During the revolution and the early national era of the nation's history the Methodists were more concerned and agitated about the institution of African slavery than any other group of evangelical Christians. Although the Methodist Episcopal Church was not officially established in the United States until 1784, Methodist societies were formed prior to and during the American revolution. These early societies were encouraged by John Wesley and his associates in America to strive for the emancipation of blacks. In 1774 Wesley published *Thoughts Upon Slavery*. He maintained that "liberty [was] the right of every human creature as soon as he breathes the vital air." ¹ Slavery, he declared, was irreconcilable with justice or mercy, and slave owners were called "man stealers." ² He charged that slaveholders shared with slave traders the guilt of such sins as fraud, robbery, and murder. ³ Wesley was convinced that slaveholding was barbaric, was contrary to the spirit of Christianity, and was a denial of the natural rights of man.

Francis Asbury, Wesley's representative in America during the revolution and later the first bishop of the church, shared Wesley's views on slavery and hoped that in a struggle for liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness, the black man would not be ignored or forgotten. In the winter of 1778-79, Asbury confided to his journal, "I have lately been impressed with a deep concern, for bringing about the freedom of slaves in America, and feel resolved to do what I can to promote it." ⁴ During the spring of 1779 Asbury shared his feeling about slavery with some of his Methodist colleagues and became convinced that the best course of action would be to try to expell "the practice from our societ[ies]." Slavery was discussed at the annual conference of Methodist preachers in April and Asbury was designated to prepare a circular letter on emancipation "to be read in [Methodist] societies." ⁵ A year later the conference adopted its first official action on slavery. Slaveholding was declared to be "contrary to the laws of God, man, and nature, and hurtful to society." It was a violation of the Golden Rule, "the dictates of conscience and pure religion." Traveling preachers who

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² Ibid., 33, 49.
³ Ibid., 50.
⁵ Ibid., 36.
owned slaves were required to promise to emancipate them and "disapprobation" was expressed toward "all our friends who keep slaves." 6

Shortly after the conference adjourned Asbury traveled through eastern Virginia and he talked with some of his co-religionists about "slave keeping." In one place his friends agreed with him about the evils of slavery but explained that if blacks were freed "they would be taken up and sold again," since Virginia law did not permit one to set a slave at liberty.7 At another place Asbury conferred with a Brother Hill who promised to free his Negroes at Christmas. Asbury, however, was discouraged because many of the people with whom he talked "could not bear" the thought of freeing the slaves.8

The conference did not rescind its 1780 action and in 1783 decided that local or settled preachers, who possessed slaves, should free them. Conference action was described in the following manner. The question for discussion was, "What shall be done with our local preachers who hold slaves contrary to the laws which authorize their freedom in any of the United States?" Conference answered, "We will try them another year," and warned that if they did not release their blacks it might be "necessary to suspend them." 9

The annual conference which met at Baltimore in the spring of 1784 reaffirmed the policy of previous conferences. It voted to suspend slave holding clergymen in Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. It was decided to permit the clergy in Virginia one additional year to emancipate their slaves.10 Itinerant preachers who owned slaves and who resided in states where laws permitted manumission were to be employed "no more." 11 This conference also denounced the slave trade and threatened expulsion from the society of those who participated in the slave traffic. In answer to the query, "What shall we do with [those] . . . who buy and sell slaves?" the conference replied, "If they buy with no other design than to hold them as slaves, and have been previously warned, they shall be expelled, and permitted to sell on no consideration." 12

