THE METHODIST ANTI-SLAVERY TRADITION,
1784-1844

By Lewis M. Purifoy

The Methodist Episcopal Church was torn by a bitter controversy over the question of Negro slavery in 1844. In the course of the debates which rocked the General Conference that year and which culminated in schism between its Northern and Southern branches, much was said about the historical position of the Church1 with regard to the "peculiar institution." Methodists of the North, or at least Methodist preachers, maintained that their Church had always been anti-slavery, a view stated by the famous circuit rider Peter Cartwright in these plain words, "Now, sir, I will say that in all my long years of relation to, and acquaintance with Methodism and Methodist preachers, I never heard one that did not oppose slavery from stem to stern." 2 If Peter Cartwright had never heard such a Methodist preacher in Illinois or in Kentucky, where he formerly lived and preached, he heard them at this Conference. William A. Smith of Virginia, for example, defended the Methodists of the South for defending slavery "from stem to stern," saying that "we feel justified in our course, and, indeed, cannot avoid it. And we feel that we should be doing an infinitely greater wrong by altering the condition of the slaves, under present and existing circumstances." 3

With such a wide divergence of opinion, it is proper to ask what, indeed, was the official position of the Methodist Episcopal Church on the subject of slavery. The first official action on the subject was taken by the Annual Conference4 of 1780. The questions and answers then inserted in the discipline read as follows:

Ques. 16. Ought not this Conference to require those traveling preachers who hold slaves to give promises to set them free?
Ans. Yes.
Ques. 17. Does this Conference acknowledge that slavery is contrary to the laws of God, man, and nature, and hurtful to society; contrary to the dictates of conscience and pure religion, and doing that which we would not others should do to us and ours? Do we pass our disapprobation on all our friends who keep slaves, and advise their freedom?
Ans. Yes.5

1 The term "the Church" is to be understood hereinafter to refer exclusively to the Methodist Episcopal Church unless otherwise specified.
3 General Conference Journal, p. 29.
4 Annual Conference, in this case, refers to the meeting of the entire traveling ministry of the Methodist Society. The Society, as it was called, did not become a Church until 1784, and the quadrennial General Conference, of which several Annual Conferences were later to be subsidiaries, did not come into existence until 1792.
5 Methodist Episcopal Church, Minutes of the Annual Conference (1780), p. 12.
Three years later it was decided that local preachers too would have to emancipate their slaves if the laws of their respective states permitted. They were to be given another year, however, after which time, it was warned, it might be necessary to suspend them.6 This exception should be noted, for it was only the first of many which tended to nullify every anti-slavery law the Church ever passed. The founding conference of Methodism, the so-called Christmas Conference of 1784, castigated the institution of slavery in the harshest terms, calling it "... contrary to the golden law of God, on which hang all the law and the prophets, and the inalienable rights of mankind, as well as every principle of the Revolution. ..." 7 All members were required to free their slaves within twelve months or within a prescribed period to be determined by the age of the particular slave involved. Pastors were to keep a record of all slaveholding members and enforce compliance with the rule. Persons not complying should be excluded from the Church, and no one was to be admitted as a new member until he had complied. Thus the necessary steps had been taken, as was said, "for extirpating this abomination." Once again there appears the vitiating exception: the rules were to have effect only as far as they were consistent with the laws of the various states; and the brethren in Virginia, because of their peculiar circumstances, should have two years to consider the expediency of compliance or non-compliance.8 Even with these exceptions, the rules proved so unpopular that they had to be suspended the very next year, and the Church was without any rules on the subject of slavery until the General Conference of 1796.9

Although nothing new was added to the Discipline with respect to slavery between 1785 and 1796, a significant addition was made to the General Rules during this period. These rules, originally prepared by John Wesley, contained a list of things from which Methodists must refrain by way of proving a sincere desire for salvation. In this list of sins to be avoided, the following appeared in the year 1789: "The buying or selling the bodies and souls of men, women, or children, with an intention to enslave them." 10 It is not clear exactly how this provision came to be a part of the General Rules. Indeed there was some doubt as to its legality. Since it was generally interpreted to refer to the foreign slave trade, however, and not applicable to Methodists generally, its validity was never challenged.11 It was not until some years after the schism

