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The Beginning of the End: A Look at the Causes of the Schism in the Methodist Episcopal Church

Rebecca Rowe
Hollins University

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Rebecca Rowe: Essay

When Professor Doan told our Antebellum America class that we would need to write a term paper about anything or anyone from the antebellum period, I instantly thought about the splits seen in churches such as the Baptist and Methodist churches. I knew very little about the schisms besides that they had happened. I chose to focus on the Methodist schism, Googled it, and discovered that it had happened in 1844 and that the issue with Bishop Andrew was the reason the southern churches used to leave the Methodist Episcopal Church. Next, I went to the library and located the Methodism section. I literally checked out every book about Methodism history trying to discover something that I could write about the schism.

At first, I wanted to discuss the schism itself and its repercussions, but I quickly discovered that, while interesting, it was a much broader topic than I could discuss in eighteen to twenty pages. I then found a source on Google Books, History of the Great Secession from the Methodist Episcopal Church in the Year 1845, a book commissioned by the Methodist Episcopal Church to study the causes of the schism at the General Conference of 1845. I realized that most of my search results focused on what had happened because of the schism, but that very few scholars had delved into the causes. Charles Elliott, the writer of the said book, argued that the schism came about because of slavery, an opinion that with which I whole-heartedly agree, but he did not discuss why slavery caused the schism.

I started looking into the changes occurring throughout the church and the country, and I found a three things: (1) throughout the most of the life of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the majority of the members of the church were located in the south, but that changed twelve short years before the schism; (2) pro- and anti-slavery beliefs changed drastically from 1792 to 1844; (3) these changes can be seen in the Discipline, the publication of rules and regulations of the General Conference. From there, I generated an argument encompassing the first two facts while demonstrating how they can be seen in the Discipline.

My biggest research problem came when I tried to find the Disciplines for 1784 through 1844, many of which no longer exist or exist in original form in libraries beyond my reach. Luckily, Charles Elliott also included in his writing complete sections on slavery in the Disciplines for the years I needed. The most important lesson I learned was to start by researching your topic broadly because your intended sub-topic may change.

The Beginning of the End:
A Look at the Causes of the Schism in the Methodist Episcopal Church

On June 1, 1844, Bishop James Osgood Andrew walked down a New York City street on his way to the Methodist Episcopal General Conference. Before him stood both the promise of an unwanted weight lifted and a life turned upside down. Trusting in his God, he strode into Greene Street Methodist-Episcopal Church minutes before 8:30 a.m. Around him were men of differing backgrounds and beliefs: there was James Finley, who had brought forward the accursed and blessed resolution¹ and who would now not meet Andrew's eyes; just past Finley was Finley's co-signer, Joseph Trimble; on the other side of the aisle, stood a group of men with somber yet determined faces, among them Lovick Pierce and William Capers, some of the many men who fought for Andrew's right that was even then under trial.²

The glares and stares had all started because of an elderly lady's kindness. Andrew, who, by some accounts, had never really wanted to be a Bishop but to preach God's word, had inherited a few slaves from an elderly family friend then from his wife. He was unable to set the slaves free because he lived in Georgia. This had been discovered by some of the more forceful

¹ This resolution called for Bishop Andrew to be at the very least demoted from Bishop, an office that had all but been forced on Andrew, and made a preacher again.

² Some sources on the Methodist Episcopal Church and its schism include Gross Alexander, *A History of the Methodist Church, South, in the United States*. (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1894), http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&id=Ah4RAAAIAAJ&dq=%22methodist+episcopal+church+south%22&printsec=frontcover&source=bll&ots=JQzHRbUgrj&sig=GLREj2CIuzbyzvV28ReLPqEmtHk&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=14&ct=result#v=onepage&q&f=false (accessed on September 19, 2012); Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*. (New York: G. Lane & P. P. Sandford, 1840); Charles Elliott, *History of the Great Secession from the Methodist Episcopal Church in the Year 1845* (Cincinnati: Swormstedt & Poe, 1855), http://books.google.com/books?id=bBORAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=methodist+discipline+south&source=bl&ots=DXZm7VVS6s&sig=Fe3M9sCp-3rej_Iu9_8Xilet-D0&hl=en&sa=X&ei=61OFUMHoKs3p0QH404DAAQ&ved=0CFEQ6AEwBQ#v=onepage&q&f=false (accessed October 23, 2012); Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965); John Nelson Norwood, *The Schism in the Methodist Episcopal Church 1844: A Study of Slavery and Ecclesiastical Politics*. (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1976).

anti-slavery members of the Conference weeks before it started. When Andrew became aware of the fact, he “determined...to resign, for he thought this action might allay the excitement and prevent a dangerous situation from arising.”³ His southern brethren encouraged him to remain a Bishop so as to finally bring the issue of slavery to the forefront and force the delegates to reach an understanding on the slavery issue.