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6 Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for the Years, 1773-1828 (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), minutes for 1780, 12.
7 Maser, op. cit., 41. Not until 1782 did Virginia law permit a master to manumit his slaves. Prior to this time manumissions were permitted only for some meritorious service which would meet the approval of the Governor and Council.
9 Minutes of the Annual Conferences (1783), 18.
10 Ibid., (1784), 20.
11 Ibid., (1784), 21.
12 Ibid., (1784), 20.
At the founding or Christmas Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784, the clergy adopted a vigorous protest against slavery and formulated rules against slave owning. Thomas Coke addressed this gathering and declared, "We view it as contrary to the Golden Law of God . . . and the unalienable rights of mankind, as well as, every principle of the Revolution, to hold in the deepest debasement . . . so many souls that are capable of the image of God." 13 The conference adopted a policy favoring the emancipation of all slaves. It proclaimed "every member of our society who has slaves, in those states where the laws will admit of freeing them, shall within 12 months (except in Virginia, and there within two years) legally execute and record an instrument, whereby he sets free every slave in his possession." 14 It was suggested that slaves above the age twenty-five be freed within five years, that those between the ages twenty and twenty-five be freed by the time they were thirty, and that all blacks under age twenty be given their liberty by the time they reached their twenty-fifth birthday. It was recommended that infants of slaves be declared free "immediately on birth." 15 The conference declared "every person concerned, who will not comply with these rules, shall have liberty quietly to withdraw from our society within twelve months," otherwise he would be excluded from membership. It was also agreed that "no person holding slaves, shall in future be admitted into [the] society," and all members who "buy or sell slaves, or give them away, unless on purpose to free them," shall be expelled immediately. 16

The 1784 statement on slavery was the most advanced position taken by the church on the subject and it culminated more than four years' discussion of the issue. The Methodists, under the leadership of Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, sought to implement the church's policy; however, they soon realized that the denomination's constituency did not wholly agree with the policy formulated by the clergy. In the spring of 1785 Coke and Asbury traveled through Virginia, explained the conference's position on slavery, and sought to persuade slaveholders to emancipate their blacks. Coke first talked privately with some slave owners, hoping that they would agree to free their slaves. However, his efforts were unsuccessful, since many "would not be persuaded." On April 1, 1785, Coke began to preach against the evils of slavery and although he found that some were offended at his remarks,

15 Ibid., 101.
16 Ibid., 101-102.
one man agreed to emancipate his eight slaves.\(^{17}\) The following week he preached at another place in Virginia and "bore testimony against slavery." On this occasion he "provoked many of the unawakened" to leave the meeting. They gathered together and prepared to beat Coke when the meeting ended. The clergyman was saved from bodily injury by a justice of the peace who happened to be attending the service.\(^{18}\) This incident terminated Coke's public preaching against slavery.

Coke's antislavery comments offended some churchmen and prompted at least one local church leader to resign and leave the denomination.\(^{19}\) Asbury was deeply concerned about the mood of the populace concerning slavery and the animosity aroused by Coke's opposition to the institution. He noted that the people were "greatly agitated with our rules against slavery."\(^{20}\) At the meeting of the Virginia Conference on May 1, 1785, "a great many principle friends" met Asbury and Coke and insisted on "a repeal of the slave rule," which required church members to free their slaves within twelve months. After some deliberation the conference agreed not to insist that this rule be implemented, and it was decided to seek the support of others and petition the state legislature to enact laws for the "immediate or gradual emancipation of all slaves."\(^{21}\) This action did not imply that slavery was now solely a political problem; it was an acknowledgment that it was a problem whose solution required the assistance of secular authority.

A petition was drafted and copies were given to each Methodist preacher, requesting that he procure the signatures of as many freeholders as possible.\(^{22}\) In the weeks and months following the meeting of the Virginia Conference, Asbury and Coke conferred with leaders of other denominations and with influential civilians seeking support for legislation to end slavery in Virginia. Asbury visited "Colonel [Robert] Carter, a Baptist . . . [and] had much free conversation on . . . slavery." He also talked with Samuel Stanhope Smith, a prominent Presbyterian and the president of Hampden-Sydney College, about the emancipation of slaves. Asbury and Coke visited General George Washington and sought his support for legislation to free the Africans. Asbury claimed that Washington "gave us his opinion against slavery," however he refused to sign the petition. He indicated to the clergymen that he

\(^{17}\) Extracts of the Journals of the Late Rev. Thomas Coke, L.L.D.; Comprising Several Visits to North America and the West Indies (Dublin: R. Napper, 1816), 61-62.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 64.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 69.

\(^{20}\) Clark, op. cit., I, 488.

\(^{21}\) Coke, op. cit., 67.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 67.
would "signify his sentiments" by letter if the legislature considered the subject. Methodist support from the Presbyterians and Baptists was insignificant.

