The Social, Political and Religious Significance of the Formation of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (1870)

by William B. Gravely

Among the denominational traditions of black Methodists in the United States, less attention — relatively speaking — has been devoted in the literature on black religion in the past two decades to the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. Its beginnings lack the drama of the originating event for the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church — the walkout by Richard Allen, Absalom Jones and other black members from St. George's Church, Philadelphia in 1787 to protest discriminatory seating arrangements. Likewise, in the origin of the C.M.E. Church, there is missing the persistent assertiveness which the early leaders of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (A.M.E.Z.) Church exhibited in confronting the proscriptions they experienced in late 18th and early 19th century Methodism in New York City. Instead, the C.M.E. Church came into

1The author acknowledges the assistance of the Faculty Research Fund of the University of Denver for covering costs of photoduplication and microfilming of primary sources used in the preparation of this article.
4The most comprehensive documentary and interpretive account of the origins of Zion Methodism is the late Bishop William J. Walls' The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church: Reality of the Black Church (Charlotte: A.M.E. Zion Publishing Co., 1974), 43ff.
existence in 1870 under complex and confusing conditions and only after six years of a tedious process of experimentation and intra-Methodist competition for the religious loyalties of the freedpeople. The story of these developments in its social, political and religious dimensions is significant for the history of black religion generally and of black Methodism particularly, as well as for American church history.

The context for considering how a third major black Methodist denomination was formed is the post-war southern setting which the defeat of the Confederacy brought in the spring of 1865. The upheaval had its religious consequences, which seemed to indicate for a short time at least and to some people, mostly northerners, that the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, might disband, reunite with its northern counterpart or be absorbed in some form of ecclesiastical reconstruction. Instead, as one might expect of a defeated people, old loyalties were reasserted and Southern Methodism made a remarkable and speedy recovery and resumed its prominent place in Southern Protestant life. The membership, which in 1866 was lower than in 1854, doubled within fifteen years after the war. That institutional rebuilding — which involved a new generation of leadership including lay representation for the first time — began in the summer and fall of 1865 with the re-establishment of the denominational press (at New Orleans, Richmond and Macon though not at Nashville) and the reorganization of the annual conferences. It culminated in April, 1866, with the convening of the first General Conference in eight years, the session scheduled in 1862 having been cancelled due to the war.

Even before the first post-war sessions of the annual conferences of the M.E. Church, South, were held, denominational leaders were faced with the religious consequences of freedom for the black membership. In 1860

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6Farish, 69.
Southern Methodism, largely through its program for evangelizing the slaves, claimed 171,857 black members, plus 35,909 probationers (making the usual total of 207,000 that the general histories cite). Every annual conference which met in 1865 showed major decreases, so that by the next year when more complete statistics were available, only 78,742 "colored members" remained in the church relations that they had as slaves. In the same way that blacks left the plantations to follow where Union armies occupied slave territory after 1861, nearly two-thirds of the Methodist freedpeople cut their former church ties within the first year and a half of freedom. Both mass movements — examples of black initiative — forced definitions of policy. In the case of the so-called "contrabands," as the liberated slaves were called at first, federal protection became necessary, leading to the Freedmen's Bureau. In the case of Southern Methodism, the white leadership was forced to consider the meaning of the black exodus from the denomination.

In a pastoral letter issued August 17, 1865, the Southern Methodist bishops defended the church's missionary enterprise to the slaves and restated its continuing "obligations to promote the spiritual welfare" of the freed blacks. But the episcopal leaders also acknowledged "recent changes and casualties" that had reduced the black membership. "Defections, doubtless, will take place from their ranks to churches offering greater social inducements for their adhesion," they predicted. "If they elect to leave us, let them go with the assurance that as heretofore we have been, so we will continue to be, their friends, and in every suitable way aid their moral development and religious welfare." For "those who remain with us" or who return "after a brief experiment

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8Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, for the Year 1860 (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1861), 293.
9Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, for the Year 1866 (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1870), 94.
elsewhere,” the bishops advised, “we must still keep a place.”

Reports at annual conferences and articles in the denominational press from the summer of 1865 down to the meeting of the Southern General Conference the next April indicate a divided opinion on how to respond to the departure of black members. The search for a consensus to adjust the ecclesiastical relationship of the remaining blacks continued until the General Conference adopted an official stance in 1866.

Some white Methodists accepted the racial division that had occurred. Writing to the *Southern Christian Advocate* in August, 1865, George W. Williams of Charleston predicted that “the whites and blacks will probably never worship together again” in that city. “I am not sure,” he concluded coldly, “but Methodism will be improved by the separation.” Holland N. McTyeire, who would be made bishop the next year, concurred. “As respects religion,” he wrote to *The Episcopal Methodist* in Richmond, “ecclesiastical independence is bound to follow the civil. They will leave us.”

The separatist point of view occasionally came from whites who expressed “much irritation against the blacks, for their ungrateful behaviour towards those who had always been their best friends,” as the editor of the *Southern Advocate* put it in a challenge to the Georgia Conference to resume its ministry to ex-slaves.