Only the day before, the bishops, excluding Andrew, of course, had decided to table Andrew’s embarrassment. However, the argument that had been going on for over a fortnight would not die that easily. Sometime during the morning session, Bishop Elijah Hedding withdrew his name from the decision to table Andrew’s trial until another General Conference. The Bishops’ motion was tabled, and almost immediately, Jesse Peck called for a vote to suspend Andrew. The ayes and noes were counted: Andrew had been defeated. Moments later, Lovick Pierce “gave notice that a protest would be presented by the minority on this vote.”⁴ Within days, the Conference and church split in two for nearly a hundred years.

What caused this? How could one man with the wrong kind of possessions completely split a church in two? Slavery in the Methodist Episcopal Church had been just as big an issue as it was in American politics. At the beginning of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the south had many more members than the north, but as the population in the north grew, so did the number of Methodists residing in the north. In addition, after 1820, anti-slavery sentiment began to strengthen in the north while white southerners began to fight for their right to own slaves. In fact, William Warren Sweet argues “that the church does not lead public opinion on such matters

³ William Warren Sweet, *Methodism in American History* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1953), 246.

⁴ Methodist Episcopal Church, *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1844*, (New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1855), 2: 85,
<http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=MtEYAAAAYAAJ&oi=fnd&pp=PA3&dq=journals+of+the+genera+l+conference+of+the+methodist+episcepis+church&ots=YWHvZaBJ0f&sig=DP-6jvpaVMYxIEoi3NpbZSACLps#v=onepage&q&f=false> (accessed September 19, 2012).

as the slavery issue, but, rather, tends to follow public opinion,” so when the public opinion in the north and south changed, so did the opinion of the churches in those areas.⁵ The only aspect of slavery that both sides seemed to be able to agree on was that they should convert the slaves, and the north and south could not even agree on what was the best manner to do that. The proportion of northern members to southern members at General Conference finally shifted in favor of the north in 1832, and churches in the north finally had the ability to change rules against slavery. Simply put, the power shifted from the south, but the south refused to give up their slaves. One way this change in power can be seen is how the Discipline, the guidelines for the church set out by the General Conference, went back and forth on the slavery issue as power plays were successfully passed or defeated. Therefore, the schism can be seen as caused primarily by the changing geographical make-up of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the changing ideas on slavery in the north and south. This change can be seen through the rules on slavery expressed in the Discipline from the Revolutionary War to the schism.

When the Methodist Episcopal Church was founded in America, it was founded among and by evangelicals based in New York City, Baltimore, and the Chesapeake region. Methodism was considered an extreme denomination of religion in part because it preached the idea that a person should do good works to show one's faith. Afraid of Tom Paine-like deists, Christians started even before the birth of America to reform their religion. The product was primarily evangelical denominations such as Methodist, Baptist and Presbyterian that allowed the democracy that was currently being created in the American government to reside in the religion they loved.⁶ Before 1784, Methodism was actually stronger in the north because John Wesley and his followers had started in places like New York City, which is firmly fixed in the north,

⁵ Sweet, *Methodism in American History*, 233.

⁶ John B. Boles, *The Great Revival: 1787-1805*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1972, 12,13.

and Baltimore, which is on the edge of the south. As time went on, religious revivals became popular in many parts of America, and with the reform of religion often came Methodism. By 1784, Methodism was spreading in the south much more quickly than in the north.

Although the geographical sections of the church were not always clearly established, by 1844, the lines were clear between the north and the south. At the General Conference of 1844, delegates from fourteen conferences (Virginia, Kentucky, Missouri, Holston, Georgia, North Carolina, Illinois, Memphis, Arkansas, Mississippi, Texas, Alabama, Tennessee, and South Carolina) warned the General Conference “that the continued agitation on the subject of slavery and abolition in a portion of the church; the frequent action on that subject in the General Conference; and especially the extra-judicial proceedings against Bishop Andrew... must produce a state of things in the South which renders a continuance of the jurisdiction of this General Conference over these Conferences inconsistent with the success of the ministry in the slaveholding states.”⁷ These Conferences formed the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. These Conferences covered those states, territories, and lone Republic mentioned as well as part of Florida. The northern churches consisted of the following Conferences: New York, Providence, New England, Maine, New Hampshire, Troy, Black River, Oneida, Genesee, Erie, Pittsburg, Ohio, North Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Rock River, Baltimore,⁸ Philadelphia, and New Jersey.⁹

By clearly defining the north and south sections of the Methodist-Episcopal Church, one can easily see how the population changed between the two over time. Starting in 1780, the south¹⁰ had the clear majority of members, as can be seen in Graph 1.¹¹ Around 1804, the

