

THE A.U.M.P. AND U.A.M.E. CHURCHES: AN UNEXPLORED AREA OF BLACK METHODISM

Lewis V. Baldwin

Despite the marked quickening of interest in black church history in recent years, the histories of the African Union Methodist Protestant and Union American Methodist Episcopal Churches remain virtually unknown.¹ In treating the origins of African Methodist movements in this country, historians, both black and white, have largely ignored these churches while focusing their attention on the larger and more popular branches of black Methodism, such as the African Methodist Episcopal, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion, and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Churches.

The general neglect which the A.U.M.P. and U.A.M.E. Churches have received from historians is abundantly evident in all of the books which explore the history of black religion and the black church in America. W.E.B. Dubois, who issued the first study of the black church in 1903, did not make a single reference to these churches. Carter G. Woodson mentioned them briefly in his book, *The History of the Negro Church*, a 1921 publication. No reference was made to these churches in studies by E. Franklin Frazier, William Banks, and Hart M. Nelsen, et. al. Gayraud S. Wilmore gave fleeting attention to them in his 1972 publication, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*. No mention is made of the A.U.M.P. and U.A.M.E. bodies in recent studies on black religion by Joseph R. Washington, Jr., C. Eric Lincoln, and Albert J. Raboteau.

Major studies of African Methodism also reflect this general pattern of omission regarding the Union Churches. J. Beverly F. Shaw discussed them in several paragraphs of his book, *The Negro in the History of Methodism*, which was issued in 1952. Brief references are made to them in Harry V. Richardson's 1976 publication, *Dark Salvation: The Story of Methodism As It Developed Among Blacks In America*.

¹The A.U.M.P. and U.A.M.E. Churches are ordinarily referred to jointly as the Union Churches, or the Spencer Churches. The term "African Union Methodism" is also used frequently in reference to these churches.

Major historical works on American Methodism also share the limitations common to studies previously mentioned. Bishop Matthew Simpson of the Methodist Episcopal Church became the first author to devote considerable attention to the movement which produced these churches in a major study of American Methodism. Simpson, the highly regarded Methodist leader who eulogized President Lincoln in April, 1865, gave vital statistics which clearly showed the state of the U.A.M.E. Church in 1876². Frederick A. Norwood, in *The Story of American Methodism*, published in 1974, became the first Methodist scholar since Simpson to make significant references to the Union Churches in a major comprehensive historical study of American Methodism.

In 1920, Daniel Russell, Jr., influenced by the fact that the rich heritage of the A.U.M.P. Church had been closed out of all synoptic histories up until that time, produced a 55-page history of the church. Russell, who at that time was the president of the Philadelphia and New Jersey District of the A.U.M.P. Church, began his study by citing the need for a major historical study of his church:

The ministers and members of the African Union Methodist Protestant Church have anxiously watched for over one hundred years for a true history of Father Spencer and his Church -- the African Union Methodist Protestant Church -- A work indispensable to a proper knowledge of our origin.³

Even though the Russell study was very important, it fell short at many points. The study, which consists of 25 pages of written history and 30 pages of pictorial materials, is not very clear in organization, exposition, and analysis. Furthermore, it is replete with errors of a historical and typographical nature. Nevertheless, it offers useful information on the early years of the movement which gave rise to the A.U.M.P. and U.A.M.E. Churches.

In 1973, 49 of the 54 existing U.A.M.E. congregations, disturbed by the lack of attention given their church by historians, prepared individual histories. These accounts, which are somewhat sketchy and incomplete, were compiled in a single volume under the title, *Our Heritage: The History Of The Union American Methodist Episcopal Church*.

The general lack of attention given the Union Churches stems primarily from a lack of knowledge concerning them on the part of historians of the American Church. Recognizing this problem, I undertook the task in 1978 of uncovering the rich heritages and histories of

²Matthew Simpson, ed., *Cyclopaedia of Methodism Embracing Sketches of the Rise, Progress, and Present Condition, With Biographical Notices and Numerous Illustrations* (Philadelphia: Everts & Stewart, 1878), pp. 876-877.

