

## SLAVERY AND PATRIOTISM: NEW JERSEY METHODISTS DURING THE CIVIL WAR

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The attitude of the Methodist Episcopal Church in New Jersey toward slavery significantly changed in the context of a country divided by a Civil War. The expression of anti-slavery sentiment increased dramatically. People were no longer reticent about their opposition to slavery, as they had been for decades previously, and even the plight of free blacks and newly freed slaves received attention. The Civil War engendered strong patriotic fervor, and out of this patriotism, concern for both the slave and the free black blossomed. At least, the Methodist anti-slavery heritage from Wesley and Coke, confirmed in the Christmas Conference of 1784, found expression in annual conference resolutions. These resolutions, passed by the conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church in New Jersey during the Civil War, were in stark contrast to the racial antipathies expressed by the general populace of the state. It was not until 1864 that New Jersey Methodists finally endorsed changing the General Rule on Slavery to forbid slaveholding as well as slave-trading. Individual clergy spoke out on the evil during these years far more directly than they had before. The Methodists of New Jersey voiced anti-slavery opinions and encouraged support for the government's war effort in the northern state which had the strongest pro-southern and anti-black sentiments. However, the concerns and viewpoints of the Methodists were legitimized by the aura of patriotism. At last they opposed slavery with vigor, but well after the national mood had been set. The Methodists of New Jersey offer an insightful case study of how patriotic support for the war effort shaped their response to the moral and ethical problem of slavery. It is suggested here that patriotism shaped this response more than the ideals of justice and equality inculcated in either Scripture or the writings of John Wesley.

### New Jersey's Southern Sympathizers

At best, New Jersey could be considered a border state. Thomas Fleming considered it such "in heart and mind, in politics and economics." It was separated "only by an accident of geography from the rebellious South. For New Jersey this ambiguous status meant another decade of searing internal division."<sup>1</sup> In 1861 New Jersey had not yet totally

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Fleming, *New Jersey: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1977), p. 116.

abolished slavery and still denied free blacks in the state the right to vote. Hinton Rowan Helper of North Carolina called New Jersey "a second-rate free state."<sup>2</sup> Politics were dominated by the Democratic Party, which advocated states' rights and refused to interfere with slavery in the other states. A report was adopted by the New Jersey State Senate on March 22, 1860, indicating that a state should attend to its own affairs and let the territories settle the slavery issue for themselves. As the Republican Party took shape in New Jersey, it realized that full identification with the national platform was a severe liability locally. Hostility toward racial equality and an end to slavery was so strong in New Jersey that the new party found it advantageous to avoid use of the Republican name. Therefore, those who formed this new party and stood opposed to the Democrats from the late 1850s until the war years called themselves the Opposition Party. And this Opposition Party did not advocate the abolition of slavery, but only opposed the extension of slavery into the territories.<sup>3</sup> Issues related to the struggles of blacks did not command voter approval in New Jersey.

Larry A. Greene, a student of New Jersey history, described the actions of a Democratic gathering:

At the July, 1860, convention called by Democratic leaders to express the opinion of the conservative element in the state, resolutions were passed attributing the impending sectional crisis to 'the actual and threatened interference on the part of the Northern agitators with the rights and property of the people of the Fifteen States of this Union.' The solution to sectionalism, according to these New Jersey Democrats, was the maintenance of the status quo through traditional concepts of sanctity of property and racial inequality as expressed by the motto of the Democratic Party: 'The Constitution as it is, the Nation as it was.'<sup>4</sup>

During the course of the war, the Democratic-controlled legislature passed resolutions in support of the South, opposed the draft of men for the armies, and opposed the Emancipation Proclamation. Thereby, New Jersey earned recognition as a Copperhead stronghold. This was a term given to northerners opposed to the war policies of the Federal Government and in sympathy with the South.

In the presidential election of 1860, Abraham Lincoln received four electoral votes and Stephen Douglas received three from New Jersey. New Jersey was the only free state which did not give its entire electoral vote to Lincoln.<sup>5</sup> Four years later General McClellan carried New Jersey by a popular majority of 7,291 votes. He received twenty-one electoral votes

<sup>2</sup>Hinton Rowan Helper, *Compendium of the Impending Crisis of the South* (New York: A. B. Burdick, Publisher, 1860), p. 109.

<sup>3</sup>Charles M. Knapp, *New Jersey Politics During the Period of the Civil War* (Geneva, N.Y.: W. F. Humphrey, 1924), pp. 21-23.

<sup>4</sup>Larry A. Greene, "The Emancipation Proclamation in New Jersey and the Paranoid Style," *New Jersey History* 91 (Summer, 1973): 108-109.