The antislavery petitions circulated by Methodist clergymen were presented to the Virginia Assembly in the fall of 1785. Typical of this type of petition was the one from Frederick County. It declared,

"Your petitioners are clearly and fully persuaded that liberty is the birthright of mankind, the right of every rational creature. . . . The body of Negroes in this state have been robbed of that right. . . . in justice [they] ought to have this right restored. We . . . entreat the Assembly . . . to pursue the most prudent, but effective method for the immediate or gradual exterpation of slavery."

Petitions favoring emancipation were countered by petitions defending the rights of property and arguing the scriptural defense of slavery. The General Assembly unanimously rejected all petitions to abolish slavery.

At the same time that the Methodists were seeking support for the abolition of slavery in Virginia there was increasing pressure within the church to suspend or repeal the 1784 policy on emancipation. Opposition to this policy prompted a conference of the church, which met at Baltimore in June, 1785. Here it was decided "to suspend the execution of the minute on slavery till the deliberation of a future conference."

Some have claimed that the church retreated on slavery because Methodism was "too infantile to push the issue." Although the Methodist Episcopal Church was a new organization and was struggling for existence, the position which it took on slavery in 1784 was opposed "by many . . . [church] members, local preachers, and some travelling preachers." Jesse Lee, a native born Methodist

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23 Clark, op. cit., I, 489, 498.
24 Petition to the General Assembly of Virginia, From Frederick County, November 8, 1785 (Manuscript in Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia). Seven petitions, with identical wording as the one from Frederick County and containing the signatures of 285 persons, were presented to the Virginia Assembly on November 8, 1785. See Religious Petitions to General Assembly of Virginia (Manuscript in Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia).
25 Petition to Virginia General Assembly from Brunswick County, November 10, 1785 (Manuscript in Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia); Petition to Virginia General Assembly from Mecklenburg County, November 8, 1785 (Manuscript in Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia).
28 Bucke, op. cit., I, 254.
29 Lee, op. cit., 102.
preacher, admitted that slavery was an evil but he believed that the 1784 statement was ill-timed and offensive to most southerners.\(^{30}\) He claimed that the rules propounded at the Christmas Conference were "calculated to irritate the minds of . . . people" rather than "convince them of errors."\(^{31}\)

Francis Asbury noted that there was much resentment against those who favored abolition.\(^{32}\) This feeling was most pronounced in the proslavery petitions to the Virginia Assembly countering the Methodist petitions favoring legislation to abolish slavery. Anti-slavery advocates were accused of having a false sense of piety and "pretending to be moved by religious principles." It was maintained that slaveholding was not contrary to biblical teachings, that the Old Testament and the writings of Saint Paul sanctioned slavery and that slave owning was never denounced by Jesus or the early church. The argument from scripture concluded with a refutation of the natural rights of man concept by declaring some nations should serve others and that all were not equally free.\(^{33}\) Proslavery spokesmen also denounced those who favored emancipation as enemies of independence, as "tools of the British," and as persons who wish to dispossess Americans of their property. It was claimed that the American Revolution erupted "when the British Parliament usurped a right to dispose of our property without our consent." The Americans then dissolved the union with England and "established . . . a form of government . . . that our property might be secure." However, these petitions noted, since independence a movement had begun to dispossess Americans of "a very important part of their property." This movement, it was charged, was being conducted by "enemies of our country . . . [who] wish . . . to wrest from us our slaves by an act of the legislature." Although denying that blacks possessed natural rights and claiming that slavery conformed with religious principles, the proslaveryites climaxed their argument with an appeal to fear. It was asserted that if the slaves were emancipated it would "be the ruin of the state"; poverty, distress, rapes, robberies, and murder would be the result.\(^{34}\)

Asbury was keenly aware of the proslavery temper of many in

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 102.


\(^{32}\) Clark, op. cit., I, 498.

\(^{33}\) Petition from Brunswick County, November 10, 1785; Petition from Mecklenburg County, November 8, 1785.