Similar bitter responses in reports of annual conference missionary societies sent up a chorus of lamentation at their first sessions after the war. After surveying the destitute state of many of its thirty-four missions, the Mobile Conference Missionary Society, in December, 1865, for example, exclaimed (through its secretary, southern theologian, Thomas O. Summers):

> How appalling are the moral results of the unsuccessful struggle in which the South has been engaged! What a blight has been cast upon the once fruitful and flourishing mission field of the Southern States!

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12Farish, 164.
13August 31, 1865.
14October 11, 1865.
15November 16, 1865.
THE SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE

... We once fondly thought that speaking after the manner of men, Providence was making a grand experiment on the African race of this country, having ulterior bearing upon the fifty millions on the African continent. That experiment seemed, moreover, to be in a state of successful development, and that too very largely through the instrumentality of our communion ... But a violent and sudden check has been given to this great undertaking, and it is impossible to divine what the developments of the future will be.16

Much of the resentment over the exodus of the freedpeople from the M.E. Church, South, was targeted against northern missionaries. As early as July, 1865, David S. Doggett (future bishop in 1866) ventilated the anger of white southerners. "Methodist bishops, this day," he wrote, "are sending missionaries to cultivated fields, to dispossess the rightful laborers of the harvests they have toiled to raise, and deprive them of the houses of worship which they have erected." Turning cynical, Doggett exclaimed: "What plentitude of compassion! What angelic tenderness! What romance of Christian enterprise!"17

Alongside separatist sentiment and hostility toward invading northern missionaries, some prominent denominational leaders advised patience and caution in responding to the black initiatives for ecclesiastical freedom. Speaking to the Georgia Conference, Bishop George F. Pierce predicted that the blacks would conclude before long "that they had acted hastily," and that soon "most, if not all, the colored members would be willing to come back to their former allegiance to the Church, South."18 The Mississippi Conference late in 1865 continued its appointments to "colored charges," warning that it was in bad faith to abandon the blacks "to the religious and educational control of those whose principles, if not their sole object, is to inspire hatred of their former owners and masters."19 Some of the same missionary societies which lamented the results of the black exodus tried to rekindle the old spirit of the slave

16Southern Christian Advocate, December 21, 1865. Other examples are in the issues of November 23 and 30, 1865.
17The Episcopal Methodist, July 26, 1865.
18Southern Christian Advocate, November 23, 1865.
19Ibid., December 7, 1865.
evangelization movement. Indeed, as a Georgia Conference committee shrewdly observed, the failure to provide for the religious needs of the freedpeople would call into question the sincerity of the pre-war slave missions. "Such a course," the report declared, "would signalize ours as a Christianity so low, that it gave the gospel to the negro, because he was our slave yet would deny it to him a freedman, though he no less has a soul to save. This would leave our church," the committee rightly concluded, "under the imputation that self interest rather than christian principle lay at the foundation of all those efforts for the negro's religious instruction, for which the world has commended us, and on which we sometimes plumed ourselves."20

At no time, however, did any of the advocates of a continued ministry to the blacks within the M.E. Church, South suggest altering the basic pattern of "an inferior and subordinate relation" of blacks in the church. Hunter D. Farish's conclusion in 1938 holds: "There was no disposition to concede [them] any real voice in the management of the affairs of the Church. [They were] admitted to neither an unrestricted pastoral nor legislative relation."21 There is evidence that Southern annual conferences were willing to ordain black local preachers as early as the fall of 1865 to officiate among the freedpeople — a practice that had a few precedents in the ante-bellum period.22 The notion, however, of according ecclesiastical equality at any significant level in denominational governance was never entertained. One prominent spokesman, J. E. Evans, put the matter clearly in the Southern Advocate. "Public opinion and the social relations of the two races at the South," he stated, "preclude the idea of such equality in a common organization with the whites."23

Any consensus on racial policy in Southern Methodism required a reconciliation of several competing factors. First, the Church had to do something, not only to respond to the

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20Ibid., November 23, 1865.
21Farish, 170.
22Southern Christian Advocate, November 2, 1865.
23Ibid., June 15, 1866.
continued presence of nearly 80,000 black members, but also to vindicate the reputation of what Bishop James O. Andrew had called in 1858, "the crowning glory of Southern Methodism," its slave mission program. Secondly, the Church had to reckon with intra-Methodist competition, especially from the Methodist Episcopal Church, which was likewise fumbling to come up with a workable program for southern missions both to whites and to the freedpeople. Any Southern Methodist policy assumed that Southern whites knew best "the character and habits of the negro" — to quote David S. Doggett in the summer of 1865 — and hence, that they, rather than northerners, should control the educational and religious development of the ex-slaves.