6 Ibid. (1783), p. 18.
7 Methodist Episcopal Church, Minutes of the Annual Conference (1784), p. 29.
11 This provision was added to the General Rules before the beginning of the General Conference system and at a time when the Church was experimenting with the Council, a sort of supervisory body whose powers were not clearly defined. (John J. Tigert, A Constitutional History of American Episcopal Methodism (Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church South, 1909).
of 1844 that Southern Methodists became sufficiently irritated by the rule to remove it from their discipline.

At the meeting of the second General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1796, attention was again turned to the slavery question. As if apologizing for the ten-year holiday on the subject, the new slavery rules were introduced with these words: "We declare that we are more than ever convinced of the great evil of the African slavery which still exists in these United States...." 12

The following three rules were drawn up with regard to slaveholders: (1) no slaveholder in the future should occupy an official station in the Church until he had given security for the emancipation of his slaves, immediately or gradually, as the laws of the respective states and the circumstances of the case would permit; (2) no slaveholder should be received into membership until he had been spoken to "freely and faithfully" on the subject of slavery; (3) anyone who sold a slave must be excluded from membership, and anyone who had purchased a slave was required to free him after the slave had served long enough to work out his purchase price, this period to be determined by the quarterly conference involved. 13 These rules were weak and did not accomplish much toward ridding the Church of slavery. Present slaveholders in official positions were not to be touched, and, in the future, only when they lived in states that permitted emancipation, a question to be decided by the Annual Conference. 14 No slaveholder would be denied membership if he would submit to being spoken to "freely and faithfully" on the subject of slavery. Private members would be inconvenienced only in the matter of buying and selling slaves. No financial hardship was to be incurred in the case of a slave-buying Methodist, however, for he would not have to emancipate until he had gotten his money back, and his local Quarterly Conference would decide how long this should take. Only for the selling of a slave was the rule simple and explicit, it being provided that a member who sold a slave should be excluded from the church. 15

p. 252.) As there are no records of this Council's proceedings, one cannot say with certainty that it was the Council which added the rule on slavery. It is logical to assume that this was the case, however, since the only other body with possible authority to do it, the Annual Conference, does not mention any such action in the record of its proceedings. (See Minutes of the Annual Conference [1789].) Bishop Holland N. McTyeire dismissed the action with this comment: "No conference put it there, and no editor or printer ever confessed doing it." Whether legally done or not, the rule was retained in the Discipline and thus accepted as valid. More important to Southern Methodists was the fact that, like the anti-slavery rules of 1784, it did not come from John Wesley. (A History of Methodism [Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1891], p. 403.)

12 General Conference Journal (1796), p. 22.
13 Ibid. (1796), pp. 22-23.
14 General Conference Journal (1796), pp. 22-23.
15 John Nelson Norwood in The Schism in the Methodist Church, 1844: A Study of Slavery and Ecclesiastical Politics (Alford, New York: Alfred University, 1923), p. 11, finds evidence of actual enforcement of these rules in a few cases in the Dorchester Circuit of the Baltimore Conference between 1805 and 1816. (Hereinafter cited as Norwood, Schism in the Methodist Church.)
The brave new beginning of 1796 turned out to be a retreat, and it was to be continuous. The General Conference of 1800 began to move away from all attempts to control slavery among private members and to concentrate its attention on cleansing the ministry. The rule which required that new slaveholding members be "freely and faithfully spoken to" was deleted and replaced with a new rule which would prove most troublesome in time to come, namely,

When any traveling preacher becomes an owner of a slave or slaves, by any means, he shall forfeit his ministerial character in our Church, unless he execute, if it be practicable, a legal emancipation of such slaves, conformably to the laws of the state in which he lives."16

The Conference then called upon Annual Conferences to memorialize their respective state legislatures to provide for gradual emancipation.17

