WILLBUR FISK AND AFRICAN COLONIZATION: 
A “PAINFUL PORTION” OF 
AMERICAN METHODIST HISTORY

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One of the most intriguing chapters of American Methodist history encompasses the story of the confrontation of the Methodist Episcopal Church with American Negro slavery in the years between 1784 and 1844. As Donald G. Mathews points out in *Slavery and Methodism*, “because the Methodists had an antislavery heritage and a reputation for strict morality, the record of their grapple with slavery proved rich in irony, contrast, and human conflict.”1 Contemporary American Methodists, however, in spite of having at their disposal Mathews’ insightful and thorough work, tend to have only limited recall with respect to that “grapple with slavery.” They have, in many cases, a vivid recollection that Methodists were second only to Quakers in their early protests against American slavery, a definite sense that those protests waned for nearly half a century following 1785, and a conscious awareness that many northern Methodists provided support for and participated in abolitionist endeavors.

Seldom, however, does one hear details of Methodist involvement in the African colonization movement, a movement that began in earnest with the 1816 founding of the American Colonization Society. That movement sought to assist black slaves in returning to Africa, where they would be free full-fledged citizens. The movement hoped to thereby endow the “dark continent” of Africa with the “benefits” of American religion and civilization while also eventually freeing all slaves through the process of expatriation. Although no Methodists were involved in the founding of the American Colonization Society, there was no shortage of Methodists, from either above or below the Mason-Dixon line, who became active in promoting the work of African colonization, particularly in the years between 1824 and 1844.

This article will not trace the involvement of Methodists in African colonization activities of the early nineteenth century. Mathews has already devoted a superlative chapter of *Slavery and Methodism* to that topic. Rather, the focus herein will be upon Willbur Fisk, “the most respected and outstanding colonizationist in the Methodist Episcopal

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Church, ... and upon his reasons for supporting African colonization. Such a focus is important for several reasons: first, it reveals that not all influential northern leaders of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the two decades preceding the 1844 schism were proponents of abolitionism; second, it allows one to glimpse a wide variety of arguments used to defend African colonization and to sense the earnestness with which those arguments were propagated; third, it opens the windows of historical scholarship upon the view of one man among many who claimed to hate slavery and yet could not endorse abolitionism; and finally, it provides a basis for understanding the bitter conflict that occurred in northern Methodism in the 1830s and 1840s between advocates of colonization and supporters of abolitionism.

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W illbur Fisk was one of the most respected and influential leaders of New England Methodism in the 1820s and 1830s. Born in Brattleboro, Vermont on August 31, 1792, Fisk spent most of his young life in Vermont until he went off to college at Brown University, from which he graduated in 1815. "Admitted on trial" to the New England Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the summer of 1818, Fisk was the first New England Methodist minister to have earned a college degree. Highly respected by his conference brethren for his keen mind and impressive preaching, Fisk was appointed to three successive leadership positions within New England Methodism: in June 1823, he was named Presiding Elder for Vermont; in 1826 he was appointed Principal of Wesleyan Academy in Wilbraham, Massachusetts; and in September 1831, he began his tenure as the first President of Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, a post he held until his death in 1839.

One indication of the high esteem in which Fisk was held by his New England Methodist colleagues was his election to lead the New England delegation to General Conference in both 1828 and 1832. He earned 70 of 72 and 67 of 71 votes, respectively, in those two years in the General Conference delegate balloting. He was also elected (with 69 of 104 possible votes) to attend General Conference in 1836, though he declined the honor because the abolition-colonization controversy had, in his opinion, tainted the electoral process by which the New England delegation had been chosen. Furthermore, Fisk was elected a bishop of the church in 1836, an honor which he also declined. 3