Some kind of understanding, moreover, had to be achieved between the M.E. Church, South, and the two black Methodist denominations — the A.M.E. and A.M.E. Zion churches — which also were carrying on vigorous missionary activities among the freedpeople as early as 1863. In May, 1865, the A.M.E. Church established a South Carolina Conference, which reported 22,338 members a year later. That conference was the eastern thrust of A.M.E. missions, while in Louisiana another conference was formed in November, 1865 for work in the lower and middle Southern states. The A.M.E. Zion Church organized its first southern conference in North Carolina late in 1864 (December 17), adding a Louisiana Conference the following March. A clarification of the relationship between the African

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26 The Episcopal Methodist, July 26, 1865.
29 Walls, 188, 192.
Methodist denominations and the M.E. Church, South, was imperative because of questions of church property. In several instances at the local level agreements were worked out between white trustees and the A.M.E. and A.M.E. Zion preachers to use buildings formerly set aside for the religious interests of the slaves. Southern Methodist annual conferences, however, had steadfastly refused to turn over deeds to such property until the General Conference decided the matter.

In their episcopal address which set the agenda for the General Conference of 1866, the four Southern Methodist bishops took account of all these factors affecting "the colored population." "Many of them," they conceded realistically, "will probably unite with the African M.E. Church, some of them with the Northern Methodist Church, while others, notwithstanding extraneous influences and unkind misrepresentations of our Church, will remain with us."

The special committee designated to propose denominational policy on blacks issued four reports to the General Conference. The first called for "the establishment of day-schools, under proper regulations and trustworthy teachers, for the education of colored children." Such a recommendation followed from the recognition that "the condition of the colored people of the South is essentially changed," but its significance lay with the determination shown by some white Methodists to compete with northern educators to meet the "intellectual wants" of the blacks.

A second report turned out to be the crucial legislative basis for the formation four years later of the C.M.E. Church. At the time there was a difference of opinion whether in fact the move to organize "separate pastoral charges" for blacks ("wherever they prefer it, and their numbers justify it") could

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30The Episcopal Methodist, October 11, 1865; Southern Christian Advocate, November 2, 1865: The Loyal Georgian (Augusta), July 6, 1867.
31Southern Christian Advocate, November 23, 30, 1865.
33Ibid., 39; Southern Christian Advocate, May 4 and 11, 1866. From all indications which I have, very little actually was done in the way of Southern Methodist support of the education of the freedpeople until the C.M.E. Church founded its institutions, Paine and Lane colleges.
be done within the M.E. Church, South, or whether inevitably the separation would end in the creation of a new black denomination. The committee's recommendations duplicated a scheme first suggested by David S. Doggett the previous summer (and endorsed soon afterwards by Holland N. McTyeire). On the floor of the General Conference Doggett made the major defense of the proposals. Citing the movement of blacks as evidence that "the idea of their ecclesiastical liberty and status is associated with their political liberty and status," the Virginian appealed to his fellow churchmen:

We can do nothing by restriction. We must convince them that we are as much interested in them and in their work, as their pretended friends are. If we do not acknowledge that, what will be the result? Let it go forth from this body that we do not appreciate their position, it will react upon us and large numbers of the colored people, who belong to us, will detach themselves from us.  

From the local level, the report followed typical Methodist structure for creating separate quarterly, district and annual conferences at the discretion of the bishops. The power to license black preachers and to ordain them deacon and elder lay with the existing white annual conferences. After two or more all-black annual conferences were operative, the legislation authorized "a separate General Conference jurisdiction" — again, if the blacks "so desire, and the Bishops deem it expedient." The original report of the committee instructed the bishops to "advise and assist them in organizing a separate general conference jurisdiction for themselves, in accordance with the doctrines and discipline of our Church, and in fraternal union with the same." Instead, the delegates amended the report to call for a black general conference which would have "the same relation . . . [to the M.E.C.S.] as

34 The Episcopal Methodist, August 2, October 11, 1865.
35 Southern Christian Advocate, May 4, 1866.
the Annual Conferences bear to each other."\textsuperscript{36}

Two final reports approved by the General Conference were precipitated both by the visit of three fraternal delegates from the A.M.E. Church who brought a set of proposals from their bishops, and by the practical fact of local conflict over property questions between the two denominations.\textsuperscript{37} In their message the A.M.E. bishops pointed out that "thousands of persons" formerly members of the M.E. Church, South had become members of their church during and since the war. They recalled that many of the "houses of worship" had been built wholly or in part "by the means of the colored people, and for their special use." They asked, therefore, "if arrangements [could] be made by which the said properties [could] be peaceably and permanently transferred" to the A.M.E. Church.\textsuperscript{38}

Despite the fact that the original report from the Committee acceded to the request from the A.M.E. bishops, the General Conference was in no mood to give away church property.\textsuperscript{39} Some delegates reminded the Conference that there was more than one African Methodist denomination, inferring that it was unfair to work out an agreement with the A.M.E. Church without also giving the same option to the A.M.E. Zion Church. Most debaters, however, pointed to the inconsistency of arranging for separate conferences for remaining black members looking toward a separate black jurisdiction in the M.E. Church, South, while encouraging those same members to join the A.M.E. Church and to take