\(^{34}\) Petitions from Amelia County, Halifax County, and Pittsylvania Counties, November 10, 1785 (Manuscript in Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia); Petition from Brunswick County, November 10, 1785; Petition from Mecklenburg County, November 8, 1785.
the United States and he also realized that if the Methodist Church was to exist and grow in America it must not alienate its potential constituency by espousing measures contrary to the value system of the society. Thus in June, 1785, Asbury, a man who abhorred slavery, agreed to a suspension of the church rules on slavery. Shortly thereafter Thomas Coke, the most outspoken critic of slavery in the church, acknowledged that the denomination's position was too advanced and that his preaching against slavery had been an error. The 1784 statement had been formulated by the clergy and it represented the ideals and values of these men. It did not represent the opinions and beliefs of lay Methodists, and when church policy conflicted with the customs and practices of society the leaders modified this policy.

Although the church issued no further official pronouncement concerning slavery until the meeting of the General Conference in 1796, Asbury and some of his colleagues did not completely neglect the blacks and they often sought to impress upon Methodists the evils of slaveholding. In 1787 ministers were urged “to leave nothing undone for the spiritual benefit and salvation” of blacks. Clergymen were asked “to embrace every opportunity of inquiring into the state of their souls” and to bring into the church “those who appear to have a real desire of fleeing from the wrath to come” and to organize classes for them and instruct them in the Methodist discipline. The 1789 edition of the *Discipline* prohibited “buying or selling the bodies and souls of men, women, or children, with an intention of enslaving them.”

During these years some Methodist clergymen continued to preach against slavery and tried to persuade slave owners to free their blacks. In 1788, Asbury recorded that Brother Joseph Everett preached “with zeal and boldness” for the emancipation of slaves. In this same year Philip Gatch and his wife freed their slaves because they were convinced “all men were by nature equally free” and that slaveholding was an injustice. Gatch became a member of the Virginia Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and sought to promote the idea that Africans, as well as whites, possessed a claim to the natural rights of man. In the spring of 1790, William Colbert, a circuit rider in Maryland and Virginia, expelled a church member for abusing blacks. He “turned . . . out of Society” a woman “for putting so many irons on her Negro

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85 Coke, op. cit., 95.
86 *Minutes of the Annual Conferences,* (1787), 28.
87 Bucke, op. cit., I, 255.
88 Clark, op. cit., I, 582.
women.”

William McKendree also on occasions would discuss his antislavery sentiments in Methodist class meetings.\(^41\) James O’Kelly, a Methodist itinerant in Virginia and North Carolina and an outspoken opponent of slavery, left the Methodists in 1792. The church’s toleration of slavery was one of the factors which prompted his action.\(^42\) In 1792 Asbury commended the Presbyterian clergyman, David Rice, for his pamphlet espousing the natural rights of man for blacks, and for Rice’s efforts to have the Kentucky constitutional convention prohibit slavery in that state.\(^43\)

At the meeting of the Virginia Conference in 1794, Asbury noted “We . . . had great siftings and searchings . . . on the subject of slavery.” After a lengthy discussion it was agreed “almost unanimously” that traveling preachers would not be permitted to own slaves in states where the law would permit manumission. In states where the law prohibited emancipation itinerants would have to “agree to pay them [slaves] the worth of their labor,” and at the owner’s death to leave them in trust to some “person . . . or society . . . to bring about their liberty.”\(^44\) This statement was a prelude to an official position by the General Conference in 1796.

At the General Conference in 1796 the Methodist clergy did not reinstate the suspended 1784 rules on slavery. However, they did declare “we are more than ever convinced of the great evil of . . . slavery which still exists in these United States.”\(^45\) Local conferences were urged to be “cautious” about whom they admitted to “official stations” in the church. It was recommended that slave holders who sought such stations be required to emancipate their blacks “immediately or gradually,” as the laws of the states and “circumstances of the case” permitted.\(^46\) It was suggested that rules and regulations on these items be formulated by the local conferences. The General Conference resolved that no slave owner would be received into the church until a clergyman had first “spoken to him freely and faithfully on the subject of slavery.”\(^47\) This conference adopted the rule that “every member of the Society who sells a slave shall immediately . . . be excluded.” It also directed Methodist slave owners to permit their blacks to obtain their free-

\(^{40}\) Journal of William Colbert, May 17, 1790 (Typed copy in Methodist Historical Society, Lake Junaluska, North Carolina).