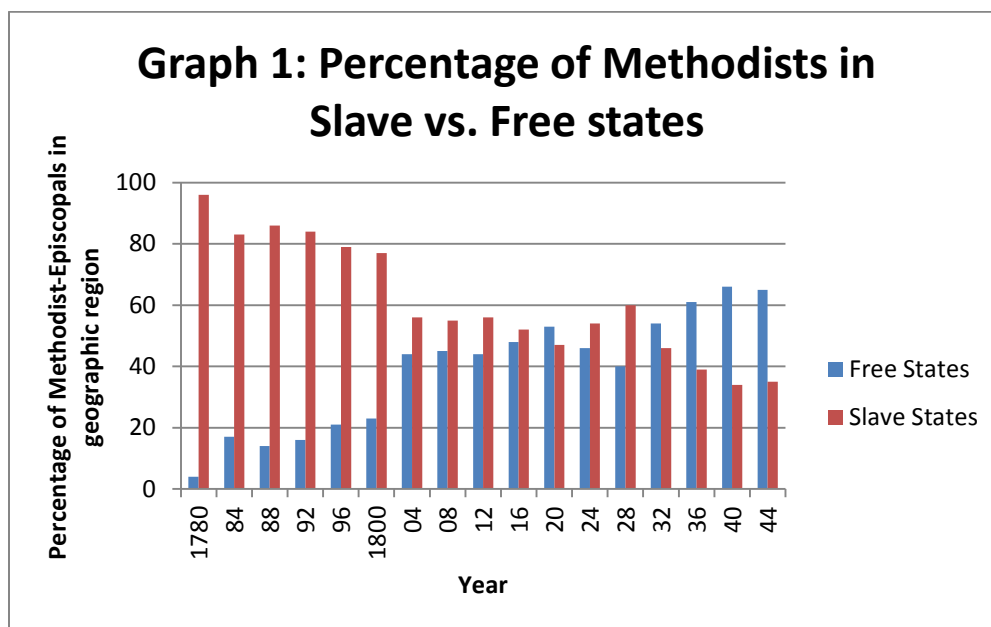
⁷ Church, Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Vol. 2 1855, 109.

⁸ The Baltimore Conference, though located in a slave state, did not split with the other conferences located in slave states.

⁹ Ibid., 2-3.

¹⁰ For the remainder of the paper, the south conferences will be those that eventually form the Methodist-Episcopal Church, South, and the north will be those conferences that stay in the church. Slave or free indicates what the state the Conference was located in was legally. Mostly, these match (southern churches were in slave

percentages became more equal, and in 1820, the north even had more members. By 1832, the north had surpassed the south in number of members, which stayed consistent right up to the split.



The importance of this shift in member base comes from way the General Conference was organized. The north simply had more people to convert to Methodism than the south. After the south had converted most of the people living there, Methodists started focusing on the unconquered north. Whereas every “General Conference from 1784 to 1824, with the exception of

states, northern churches were in free states), but some conferences, such as Baltimore, are located in slaveholding states but did not secede from the main church. These conferences are mostly in the states that became border states in the Civil War, like Maryland, seventeen years after the schism.

¹¹ For my data, from 1773 till 1828, every single member of the Methodist-Episcopal Church is recorded in a synopsis of the Annual Conferences, but after that, they begin to list just the representatives for each conference (the idea being that for every two thousand members there would be two representatives, one preacher and one layman, at the conference). The difference here is slaveholding states versus non-slaveholding states, not what conferences split from the main church and which stayed. Methodist Episcopal Church, *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the Years 1772-1828* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), http://books.google.com/books?id=vj4mQAAlAAJ&pg=PA29&lpg=PA29&dq=methodist+general+conference+1788&source=bl&ots=xnJfmOerOj&sig=um57Hwdkulg6HwtGwou_Jj1nikM&hl=en&sa=X&ei=sJOGUMDGKvGX0gHQyYD4DQ&ved=0CEcQ6AEwAw#v=onepage&q&f=false (accessed October 23, 2012); Methodist Episcopal Church, *Journals of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1855), 1:

<http://books.google.com/books?id=yNAYAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA461&dq=methodist+episcopal+general+conference+1832,+1836&hl=en&sa=X&ei=hl6IUOTgLo6y0QGktoHQCg&ved=0CEMQ6AEwAw#v=onepage&q=1836&f=false> (accessed October 24, 2012); Methodist Episcopal Church, *General Conference*, Vol. 2.

that of 1812, met in the city of Baltimore,” in the slave state of Maryland, “for the simple reason that Baltimore remained during all that period the center of American Methodism,” by 1828 the General Conference had moved to New York, the new center of American Methodism.¹² This site move demonstrated the shift of member base. Following the model set out by the American government, two representatives, one preacher and one layman for every two thousand members, were included in the General Conference. As the number of members in the north grew, so did the number of delegates in the General Conference. By 1844, they had enough of a majority to create rules for all American Methodists that were increasingly anti-slavery. The south had no power to stop them, so they were forced, in their own minds, to leave.