\textsuperscript{36}Journal of the General Conference of the M.E. Church, South, 1866, 58-59. Kenneth K. Bailey's article, "The Post-Civil War Racial Separations in Southern Protestantism: Another Look" in Church History, 46 (1977), 458, 464-65, emphasizes this amendment as an act of good faith to keep blacks within the same denomination though in a racially separate jurisdiction, an idea that was resurrected in 1939 in The Methodist Church's Central Jurisdiction. In his effort to find evidence that southern whites were reluctant to have blacks leave the "integrated" churches of the antebellum era, Bailey overlooks much overt racial hostility by white churchpeople and romanticizes the pre-war racial relationship in the churches with its inevitable imbalance of power between white leaders and slave members.

\textsuperscript{37}See notice of petitions from black congregations in Harrodsburg and Lexington, Ky. and from Vicksburg, Miss. in Journal of the General Conference of the M.E. Church, South, 1866, 24, 62.

\textsuperscript{38}Western Christian Advocate, March 20, 1867.

\textsuperscript{39}Christian Recorder, May 5, 1866.
the church property with them. Finally, T. O. Summers put a stop to the discussion by moving an amendment that there could be no transfer of church properties.\textsuperscript{40} Immediately, the A.M.E. delegation walked out of the General Conference, an action which “produced,” they recalled in a report to their bishops, “a deep and saddening effect upon the reflecting and more considerate portion of the members.” Some white Methodists behind the scenes implored the A.M.E. delegation to remain and give the General Conference a chance to reconsider. Those negotiations explain how a day later, the General Conference adopted a more positive response to the A.M.E. initiative. The report instructed the Southern Methodist bishops to confer with their black counterparts “as to the propriety of union” and requested white trustees to allow “the use of houses of worship” (not transfer of deed but use) where “entire churches and congregations shall have voluntarily left us.”\textsuperscript{41}

The end result of the varying forms of General Conference action was confusion. There were three main thrusts: (1) to create separate charges and annual conferences within the M.E. Church, South for black members; (2) to refuse transfer of property to the A.M.E. Church; (3) but, at the same time, to open conversations on union with the A.M.E. Church while working out accommodations for the use of church property at the local level.

It did not take long for the obvious ambiguity of the General Conference legislation to surface in specific cases of conflict. In late June, J. C. Simmons, a white pastor in Lumpkin, Georgia, wrote to the \textit{Southern Advocate} for a clarification and practical application of the confusing policies. An A.M.E. preacher, Fortune Robeson, had tried to take charge of the black church in Lumpkin, on instructions from his presiding elder, Henry McNeal Turner (eminent A.M.E. leader, reconstruction politician and later bishop). The congregation, according to Simmons, had not asked for

\textsuperscript{40}Southern Christian Advocate, May 4, 1866; \textit{Journal of the General Conference of the M.E. Church, South}, 1866, 59, 65-66.

\textsuperscript{41}\textit{Journal of the General Conference of the M.E. Church, South}, 1866, 73; Southern Christian Advocate, May 11, 1866; \textit{Christian Recorder}, May 19, 1866.
an assignment from the A.M.E. Church, for it had expected
to come under the legislation which maintained a continued
relationship to the M.E. Church, South. 42

The task of replying to Simmons was left to J. E. Evans,
the Southern Methodist pastor in Columbus, Georgia who had
played a prominent role in General Conference policy-
making. He had just published three articles in the Southern
Advocate explaining the new policies and sharing some basic
information about the A.M.E. Church with readers. 43 In
Evans' response, the basic outlines of the agreement with the
A.M.E. Church became clearer. The General Conference
provided for both kinds of black Methodists, he explained:
those who preferred "the new order of things" which could be
most easily implemented in an alliance with the A.M.E.
Church, and those who preferred "the old order of things"
within the M.E. Church, South. The black denomination had
agreed not to "seek to divide our Churches, or to induce them
to leave us," Evans continued, and white Methodists had
consented not to prevent any members or churches who
wished, from joining the A.M.E. Church. Furthermore, Evans
declared, the white churchmen "expected and understood"
that the A.M.E. ministers would "give themselves to the one
work of preaching the Gospel . . . avoiding all questions that
may stir up strife between the whites and the Colored
People." 44

In conclusion, Evans spoke of the practical need for
white clergy in many areas to keep up their ministry to
blacks since the A.M.E. Church would not be able to
provide for the whole South and as an accommodation to
those blacks who did not wish to join that denomination.
The end result of this plan, Evans assured Simmons and
Advocate readers, was not an effort "to bring the Colored
People into the church . . . as peers of the whites in the

42July 6, 1866.
43Southern Christian Advocate, June 15, 22, 29, 1866.
44Ibid., July 20, 1866. The Christian Recorder, the A.M.E. weekly paper, forecasted future
difficulties on this matter when its editor commented (September 8, 1866) that since "there
was so much difference of opinion about the performance of this 'one work,' it has a painful
significance."
same body."  