The General Conference of 1804 modified its restriction on the selling of slaves so as to permit sale at the request of the slave in cases of mercy and humanity. This act, although justified by sound Christian motives, was simply another retreat; but an even more significant retreat was a statement which, for the first time, emphasized the duties of slaves to their masters: "Let our 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." 18 Furthermore the law did not apply to the areas where it was most needed; for Methodists in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Tennessee were exempted from the operation of all rules on slavery.19

Finally, at the General Conference of 1808, the last remaining rules concerning slaveholding private members were struck from the Discipline. These had to do with the buying and selling of slaves, a problem which was placed in the hands of the various Annual Conferences. Even so, on the motion of Bishop Asbury, the General Conference took the extraordinary step of ordering one thousand copies of the Discipline printed with the section on slavery omitted for the use of the South Carolina Annual Conference. The only significant slavery rules now remaining in the Discipline were the rules of 1796 dealing with slaveholders in official positions and the rule of 1800 on traveling preachers.20

The retreat from the high anti-slavery ground of 1784 was complete with this action of 1808. The section of the Discipline relating to slaveholding official members was re-worded in 1816, however, and this action was in later years usually referred to as the "great compromise." The original rule of 1796 had declared against the elevation of slaveholders to official stations until they had provided

18 Ibid., p. 63.
19 Ibid., p. 93.
for the emancipation of their slaves, "immediately or gradually, as the laws of the states respectively and the circumstances of the case will admit." The new rule provided a larger loophole since it barred a slaveholder from an official station only "where the laws of the state in which he lives will admit of emancipation and permit the liberated slave to enjoy freedom." 21

The Church could justify its acceptance of the Negro's bondage only if it gave evidence of deep concern for his spiritual welfare. It had always shown some such concern, but the General Conference of 1824 went further by making provision for the Negro to be a bearer as well as a hearer of "the word." There were to be both local and traveling colored preachers, with all the privileges of white preachers where "the usages of the country do not forbid it," and separate quarterly and district conferences were authorized where there was a sufficient number of colored preachers to warrant them. More than that, the necessity of teaching slaves to read the word of God and of allowing them time to attend upon the public worship of God was to be "prudently" enforced upon Church members. The conservative formula as now completed could be summarized as follows: leave the institution of slavery alone, and minister to the slave. The old anti-slavery Church of the 1780's had made its peace with slavery.22

A new surge of anti-slavery feeling in the 1830's posed a threat to the "compromise settlement" of 1816. Methodist anti-slavery

21 General Conference Journal (1816), pp. 169-170. It should be noted that these rules were a compromise which permitted slaveholding among "traveling preachers" and "official members" when the law was very generously interpreted. In some states an "official member" could escape the operation of the rule since it required that the state's laws allow emancipation and permit the liberated slave to enjoy freedom, and most of the Southern states had passed laws by the end of the 1830's which permitted emancipation only if the freed men were removed from the state. In Kentucky, Delaware, and Missouri, freed slaves could remain in the state if security were given against their becoming public charges; and in North Carolina, Mississippi, and Texas, on application to the state legislature, for meritorious service, a slave could be freed and remain in the state if security were given. In Georgia and South Carolina, a slave could be freed only by the legislature, but presumably the same law that freed him could grant permission to remain in the state. Other slave states had similar laws. It is an interesting fact that Georgia, in 1818 and again in 1829, strengthened its laws against freeing slaves by will or deed of trust by increasing fines for such offenses, indicating that slaves were being freed despite the law. (John Codman Hurd, The Law of Freedom and Bondage in the United States (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1858-1862), pp. 7-24, 77-109, 143-196.) The important fact is that either the legislature or the county court could free slaves in every state, and, although in some cases they would have to be removed from the state, emancipation was practicable for every "traveling preacher" in the United States "conformably to the laws of the state in which he lives."