<sup>5</sup>Knapp, *New Jersey Politics*, p. 36.

nationwide—seven from New Jersey and the votes of Kentucky and Delaware.<sup>6</sup>

New Jersey voters reacted against Lincoln's preliminary proclamation freeing the slaves in the rebellious states, announced in September 1862, by electing an entirely Democratic-controlled state government—governor, Senate, and Assembly—in November. Then the Legislature acted on this mandate by greeting the Emancipation Proclamation with a proposed bill to prevent black migration into the State. The Assembly passed it on March 18, 1863, but it never came up for a third reading in the Senate and thus never became law. The depth of anti-black feeling in the state was embodied in the provision that any black who moved into the state would be convicted of a misdemeanor and transported to either Liberia or the West Indies.<sup>7</sup> In 1864 a bill to prevent intermarriage across racial lines passed the Assembly but died in the Senate.

The amendments to the Constitution of the United States, adopted during Reconstruction, faced strong opposition in the state. The Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery, was not ratified until after it had become law; the Legislature tried to rescind ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment which guaranteed Civil Rights, when the Democrats regained control of the Legislature; and finally, the Fifteenth Amendment, granting suffrage to blacks, was not ratified until 1870.

It was in this environment of racial hostility and Southern sympathy that the Methodists of New Jersey took their stand against slavery and in support of the Union.

### **Methodist Opposition to Slavery**

In spite of the hostile political climate in New Jersey, the Civil War enabled Methodists to demonstrate forceful opposition to slavery and concern for the plight of black Americans. The sentiments of the Newark and New Jersey Conferences<sup>8</sup> were most fully articulated in the "State of the Country" reports initiated during the Civil War but unfortunately discontinued at its conclusion. These reports, prepared in committee and approved by the full body of delegates, provided a forum for the annual conferences' opposition to slavery, support of the war effort of the Federal Government, and understanding of the conflict. The great events of the day, so closely linked with slavery and the concerns of blacks, did not go unnoticed by the Methodist clergy as they preached or met in their annual conclaves. The evidence gleaned from these sources stands in marked con-

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>7</sup>Carl E. Hatch, "Negro Migration and New Jersey—1863," *New Jersey History* 87 (Winter, 1969): 233, 244.

<sup>8</sup>The New Jersey Conference, embodying the entire state, was formed in 1836. The northern third of the state was set apart as the Newark Conference in 1856. Currently, these are the Northern and Southern New Jersey Conferences.

trast to the response of the Methodists in the three decades prior to the war. During these years the Methodists of New Jersey refused to support any abolitionist activity and refused to support the removal of slaveholders from church membership. Instead, their energies expended on the behalf of blacks, which was minimal, focused on support of the colonization of blacks to Africa. The Civil War broke the virtual silence of New Jersey Methodists concerning slavery.

In 1863 both conferences in New Jersey condemned slavery with a forthright vigor not heard before. The New Jersey Conference felt "called upon to recall the attention of our people to the fact, that the Methodist Episcopal Church, viewing it as a great moral wrong, had long maintained on the pages of her book of *Discipline*, the question: 'What shall be done for the extirpation of the evil of slavery?'"<sup>9</sup> The resolution concluded by alerting the reader to the Chapter on Slavery in the *Discipline* which forbade slaveholding by church members. This is somewhat ironic in that just three years before, at the General Conference, the delegates from New Jersey opposed adding that prohibition to this chapter. Now in the midst of war, they pointed to this with agreement and pride. The Newark Conference claimed "that entertainment of the pro-slavery sentiments, and the avowal of the same by either our ministers or people, we declare to be unmethodistic and contrary to the teachings and spirit of the Gospel."<sup>10</sup> The conference witnessed "with delight the rapid and radical change which is taking place in the sentiments of the people of the border states, on the question of slavery."<sup>11</sup> Probably the strongest resolution against slavery was passed by the Newark Conference in 1865:

That believing slavery to be the evil spirit which seeks to rend our body politic, and confessing it as our great national sin, and the dark stain upon our national name, we devoutly thank God that its power is prostrated, and pray that the hour may speedily come when every fetter shall be broken, and bondage cease from the whole land for ever.<sup>12</sup>

The Newark Conference made concrete its opposition to slavery by bringing disciplinary action against a ministerial member in 1865. An investigation into alleged misconduct by W. H. Dickerson provided an opportunity to condemn him for using "certain very objectionable expressions . . . with reference to the government and the rebellion" and for his views on slavery. The actual charges against Dickerson accused him of illegally voting in Pennsylvania while a resident of New Jersey, but the committee's report revealed interest in other matters. It read:

While, therefore, the Committee hopes that in the future Bro. Dickerson will be more circumspect in his action and prudent in his utterances; and that his views on the sub-

<sup>9</sup>*Journal*, New Jersey Conference (1863), p. 15.