The month before Evans had explained that "public opinion would not sustain a policy that brings them into the councils and offices of the church, as the peers of the white man."  

During the next two years the cooperative experiment between the M.E. Church, South, and the A.M.E. Church failed for three reasons. First, the agreement between the two churches did not take sufficient account of the inevitable competition that emerged between the blacks who remained in the M.E. Church, South (ultimately the C.M.E. Church) and those who transferred into the A.M.E. Church. The logic of denominationalism is, as the agreement sought to recognize, voluntarism, but that implies competition as well. The incident at Lumpkin, Georgia revealed the inherent weakness of the agreement. Perhaps, however, it was merely a temporary measure. Evans even spoke in this vein when he wrote that given "the want of cultivation and experience" of blacks "in church legislation and administration," the A.M.E. proposals "seemed to be a providential provision to meet the same."  

The competition was further increased throughout the South by the missionary operations of the M.E. and the A.M.E. Zion churches. The ultimate formation of the C.M.E. Church cannot be understood, therefore, without acknowledging the four options open to any Methodist freedperson — membership in either of two African Methodist churches or in northern Methodist missions or in the Southern Church. Since the Southern Methodists considered their real competitor to be the M.E. Church, cooperation with either of the African Methodist denominations was to be preferred rather than "to encourage our colored people to unite with the white Northern M.E. Church," a move, Evans put it, "not thought to be for the peace of the South."  

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45 Southern Christian Advocate, July 20, 1866.  
46 Ibid., June 29, 1866.  
47 Ibid.  
48 Ibid.
likewise made A.M.E. missionaries into ecclesiastical foes of northern Methodist preachers. Southern Methodists rejoiced, therefore, to find some A.M.E. leaders regarding the M.E. Church, South, as "the true friend of the colored man," and castigating "the rabid aggressions of the unscrupulous agents of the M.E. Church, North."

The second cause for failure of the alliance between the A.M.E. Church and Southern Methodism can be traced to internal conflicts within the black denomination. At its General Conference of 1864 it had opened fraternal relations with the M.E. Church and had advanced proposals for union with the A.M.E. Zion Church. The move in 1866 to cooperate with the M.E. Church, South, therefore, had to be reconciled with those general conference directives. The Christian Recorder, the A.M.E. paper, had several times during the year after fraternal ties were established with the M.E. Church, South, to defend against the charge that they endorsed "the slaveholding animus of that Church." At first, James Lynch, editor of the Recorder, was disposed to argue "that an Ex-Rebel Methodist can become a true friend of the colored man, as well as a Northern negro-proscribing Methodist can." He was troubled, however, that the Southern Methodist General Conference had refused formally to introduce the A.M.E. delegation in 1866, conferring only with them in committee and privately. The "studied avoidance" of normal courtesies between Methodist communions, he condemned as "shabby treatment." Increasingly, Lynch disavowed the attack by the A.M.E. delegation when it sided with Southern Methodists in calling for "an unbroken phalanx to counteract" the M.E. Church.

In March, 1867, Bishop Daniel A. Payne joined Lynch in expressing reservations about the denomination's relations

49Ibid.
50Christian Recorder, May 19, 1866.
51Ibid., February 2, 1867.
52Ibid., June 2, 1866.
53Ibid., May 19, 1866.
54Ibid.; see also issues for September 1, 1866 and February 9, 1867.
with the Southern Church. Responding to possible union between the A.M.E. and M.E. churches, he denied that the A.M.E. delegates in 1866 were empowered “to strike a blow at the Methodist Episcopal Church.” “What induced them so to act,” he wrote, “I know not. They may have been goaded to it by the treatment of certain agents of the Methodist Episcopal Church. To me, it always has been a cause of chagrin, because they were not sent to widen the breach. . . .” 55 On the other hand, Payne’s episcopal colleague, Jabez P. Campbell, led the opposition to all moves toward union with the M.E. Church. He dissented from Payne’s conclusions and reasserted the attack on the M.E. Church, especially in New Orleans. 56 With one party in the A.M.E. Church looking northward, and the other favoring cooperation with the Southern Church, the arrangement agreed to in 1866 was doomed to fail.