societies, so-called, were organized in both the New England and New Hampshire Annual Conferences in 1835. They were indeed abolitionist societies, for they branded slavery a sin in all circumstances and demanded the immediate and absolute emancipation of all slaves.\(^{23}\) In 1836 two New England abolitionists, while attending the General Conference in Cincinnati, addressed an anti-slavery group. A demand for their censure was countered by a demand from Orange Scott, leader of the abolitionist Methodists, for the censure of the institution of slavery. Scott’s proposal lost, and his two followers were censured for their anti-slavery speeches.\(^{24}\)

The abolitionists were not to be easily silenced, however, and a small but determined group of them were present as delegates to the General Conference of 1840. They provoked a fight over the question of Negro testimony in Church trials but were beaten when it was decided that no preacher should permit it in any state where the privilege was denied in trials at law.\(^{25}\) Their hardest fight was made in an effort to take away some of the power from the presiding officers of conferences (presiding elders in district conferences and bishops in the Annual Conferences), for these officials generally used their power to curb the activities of abolitionists. They were defeated on this point when the conference upheld the right of the president of an Annual or quarterly Conference to decline putting the question on a motion when, in his judgment, the motion did not pertain to the business of the conference. Furthermore the presiding officer could adjourn a conference whenever he felt that all the business prescribed by the Discipline had been transacted.\(^{26}\)

Finally the question of slaveholding preachers, settled in 1800, came up for reinterpretation. A petition was presented by the Westmoreland Circuit of the Baltimore Annual Conference protesting the fact that persons living in Virginia but under the jurisdiction of the Baltimore Annual Conference were being excluded from the ministry on the simple grounds of slaveholding. A committee, appointed to investigate the matter, could find no evidence that anyone had been barred on these grounds; but in clearing up the point, another concession was made to slaveholders, and the abolitionists suffered their worst defeat.

The Discipline stated that when a “traveling preacher” became the owner of slaves, by any means, he should forfeit his ministerial character in the Church unless he should execute, “if it be practicable, a legal emancipation of such slaves, conformably to the laws

\(^{23}\) Norwood, Schism in the Methodist Church, pp. 30-33.

\(^{24}\) General Conference Journal (1836), p. 447.


\(^{26}\) General Conference Journal (1840), p. 121.
of the state in which he lives." As previously noted, it was "practicable" to free slaves in every state if one interpreted "practicable" to mean possible. In clarifying the position of the slaveholding "traveling preacher," the General Conference obviated the difficulty over the word "practicable" by resolving that

... the simple holding of slaves, or mere ownership of slave property, in the States or Territories where the laws do not admit of emancipation, and permit the liberated slave to enjoy freedom [writer's italics], constitutes no barrier to the election or ordination of ministers to the various grades of office known in the ministry of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and cannot, therefore, be considered as operating any forfeiture of right in view of such election or ordination.27

The italicized words in the above quotation were taken from the Discipline's provision on "official members." Thus "traveling preachers" were given the same slaveholding rights that "official members" enjoyed. Since most slave states forbade an emancipated slave to remain in the state, it was not only impracticable for a preacher to free slaves under the terms of the new interpretation but, in most cases, impossible.

The prospects were not bright for the Methodist abolitionist in 1840. Looking to his Church's tradition for support, he found numerous official pronouncements condemning slavery and even threatening its extinction. He knew, however, that each of these had been a dead letter almost from the moment of its adoption. He found no body of argument to draw upon, particularly none of a theological nature—not even from Wesley himself, for all his opposition to slavery. The nearest official statements had ever come to the use of Biblical sources were general pronouncements to the effect that slavery was in violation of the "Golden Law of God" and that it was "contrary to the spirit of the Christian religion." The most astonishing fact of all is that none of the Church's official statements, not even the previously quoted Pastoral Address of 1800, called upon the name of Jesus Christ. The abolitionist would have to formulate his own Biblical arguments, or borrow them from outside the Church. As a last resort, he could leave the Church, as many of them did.28

One wonders why the Church should have so soon retreated from the high moral ground it had taken and then make war upon those who tried to uphold the original position. The answer was suggested in part by Bishop Francis Asbury who, in 1809, wrote:

27 This was said to be "advisory resolution" and not a new provision of the Discipline. (General Conference Journal [1840], p. 171.) On the subject of the practicability of freeing slaves in the different states, see above, p. 7, f. n. 21.