2 Ibid., 106.

3 In the first place, Fisk declined to be ordained to the episcopacy because he had been elected "conditionally." That is, two bishops had been ill and had requested a lessening of their work load. However, in the five months from the end of the 1836 General Conference until Fisk's return from Europe, all episcopal duties had been thoroughly carried out. Fisk thus felt that his services as bishop would not be necessary. In addition, Fisk's health was poor and he felt obligated also to continue his work as President of Wesleyan University.
Fisk became deeply involved in a variety of social and ecclesiastical issues throughout his lifetime. An apologist for Methodism’s Arminian theology, he wrote extensively in opposition to Calvinism, Unitarianism, and Universalism, with many of his writings being published by the New England Conference. Fisk’s leadership in the field of education cannot be questioned: until his time the Methodist Episcopal Church had struggled fruitlessly to establish scholarly and financially solvent colleges and secondary schools. Under his leadership both Wesleyan Academy and Wesleyan University prospered and grew. While at Wesleyan University, Fisk initiated the awarding of a “modified diploma” that became the first Bachelor of Science degree awarded in this nation, and he developed a system of entrance examinations to afford students the opportunity to achieve advanced standing at the University. This, too, was a first in the nation.

It was Fisk who developed the first Conference Course of Study used to train New England Methodist ministers, and it was in response to his prompting that the Methodist Episcopal Church first provided special funding for the training of home and foreign missionaries (training done at Wesleyan University). Fisk was responsible for convincing the Young Men’s Bible Society of New York to undertake the first translation of the Bible into the Mohawk language, and it was Fisk who recruited the first Methodist missionary to the Flathead and Nez Percé Indians of Oregon (the missionary, sent in 1833, was Jason Lee, a former Wilbraham Academy student). And finally, Fisk was the most dynamic proponent of the temperance reform movement undertaken by New England Methodists in the years between 1827 and 1836.

In each of these four areas—theology, education, missions, and temperance—Willbur Fisk provided significant leadership for New England Methodism and for the entire Methodist connection. In none of these areas did Fisk encounter serious or sustained criticism from within Methodist circles. Such was not the case with Fisk’s involvement in the African colonization movement. His pro-colonization stance engendered controversy and bitterness both within and without the Methodist connection. And yet Fisk stood firm in his belief that colonization was the best available means for eradicating slavery from the nation without tearing asunder the nation or the Methodist Episcopal Church. That firm stance, however, was in fact responsible for much bitterness and divisiveness within the church and for a diminishing of Fisk’s leadership role in New England Methodism in the half-decade before his death in 1839. As Joseph Holdich writes in his 1842 biography of Fisk:

We now come to a painful portion of our subject's history. It was painful to himself, because it brought him into collision with many of his brethren, and some

even of his earliest and dearest friends in the ministry; and it was painful to the church, because the talents which might have been so available if otherwise employed, were occupied in a comparatively fruitless controversy. . . . The reader will perhaps understand that we allude to the Abolition Controversy.

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Willbur Fisk abhorred the existence of slavery in the United States. Never did he intend to be an apologist for slavery, for he perceived slavery to be an atrocity and an evil. In reviewing Fisk's record of activity on behalf of the African colonization cause one must be careful not to equate that activity with a conscious advocacy of the continuation of slavery. Fisk's hatred of slavery stemmed primarily from his exposure to the institution during a stint as a tutor with a wealthy Maryland family in the years 1816 and 1817. A vivid representation of that hatred is contained in a February 5, 1817 letter written by Fisk to a friend in Vermont:

... When I see the slave groaning beneath his oppressions I say in my heart there is nothing of this in Vermont. . . . Slavery is the curse of our country and will one day prove its ruin. I make no pretensions to the gift of prophecy and my ideas may be incorrect but I sincerely believe if our beautiful political fabric is torn down the work will be commenced by the slave-holding states. I will no longer boast of the liberty of these states since in no more than one half of the territory the greater part of the population are slaves. And many of them miserably abused God knows. Our truly humane legislature has prohibited the foreign slave trade, but what have the negroes gained by this. The negroes of Africa are not torn from their country to sure, but an internal slave trade is carried on in our country. Wives and husbands, children and parents are separated as before. And even kidnapping is practiced to an alarming extent.

Fisk was often forced to point out, later in his life, that working on behalf of colonization and opposing abolitionsim did not automatically brand an individual as a proponent of slavery. And Fisk's own abhorrence of slavery did not dissipate as he grew older and became increasingly involved in colonization activities. A testimony to his continued distaste for slavery is contained in one of his addresses to the Wesleyan Conference held in Birmingham, England in 1835:

I have been educated in a different school—one of abhorrence of slavery; and, never having lived in the slaveholding states, I have scarcely seen more than five or six colored persons, until I grew up to manhood; and all I have seen, in slaveholding states, since that time, has tended to strengthen and confirm my impression. In my opinion, slavery is evil—only evil—and that continually.