Other changes that contributed to the schism were occurring in the Methodist Episcopal Church besides the Methodist population shifting from the south to the north: predominantly, slavery and anti-slavery sentiments were changing during this time period throughout the country. In the beginning of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the church was “a pioneer anti-slavery institution.”¹³ However, by the third decade of the nineteenth century, evangelicals of all American denominations, including Methodists, “had retreated from their early antislavery stand.”¹⁴ This was partly because of southerners’ growing pro-slavery attitude and partly because of northerners’ dislike for black people. However, as America crept into the 1840s, northerners became less tolerant of slavery as southerners became less tolerant of anti-slavery, eventually leading to cessions and schisms such as the one in the Methodist Church.

¹² Sweet *Methodism in American History*, 229.

¹³ Norwood *Schism*, 9.

¹⁴ Anne C. Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order, 1800-1860*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 190.

Paul Finkleman argues that the “most common Northern discussion of slavery is what we might call ‘abstention,’” leaving the issue of slavery to the Christians in the south.¹⁵ The “Founders...firmly believed that the Revolution’s goals were intimately linked with the sanctity of private property” and feared secession of the slave states which ensured that even those Founders that disliked slavery were unlikely to try to eradicate it.¹⁶ Out of fear of violence similar to the French Revolution, the “North’s antislavery consensus began quietly to melt away.”¹⁷ Despite this decline in desire for a national change in slavery after the American Revolution, by “the 1790’s, legislation for the gradual extinction of slavery was being enacted or considered in every Northern state. The idea of owning slaves had obviously become extremely repugnant to many white Americans.”¹⁸ James Brewer Stewart argues that this change came from the egalitarian and anti-slavery influence of the European Enlightenment and from the fact that “Christian sanctions for enslavement...began to appear suspect to Americans who now felt that institutions out to be purged of ‘superstition.’”¹⁹ Slavery began to appear as barbaric to the northerners who were caught up in the progress offered by the Enlightenment, and the Biblical reasoning that God approved slavery simply because He had let it continue for so long was no longer enough cause to keep slavery for northerners.

Even the fervor for state abolition of slavery died by 1816, partly because of fear. The American people believed “that in France anticlericalism, property confiscation, and political purges had overwhelmed orderly republican reform.”²⁰ The United States had anti-slaveholderism, the threat of the confiscation of slave property, and the unbalance of free and

¹⁵ Paul Finkelman, *Defending Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Old South*. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003), 3.

¹⁶ James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

slave states. With so many similarities, Americans believed they could not afford to follow the same path as the French. Slave rebellions were also causing both southerners and northerners to worry. Thus, stricter slave laws, like the fugitive slave law, were introduced, and with the invention of Eli Whitney's cotton gin, slaves were needed more than ever. By 1816, most anti-slavery feeling had moved in the direction of colonization.

Those factors that had motivated the north to subdue their anti-slavery ideals and other incentives were perpetuating the idea of pro-slavery in the south. When the Constitution was created, it also created the need for states to gather more states with a similar ideology and socio-economic base. Because of this, southerners had to fight for the right of slavery as new states were introduced. If the free states ever did get that coveted majority, "slave states would have to contend with the ideas and beliefs of Americans from the emerging free states who increasingly challenged the religious, moral, political, and social legitimacy of slavery."²¹ By 1820, these pro-slavery beliefs had solidified while southerners began to find ways to explain why slavery was acceptable, including reasons such as "black inferiority; that slavery is both universal and natural in all societies; and that Southern slavery is the most humane system of slavery ever devised because it protects and nurtures the slaves, who are inferior beings in need of care and supervision."²² In 1816, the Methodist Episcopal Church even "admitted that 'under the present existing circumstances in relation to slavery, little can be done to abolish a practice so contrary to the principles of moral justice'" because slavery was "'past remedy.'"²³ If the church was unwilling to admit that slavery was even an existing problem and politicians were doing nothing to change the situation, it is no surprise that southerners were content with the "sin" of slavery continuing in their lives. In fact, Anne C. Loveland argues that the "churches' retreat from

²¹ Finkelman *Defending Slavery*, 25.

²² *Ibid.*, 26.