<sup>10</sup>*Journal*, Newark Conference (1863), p. 32.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.* (1864), p. 33.

<sup>12</sup>*Journal*, Newark Conference (1865), p. 22.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

ject of the abolition of slavery may soon be brought to harmonize more fully with the position of the Methodist Episcopal Church; on the whole, we recommend that his character do now pass.

S. Y. Monroe, Chairman.<sup>13</sup>

Sermons preached in memory of Abraham Lincoln often referred to the role played by slavery in the great events of the day. One such sermon was delivered by Samuel J. Morris, in the town of Pine Brook, in the Newark District of the Newark Conference. In it he attacked slavery, described its foul deeds, and found it responsible for causing the assassination itself. While it was a strong denunciation of slavery, it was preached so late in the struggle that it can receive no credit in assisting the demise of slavery. To Morris, "slavery has ever been the black spot on our fair escutcheon. It wished to tyrannize over the majority. It lifted its hydra-head against the Government to overthrow it—and that the best government in the world."<sup>14</sup>

The New Jersey Conference duly condemned the New Jersey Legislature's refusal to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery. This resolution reveals how far the conference had moved in opposing slavery. Only five years before, the conference did not want to remove slaveholders from the church for the sake of ecclesiastical harmony. Now they supported a Constitutional amendment abolishing slavery.

Resolved, That while the passage by Congress of the Constitutional Amendment, forever excluding slavery from the States and Territories of the Nation, meets our hearty and grateful approval, we must say that language utterly fails to express our deep and abiding mortification at the recent action of our own State Legislature, in refusing to sanction a measure so inseparably connected with the future peace and prosperity of our whole country. However, as this action is not final, our feelings are somewhat relieved. We firmly believe the citizens of this State are so imbued with the spirit and love of liberty, that when the proper time comes, they will say in a way not to be misunderstood, that New Jersey must and shall stand by the side of those States which have already decided in favor of universal freedom.<sup>15</sup>

A year later, the people of New Jersey did speak by electing a Republican-controlled Legislature, which immediately ratified the amendment, even though it had already become law. Still, the New Jersey Conference rejoiced at the action of the Legislature and prayed that,

the full measure of the sublime results attained in the late contest may be realized, and that by wise national legislation, the principle of universal freedom and brotherhood may be distinctly and constitutionally recognized, as our authoritative national expression for this and after ages, and we therefore rejoice in the late action of our State Legislature.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup>S. J. Morris, *A Sermon on the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln*, preached in the M. E. Church, Pine Brook, N.J. (Newark, N.J.: A. Stephen Holbrook, printer, 1865), p. 306.

<sup>15</sup>*Journal*, New Jersey Conference (1865), p. 24.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.* (1866), p. 27.

<sup>16</sup>*Journal*, New Jersey Conference (1865), p. 24.

The full flowering of these Methodists' opposition to slavery is illustrated by their about-face concerning the regulations on slavery in the *Discipline*. Not only did the Conference pass resolutions condemning slavery, but the delegates to the General Conference of 1864 supported changing the General Rule on Slavery. After almost thirty years of debate and controversy, when the action was meaningless in the context of national policy, the Methodist Episcopal Church removed the last vestige of slavery from its book of church government. On May 17, by a vote of 207 to 9, the General Rule was changed to forbid slaveholding. All New Jersey delegates to the General Conference voted in favor of the change.<sup>17</sup> For the first time, New Jersey Methodists voted for abolition. The New Jersey Conference voted concurrence with this action at its annual session in 1865 by a vote of 118-0.<sup>18</sup>

Nicholas VanSant, a member of the General Conference delegation from the Newark Conference, remembered the events of the 1864 gathering:

In the General Conference of 1864 it fell to my lot to be a member of the Committee on Slavery, and there help by voice and vote to frame the rule by which slaveholding was made an absolute bar to membership in the Methodist Episcopal Church, and afterward to go on record with the enthusiastic, overwhelming majority that adopted the rule in full Conference.<sup>19</sup>

To VanSant, that day "was a sublime epoch in the progress of the Methodist Episcopal Church."<sup>20</sup>

The condemnation of slavery through conference resolution and alteration in the *Discipline* could prove very unpopular in New Jersey. This transition in the Methodists' confrontation with slavery was not the result of any change in the attitudes of New Jersey citizens as a whole. The hostility of Jerseyans, both church and non-church people, made the Methodist opposition to slavery more remarkable. Several clergy faced the problem of being identified with anti-slavery agitators.