Fisk's hatred of slavery provided the principal motivating force for his involvement in colonization societies and other pro-colonizationist activities. Like many other residents of northern states, Fisk endorsed

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*Letter of Willbur Fisk to Mr. H., February 5, 1817 (Fisk Papers, Archives of Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT).
*Christian Advocate and Journal (CAJ).* September 16, 1835.
colonization enterprises because he sincerely believed that they would be effective in eliminating slavery and simultaneously restoring dignity to those who had been unjustly bound as slaves. Fisk certainly shared the expectations and hopes, expressed in an 1832 letter written to him by the Colonization Society of the City of New York, that colonization would be successful

...in transforming a debased and despised race of beings into a virtuous, happy and flourishing people; ...in suppressing the slave-trade; in planting the germs of civilization and Christianity in the dark domains of Africa, and thereby redeeming a portion of the moral debt we owe her.8

In discussing Fisk’s support for colonization organizations and activities it is important to recognize that “colonization” was not always defined in identical terms by all who embraced the concept. Fisk understood colonization to be a voluntary process by which black persons, both free and slave, would be taken from America to Africa, where they would be afforded the opportunity to establish their own colony or colonies. The process was to be voluntary in the sense that no free black persons would be compelled to involve themselves in the enterprise and no political legislation was to be enacted for the purpose of compelling slaveowners to free their slaves in order to aid the colonization endeavor. It is unclear how Fisk felt about conditional manumission of slaves; that is, about slaveowners freeing slaves only on the condition that they be sent to Africa upon their release.

There can be no doubt that Fisk and others understood the colonization enterprise to involve a missionary thrust. Such an understanding was distinctly grounded in a sense of the superiority of Christianity and American culture to all other religions and cultures. But Fisk and many other colonizationists also shared the hope that colonization would eliminate slavery and at least partially correct the horrendous wrongs of slavery: one does not speak of owing someone else a “moral debt” unless one is convinced that a grievous wrong has been perpetrated upon that other person. In sum, many colonizationists of the early nineteenth century, including Fisk, believed that their efforts were morally correct and potentially effective measures for eliminating slavery:

...Begun in the purist benevolence, and sustained by the noblest philanthropy, it [colonization] has won its way to universal commendation. A period has now arrived that calls for increased exertion. ...Never has there been a period, so auspicious as the present, to the consummation of our object.9

The question then arises as to why Fisk and other advocates of colonization chose to support colonization societies and oppose the measures endorsed by abolitionists, those persons seeking immediate

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8Letter from the Colonization Society of the City of New York to Fisk, 1832 (Fisk Papers).
9Idem.
freedom for all slaves and total abolition of slavery. One might respond succinctly by stating that colonizationists felt that their measures could eliminate slavery while maintaining the unity of the nation, which they feared would be shattered by the increasing pressure of abolitionism. Many Protestant colonizationists also cherished the unity of their individual churches and were concerned that abolitionism threatened to bring about schisms within those churches. Most believed that colonization activities would not push those churches into the tragedy of ugly conflict and ultimate separation. Fisk's writings in support of colonization include these arguments and several others: it is important to review them now in depth.

"Since 1826 when he was manager of the auxiliary [colonization] society in Vermont, Fisk had worked hard to promote and to defend colonization as a nonrevolutionary, sensible reform." Even though he publicly supported colonization at least as early as 1826, Fisk had not written anything for publication in defense of colonization or in opposition to abolitionism prior to 1835. In January of that year, however, Fisk received a letter from Benjamin Kingsbury, the editor of Zion's Herald (the official newspaper of the New England Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church), informing him that the paper was preparing to allocate space for discussion of the "slavery question." Even then Fisk had no intention of becoming a participant in that discussion. But in February, George Storrs, a New Hampshire Methodist preacher, converted Fisk's celebrated address on temperance into a pro-abolitionism document merely by altering certain key words in the text. Fisk, outraged by what he perceived to be an attempt to portray him as an abolitionist, entered the printed dispute over the "slavery question" in March. Only his death in 1839 would extricate him from the ensuing conflict.