³Daniel J. Russell, Jr., *History of the African Union Methodist Protestant Church* (Philadelphia: Union Star and Job Publishing Company, 1920), pp. 1 ff.

these churches. The final product, which was my doctoral dissertation, has been completed under the title, " 'Invisible' Strands in African Methodism: A History of the African Union Methodist Protestant and Union American Methodist Episcopal Churches, 1805-1980." This study has attempted to place these churches in their proper spectrum in the history of American Methodism generally, and African Methodism particularly.

Despite the importance of my study, American church historians, particularly those of the Methodist persuasion, need to devote more specific studies to the Union Churches. This recommendation is offered for several reasons. First, these churches, despite finding a unique expression on the American historical scene, are a vital part of the American Methodist tradition. Peter Spencer, who led the movement which culminated in the rise of these churches, was nourished in the Asbury M. E. Church in Wilmington, Delaware. Even though he, like Richard Allen, broke with Mother Methodism, Spencer was continuously influenced by the example of John Wesley and by the doctrines and polity of Episcopal Methodism.⁴

Secondly, the history of these churches, once examined, will show American church historians that they have committed a serious historical error in contending that the African Methodist Episcopal Church predated all separate and independent African Methodist connections. Recent research has made it abundantly clear that black Methodism in America first assumed organized connectional form in the Union Church of African Members, the parent body of the A.U.M.P. and U.A.M.E. bodies. This church signaled the culmination of a movement toward independence among black Methodists in Wilmington, Delaware. The movement began in 1805 with Peter Spencer and 41 other blacks who walked out of the predominantly white Asbury M.E. Church in Wilmington to demonstrate their opposition to racially proscriptive policies and practices. They soon built Ezion M.E. Church, but were compelled to move on after learning that they were still subject to the supervision of Asbury's white elders. In September, 1813, Spencer and 26 of his followers organized the Union Church of Africans, which was incorporated at Dover, Delaware.⁵ By December of 1813, this church had become a connectional body with the addition of two small congregations in New York and Pennsylvania. By 1816, the year the A.M.E. Church was incorporated as an independent African Methodist connection, the

⁴Peter Spencer, Compiler, *The African Union Hymn-Book* (Wilmington, Delaware: Porter & Naff, 1839), pp. 1 ff.; and *The Discipline of the African Union Church in the United States of America* (Wilmington: Porter & Eckel, 1852), pp. 1 ff.

⁵Russell, *History of the African Union Methodist Protestant Church*, pp. 7 ff; and *The Discipline of the African Union Church*, 1852, pp. 1-7.

number of congregations comprising the Union Church of Africans had increased to five.⁶ Such findings merit a re-writing of the history of African Methodist Churches based on the chronological priority of the Union Church of Africans.

Thirdly, additional studies on the Union Churches will offer fertile ground for church historians who are interested in establishing a comparative context with the various branches of black Methodism. The Union Churches have historically shared many similarities and differences regarding doctrine and polity with the A.M.E., A.M.E. Zion, C.M.E., and Colored Methodist Protestant Churches. These differences and similarities need to be explored further. Furthermore, additional research should be done to determine why the Union Churches, unlike the larger and more popular black Methodist bodies (A.M.E., A.M.E. Zion, C.M.E.), never became "national churches." Throughout their long histories, these churches have been confined primarily to the Eastern part of the United States, particularly the states of Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Their regional significance needs to be explored as over against the national character of the other black Methodist Churches.

Finally, more research concerning the Union Churches could establish that their over-riding importance for American Methodism, particularly black Methodism, lies in their moral significance as well as in their contributions to the dual concerns of black liberation and survival. Throughout their histories, these churches have strongly emphasized and supported temperance campaigns and other movements designed to alter the deteriorating moral fiber of the American society. During the same period, the leaders of these churches gave their undivided support to efforts oriented toward benefiting black Americans.⁷

⁶Lewis V. Baldwin, "'Invisible' Strands in African Methodism: A History of the African Union Methodist Protestant and Union American Methodist Episcopal Churches, 1805-1980," an unpublished Doctoral Dissertation submitted to the Graduate School of Northwestern University, Department of Religion, Evanston, Illinois (August, 1980), Chapters III-IV.

⁷Russell, *History of the African Union Methodist Protestant Church*, pp. 11-15; and Baldwin, "'Invisible' Strands in African Methodism," Chapters IV-IX.