It required a substantial amount of courage on the part of a preacher to attack slavery openly. The following is an account of a confrontation in Hunterdon County involving a Methodist preacher (probably Jacob Dailey, a member of the Newark Conference appointed to Quakertown in 1862 and 1863):

After the start of the war, some individuals were less reticent, though the 'nigger cause' was still unpopular in the county. It is said of a brave Methodist circuit rider, who preached regularly at Quakertown: 'He fearlessly advocated freedom of slaves and the Union.'<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup>*Journal of the General Conference* (1864), pp. 166-167. Hereafter abbreviated JGC.

<sup>18</sup>*Journal, New Jersey Conference* (1865), p. 12.

<sup>19</sup>Nicholas VanSant, *Sunset Memories* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1896), p. 90-91.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>21</sup>Rev. R. Wesley Smith, *One Hundredth Anniversary of the M.E. Church at Quakertown, 1836-1936*, p. 7, quoted in Hubert G. Schmidt, "Slavery and Attitudes on Slavery, Hunterdon County, New Jersey," *Proceedings, New Jersey Historical Society* 58 (July-October, 1940): 244.

In 1864, Isaac Wiley, then headmaster of the conference seminary in Pennington and later to serve as bishop, delivered two powerful lectures in Trenton condemning slavery, condemning the South, and calling for a full prosecution of the war by the Federal Government. Such anti-slavery and anti-southern views were unpopular in a Copperhead state. It was reported that while the manuscript was at a publisher's to be issued in pamphlet form, there was "an attempt by disloyal persons to destroy the forms in the printer's office."<sup>22</sup> The Methodist Episcopal Church in Washington, Warren County, requested that Nicholas VanSant be appointed elsewhere shortly after he arrived in 1868 because of his strong anti-slavery record.<sup>23</sup>

This open attack on slavery had been slow in taking shape, for the Methodists waited until the issue was almost settled before adding their voices to the abolitionists. They were not in the vanguard of social reform. The slow transition to more forthright rhetoric is revealed in a Newark Conference resolution of 1862. Even though the war was already underway, the conference was sensitive to the southern commercial interests centered around Newark and seemed to imply that emancipation should be voluntary. The conference resolved:

That in view of the intimate moral, social and commercial relations existing between the North and South, should any of the States where slavery now exists desire emancipation, we deem it patriotic and generous for the free States to share the burdens involved in the process.<sup>24</sup>

The war was half over before the conferences' attack on slavery reached full flower. But after the war, in 1868, the Newark Conference heard and adopted a report from the Committee on the American Colonization Society.<sup>25</sup> Colonization, as a way of ending slavery, had been discredited by abolitionists and by free blacks for decades. Now that slavery was abolished, the conference clung to colonization in recognition that the two races could not co-exist in the United States.

Jonathan Townley Crane, a leader of the Newark Conference, illustrated in two sermons the reluctance of the clergy to confront the existence of slavery. He maintained consistent support for colonization, cautiously addressed the problem of slavery in a sermon in 1859, and avoided all mention of slavery in a sermon preached on the death of Abraham Lincoln. On Sunday, December 11, 1859, in the Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church in Jersey City, Dr. Crane preached a sermon in which he opposed all use of violence as a means to end slavery, feared the blood bath of a slave revolution, opposed the immediate freeing of the slaves, and suggested the possibility of leaving the slaves in "temporary

<sup>22</sup>Richard S. Rust, ed. *Isaac W. Wiley: Late Bishop of the M.E. Church* (Cincinnati and New York, 1885), p. 70.

<sup>23</sup>VanSant, *Sunset Memories*, p. 166.

<sup>24</sup>*Journal*, Newark Conference (1862), p. 26.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.* (1868), p. 12.

serfdom.”<sup>26</sup> A sermon of this sort—deliberately undertaken, clearly directed to congregational ears by the church’s own pastor—clearly illustrates that an immediate end to slavery was unpopular in Trinity Church and that the war-induced rhetoric of conference resolutions opposing slavery was a new phenomenon in Jersey Methodism. Six years later he delivered a sermon, like so many other clergy, on the death of Lincoln. In this sermon he made no mention of slavery or emancipation. Robert Drew Simpson, in reviewing this sermon, found Crane to be “rather typical of his time,” for he “could belabor some of the personal vices such as dancing as evil, but couldn’t call slavery by its right name.”<sup>27</sup>

While the change in the thinking and activity of some New Jersey Methodists may have been modest, certainly the hallmark of the Civil War years was a more vigorously expressed anti-slavery sentiment. The issues of slavery, war, the preservation of the Union, and the activity of God were inextricably linked through events understood frequently in apocalyptic imagery. Anti-slavery rhetoric had been profoundly shaped by the war.