Three pieces written by Fisk in 1835 preserve his most cogent arguments on behalf of colonization and in opposition to abolitionism: an indignant response to Storrs in the March 11 issue of Zion's Herald; a "Counter-Appeal on the Subject of Slavery," written on behalf of five other New England Methodist preachers, in direct response to an "Appeal" written by Storrs, La Roy Sunderland, Shipley W. Willson, Abram D. Merrill, and Jared Perkins; and a July 4 address to the annual meeting of the Middletown Colonization Society. In each of those pieces Fisk angrily condemned abolitionists for branding colonizationists as proponents and propagators of slavery when in fact colonization societies had been more effective than abolitionists in achieving the emancipation of slaves:

... Suffice to say, at this time, when our Brethren at the North [the authors of the "Appeal"] shall have labored and suffered as much, and as effectually, for the elevation and the salvation of the negro race, as those have whom they are in the constant

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10Mathews, p. 107.
habit of stigmatizing as manstealers, robbers, and murderers [colonizationists], they will be able to judge of the correctness of their censures...I will have no partnership in the sentiment...that all who do not join in the present abolition movements, are “apologists” for slavery....The Colonization Society...has indirectly liberated more slaves, probably, than all the antislavery societies of our country, from the beginning until now! A society which the unprincipled slave holder hates and dreads, because it leads to abolition; and the ultra-abolitionist opposes because it stands in the way of his dangerous high-pressure engine. A society which, by a successful experiment, makes fair promise of giving to the world a convincing and extended exhibition of negro elevation—moral, intellectual, and social.\textsuperscript{11}

Fisk believed that the nation’s colonization societies had accomplished a positive step toward the emancipation of slaves by establishing the African colony of Liberia as a home for emancipated slaves. Fisk also saw significant good being done by those societies becoming involved in educating and ministering to slaves in an attempt to “elevate” them and improve their lives, both physically and spiritually. Furthermore, Fisk pointed with approval to the fact that colonization societies included slaveholders among their members, thereby facilitating the preaching to slaves and thus nourishing their souls while society members gradually worked for the freedom of the slaves by convincing masters of the immorality of slavery. This “gradual” approach, thought Fisk, was superior to abolitionism because it attempted to minister to the slaves while slowly, surely, and peacefully bringing about their emancipation and subsequent return to an African homeland:

The truth is...Colonizationists, when they cannot do all the good they would, are willing to do what they can; and knowing, as they do, that great and prominent enterprises generally have small beginnings, and at first a slow growth, they feel encouraged to proceed in their work, since they are doing an amount of good in the present tense, sufficient to compensate them a thousand fold for all their labor, and have good hope that they are laying the foundation of an enterprise, the benefits of which will be felt through all coming generations....The direct and appropriated field of this society, is the elevation of the free man of color, to the high privileges of citizenship and independence. Of this she has her living witnesses in the happy and flourishing colonial republics, that stud the coast of Liberia....We find the abolition plan doing nothing—yes, sir, absolutely and unqualifiedly nothing, in the work of emancipating the enslaved, nothing in meliorating their condition; and very little good, but much more harm, to the free: while the Colonization enterprises, without waiting for the future and for others to develop all its advantages, is elevating and cheering its beneficiaries, as it advances; and gives practical and immediate demonstration of the safety, efficiency, and philanthropy of its operations.\textsuperscript{12}

Fisk and other colonizationists were convinced that continued preaching of the Gospel among slaves was a vital arm of Christian missionary endeavors. Their hope was that they could provide ongoing oppor-

\textsuperscript{11}Zion’s Herald (ZH), VI(March 11, 1835)10.
\textsuperscript{12}Willbur Fisk, Substance of an Address Delivered Before the Middletown Colonization Society, at their Annual Meeting, July 4, 1835 (Middletown, CT: Published by the Society, 1835).
tunities for Christian education and spiritual growth among the slaves while attempting to convince slaveowners that Christian duty required them to free their slaves. The belief that slaves were receiving Christian teaching was not an illusion: many slaveowners did allow their slaves to be exposed on a regular basis to preaching of the Gospel. Two letters from Josiah Flournoy (a plantation owner in Georgia and father of a student at Wesleyan University) to Fisk, dated 1832 and 1835, reveal a glimpse of one slaveowner who provided for such religious instruction:

I have about 140 slaves for whose religious instruction I have about the same care as for that of my white family. The Georgia Conference has appointed a preacher whose special duty is to instruct the slaves in my section of the country; he preaches at two of my plantations and the people here give their slaves every advantage in Religion....Here we have no trouble [with abolitionism], the Slaves behave well and have all the advantages of Religious instruction and are every way better off than the laboring Class of most Countries and are altogether the most happy poor in the world.13

Fisk worried that such preaching and religious instruction would be curtailed or even eliminated if abolitionists continued their vehement attacks upon the character of slaveowners and persisted in clamoring for immediate emancipation of slaves through legislative measures. In 1835 Fisk received a letter from a southern clergyman warning him that abolitionism did indeed threaten the bringing of the Gospel to slaves:

The abolition movements of the North, are just now becoming matters of serious consideration and wide spread alarm, in the Southern States.—I deplore the blind fatuity of the New England Conference, which is the first to give high official sanction to this fatal delusion....[If abolitionism continues] the negroes must be subjected to more rigorous discipline, their privileges curtailed, their congregations dispersed, their improvement stayed, their Christian teachers silenced; for these privileges are very capable of being perverted to ruinous purposes. And then the men of the North will anathematize us for measures, which they force us, against our will to adopt. These things will speedily come to pass.14

Fisk, however, was never aware, or he never acknowledged, that slaveowners often allowed their slaves to read the Bible and hear Christian preaching only because they (the owners) believed that such Bible-reading and preaching encouraged slaves to accept their bondage as being the will of God. As E. Franklin Frazier has written, “opposition to teaching the Negro the Bible declined as masters became convinced that sufficient justification for slavery could be found in the New Testament. In fact, some masters became convinced that some of the best slaves—that is, those amenable to control by their white masters—were those who read the Bible.”15

13Letters of Josiah Flournoy to Fisk, October 10, 1832 and August 12, 1835 (Fisk Papers).
14Sentinel and Witness (Middletown, CT), November 11, 1835.
make them more docile with respect to their enslavement. As Frazier explains, "black men were expected to accept their lot in this world and if they were obedient and honest and truthful they would be rewarded in the world after death." Fisk never addressed this issue, perhaps because he was unaware, or unwilling to believe, that Bible teaching and preaching were being used as tools of oppression.

Fisk also endorsed colonization efforts and opposed abolitionism because he felt certain that the latter would ultimately tighten the chains of bondage upon the slaves and thereby cause them more torment and unhappiness. And as was alluded to in an earlier quotation, Fisk was convinced that abolitionism might also serve effectively to revoke the rights of freedom earned by or granted to former slaves and thus to return them to slavery. On the other hand, colonization would, said Fisk, eventually lead to abolition of slavery through convincing slaveowners of the un-Christian, immoral nature of slaveholding while preserving what good treatment slaves were already enjoying.

Fisk believed, with significant justification, that the castigation and threatening of slaveowners by abolitionists would cause tighter laws against manumission of slaves to be enacted by the legislatures of slaveholding states. In the "Counter-Appeal" he argued further that if by striving to eliminate one state of unhappiness one brings about a state of still greater unhappiness, as abolitionism threatened to do, then that course of action is inappropriate:

Every diminution of the intensity of suffering... or of the amount of exercisable authority, which could be made, without creating more misery than it subtracts, ought instantly to be made; and the moment the whole can be diminished away, whether immediately or gradually, without causing more suffering than it destroys, then and not till then, should it be absolutely and entirely annihilated.

Fisk goes on to make at least two major points: first, that all masters of slaves were not tyrannical, as the abolitionists claimed, and that some may indeed have been models of Christian character; and second, that to assail such merciful slaveowners was to make them defensive and less favorably disposed to voluntarily liberating their slaves.

