sure to fit some one of the numerous subjects embraced in that discourse, which went entirely through the Bible, from the Creation to the last chapter of Revelation. In the course of his remarks, he stated some facts concerning the transgression and consequent punishment of Adam and Eve which have not, I think, been brought to light by the researches of any commentator.

“Eve was jus’ like all the women; they’s such hard-headed creatures that when they gets their minds set, you can’t never ’suede them outta it. So when Eve done made up her mind to eat that there apple, she’d ha’ ate it if the angel Gabriel had been a-standin’ right there. But Adam wouldn’t never ha’ ate it at all if Eve hadn’t ’sueded him. An’ jus’ as he was swallowin’ the firs’ piece, he felt mighty sorry, an’ he tried to spit it out, but it done gone too far down; an’ Eve, she tol’ him not to make a fool of hisself but jus’ eat the res’. So he done eat it up, an’ ya knows, my brethren, what come to him then: how he got drove outta the garden an’ ’bliged to work for a livin’. The women oughta work, that’s so; for if it hadn’t ha’ been for Eve, we wouldn’t none of us ha’ been ’bliged to work at all.”

The sisters sat in “solemn silence all” under this portion of the discourse; but the brethren manifested their appreciation audibly.

The sermon was divided and subdivided and extended to such a length that Old Billy’s warmest admirers began to show signs of weariness before the close. [...] Then followed a prayer, the congregation kneeling and repeating, as is their frequent custom, each sentence after the minister—a somewhat noisy exercise and not calculated to promote devotional feelings. [...] The prayer threatened to be as long as the sermon, for Billy remembered everybody, calling them by name, until it seemed as if he must need a directory to help him through. But it was finished at last, and he came down from the pulpit and stood within the railing.

Then began one of those scenes which, when read of, seem the exaggerations of a disordered imagination and, when witnessed, leave an impression like the memory of some horrid nightmare—so wild is the torrent of excitement that, sweeping away reason and sense, tosses

men and women upon its waves, mingling the words of religion with the howlings of wild beasts and the ravings of madmen.

The leader, on these occasions, usually starts a hymn, in which the congregation join. Sometimes all sing together; sometimes the leader and the congregation sing alternate lines; [or] again, he sings the verse throughout, the congregation only giving the chorus. In the pauses between the hymns, some brother or sister give[s] their "experience," always talking in a scream and as if crying—a natural tone of voice not being considered suitable for such occasions—while the others clap their hands, stamp, and shout, "Yes, yes," "That's so," "Praise the Lord"; and the moment the speaker pauses, some voice starts a hymn, the leading sentiment of which harmonizes with what has just been said. Their quickness in finding hymns appropriate to the different phases of experience and expressions of feeling is something wonderful.

Two or three hymns are usually sung before they get warmed up to the talking. The first one was, as is almost invariably the case in negro meetings, "When I Read My Title Clear." This seems to be their chief favorite; I have heard it sung six times in the course of an evening, to different tunes. Simultaneously with the first note of the hymn began a tapping of feet by the whole congregation, gradually increasing to a stamp as the exercises proceeded, until the noise was deafening; and as the excitement increased, one and another would spring from their seats and jump up and down, uttering shriek after shriek, while from all parts of the house came cries of "Hallelujah," "Glory to God," "Jus' now, Lord, come jus' now," "Amen," and occasionally a prolonged, shrill whoop, like nothing earthly unless it be some savage war cry. At the close of the first hymn, without a moment's pause, they struck into another [...]

At the close of [a third] hymn, there was a pause, and a woman rose and began, "My dear brethren and sisters, I feel, I feel, I feel"—then, apparently unable to find words, she burst into a hymn, in which the others joined. [...] Another sister followed, who, after a lengthy expression of her feelings, closed by saying:

"I goes to some churches, an' I sees all the folks sittin' quiet an' still, like they dunno what the Holy Spirit am. But I finds in my Bible that when a man or a woman gets full of the Holy Spirit, if they should hol' their peace, the stones would cry out; and if the power of God can make the stones cry out, how can it help makin' us poor creatures cry out, who feels to praise him for his mercy. Not make a noise! Why, we makes a noise 'bout everything else; but they tells us we mustn't make no noise to praise the Lord. I don't want no such 'ligion as that there. I wants to go to heaven in the good ol' way. An' my brethren and sisters, I wants ya all to pray for me, that when I gets to heaven, I won't never come back 'gain." [...]

Several of the sisters spoke, all closing with the same words: "I hopes ya'll all pray for me, that when I gets to heaven, I won't never come back." The women, by the way, go upon the principle of "early and often" in speaking and, frequently in these meetings, monopolize the greater part of the time. It was some time before any of the brethren had a chance [...]

Then [Billy] proceeded to "*reform* the brethren an' sisters that Sis Sally Tolliver done 'ceased"—(they never say a person is dead; always she "done 'ceased")—"this evenin' at four 'clock, an' her funeral will be preached in our place of worship on Chuseday (Tuesday) evenin'. Sis Sally,

as you all know, was a good woman, an' she have gone where sickness an' sorrow am no mo', and where they don't die no mo'. Sing now, all sing 'Jesus Said He Wouldn't Die No Mo'.'"

Then we heard that hymn, the strangest, wildest, most meaningless of all that the negroes sing, and, at the same time, the one which seems to excite them the most powerfully—not so much, I imagine, by the words as the music, which is utterly indescribable, almost unearthly, with its sudden changes, each one ushered in by a long, quavering shriek.