Some Southern Methodists were apprehensive over a possible union between the M.E. and A.M.E. churches, but the major factor in a growing southern disaffection with the plan of 1866 was the political involvement of the African Methodists in Reconstruction — a third cause of failure. The first sign that the Southern Advocate comprehended how the A.M.E. Church made it a duty to work for the political advancement and civil rights of the freedpeople came in June, 1867. Commenting on a report from a New Orleans paper that Bishop Campbell had made a public appeal to support the Republican party, E. H. Myers warned:

Were [the A.M.E. Church] to remain true to the professions made at the General Conference, and seek only to preach the gospel to the colored race, to educate and elevate them, without arraying them against the whites, it would have the sympathy of all good men in the South. But when it turns the Church into a political

56 Christian Recorder, June 1, 1867; September 21, 1867.
club, no matter what complexion of politics, it has departed from the simplicity of the gospel, and should be rebuked. It was nearly a year later before Myers confessed having felt deceived by the A.M.E. delegation back in 1866. Castigating his fellow Southerners, he wrote, "we were foolish enough to believe that here at least is a pure minded people, who would give themselves to preaching the gospel, and saving souls, and would, as a church, abstain from political action." Myers was restating the old pre-Civil War Southern Protestant version of the spiritual nature of the church, reformulated in order to urge black Methodists to stay out of Reconstruction politics and to rationalize, at the same time, the political position of white Methodists in the South. Especially in the highly politicized context of Reconstruction, no religious paper or leader was likely to remain aloof from political matters, least of all the fiery editor of the Southern Christian Advocate who himself wrote in favor of Presidential Reconstruction and defended Andrew Johnson against the radical Republicans during the same period that he penned the above statement glorifying the spiritual church. Moreover, here the most fundamental reason why the control of church property was so crucial came to the surface. White Southerners allowed the use, but rarely if ever turned over properties to the African Methodists of either persuasion simply because they wanted to insure that churches be used for religious purposes only. "We will not allow our places of worship," wrote the Griffin Georgia District Meeting, "desecrated by preaching politics or holding political meetings.

57Southern Christian Advocate, June 7, 1867. The text of the bishop's talk is in the New York Public Library, Speech of Rev. Bishop Campbell, of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Delivered in Lafayette Square, New Orleans, on Thursday, May 16, 1867. To Colored Voters. The Battle Hymn of the Republic. The Civil Rights Bill, &c. (New Orleans: New Orleans Republican, S. L. Brown and Co., 1867). It is surprising that Myers and other Southern Methodists failed to recognize that the A.M.E. Church made political action a part of its southern mission, since there appeared to be no attempt by black leaders to be secretive about their goals. A clear statement, reviewing the A.M.E. program in the South, was given by Bishop Daniel A. Payne, The African M.E. Church in its Relations to the Freedmen (Xenia, Ohio: The Torchlight Co., [1868]) — a copy of which is in the library at Wilberforce University.

58Southern Christian Advocate, May 29, 1868.

59For examples, see ibid., March 15, May 24, 1867; May 3, October 2, 23, 1868.
The story of black churches being burned and bombed — as they were during the civil rights revolution of our generation — has its origins during Reconstruction. There can be no full comprehension of the beginnings of the C.M.E. Church, therefore, without seeing the ramifications of the property question.

With the failure of the plan for cooperation with the A.M.E. Church, and with it the end of "the proposed union or fraternization" with either black Methodist denomination, Southern Methodists fell back on the original idea of creating separate churches and conferences looking to "an independent organization" for black members "to which may be safely transferred the property in question." The bishops had, in fact, already begun to implement the scheme even before there was a public admission that the arrangement with the A.M.E. Church was void. In 1867, Bishop Robert Paine appointed a white minister, Thomas Taylor, General Superintendent of the Colored Work. By November 20, he had rounded up about 10,000 members and 120 local preachers among black Methodists within the Southern Church in Tennessee, and had formed, under Paine's administration, the first colored conference at Jackson. Following Taylor's plan, bishops in other areas created four more annual conferences during the next two years. Bishop McTyeire presided at the first Kentucky conference in October, 1868. Bishop Pierce inaugurated a Georgia Colored Methodist Conference and Taylor the first Mississippi Conference in January, 1869. The following November a fifth annual conference, in Alabama, was formed under Bishop McTyeire.

There were several problems, not the least of which was continued controversy and opposition to the movement from competing Methodist bodies. In two and a half years, however, the groundwork was laid for the final step, the formation of a general conference for these black Methodists.

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60 Ibid., August 14, 1868.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., July 5, November 20, 1867; October 6, November 14, 1868; January 15, 22, 29, 1869; Nashville Christian Advocate, January 23, July 17, December 18, 1869.
The Southern Church waived many of its literary and theological standards to accomplish some licensing and ordaining of preachers, but the new colored conferences began immediately to set up a program for improving the educational status of their clergy. Most, a survey of early reports shows, could read; fewer could read and write, but only a small minority were completely illiterate. They made their way by continuing the legacy of the folk preacher during slavery, whose oratorical power was indisputable and who turned his oral instruction into Christian faith (oral, because of southern prohibitions against instructing slaves to read) to his own advantage. Reminiscent of the debates over the education of ministers in frontier Methodism a generation earlier, the delegates to the organizing convention of the new denomination heard one of the eloquent defenders for the tradition of the folk preacher. “Take care what you are agwine to do — take care, I tell you,” Anderson Jackson of Alabama warned. “It aint for us, brutherin, to measure out a man by a book, and say who God shall call, and who he sha’n’t. No, sire, never. T-a-k-e c-a-r-e. My father, sir, didn’t know A from B, and yet by his preaching hundreds — yes, thousands — was converted. Scores of ’em in heaven now, white as well as black.”