²³ Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, 191.

antislavery would not have been so important a factor in shaping the southern evangelical view had some ministers in the South continued to voice antislavery opinions,” but when they did not, southerners believed their pro-slavery ideals more firmly.²⁴

As “antislavery feeling receded, Americans in both sections began to transfer their concerns about slavery to the American Colonization Society.”²⁵ This society proposed to move African-Americans “back” to Africa, assuaging the worries of those who wondered what would happen to the slaves after they were freed. Southerners were relieved to know that there was a plan in place for the time when, not if, the rising number of slaves planned an insurrection. While most Americans could agree on this plan, many evangelicals believed that the abolitionists who disagreed with colonization “endangered the cause of religion in the South.”²⁶ Some masters believed that ministers who preached to slaves were slipping their abolitionist views to the slaves. After the Nat Turner rebellion and a British Jamaica slave rebellion in 1831 led by devout Christian slaves, and as abolitionists got more vocal in the 1830s, preachers had an even harder time of convincing southern slaveholders that they were innocent of abolitionism, and this was destroying the religion of the masters as well as the slaves.

With improved transportation and new inventions that allowed for mass production, the market revolution had swept across the north by the 1820s while the industrial revolution introduced a new line of work in the north as early as the late 1780s. This “change emphasized the differences between the North and the South and urged on the sectionalization of the country;” the industrialists and subsistence farmers in the north had no need for slaves while those in the south believed their economy hinged on the necessity of slaves.²⁷ Donald G.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 192.

²⁵ Stewart *Holy Warriors*, 29.

²⁶ Loveland *Southern Evangelicals*, 193.

²⁷ Norwood *Schism*, 24.

Mathews argues that the reason those with anti-slavery beliefs in the south succumbed to slavery ideals “lay not only in the great cotton [sic] boom which convinced many whites that slavery was necessary, and in the laws which discouraged manumission, but also in the public opposition to any criticism of slavery.”²⁸ Those in the north wrote off slavery as an unforgivable sin and those in the south found ways to justify slavery. The change happening across the country took its effect on the Methodist Episcopal Church, too. By 1834, the northerners were more often abolitionists. They began to publish appeals against slavery, and this “abolitionist method of attack was not calculated to make the southern Methodist love his northern brother more loyally,” and a distrust began that would eventually lead to the secession of the southern conferences.²⁹

The changes in population concentration and shifting ideals unfolded in the evolution of the Methodist Discipline. Originally, the Discipline constituted a modified version of what John Wesley wrote for his own followers in England. However, with Wesley’s death, the Discipline became whatever the members of the General Conference wanted it to be. Part of each General Conference was the members trying to decide what they should put into the Discipline, so it gives an accurate description of the attitudes of the majority of the delegates to the General Conference. The changing Discipline shows how the number of northern delegates versus southern delegates and the changing views of anti- and pro-slavery came into play over time.

Since the Discipline originally was made up of Wesley’s writings, it spoke of a brotherly love towards all people.³⁰ In 1784,³¹ after a week of freely debating and reaching all decisions by

²⁸ Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism*, 40.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁰ Although Wesley was against slavery, the subject was not included in these papers because the peoples he was working with, a largely English society, had already made slavery illegal.

³¹ This General Conference, often referred to the Christmas Conference, was when the Methodist Episcopal Church was formed.

a majority vote (as Bishop Francis Asbury described it), the General Conference agreed to accept Wesley's *Large Minutes* with just a few adaptations for the American government, including a comment on slavery.³² John Nelson Norwood argues that it "is not unlikely that the rigid anti-slavery views of Wesley...were thrust, in a sense, upon an unwilling or indifferent conference."³³ However, the members of even the General Conference of 1780 agreed that "travelling preachers who hold slaves...[should] give promise to set them free" and that "slavery is contrary to the law of God, man, and nature, and hurtful to society."³⁴ This shows that the members of the General Conference had no problem agreeing between themselves that slavery was bad; their main task was convincing the general members of the church.

One of the biggest changes in the Discipline³⁵ of 1784 from Wesley's writings was the addition of a section on slavery. This section condemned slavery by saying that the delegates of the Conference, and therefore all Methodists were "deeply conscious of the impropriety of making new terms of communion for a religious society already established, excepting on the most pressing occasion; and such [they] esteem[ed] the practice of holding our fellow creatures in slavery."³⁶ From this, one could extrapolate that the Methodist Church was founded on anti-slavery, and it was considered one of the most anti-slavery denominations of its day. The Discipline even included several rules for members about buying, selling, and owning slaves. First and foremost, every "member of [their] society who has slaves in his possession, shall...legally execute and record an instrument, whereby he emancipates and sets free every

³² Sweet, *Methodism in American History*, 110-111.

³³ Norwood, *Schism*, 14.

³⁴ Elliott, *Secession*, 22.