### Piety and Patriotism

This marked change in the willingness of the Methodists of New Jersey to openly oppose slavery during the Civil War was rooted in a rising tide of patriotism, not in the recovery of the anti-slavery heritage of Wesley. William Warren Sweet documented “the importance of the Churches as an aid to the Government during the Civil War.” He believed that the Methodist Episcopal Church was a significant force in bringing the War of the Rebellion to a successful close.<sup>28</sup> The evidence shows that New Jersey Methodists were typical of their northern counterparts in their patriotic fervor. Opposition to slavery rode the coattails of patriotism. Like their counterparts across the country, they discussed the role of slavery in causing the war and the role of God as avenger and shaper of national destiny. Anti-slavery rhetoric was linked with the preservation of the Union and the maintenance of liberty. The hand of God was perceived in national events and the war was defended as a holy effort against the corrupt South.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Jonathan Townley Crane, D.D. *Christian Duty in Regard to American Slavery* (Jersey City: R. B. Kashow, 1860).

<sup>27</sup>*The Circuit Writer*, Newsletter of the Commission on Archives and History, The Northern New Jersey Annual Conference, No. 9 (Spring 1977): 1; sermon by Crane was *Sermon Preached in Morristown upon the death of Abraham Lincoln*, December 10, 1865 (Morristown, N.J.: The Jerseyman, 1865).

<sup>28</sup>*The Methodist Episcopal Church and the Civil War* (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern Press, 1912), p. 8.

<sup>29</sup>See James H. Moorhead, *American Apocalypse: Yankee Protestants and the Civil War, 1860-1869* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978); and William A. Clebsch, *Christian Interpretations of the Civil War* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969) for the national context of the New Jersey response.

There was common agreement that slavery was a contributing factor leading to war. The New Jersey Conference in 1863 regarded "slavery as the prime cause of the war, having rendered those now in rebellion too arrogant to bear the restraints of constitutional and judicial limitations."<sup>30</sup> Samuel Morris, in his sermon at Pine Brook referred to above, placed responsibility for the war with the men of the South and the institution of slavery and accused the peace men of the North of prolonging the war by their resistance.

However, other commentators understood slavery to be only a symptom of deeper problems that were truly the cause of the conflict. Isaac Wiley, a member of the Newark Conference, believed that slavery was the cause of the war only insofar as the advancement of Christianity could no longer accept the foul institution on American soil. His two lectures, "How We Got In" and "How to Get out," delivered in Temperance Hall, Trenton, on February 16 and 23, 1864, harshly condemned the South, those in New Jersey who counseled reconciliation with the South, and slavery. Slavery helped to start the war by causing a total degeneracy of society and such degeneracy led to conflict. There was no doubt that slavery was crucial in helping to start the war but fundamental sectional differences played a more significant role in triggering the conflict. Why was the Union at war? Wiley answered,

... it is the onward progress of liberty and right that has brought on this collision between the two sections of our country; then it still is true, that slavery lies at its foundation. I don't believe that it is its cause. It has been mighty; but tenfold more mighty has been that degeneracy of society, that corruption of the community; that hardening of hearts, that searing of consciences, that development of a thirst for gold, that ambition for lawlessness and aristocracy, that is the fruit of slavery itself, that has led us into this conflict.<sup>31</sup>

Wiley was joined by a leading Methodist layman in New Jersey, James Rusling,<sup>32</sup> in perceiving issues other than slavery as causes for the war. To Rusling, writing in the *Methodist Quarterly Review* while serving as a general in the Union armies, the fight concerned the authority and power of the national government. Slavery was a "condition" of the war. It was what united the South. He continued:

The real cause of the rebellion lies deeper. Slavery is only the common platform, the bond of union, the vital cord, which must itself be completely severed before the parts by it united can return to their old condition of peace and loyalty. But it is, after all,

<sup>30</sup>*Journal*, New Jersey Conference (1863), p. 15.

<sup>31</sup>Isaac Wiley, *How We Got In. How to Get Out*, reported by James Ristine, A.M. (Trenton: Thomas U. Baker, 1864), pp. 30-31.

<sup>32</sup>James F. Rusling was a native of Washington, Warren County, N.J., and a graduate of the Pennington Seminary. In 1858 he had become a local preacher in the M.E. Church and entered the army at the start of the Civil War. He returned to New Jersey, served as president of the Mercer County Sunday-School Association, trustee of Pennington Seminary, and was a member of the State Street Church in Trenton (Simpson, *Cyclopedia of Methodism*, 1881, p. 769).

only a condition of the rebellion; a necessary condition, we grant; a condition which we would be blind not to see and allow for.<sup>33</sup>

But the South had been functioning with a different understanding of nationhood shaped by the Jeffersonian concept of states' rights. The issue of slavery was simply the most convenient route for Calhoun and others to take to divide the Union. For Rusling,

The rebellion under the form of secession, is simply Jeffersonianism pushed to its logical results. . . . They fight for anarchy; we fight for government. They fight for lawlessness; we fight for law.<sup>34</sup>

The North was called upon to resist this continued erosion of the sense of union and national identity.