As a means of publicity the colored annual conferences issued their minutes and a record of the Southern Church’s legislation authorizing the movement. One black preacher from Kentucky, George Jackson, spoke of the need for such material to combat the opposition. “Going round and round in his travels up and down,” The Southern Advocate reported, “he was met by them calling themselves the ‘old side’ (M.E. Church, North) and by the ‘Bethel’ (A.M.E. Church) and by the ‘Zion’ (A.M.E. Zion Church) who abused him powerfully;

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63In the Kentucky Conference, twenty-two could read, and eighteen read and write of twenty-five ministerial candidates. In Tennessee, the estimate was half of the candidates could write, and in Mississippi, only a few who could not read. Southern Christian Advocate, October 16, November 14, 1868; Nashville Christian Advocate.


65Nashville Christian Advocate, January 7, 1871.

66Southern Christian Advocate, November 14; December 4, 1868.
calling him 'Reb' and 'Secesh.' "67 As a further means to consolidate the work, the movement added a monthly periodical to its repertoire. Samuel Watson, a white preacher for thirty-three years among the blacks, was its founding editor.68 The Southern Advocate made no bones about the purpose of The Christian Index, as the paper was, and is, called. "It carries facts of history and arguments, with which our colored friends of a non-political church can meet their enemies, and who, we are sorry to say, are numerous, and who use the press freely."69 In this paper, which Watson edited for four years (and whose earliest publications are no longer extant), future leaders of the C.M.E. Church could write their own defenses and instructions to members as they had begun to do in the Southern Methodist press.70

By the time the General Conference of the M.E. Church, South, gathered in Memphis in May, 1870, its bishops could report with obvious satisfaction that the plan for creating a separate organization for black members had been put into effect, including the scheduling of a General Conference the following winter "for the purpose of organizing them into an entirely separate Church."71 While none of the colored conferences within the Southern Church sent delegates to the General Conference in May, they did petition the body to express appreciation for the leadership given by the bishops and by Thomas Taylor and Samuel Watson. As a demonstration of diplomacy and astuteness, the petitioners also thanked the white Methodists in advance for "the provision made to transfer the property held for our use," praising the action as "without parallel for its magnanimity and confidence."72 Everything was in place for the final act in the drama — the holding of an organizing General Conference,

67 Ibid., December 4, 1868.
68 Ibid., September 17, 1869; January 4, 1870; Nashville Christian Advocate, October 9, November 27, 1869.
69 Southern Christian Advocate, February 2, 1871.
70 Ibid., March 15, July 9, 16, 1869.
72 Southern Christian Advocate, May 27, June 10, 1870.
set for December 16, 1870 and there the electing of black bishops for the new church.

Between the time of the Southern and the Colored General Conferences, the black annual conferences — including three new organizations in South Carolina, Arkansas and Texas — met to select delegates to the historic meeting in Memphis. They also received one last round of advice from J. E. Evans from Georgia, who wrote three essays for the *Southern Advocate* addressing the departing black membership. In them he explained what had been the position of the "Mother" church (as the M.E. Church, South began to be called in this relationship) on the question of separate black churches and conferences, and what was the result of the previous four years. "We are responsible for having set you up to yourselves," he declared. "And now that you are set up to yourselves, you alone will be responsible for the future of the Colored M.E. Church, South." Furthermore, Evans advised, the new church should maintain its independence by spurning all offers of union with the other three Methodist denominations in the South. Reiterating the doctrine of the spiritual church, he insisted, moreover, that it was "all important to you to keep your Church pure from political entanglements." At the end, Evans saluted the new Methodist body and challenged it to adhere to "Wesleyan doctrine and Discipline."74

Bishops Robert Paine and Holland N. McTyeire presided over the General Conference which founded the C.M.E. Church, up to the time of the election of two black bishops, W. H. Miles and Richard Vanderhorst, both ex-slaves. Both men were former members of the African Methodist denominations. Miles joined the A.M.E. Zion Church in 1865 and was a General Conference delegate in it in 1868. Vanderhorst was a member of the South Carolina Conference of the A.M.E. Church for at least three years, 1865-67.75 The

73Ibid., June 10, 1870.
74Ibid., June 17, 24, 1870.
new organization adopted its own name, omitting "South" from the title and adding "in America" to the designation by which it was already known, the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church.

Among the distinctive changes from the Discipline of the M.E. Church, South, the C.M.E. General Conference attested to the link of property and politics which had been present from the beginning of the movement for a separate black church. Churches were "on no account, [to] be used for political assemblages or purposes." The "non-political" status of the C.M.E. Church, therefore, was written into its own conditions for holding property in behalf of the denomination. When, at the turn of the century, Charles H. Phillips — later bishop — wrote the history of the C.M.E. Church, he celebrated the tradition of abstention from politics. In 1925, however, when he updated the same history, Bishop Phillips praised the work of the Afro-American Council and other early twentieth century civil rights organizations. It is possible, therefore, to trace a shift after the first generation of the C.M.E. Church to what is now claimed to be the more normative posture of the black church tradition in this country, that of protest and struggle.