³⁵ Most of the Disciplines no longer exist in print except for what was verbally decided at the General and Annual Conferences. However, in 1845, Charles Elliott was tasked with writing the history of the Methodist Episcopal Church to try and understand why the schism occurred in 1844. Published in 1855, this history includes all sections of any *Discipline* or General or Annual Conferences from the beginning of the Church through 1844 that reference slavery, anti-slavery, or the treatment of colored people.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

slave in his possession” that met certain criteria, and all slaves of Methodist members were to be free within twenty years.³⁷ Those who did not follow these rules was to “have liberty quietly to withdraw himself from [their] society” or be excluded from said society.³⁸ Those thus excluded were no longer allowed to take the Lord’s Supper with Methodists, and any member wanting to join the church had to follow these rules either prior to joining or within a year of joining.³⁹ Anyone that bought or sold slaves were “immediately to be expelled, unless they buy them on purpose to free them.”⁴⁰ They also wrote an important note about how black people were to be treated, warning the preachers to make sure and meet with the Negroes.⁴¹ These were the strictest rules on slavery held by the Methodist Episcopal Church before the Civil War.

However, most of the rules were repealed just the next year. The majority of the Methodists came from slave states at this time, and even though the delegates at the General Conference were often more anti-slavery than the general members, they were out-numbered by the thousands they represented. The minutes of the next Annual Conference stated that it “was recommended to all [their] brethren to suspend the execution of the minute on slavery, till the deliberations of a future conference.”⁴² Americans of this time would be sensitive to the slavery issue; they were part of the same people that would in just three years tip-toe around the slavery issue in the Constitution of the United States. Likewise, issues of slavery were largely ignored in the published writing of this Conference except to repeal the acts that caused so many problems. In his history of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Dr. Nathan Bangs said that the members of the 1785 Annual Conference removed the rules because they “could not have considered [slavery]

³⁷ Ibid., 34.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Members from states like Virginia who had stricter laws on the freeing of slaves were given more time on all these rules, and this particular rule was doubled to two years.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 33.

⁴² Ibid., 35.

such a sin ‘as to exclude a man from the kingdom of grace and glory,’ which is what they effectually did by not allowing some people to participate in the Lord’s Supper.⁴³ The choice, in their minds, was between getting as many people into heaven as possible by getting them into church, or abolishing the sin of slavery from the United States. As far as what was put in the Discipline, for a while, they decided to get people into the church and not worry about slavery. By 1786, the only rules on slavery remaining maintained that any member caught buying or selling slaves would be expelled.

However, the “Methodists in America have always [at least through 1855] taken an active part in behalf of the salvation and welfare of the colored people.”⁴⁴ During the latter part of the eighteenth century, while Methodists were taking a break from trying to abolish slavery, they began to work on reforming the slave. In 1785, the instructions for ministering to colored people were for “all [their] minister and preachers, by the love of God and the salvation of souls...to leave nothing undone for the spiritual benefit and salvation of them...and for this purpose to embrace every opportunity of inquiring into the state of their souls, and to unite in society those who appear to have a real desire of fleeing from the wrath to come, to meet such in class, and to exercise the whole Methodist Discipline among them.”⁴⁵ While this sounds wonderfully equal, the fact that most preachers had to be told to do this may indicate that equality was not as apparent as it could have been. By 1790, the General Conference was more concerned with the “instruction of poor children, white and colored” than with the education of adult blacks.⁴⁶

⁴³ Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 217.

⁴⁴ Elliott, *Secession*, 36.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

In 1792, “nothing remain[ed] concerning slavery, except the General Rule.”⁴⁷ However, one of the designated fasting days was spent in the hope that “Africans and Indians may help to fill the pure Church of God.”⁴⁸ On another fasting day, “the prayer of thanksgiving is to extend to ‘And for African liberty; we feel gratitude that many thousands of these poor people are free and pious.’”⁴⁹ It is interesting that no matter how much they wanted the freedom of the Africans and their conversion to Christianity, they still found them “poor people,” something different from themselves, the saviors of all other races. At this time, Methodist membership in slave states still outnumbered membership in free states, so even though anti-slavery ideals were more widely spread in the 1790s, the free states were unable to abolish slavery from their religion even as they did so legally in their states.

In 1796, several changes were made, creating more explicit yet easier rules for slavery. The first rule says that those hiring people for official offices in the church should seriously consider not hiring slaveholders, but it does not outlaw slaveholders as preachers. The second rule says that no “slaveholder shall be received into society, till the preacher who has the oversight of the circuit has spoken to him freely and faithfully on the subject of slavery,” but slaveholders could still join the church.⁵⁰ The third rule says that a member who sells a slave is to be immediately expelled, but if he bought a slave, a time table would then go into effect telling the member how long they had to free the slave. The final rule on slavery says that preachers should “consider with deep attention... any important thought upon [slavery], that the conference may have full light, in order to take further steps toward the eradicating this enormous evil from

⁴⁷ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 38.

that part of the Church of God to which they are united.”⁵¹ This seems to be a common theme: the preachers at General Conferences did not know how to handle the slavery problem, so they tabled it until next year. This Discipline is also interesting because, for the first time, the Bishops wrote notes about the changes in the Discipline that were included therein. The notes on slavery all indicate that they found it sinful, yet they did not try again to completely eradicate it.