As many clergy were doing, the Methodists in New Jersey sought to find God's hand in the events of the nation. God was not distant or uninterested but directly involved in using the war for instruction and for the end of slavery. The army of the United States government was a tool of the Almighty. In 1864 the Newark Conference resolved:

That while for years past we have been asking, "What shall be done for the extirpation of the evil of slavery?" we believe that God is now, in his providence, effectually answering it by the terrible arbitrament of the sword.<sup>35</sup>

Isaac Wiley believed that God was moving in the conflict and actively working to end slavery. The South had "drawn down upon themselves a terrible judgment from the hand of God." He proclaimed to much applause:

God has come upon the stage, and is working in this nation. Who has not heard the stepping of his feet? Who has not seen the moving of His Divine hand as He has steadily moved forward from the first outbreaking of this war until now, saying, "You begin it, and I will end it; let my bondsmen go."<sup>36</sup>

God was using the war not only to end slavery, but had molded it into a baptism of fire in order to purify corrupt politics. The war was not just a way to punish the South but to instruct the North as well. According to Lewis Dunn, Methodist pastor in Morristown,

this baptism of blood, these scenes of trial through which we are now passing, will only purify and strengthen us. These stripes He inflicts are only to discipline and improve us.<sup>37</sup>

A debate of long standing was whether the Word of God in the Scriptures supported or prohibited the practice of slavery. If God was acting to end slavery, it was necessary to refute those who used the Bible to justify

<sup>33</sup>James F. Rusling, "The War for the Union," *Methodist Quarterly Review* 46 (April 1864): 310-311.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 311.

<sup>35</sup>*Journal*, Newark Conference (1864), p. 33.

<sup>36</sup>Wiley, *How to Get Out*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>37</sup>Lewis Romaine Dunn, *An Oration Delivered at Morristown, N.J., July 4, 1863* (Morristown, N.J.: A. A. Vance, 1863), p. 22.

the practice. Such a refutation was penned by the Rev. Joseph B. Dobbins, pastor of the Third Street Methodist Episcopal Church in Camden and a prominent leader of the New Jersey Conference, in 1863 entitled *The Bible Against Slavery; a Vindication of the Sacred Scriptures Against the Charge of Authorizing Slavery, A Reply to Bishop Hopkins*.<sup>38</sup> John W. Hopkins, Episcopal Bishop of Vermont, had defended slavery as “perfectly coincident with the teachings and spirit” of the Bible. Bishop Hopkins placed the blame for the war on the anti-slavery preachers. Dobbins countered that the Bishop “has been betrayed into ‘political preaching;’ for the pamphlet seems to be a political sermon, with the ‘Bible view of slavery’ for the text.”<sup>39</sup> Dobbins claimed that Hopkins devoted only four pages out of a total of sixteen to the study of biblical texts. The rest of the tract was a denial of human equality. After dismissing the work of Bishop Hopkins, Dobbins went on to develop the main theme of his essay, that Scripture, especially the Old Testament, did not sanction slavery. In spite of the condemnation of Scripture, the slave masters chose to silence the opponents of slavery “and thus brought themselves and their institution in direct conflict with Almighty God, and he is now settling the matter with them by a most terrific vindication of his Holy Law.”<sup>40</sup>

While the theological pronouncement that God was active in terminating the slave system had been articulated on several occasions, it was outweighed by the patriotic fervor of New Jersey Methodists. The dominant ideas that shaped the anti-slavery pronouncements of the church were support for the full use of military might against the South and homage paid to the national ideals of liberty and freedom for all. It is claimed in this study that the easy truce with slavery that New Jersey Methodists usually embraced was temporarily suspended due to this overarching aura of patriotism. The zeal for reform, so evident during the war, was simply a consequence of the national upheaval, and not a renewed sense of commitment to the mandates of the Gospel.

The reports “On the State of the Country” of both annual conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church in New Jersey frequently called for support of the national government. In 1862, the New Jersey Conference never mentioned slavery but it resolved that the government was “entitled to the cooperation and support of every good citizen and Christian.” Evidently, the congregations had provided men and supplies to the war effort because the conference hailed “with gratification the enthusiastic loyalty of our congregations.”<sup>41</sup> The conference’s resolutions that next year attacked slavery but gave greater emphasis to a call for submission to the government and the “vigorous prosecution of the war for

<sup>38</sup>(Philadelphia: King and Baird, 1864).