28 Shortly after the General Conference of 1840, many New England abolitionists seceded and, joined by seceders from New York and Michigan, formed the Wesleyan Methodist Church in 1843. (Norwood, Schism in the Methodist Church, pp. 49-51.)
We are defrauded of great numbers by the pains that are taken to keep the blacks from us; their masters are afraid of the influence of our principles. Would not an amelioration in the condition and treatment of slaves have produced more practical good to the poor Africans, than any attempt at their emancipation? The state of society, unhappily, does not admit of this; besides, the blacks are deprived of the means of instruction; who will take the pains to lead them into the way of salvation, and watch over them that they may not stray, but the Methodists? 29

As Asbury saw the problem, the Church must modify its position or else anti-slavery agitation would alienate white society; and, even worse, in Asbury's mind, the Christian ministry to the blacks would be destroyed.

It is doubtful that this very practical concern, important as it was, provided a full explanation for the Church's strange behavior with regard to its anti-slavery legislation. It might even be questioned whether the Church had ever been anti-slavery in any deeply religious sense. Some insight into what was perhaps the true sentiment of early Methodists toward the whole anti-slavery cause may be gleaned from a statement by Jesse Lee, one of the most revered of Methodism's founding fathers. Discussing the Church's anti-slavery legislation in 1809, he said:

These rules [of 1784] were but short lived, and were offensive to most of our southern friends; and were so much opposed by many of our private members, local preachers, and some traveling preachers, that the execution of them was suspended at the conference held in June following, about six months after they were formed; and they were never afterwards carried into full force. . . . I shall therefore take no further notice of the rules about slavery which were made at various times for twenty-four years, i.e., from the Christmas conference in 1784, to the last general conference held in 1808. 30

This is not the language of a man committed to a crusade against slavery. Rather, it tends to bear out the conclusion of one leading student of the subject of slavery in the Methodist Episcopal Church, John Nelson Norwood, who asserts that the anti-slavery laws of the Christmas Conference of 1784 were passed "in deference to the rigid anti-slavery views of Wesley, Coke, and Asbury and that they were thrust, in a sense, upon an unwilling or indifferent conference." 31 While throwing some doubt upon the anti-slavery convictions of early Methodists, this is not to say that there was no anti-slavery feeling, much of it quite strong, among early Methodists. Evidence of strong feelings on this subject, whatever its nature, is to be found in a petition from a group of ministers of Charleston, who in 1795

---

31 Norwood, Schism in the Methodist Church, p. 14. The findings of Norwood, coupled with the statement of Jesse Lee quoted above, and the precipitate retreat of the Church from anti-slavery action, cannot but reflect upon the sincerity, or at least the depth, of the anti-slavery convictions of early Methodists. This is to be found in a petition from a group of ministers of Charleston, who in 1795...
tions of early Methodists generally, Norwood has stated the traditional view concerning Methodism’s founding triumvirate, but even here the cause of anti-slavery was not on perfectly solid ground.

No one would question that John Wesley held anti-slavery views; he plainly said he did. But surely here was “a workman who came seldom to the vineyard.” His reputation as an anti-slavery man rests primarily upon three statements: first, his lengthy essay, “Thoughts Upon Slavery,” written in 1773; second, a notation in his Journal to the effect that he had read a book by “an honest Quaker, on that execrable sum of all villanies, commonly called the Slave-trade”; and finally, the last letter of his life, in which he left this injunction with the British anti-slavery leader William Wilberforce, “O, be not weary of well doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it.” These are the sources almost invariably drawn upon by writers seeking to demonstrate that Wesley was an anti-slavery pioneer.

made to their conference the following prayer. “Whereas We the Ministers of the Methodist Episcopal Church, being deeply sensible of the impropriety and evil of slavery in itself and its baneful consequences, on Religious Society. And some formerly professing the same sentiments have nevertheless afterward upon a change of circumstances become the patrons of Slavery; as well as holders of slaves themselves; To the scandal of the ministry, and strengthening the hand of oppression do agree that all persons amongst us who are now, or may hereafter become the possessors of Slaves ought immediately to emancipate them where the Laws will permit it. And where they will not, that they ought to make them compensations for their Labor; and will them free. And we are resolved that Every member of this Association who shall act otherwise shall forfeit both his seat in Conference and Letters of Ordination.” (Resolution of twenty-three Ministers of South Carolina Conference Against Slavery, January 2, 1795 [MS in Wofford College Library, Spartanburg, South Carolina].)