But there were more forms of protest and struggle in the first generation than the hard evidence at first suggests. Here was a church that literally came out of slavery. Its membership was composed exclusively of former slaves. Its leaders until the opening of the 20th century had all been born in slavery. Its struggle, therefore, belongs to the larger tradition of the black pilgrimage in America, because it was, to recall the title of Booker T. Washington's classic autobiography, Up from Slavery. Its protest also belongs in the tradition of black religion in that these former slaves refused both to continue in the old Southern Church on terms that were too painfully reminiscent of slavery or to join any of the churches (A.M.E., A.M.E. Zion or M.E.) which had been based in the North.

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76 Nashvile Christian Advocate, January 7, 1871.
77 Phillips, 171; in the 1925 edition which contains a supplementary volume of the denominational history as well as the third edition of the 1898 History, see 304-07.
78 Ibid., 196-233.
before the war. To exercise choice in matters of religion — even if severely restricted in other spheres of life — is to assert oneself. In this case it meant breaking old ties, old dependencies, and like all dependencies they cut both ways, black and white. The account in *The Nashville Christian Advocate* of the moment when the white bishops vacated the chair and Bishops Miles and Vanderhorst took over at the original General Conference — revealed the break on both sides — even when one makes allowances for the self-congratulatory tone of the white bishops. “The time has come,” Bishop Robert Paine spoke first, for us to resign into your hands the presidency of this body, and the episcopal oversight of your people. And we now do it. Take this chair. Your people, by their voluntary suffrages, have called you, and I welcome you to it; and I pray God to bless and sustain you in all the duties of your office. . . . Like Abraham and Lot, we part — but in peace and for peace. There is no strife between us — let there never be any. While our hearts are warm with love to God or man, we shall feel an interest, a peculiar interest, in your welfare. We have labored for you when they were few who cared for your souls. Our missionaries are buried on the rice, and cotton, and sugar plantations, who went preaching the gospel to your fathers and to you while slaves.

After a survey about how the new church was brought into being, Paine concluded: “have we not fulfilled our promises? [Voices: Yes, yes] Have we not done all we said we would do? [Voices: All God bless you!] We take leave of you, with tenderness. God is our judge, we have unselfishly sought your good. We shall not obtrude our advice, but it will always give us pleasure to extend to you counsel and help, as you may desire, and opportunity may be given. Good bye.” After Bishop McTyeire made some similar remarks and Bishop Miles promised to carry out his vows, Bishop Vanderhorst responded: “Brothers, say not good bye, that is a hard word. Say it not. We love and thank you for all you have done for us. But you must not leave us — never.” A. L. P. Green, a white preacher in attendance, summed up the emotional tenor of

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“A.M.E. leader, Henry M. Turner found when visiting the "colored" preachers in the Georgia Conference some apprehension that they, just out of slavery, “would not be able to catch up with us in fifty years, and consequently that they would have to be lackey boys for us.” *The Christian Recorder*, December 15, 1866.
the event: “This is a solemn hour. We all feel it.”

In the movement which culminated in 1870 with the organization of the C.M.E. Church, social, political and religious factors intertwine, proving again, as H. Richard Niebuhr noted in 1929, that denominationalism has more often been the result of social forces than of theological or doctrinal issues. Or perhaps better, we can see how social forces — like racism, the legacy of slavery — can become doctrinal issues. The questions — what is the nature of the church, of the Christian community, and who rightfully exercises authority within it? — receive a new relevance when linked to an awareness of sexism and racism.

Here, in this story, under the conditions of religious freedom and voluntary choice in matters of religion (the American or modern tradition), racial separation was established institutionally. Ironically, given the story of Reconstruction and the rise of the Solid South, it was accomplished more easily and readily in religion than in politics or education. From the black side, however, the separation was a necessity, for as long as racial difference rather than doctrinal and ethical norms, beliefs and character ruled in the house of God, divorce was to be preferred to an unequal marriage.

Our analysis also shows competing versions of the mission of the church — a “non-political” orientation in Southern Protestantism being taken over by the C.M.E. Church in the first generation in distinction from the more activist versions of political and social reform in the A.M.E., A.M.E. Zion and M.E. denominations. No one articulated an interracial vision of Christianity, except ironically among the black Methodist denominations and in a minority wing of the M.E. Church.

Finally, here is a demonstration of the link between property and power in American religion. Those factors — social, political and religious — were interlocked in such a way that the C.M.E. Church, now more than a century old, came to be and is.

80 Nashville Christian Advocate, January 7, 1871.
83 Gravely, Gilbert Haven, chs. 5-6.