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>41</sup>*Journal*, New Jersey Conference (1862), p. 17.

the conquest and subjugation of the rebellion." The government was encouraged to use every means at its disposal to crush the rebellion.<sup>42</sup>

The Newark Conference adopted similar patriotic resolutions. In 1863, slavery was opposed in the context of supporting the government's efforts against the South. The Preamble to these resolutions set forth the fundamental ideas motivating their formulation:

Whereas, Increasing devotion on the part of the people to the Union cause, the maintenance of the public credit, the decline of sympathy with treason, and the gradual but sure progress of our arms, promise a speedy termination to the war, and indicate that the favor of God is with us, obvious reasons demand that we, as a body of Christian ministers, reaffirm and prominently maintain the following resolutions. . . .<sup>43</sup>

Among these resolutions was a denunciation of slavery. In 1866, the Conference celebrated the recent victory of the Union armies:

That in the glorious work of grace which the great Head of the Church has vouchsafed us, we recognize an evidence not to be disputed that God approves the patriotic attitude of the church during the late fearful civil war, and the fidelity with which it has adhered to the principles of freedom, humanity, and religion.<sup>44</sup>

As is clear from the above, the Methodists were not only certain that God was acting in the events of the war but that God honored and blessed the patriotism of the church.

Public flag-raising ceremonies held during the annual conference sessions were popular, with such services being held in the Newark Conference in 1863 and in the New Jersey Conference in 1864. As the flag was raised, various speakers claimed "that this Government affords equal rights to all its inhabitants" and that "liberty may suffer a while, but its final triumph is certain. The nation is worth all the pains we can lavish upon it."<sup>45</sup> The Newark Conference required that presiding elders in 1863 state whether or not those candidates presented for admission to the conference as ordained ministers were loyal to the government of the country.<sup>46</sup>

Several pastors who were known to have spoken out against slavery linked their anti-slavery words with support for the Union cause. It seemed that any proclamation denouncing slavery was in the context of supporting the armies on the battlefield. The biographer of Jacob B. Graw,<sup>47</sup> outstanding leader of the New Jersey Conference, portrayed him as one who both denounced slavery and supported the Union. He wrote:

<sup>42</sup>Ibid. (1863), p. 15.

<sup>43</sup>*Journal*, Newark Conference (1863), p. 32.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid. (1866), p. 24.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid. (1863), p. 17; *Journal*, New Jersey Conference (1864), p. 8.

<sup>46</sup>*Journal*, Newark Conference (1863), p. 38.

<sup>47</sup>Graw served as presiding elder of every district in the conference and attended eight General Conferences. He advocated temperance and for a time edited the *New Jersey Gazette*. At the time of the Civil War, he was a young pastor serving Trinity Church in Bridgeton.

Trinity's pastor was not long in his new charge before he made enemies of those who secretly favored the south. He was unceasing in his condemnation of slavery and in his support of the Union. Patriotic sermons were frequently preached and "Old Glory" was displayed on every suitable occasion.<sup>48</sup>

Isaac Wiley, in his two lectures in Trenton in February of 1864, called for full support of Lincoln and vigorous prosecution of the war. No compromise with the South was to be tolerated, but "coercion" and "subjugation" were the only appropriate treatments for the rebellious states. What options were open to the government to end the war? Wiley answered:

There is one way left yet. What is it? Whip it out of them. (Long-continued and loud applause). That is about the true doctrine. (Applause) Go right forward. Whip them into submission.<sup>49</sup>

Along with calling for a crushing military victory, clergy lauded the ideals of the republic and its founding documents. Bondage and the ideals of liberty and equality were seen as incompatible. Lewis R. Dunn, in an oration on July 4, 1863, wanted the audience to know for sure that he did not come "to speak . . . as a politician, but as a patriot. I would rise above all the mere pettiness of partisanship, into the purer region of love for my country—my whole country."<sup>50</sup> According to Dunn, the end of slavery must be realized because it was contrary to the ideal of liberty. Slavery must end with the expansion of liberty to all people. There was a conflict, he said, between the freedom enjoyed by most Americans and the bondage suffered by others. Dunn included in his address sufficient reference to God to appear appropriately pious, but reference to national principles took precedence over moral and religious sentiments. Dunn, optimistically, was certain that "the last chain must fall from the limbs of the Slaves, and liberty—the birthright of man everywhere—will be everywhere enjoyed."<sup>51</sup>

Another member of the New Jersey Conference, Ruliff V. Lawrence, considered to be an abolitionist "of the old school when it cost men to be such,"<sup>52</sup> like Dunn, attacked slavery as contradictory to the principles embodied in the Declaration of Independence. While stationed in Mount Holly, he addressed an Independence Day celebration in Goshen, Cape May County, in 1863. He condemned the rising spirit of secession (with which New Jersey was particularly afflicted) and accused the nation of living a lie in its toleration of slavery. He said:

<sup>48</sup>Alexander C. Graw, *Forty Six Years in the Methodist Ministry: Life of Rev. J. B. Graw, D.D.* (Camden, N.J.: A. C. Graw, Publisher, 1901), p. 51.