35 The three statements quoted above are specifically cited as reflections of Wesley’s anti-slavery feeling in Matthew Simpson, ed., Cyclopaedia of Methodism (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everets, 1881), p. 804. During the abolitionist agitation in the Methodist Church in the 1840’s much was said by correspondents to Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal, the Methodist journal friendliest to abolitionists, about Wesley’s anti-slavery views. Usually they stated it as a general fact that anti-slaveryism, and even abolitionism, was a Wesleyan doctrine, but one abolitionist, when asked what he meant by “immediate abolitionism,” said: “I mean what Mr. Wesley meant, when he said, ‘American slavery was the vilest that ever saw the sun.’” (Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal [Boston], May 11, 1842.) One of the leading biographers of Wesley adds weight to the Wesleyan anti-slavery tradition, although he does not explore the subject deeply. Probably referring to the “Thoughts Upon Slavery,” he says: “Let it be noted that, besides all his other honors, John Wesley, the poor persecuted
Wesley's most comprehensive statement on the subject of slavery, the "Thoughts Upon Slavery," is as interesting for what it does not say as for what it does. It could as well have been written by any intelligent "child of the Enlightenment." It demonstrates at some length that the enslavement of a man is cruel and unjust and an affront to humanity. Assuming a belief in God and in His justice and mercy, it follows that slavery is wrong. The spirit of the essay is summed up in these words: "Whether you are a Christian or no, show yourself a man! Be not more savage than a lion or a bear. . . . Liberty is the right of every human creature, as soon as he breathes the vital air; and no human law can deprive him of that right which he derives from the law of nature." The argument then is based upon the law of nature, and the appeal is to reason and good will. It is most emphatically not scriptural; no text from scripture is invoked, and the name of Jesus Christ is never used.

As Wesley provided no theological grounding for anti-slavery views, neither did he give explicit instructions to his American followers as to what they should do about the institution of slavery. It has already been pointed out that the general rule against the buying and selling of men, women, and children did not come from John Wesley; neither did the Discipline's section on slavery. The Methodist, was one of the first advocates on behalf of the enthralled African that England had, and that, sixty years before slavery was abolished in the dominions of Great Britain, he denounced the thing in the strongest terms it was possible to employ." (Luke Tyerman, The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A., Founder of the Methodists, 3 volumes. [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1872], III, 115.) A recent work which assigns Wesley a place among the anti-slavery pioneers supports the contention with the "Thoughts Upon Slavery," the letter to Wilberforce, and the tradition that Wesley delivered a sermon on the subject in Bristol, "the central stronghold of slave-traders," in 1788. The present writer has not found that homily among Wesley's collected sermons (See The Works of John Wesley), nor apparently has the author of the work under discussion, for he does not give as his source any of Wesley's works, which he makes use of, but cites instead Maldwyn Edwards, After Wesley: A Study of the Social and Political Influence of Methodism in the Middle Period (1791-1849). (Richard M. Cameron, Methodism and Society in Historical Perspective [New York: Abingdon Press, 1961], pp. 52-53.)