\(^{41}\) Diary of William McKendree, October 9, 1790 (Typed copy in Methodist Historical Society, Lake Junaluska, North Carolina).


\(^{43}\) Clark, op. cit., I, 712.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., II, 33.


\(^{46}\) Ibid., (1796), 23.

\(^{47}\) Ibid., (1796), 23.
dom via work; the length of time required for one to obtain this status was to be determined by the local conference. It was also suggested that female children of slave mothers be freed at age twenty-one and that males be freed at age twenty-five.\textsuperscript{48}

Although the 1796 policy on slavery affirmed that slavery was an evil, it was unambiguous only in prohibiting the sale of slaves. William Colbert confessed that during the “debate” on slavery “more was said in favor of it than I liked to hear,” and he noted dejectedly that slave owners were to be “continued in the society.”\textsuperscript{49} Francis Asbury realized that the 1796 position was a retreat from that taken by the church twelve years earlier, however, he maintained that it was a more realistic or practical one. The earlier statement had prompted some to label Methodist preachers as radicals and disturbers of the peace, and had caused some masters to refuse their Negroes permission to attend Methodist meetings.\textsuperscript{50} Shortly after the 1796 General Conference, Asbury wrote a colleague that he was satisfied with the statement relative “to the slaves.” “It is of great consequence to us,” he claimed, “to have proper access to the masters and slaves.” By minimizing the emancipation issue clergymen believed that they would be given greater opportunity to preach salvation to the blacks.\textsuperscript{51}

In his episcopal travels Asbury often discussed the evils of slavery with the clergy. He was pleased that seven of ten clergymen in southside Virginia were “not sympathetic to the spirit of slavery.”\textsuperscript{52} By the spring of 1798 Asbury and some of his colleagues decided that the church should try to rid itself completely of slaveholding clergymen. Asbury believed that a renunciation of slave owning by all Methodist clergymen would be an effective example for all church members. He and Philip Sands prepared a statement “against slavery,” which he hoped would be accepted by the clergy. He was convinced that “we can never . . . reform the people until we reform the preachers.” His ideal was to purge the clergy of slave holders.\textsuperscript{53}

When the General Conference met in 1800, slavery was on the agenda for discussion. Among the items proposed, debated, and defeated were (1) that no new members be admitted into the church who were slave owners, (2) that slave children born to

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., (1796), 23.
\textsuperscript{49} Journal of William Colbert, October 29, 31, 1796.
\textsuperscript{50} W. L. Grissom, History of Methodism in North Carolina From 1772 to the Present Time (Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1905), 232.
\textsuperscript{51} Clark, op. cit., III, 150.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., II, 155-156.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 156.
Methodist owners be emancipated at birth, and (3) that every Methodist slave owner prepare "an instrument of emancipation" for his slaves within one year, if he resided in a state where law permitted manumission.  

Although the Methodists refused to exclude slave owners, the General Conference of 1800 did approve two resolutions regarding slavery. One stated that whenever "traveling preachers become owners of ... slaves, by any means, they shall forfeit their ministerial character ... unless they execute, if it be practicable, a legal emancipation of such ... slaves, agreeable to the laws of the state wherein they live." The conference also appointed Ezekiel Cooper, William McKendree, and Jesse Lee to prepare an "affectionate address to the Methodist societies in the United States, stating the evils of the spirit and practice of slavery," and to impress upon them the "necessity" of removing slavery "as far as the laws of the respective states will allow." This address declared "we have long lamented the great national evil of Negro slavery ... we have considered it as repugnant to the inalienable rights of mankind and to the very essence of civil liberty, but more especially to the spirit of the Christian religion." Annual conferences were asked to petition state legislatures to enact laws for the gradual emancipation of slaves and local Methodist clergymen were urged to circulate these petitions for signatures. It appears that the suggestions of this "affectionate address" did not receive a favorable response in slaveholding areas. Francis Asbury voiced despair over the prevalence of proslavery sentiment in the south. "I am brought to conclude," he exclaimed, "that slavery will exist ... for ages; there is not a sufficient sense of religion nor liberty to destroy it; Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, in the highest flights of rapturous piety, still maintain and defend it."