In the 1800 Discipline, all sections on slavery from 1796 were retained. In addition, the General Conference commissioned the Annual Conferences “to draw up addresses for the gradual emancipation of the slaves... These addresses shall urge, in the most respectful but pointed manner, the necessity of a law for the gradual emancipation of the slaves” in order to gather ideas to further the wide-spread emancipation of slavery in the Methodist Episcopal Church.⁵² They also stated that if and when “any travelling preacher becomes an owner of a slave or slaves, by any means, he shall forfeit his ministerial character in the Methodist Episcopal Church, unless he execute, if it be practicable, a legal instrument of emancipation of such slave or slaves, conformable to the laws of the state in which he lives.”⁵³ What at first seems a firmer rule against preachers having slaves once again is really appeasing the slave states’ churches. The rule only makes preachers emancipate their slaves if it is practicable and comfortable to the state laws, which means many if not most of the preachers in the slave states would be able to keep their slaves and still abide by the new rule. Norwood argues that these “regulations... seemed to imply that what was an evil in one state might not be an evil in another.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid., 39.

⁵² Ibid., 39.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Norwood, *Schsim*, 28.

In 1804, the rules about officials needing to be wary about hiring a slaveholder and about preachers speaking “freely and faithfully” to slaveholders before they are admitted into the church were unchanged from 1796. The rule about travelling preachers should release any and all slaves they get, if convenient, was unchanged from 1800. The rule stating that every member that buys or sells slaves was changed by saying that they could sell “at the request of the slave, in cases of mercy and humanity,” and that if they bought a slave, “the ensuing quarterly meeting conference shall determine on the number of years which the slave so purchased shall serve to work out the price of his purchase.”⁵⁵ This change allowed more freedom for slaveholders to buy and sell, but also allowed slaves to request being sold to a master that owned his/her family or for a slave to work towards freedom. The only completely new law mandated that “preachers, from time to time, as occasion serves, admonish and exhort all slaves to render due respect and obedience to the commands and interests of their respective masters.”⁵⁶ This actually allowed more preachers to speak to slaves because it reassured masters that the preachers were not filling slaves’ minds with thoughts of freedom at a time when slave insurrections were a serious fear of masters. Masters were more likely to allow the preacher on the plantation and so more slaves were converted.

The Discipline of 1808 kept the rule about being cautious about church officials hiring slaveholders and the rule saying that traveling preachers who come into possession of slaves should forfeit either their job or their slaves. However, the new rule on buying and selling slaves became “The General conference authorizes each annual conference to form their own regulations relative to buying and selling slaves,” finally allowing slave state conferences the

⁵⁵ Elliott, *Secession*, 40.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

freedom to make more lenient rules on buying and selling slaves.⁵⁷ This shows how many Methodists, and Americans in general, were beginning to be less concerned about completely destroying slavery. As Mathews argues, the “laws of most Southern states rendered the rule meaningless;” the rule “also implied that Methodist ethics on slavery would derive less from Christian morality than from sectional economics, politics, and social adjustment.”⁵⁸ However, the General Rule that forbid buying or selling slaves except to emancipate them was still in place, so the slaveholding states were still kept in some control.

These rules only slightly changed in 1812. The last rule was changed to say that this was only in effect when “the laws of some of the states do not admit of emancipating of slaves” which allowed many slaveholders to make their own slave rules, but elders were absolutely not allowed to have slaves.⁵⁹ In 1816, those holding official stations in the church were officially banned from owning slaves, but the other rules remained. In 1820, the rules remained the same but the Annual Conferences were no longer allowed to make their own rules on buying and selling slaves. This is also the very first year, and the only time for eight more years, that the north had the majority of members, allowing them to repeal a rule that gave the southern Annual Conferences the power to retain slaves.

The last time the Discipline was altered before 1844 was in 1824. That year, the rules from 1820 were maintained, and rules were added to help slaves. One rule said that “preachers shall prudently enforce upon our members the necessity of teaching their slaves to read the word of God, and to allow them time to attend upon the public worship of God on our regular days of divine service.”⁶⁰ This Discipline also allowed for black preachers and gave black members and

⁵⁷ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁸ Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism*, 51.