36 The Works of John Wesley, XI, 79.
37 The Discipline which was adopted by the Christmas Conference of 1784 was based upon John Wesley's Large Minutes. These minutes contain no mention of slavery; it would thus appear that the founding conference added the section on slavery without the specific authorization of Wesley. These so-called Large Minutes bear the full title Minutes of Several Conversations Between the Reverend Mr. John and Charles Wesley, and Others from the Year 1744 to the Year 1760, the full text of which is printed in John J. Tigert, A Constitutional History of American Episcopal Methodism (Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1904), Appendix VII, pp. 532-602. Henry B. Bascom, a distinguished Southern Methodist in the period of controversy, noted Wesley's failure to speak clearly or strongly on the subject of slavery. Said he: "Mr. Wesley made no attempt to exclude it—had no rule—gave no directions on the
failure to instruct American Methodists as to the proper ecclesiastical legislation with respect to the institution of slavery is indeed a strange oversight for the man who had called American slavery the "vilest that ever saw the sun." Equally strange is the fact that, for the seventeen-year period from the writing of the "Thoughts Upon Slavery" in 1774 until the time of his death in 1791, all the words on slavery recorded in the voluminous works of a man reputed to be a great anti-slavery pioneer scarcely fill a single page.38

Except for "Thoughts Upon Slavery" (a rationalist and not a Christian document, it will be remembered), Wesley's utterances on this subject are no more than random outbursts of sympathy such as might come from any generous soul on behalf of an oppressed people. The problematical nature of the Wesleyan influence is admitted by a leading student of the subject who makes this extraordinary but revealing observation: "If one gives the credit of abolition to the Evangelicals, then one makes Wesley father of the whole movement." 39 Leaving aside this roundabout method of establishing paternity, it is seriously to be questioned whether Wesley ever said or did enough to enshrine anti-slaveryism as a subject. He condemned the system, but as a practical question of civil origin and regulation, refused to meddle with it." Bascom further quoted the Northern Bishop, Elijah Hedding, to this effect: "Mr. Wesley and his preachers did not at that time, believe it was a sin to hold slaves, where the laws were such as to prevent their continuing free after being manumitted. The language they employ clearly shows that it was their opinion that their people might be innocent in holding slaves, where the laws did not permit emancipation on Christian principles. Mr. Wesley never said one word, that I can find, against a Christian man's holding his slave in circumstances where he could not put him away without in- juring him." (Methodism and Slavery: With Other Matters in Controversy Between the North and the South [Frankfort, Kentucky: Hodges, Todd, Pruett, Printers, 1845], pp. 23-26.) It may be of some interest to note how scholars have made the transition from Wesley's anti-slavery views to the anti-slavery legislation of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. A Methodist encyclopedist, having quoted some of Wesley's anti-slavery remarks, goes on to say: "Animated by the same sentiment, the early Methodist preachers in America commenced their labors, but soon found themselves in practical difficulties." (Simpson, ed., Cyclopaedia of Methodism, p. 804.) A recent article quotes some anti-slavery statements of Wesley, and then says: "In America, too, among the Methodists, Wesley's anti-slavery attitudes were adopted, at least for a time." (Thomas W. Madron, "John Wesley on Race: A Christian View of Equality," Methodist History, New Series II [July 1964], p. 26.) The most reckless transition of all is made by one of Methodism's distinguished historians who, having quoted from Wesley's famous letter to Wilberforce, has this extraordinary sentence: "In 1774 Wesley had written a notable pamphlet against the slave trade, and the rules of the early Conferences held in America, show a strong anti-slavery attitude." (William Warren Sweet, Methodism in American History [New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1933], p. 231.)

38 See the various works of John Wesley cited in footnotes 33, 34, and 35 of this chapter.

“Wesleyan doctrine” in the hearts of American Methodists who lived in the midst of a slaveholding society.

The Methodist pioneers in America, Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke, were of no greater help. Asbury frequently spoke of the Negroes and of their need for and response to the gospel. His *Journal*, however, reveals only infrequent and mild references to the subject of slavery; and it has already been shown that by 1809 he was ready to give up the fight against slavery altogether in order the better to minister to the Negro. Coke is traditionally held to have been a more outspoken opponent of slavery than Asbury, but he too was beginning to modify his stand as early as 1787. Concerning his reception in Halifax County, North Carolina, where he had encountered hostility on an earlier visit because of his anti-slavery activities, Coke said:

I met with a little persecution on my former visit to this continent on account of my public testimony against negro slavery. Many of the people, I find, imagined I would not venture amongst them again. However, when I came, they all received me with perfect peace and quietness; and my visit, I have reason to believe, was made a blessing to many. Indeed, I now acknowledge that, however just my sentiments may be concerning slavery, it was ill-judged of me to deliver them from the pulpit.  