The General Conference which met in 1804 modified the church's policy on slavery to permit a degree of slave trading. It approved the selling of slaves by church members if the blacks requested to be sold or for reasons of "mercy or humanity." This conference also directed Methodist preachers "from time to time, as occasion serves, to admonish and exhort all slaves to render due respect and obedience to the commands and interests of their ... masters." At the General Conference in 1808 practically all questions con-
cerning slavery were relegated to the annual conferences for action.60

The 1796 rule concerning slave owners occupying official church positions, and the 1800 rule pertaining to traveling preachers were generally acceptable throughout the church; however, they did not prevent slaveholders occupying church offices or serving as itinerants. Most of the slavery discussion in local conferences pertained to the buying and selling of slaves and to ownership by private individuals. In 1813 the Virginia Conference directed local clergy to “instruct the colored people in the principles and duties of religion” and voted to expell from church membership anyone guilty of “carrying on directly or indirectly the trade of slaves.” 61 This rule, however, was unacceptable to the church’s constituency and in 1817 was modified. The new rule permitted church members to buy and sell slaves “for the . . . purpose of keeping husbands and wives, parents and children together” and when “principles of humanity” were involved.62 Annual conferences in other areas adopted a similar policy. In Tennessee, for example, it was permissible to buy or sell slaves to keep families together, but to purchase or sell “in order to make gain” or for speculative purposes, would result in expulsion from the church.63

By the close of the first decade of the nineteenth century the church had virtually abandoned its effort to persuade church members to emancipate their slaves. The Tennessee Conference declared “it is our opinion that slavery is a moral evil.” However, the conference continued, since the “laws of our country do not admit of emancipation,” nor admit “a liberated black to enjoy freedom, we cannot adopt any rule by which we can compel our members to liberate their slaves.”64 This position was similar to that expressed by the General Conference in 1816. After much deliberation concerning slavery this conference asserted “under the present existing circumstances . . . little can be done to abolish a practice so contrary to the principles of moral justice.” The belief was expressed that this “evil [slavery] appears to be past remedy.”65

Between 1780 and 1816 the Methodist response to slavery in America shifted from that of severe condemnation to acceptance.

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61 Minutes of the Virginia Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church, 1813 (Manuscript in Randolph-Macon College Library, Ashland, Virginia).
62 Ibid., (1817).
64 McFerrin, op. cit., II, 401.
During these years the church continued to maintain that slavery was an evil, that it was a denial of the natural rights of man, and that it was contrary to the spirit of Christianity. At no time during this period did churchmen claim that slavery was a benevolent institution and that it possessed divine sanction. Although the rhetoric of the church, pertaining to slavery, remained uniform, the policy of the church changed drastically. This change, as outlined, occurred gradually but by 1816 the General Conference acknowledged the church’s inability to achieve the ideals of the Declaration of Independence for blacks. By this time the church’s major interest was no longer the emancipation of the blacks, rather it was to teach them religious principles and duties. Salvation of souls rather than the liberation of bodies from bondage became the goal of Methodism in its mission to the Negroes.

Various factors help to explain why the church modified its position on slavery during the early national period. It may be claimed that the 1784 statement on emancipation represented the views of Englishmen John Wesley and Thomas Coke rather than the opinions of Americans who constituted the membership of the scattered Methodist societies. The 1784 position encountered massive public disapproval and, in some instances, was the cause of hostility toward Methodist preachers. Methodist conference gatherings consisted solely of clergymen and it might be argued, in an era when there were no opinion polls to guide them, they were not attuned to the ideas and values of their constituency. The clergy enunciated the ideals of freedom and the rights of man. They discovered, however, that many Methodists did not believe these rights should be accorded to Africans. Church leaders were determined, above all else, to establish the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. They realized, early in the history of the church, that to accomplish this objective an accommodation would have to be made with slavery or they would have to abandon all efforts to build a church.