Jesus said he wouldn't die no mo',
(Said he wouldn't die no mo'.)
 so, my dear childrens, don't ya fear.
(Said he wouldn't die no mo'.)

The Lord tol' Moses what to do:
(Said he wouldn't die no mo'.)
 "Lead the children of Israel through."
(Said he wouldn't die no mo'.)

[...]

My shoes are washed in Jesus' blood,
(Said he wouldn't die no mo'.)
 an' I am travellin' home to God.
(Said he wouldn't die no mo'.)

[...] During the singing of this hymn, the excitement, which had been gradually increasing with each change in the exercises, reached its height. Men stamped, groaned, shouted, clapped their hands; women shrieked and sobbed, two or three tore off their bonnets and threw them across the church, trampled their shawls underfoot, and sprang into the air, it seemed almost to their own height, again and again, until they fell exhausted and were carried to one side, where they lay stiff and rigid like the dead. No one paid them any further attention, but wilder grew the excitement, louder the shrieks, more violent the stamping, while through and above it all—over and over again, each time faster and louder—rose the refrain, "Jesus said he wouldn't die no mo'!"

A fog seemed to fill the church; the lights burned dimly, the air was close, almost to suffocation; an invisible power seemed to hold us in its iron grasp; the excitement was working upon us also and sent the blood surging in wild torrents to the brain, [which] reeled in darkened terror under the shock. A few moments more, and I think we should have shrieked in unison with the crowd.

We worked our way through the struggling mass, sometimes pushed and beaten back by those who, with set eyeballs and rigid faces—dead, for the time, to things external—were not conscious [of] what they did. With the first breath of cool night air upon our faces, the excitement vanished; but the strain upon the nervous system had been too great for it to recover at once its usual tone. More than one of the party leaned against the wall and burst into hysterical tears; even strong men were shaken and stood trembling and exhausted.

It has been much the custom to look upon the excitement of these meetings, and its effects, as an amusing, seriocomic exhibition; but there is more than comic or amusing, there is something of the terrible, in a power that makes itself felt alike by impressionable ignorance and—though not so quickly, as surely—by the self-control and poise of character [that are] the natural outgrowth of enlightenment, education, and knowledge of the truth. It is a humiliating admission that the physical in great measure dominates the mental, but it is true. Nerves of steel and an iron will might pass through such scenes unmoved; I cannot believe it possible of any nature cast in the common mold of our humanity. [...]

The question is frequently asked of teachers of freedmen—that is, it is so far a question that it terminates in a mark of interrogation, but it is really an affirmation with an upward inflection, to which an assent is expected as a matter of course: “You find them a universally religious people, do you not?” I know that the answer, according with the honest belief, is generally, “Yes,” and I know that I shall place myself in a small and unpopular minority by answering, “No”; yet, in reviewing my observations and experience, that is the only answer I can truthfully give.

Before going among the freedmen, I held, in common with others, the idea that they were naturally religious and that there was both reality and depth in their religious life. “Perfect through suffering,” “purified in the fires,” were in our minds; and we judged that they who had so greatly suffered must needs be thereby greatly purified and raised to a higher plane of religious life than we had attained. [...] And so thinking, we forgot that faith is born of knowledge, and that this was withheld from them. We forgot that their inability to read made the truths and teachings of the Bible a dead letter to most of them; that the only instruction they received was from men ignorant as themselves, who jumbled together words and phrases only half caught, and not at all understood, in one mass of senseless jargon; and that all their ideas of religion were gathered in noisy meetings, where those who shouted the loudest and jumped the highest were the best Christians.

Our sympathy overruled our judgment and led us into a great mistake in our work. In everything else, we strove to teach and elevate the freedmen; in this, most important of all, we sat humbly down to be learners instead of teachers. The managers of the societies had the same idea and frequently, when teachers lamented the loss of church privileges, would say, “Why, you can go to the colored churches, can you not?”—never, apparently, suspecting that there might be any lack of food, mental or spiritual. It was a mistake born of reverence and humility, but nevertheless a mistake and one that cannot now be remedied; for the molding stage of freedom, when these people were as wax in our hands, has passed. By our presence and silence, we sanctioned their extravagances; and they stand now self-confident, proof against remonstrance and instruction.

Source: Elizabeth Kilham, “Sketches in Color: Fourth,” *Putnam’s Magazine*, March 1870, 304-311, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/umn.31951002805973p>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. An additional paragraph break inserted to more clearly signal a transition. Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation emended in line with modern American conventions. Two run-on sentences broken up. Dialectal speech retained from the source publication but re-rendered closer to standard English for readability. The use of italics to highlight Billy’s use of *reform* for *inform* replicates the source, as does the insertion of *Tuesday* in parentheses to clarify the meaning of *Chuseday*. Letters or words in square brackets are interpolations by Duffy, either to correct grammatical infelicities in Kilham’s prose or to clarify the excerpted text. Song lyrics reformatted for readability. The words *directory* and *heaven*, capitalized in the source, have been converted here to lowercase; so too divine pronouns. The use of lowercase for *negro* and *freedmen* reproduces the usage of the source publication.

These edited excerpts from Kilham’s essay are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.

See also: What little is known about Kilham, beyond what she discloses in her own writing about her experiences while living in Virginia and Washington DC, comes from the following source: “Our Letter Box,” *Our Young Folks*, November 1871, 701, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nc01.ark:/13960/t7jq25v99>.



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