⁵⁹ Elliott, *Secession*, 41.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 42.

preachers “all the privileges which are usual to others in the district and quarterly conferences, where the usages of the country do not forbid it” and allowed for separate conferences to be made for only colored people.⁶¹ This showed the beginning of segregation in the church, but also gave black people more control over their spiritual lives.

Between 1824 and 1844, there were no changes to the Discipline which seems odd for the turbulent time leading up to the schism. The north had achieved a higher member population by 1832 and had a clear majority by 1836. However, they were hesitant to pass rules on slavery that might upset the southern churches.⁶² Some anti-slavery Methodists, frustrated with slavery ideals within the church, gave up trying to change the Church itself and instead joined abolitionist societies that were trying to change the United States as a whole.⁶³ Both sections eased their conscience by joining the colonization movement, their “conscientious alternative to compromising completely with slavery.”⁶⁴ However, over time, southern ministers and members became “frightened and disgusted” with the increasingly louder northern abolitionists, and anger rose between the two sections.⁶⁵ The north became angry because they could eradicate slavery from their church by a new rule, and the south feared the north finally taking the steps towards abolition in the church. Instead of the silence on the slavery issue indicating peace between the sections, it actually indicated how far apart the two sections of the church had grown and how unable they were to compromise.

Twenty years after the last revision to the slave section of the Discipline, the Methodist Episcopal Church stood in shambles with many northerners wondering what just happened.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² An example of this came in 1828 when Stephan G. Roszel and Peter Cartwright tried to pass a resolution “permitting the Church to discipline masters who mistreated their slaves.” This resolution was rejected, and no reason was given for not “refusing to enforce Christian morality.” (Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism*, 52).

⁶³ Ibid., 53.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 109.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 177.

People of the time believed that schisms like this indicated that a larger schism was ahead for America.⁶⁶ Historians like C. C. Goen argue that “there seems to be a closer link between the denominational schisms and the coming of the war than has been commonly recognized.”⁶⁷ The build-up to the Civil War seems to mirror that of the schism of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Factors that affected the Methodist Episcopal Church affected people across America, so one still sees that half of the country changed with the changing world while the elite of the other half tried to keep the lifestyle they knew and loved. Most of the north did not need slaves and morally accused the south for keeping theirs; most people in the south found a way for their “sense of duty regarding slaveholding [to] not...conflict with their religious profession.”⁶⁸ The south told the north what they would not be able to put up with and the north did exactly that. The schism in the Methodist Episcopal Church and in the United States ultimately happened because the south did not agree with the fate of one man: Bishop Andrew for the Church and Abraham Lincoln for the United States. In fact, the 1845 Annual Conference could be seen as the Fort Sumter of the Methodist Episcopal Church because the northern delegates were told to get the southern conferences back, no matter what. The lone southern representative who made an appearance at the General Conference was told that the southern conferences were still a part of the Methodist Episcopal Church, whether they acknowledged so or not, which meant that they would have to abide by any rules decided on by the General Conference. These words, and the response, spoken in anger were the shots fired that kept the church from reuniting and launched a short campaign by the north to get the southern conferences to rejoin the church.

⁶⁶ William Lloyd Garrison as early as 1837 said that “the CHURCH, in spite of every precaution and safeguard, is first to be dashed in pieces...*The political dismemberment of our Union is ultimately to follow.*” Less extreme voices joined the argument in 1860, proclaiming that “The very worst omen of the times is the fact that the religious men of the country stand apart...” (C. C. Goen. *Broken Churches, Broken Nation*. Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985, 2-3.)

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁸ Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, 190.

However, the Methodist Episcopal Church and Methodist Episcopal Church, South would not be reunited for ninety-five years. Though the rules on slavery in the Discipline at the time of the schism were not ideal for the southern conferences, they stayed in place at least until 1890.⁶⁹ Little changed, in fact, between the northern and the southern church, and yet they were unable to unite until 1939. Likewise, throughout the greater American population, the north and south fought through four years of brothers' blood before they could come to an uneasy truth. Once the hate and misunderstanding bubbled up, the north and south could not stop the anger from boiling over and destroying the peace of the country.

The growth of the membership in the north and the increasingly differing ideals of slavery in the north and south forced the southern conferences to a place where they no longer believed they could stay in the church as a whole. As the rules of the Discipline and the laws of the land changed, so did the church and the country. If Bishop Andrew had known that June first that he would be the reason his church would split for almost a hundred years, would he have gone? Would it have mattered? The north and south, separated by increasingly differing beliefs, were on a crash course to a schism. The issue of one slaveholding bishop ripped a church in two simply because the church was already stretched by the issue of slavery and primed for a single catalyst to tear them apart. That catalyst's name just happened to be James Osgood Andrew.

⁶⁹ The rules were still in the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, which was the latest Discipline I could find.

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