Abolitionist sentiments associated with Methodist pronouncements on slavery helped to create an unattractive image of the Methodist clergy, one as agitators or disturbers of social peace and stability. This image was not conducive to ecclesiastical growth and harmony. Churchmen were aware that they would have to dispel this image if the Methodist Episcopal Church was to survive and dispense the gospel of salvation to all men.

Some Methodists, perhaps, did not believe that slavery was contrary to the “true spirit of religion,” since it was apparently sanctioned by the Old Testament and the ministry of Saint Paul and

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66 Harrison, op. cit., 148.
67 Clark, op. cit., I, 620.
had not been condemned by Jesus or the early church. It was noted that the present generation was not responsible for slavery, since it was an institution which society had inherited. The humane course of action, many maintained, would be to give the blacks “the advantages of the gospel and await the developments of Providence.” 68

Another factor in the church’s retreat from the ideals enunciated in 1784 was racism. Although black and white Methodists often worshiped together, segregation was practiced in some society meetings as early as 1771. 69 Though this practice was not universal in early Methodist churches, it was not uncommon. Segregation indicated an attitude of racial superiority toward the Africans.

Although the Methodist Church was not successful in its original aim of securing emancipation for blacks, the church constantly reminded society of the evils of slavery. The debates and discussions of churchmen helped to convince some that slaveholding was wrong and prompted them to free their blacks. Thus an undetermined number of slaves were freed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries because the church was able to arouse the conscience of some slave owners to the injustice of slavery. 70

During these same years Asbury and others sought to encourage competent blacks to enter the ministry. Harry Hosier, a black man, was a friend of Asbury and often traveled with him. Asbury claimed that he was a preacher of “considerable eloquence” and sometimes he assisted Asbury in worship services. At other times Hosier might conduct the service alone. 71 In 1799 Asbury ordained Richard Allen of Philadelphia, the first Negro to receive ordination in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Allen and a group of blacks had formed a congregation in that city which Asbury said, “was governed by the doctrine and discipline of the Methodist Church.” 72 The General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church did not formulate a rule on ordaining blacks until 1800. It specified

the bishops . . . [may] ordain localdeacons of our African brethren

68 Robert Paine, Life and Times of William McKendree, Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church 2 volumes (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1869), I, 99-100; Clark, op. cit., I, 582.
71 Clark, op. cit., I, 403, 362.
72 Ibid., III, 366.
in places where they have built a house or houses for the worship of
God; provided they have a person among them qualified for that
office, and he can obtain an election of two-thirds of the male members
of the society to which he belongs, and a recommendation from the
minister who has the charge, and from his fellow laborers in the city
or circuit.\textsuperscript{73}

Jesse Lee, a member of the General Conference of 1800, reported
that the preachers from the southern states were "much opposed
to this rule" and that the Conference voted not to include this item
in the Discipline.\textsuperscript{74} Despite the implication of Lee's statement black
Methodist preachers appear to have been favorably received in
the south in the opening years of the nineteenth century. John
Charles, a Negro, was pastor of a congregation in the Wilmington,
North Carolina area and Harry Evans, a black from Norfolk, Vir­
ginia, was a successful pastor in Fayetteville, North Carolina.\textsuperscript{75}
In 1812 Asbury ordained a free black man in Virginia.\textsuperscript{76} However,
after a few years state laws in the south prohibited preaching by
Negroes and all efforts to provide a black ministry ended. The
spiritual care of the blacks would be the responsibility of the whites.

The trials and travail of the Methodist Episcopal Church relative
to slavery during the early national period reveal a degree of con­
cern manifested in no other denomination. Also revealed is an
erosion of idealism and an acceptance or accommodation with a
practice which church leaders were convinced was evil. The ac­
ccommodation was forced upon the church by the society of which
it was a part and illustrates that the church tends to reflect the
values and ideals of society rather than abstract value principles.

\textsuperscript{73} Journals of the General Conference, (1800), 44; Lee, op. cit., 270.
\textsuperscript{74} Lee, op. cit., 270.
\textsuperscript{75} Grissom, op. cit., 235; William M. Wightman, Life of William Capers, D. D., One
of the Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Including An Autobiography
(Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1902), 124.
\textsuperscript{76} Clark, op. cit., II, 694.