Clearly, the founders of American Methodism were not as stalwart in their anti-slavery belief as they might have been.

Undoubtedly a potent factor in the Church’s anti-slaveryism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was the so-called Revolutionary philosophy. A leading Methodist historian gives much credit to this philosophy as a motive for the Church’s action, pointing out that “during these years in which anti-slavery opinion was commonly held throughout the nation, the churches likewise were taking strong anti-slavery action.”  

A historian of slavery expresses a similar view. “The American Revolution and the years following” says Louis Filler, “excited new expectations that slavery must soon dwindle in strength and prestige.” The philosophy of the American Revolution does, in fact, pervade the Church’s pronouncements on slavery. The *Discipline* of 1784 spoke of it as not only contrary to the golden law of God but also to “the inalienable rights of mankind, as well as every principle of the Revolution....” The Pastoral Address from the General Conference of 1800 called upon Annual Conferences to memorialize their respective state legislatures to provide for gradual emancipation. This action was urged upon them primarily as striking at a thing

---


repugnant to the Christian religion, but it was also sought because slavery was inconsistent with the nation’s boasted liberty and because it was “repugnant to the inalienable rights of mankind, and to the very essence of civil liberty. . . ,” and finally because ours would be a glorious country if “equal liberty were everywhere established, and equal liberty everywhere enjoyed.”

It is not unlikely that the philosophy of the Revolution had much to do with determining the Church’s stand on slavery, and it is much more likely that this is the explanation for the almost casual manner in which the anti-slavery rules were adopted. It may have been that the founders of Methodism were convinced that the days of slavery were numbered and that their laws on that subject would merely speed the inevitable. Hence, there was no reason for moralizing arguments which would merely irritate those who had something to lose in slavery’s passing. Be that as it may, the early Methodists failed to provide a firm anti-slavery foundation on which those who came after could stand.

This is not to say that the Church had never had an anti-slavery tradition. Unquestionably it had in the early days, but it was a tradition only superficially held. There was a too ready assumption of the general prevalence of anti-slavery views, too great a reliance on rational argument, and too little attempt to place the anti-slavery creed at the heart of the Christian faith. It is not surprising, therefore, that in face of popular prejudice, apparently unmoved by the Revolutionary philosophy, and of slavery’s resurgence with the coming of cotton culture, the Church’s anti-slavery tradition rapidly melted away and that by 1836 the General Conference could declare itself “opposed to modern abolitionism and wholly disclaim any right, wish, or intention to interfere in the civil and political relation as it exists between master and slave in the slave-holding states of this Union.”

It is little wonder that Orange Scott, the leader of Methodist abolitionism, was converted to the cause from without the Church after he was already a presiding elder and that he felt driven from the Church as a result of his efforts to restore its anti-slavery tradition. In despair, Scott said in 1842, “I have now no expectation that the M.E. Church will ever take action against slavery. . . .” Not until 1860 would the Methodist Episcopal Church return to

---

44 General Conference Journal (1836), p. 447.
45 Gilbert H. Barnes says that Scott was converted to the cause of abolitionism at a meeting in 1834 where he heard Henry B. Stanton, “fresh from the Lane debate, denounce slavery as a sin; and he rose from his seat in the audience to pledge his life to abolition.” (The Anti-Slavery Impulse, 1830-1844 [New York and London: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1934]), p. 89.
46 Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal (Boston), June 15, 1842.
the strong anti-slavery ground of 1784; moral purpose in this cause was too weak and conservative tendencies were too strong from half a century's development to permit positive action at an earlier time. Scott and his abolitionists had pricked enough consciences, however, to make the slavery question an issue of major concern by 1844 and to precipitate in that year the most serious crisis the Church had ever faced.