<sup>49</sup>Wiley, *Hot to Get Out*, p. 50.

<sup>50</sup>Dunn, *An Oration*, p. 4.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>52</sup>Ellwood H. Stokes, George Hughes, and Adam Wallace, *The Earnest Minister. A Record of the Life, Labors, and Literary Remains of Rev. Ruliff V. Lawrence*, edited by his son (Philadelphia: Adam Wallace, Publisher, 1873), p. 80.

It is really more sinful to act a lie than to speak a lie, and our government has been acting a lie for the last eighty-five years. We have said, by the Declaration of Independence, that "all men are born free and equal, having certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," and yet we have been enslaving millions of human beings, depriving them of all liberty and manhood, buying and selling them as if they were beasts of the field.<sup>53</sup>

Lawrence was sufficiently direct to say on another occasion, "Do not chide me—I dare not be silent; I hope I have too much manhood to be silent, when I see the poor and needy crushed under the iron heel of prejudice."<sup>54</sup>

Such patriotism, expressed in conference resolution and clerical rhetoric, did not go unnoticed by contemporaries. James Rusling, in the Union army and a native of New Jersey, wrote to his brother about the joy he felt in knowing that the church was supporting the government in the face of a hostile Jersey environment.

I write you again to-day as usual. I got two good *Advocates*, etc., the other day; glad to receive all. The *Advocate* is a sterling Union sheet and I prize it highly. Am proud of it, as a periodical; and I honor your New Jersey Methodists for the unqualified manner in which they have 'spoken out' on the great question of the time. It is not so hard to be known as a Methodist, when the Church takes such high and patriotic ground, even in a Copperhead State.<sup>55</sup>

When James Rusling added his condemnation of slavery to that expressed by other New Jersey Methodists, he introduced a sense of expediency, i.e., that it benefited the war effort to end slavery. Rusling in his essay entitled "The War for the Union" saw the blacks as pawns between the warring parties. To Rusling, the crucial question at the start of the war was which side would gain the allegiance of the blacks. He believed that the black "became the pivot about which the whole contest began to revolve." At first, the leaders of the Union army in West Virginia refused any assistance from former slaves. Concern for the slaves seemed to be directly proportional to the assistance that they could render the Union armies upon their emancipation. He wrote:

History will not believe it. Who, before, ever heard of a general refusing the most valuable of allies against a common enemy? . . . And now the President, made, by repeated defeats to our arms, at last fully awake to the magnitude of the contest, and to the necessity of employing all the national resources, by his immortal Proclamation of Emancipation declared all slaves within the insurrectionary districts 'henceforth and forever free' . . .<sup>56</sup>

The implicit message seems to be that slavery need not be abolished because it was a moral evil but needed to be abolished to aid the war effort. Rusling believed "that exactly in the proportion that slavery disappears,

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>55</sup>*Men and Things I Saw in Civil War Days* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1899), pp. 299-300. Letter written April 12, 1863.

<sup>56</sup>*Methodist Quarterly Review* 46 (April 1864): 312-313.

the rebellion ceases."<sup>57</sup> The essay focused more on the secession of the southern states from the Union than on the mistreatment of blacks through the slave system. In fact, "justice to the oppressed, however dear or difficult, becomes at last the only true safety to a nation."<sup>58</sup> Winning the war, preventing secession, protecting the nation were the goals that were aided through the abolition of slavery. Rusling was not insensitive to the evil of slavery but other issues related to the war were simply more important.

### Conclusion

In analyzing the attitudes of New Jersey Methodists toward slavery, it cannot be sufficiently emphasized how much these changed during the era of the Civil War. It is claimed here that New Jersey Methodists had always been opposed to slavery in principle but the forceful expression of that principle only emerged out of the cauldron of armed conflict, and from the fervor and emotion thus generated. The determinative influence on the Methodists during these years was not the prevailing Copperheads in the state, but the biblical admonitions for justice and equality, not the need to be loyal and patriotic citizens of the Union. With that attitude, they joined their Methodist brothers and sisters through the North in speaking out for freedom, equality, and justice for all of God's people. With slavery finally abolished, attention had to turn to the freed slave and to the millions of free blacks who had never been enslaved. That new challenge awaited the churches.

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 314.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 315.