But Fisk also seems to hint that the "gradual" course of colonization was superior to that of abolitionism because it would, by its very nature, provide freed slaves with a home and a way to make a living. Abolition, however, would result in slaves being freed all at once into American society and suffering because of an inability to support themselves or feed
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...their families. This does not mean that Fisk had ceased to think of slavery as an evil. Rather, he was seeking to abolish that evil through a gradual process that would insure, to a reasonable degree, that freed slaves would not suffer more in their freedom than they had in slavery. In his words: "We hope by gradual amelioration, to evaluate the oppressed colored man to his rightful standing in the great human brotherhood, without hazard and without civil convulsion." Fisk also believed that it would be nearly impossible to change the racial prejudices of the American nation. This was still another reason for his support of colonization and his opposition to abolitionism: colonizationists recognized how deeply those prejudices were ingrained in American life and sought to free blacks from both slavery and those prejudices, while abolitionism involved subjecting freed slaves to all of the agony and suffering that those prejudices would engender. There is no evidence that Fisk opposed, as did many colonizationists, the intermingling and "amalgamation" of black and caucasian races. But he did not believe such an intermingling could take place without violence and hatred arising between whites and blacks. In African colonization Fisk envisioned a way by which slavery could be eliminated, dignity restored to black people, and peace maintained in the nation:

African Colonization is predicted on the principle that there is an utter aversion in the public mind, to an amalgamation and equalization of the two races: and that any attempt to press such an equalization is not only fruitless, but injurious. It is predicted also upon the further principle, that so far as existing prejudice is vincible, it is so only, as has been stated already, by slow degrees, and by elevating the victims of prejudice from their degrading associations and conditions. Hence this society lifts up the man of color, at once from his connections and disabilities; and places him beyond the influence of the shackles of prejudice, and teaches him to act and feel as a man.

In Slavery and Methodism Mathews refers to Willbur Fisk as "an advocate of colonization, a devotee of national union, and a partisan of Methodist solidarity." This description hints at what may have been, in Fisk’s estimation, the most important reasons for his defense of colonization and his opposition to abolitionism: the potential of abolitionism for dissolving national union and for causing a schism in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Fisk’s fear of such divisions was not merely irrational, as history has since illustrated. Nor were expressions of that fear, as some abolitionists charged, simply the rhetorical arguments of a man secretly in favor of slavery.

Correspondence from men such as Josiah Flournoy apprised Fisk of the potential threats that abolitionism posed to the unity of both the nation and the Methodist connection. For example, Flournoy wrote in 1835:

18 "Counter-Appeal" in idem.
19 Fisk, An Address, p. 5.
21 Mathews, p. 106.
If the wild Vision and extravagant antiscriptural feelings of the Abolitionist are pushed on there is certainly danger—as that the sun gives light. The South now contributes too little to our...Church interest but when it is remembered that our parent Society is in New York if these wild proceedings are not opposed, the South will finally withdraw all support and all fellowship and try to take the best care of herself and manage as best she can, a matter certainly to be avoided if possible. 23

An awareness of sentiments such as those of Flourney, as well as those of the increasing number of abolitionists, caused Fisk to be genuinely troubled by the prospects of schism within American Methodism. Concerned especially that such a schism would involve a significant weakening of the moral fibre of the nation, Fisk counseled his Methodist sisters and brothers to stand apart from abolitionist tactics:

If, then, you would not paralyze your own influence—if you would not render your exertions ineffective for anything but frenzy, disunion and disorganization to every member of the Methodist Episcopal Church, we would address the respectful, yet earnest warning, keep your hands from the machinery of excitement;...frown upon the man who counsels to split our Church as a “prop” of slavery; and assist not in breaking the golden chain of Christian connection, which is the truest conductor from one extreme of our land to the other, of holy sympathies and philanthropic influences. 24

Fisk was pointedly critical of the “party spirit” that he felt was engendered by abolitionism. He believed that such “party spirit” would cause painful divisions in the nation and in the Methodist Episcopal Church and that that “party spirit” would in turn be exacerbated by the divisions it created. In the first place, Fisk was concerned that the best men in the nation would not be elected to political offices if they were not supporters of abolitionist principles. He believed that such a state of affairs would lead to the election of men with extremely narrow political perspectives, and also to extensive corruption of the democratic process. He expressed those fears in an 1838 letter to Daniel Fillmore, at a time when he was hopeful that abolitionism was subsiding:

I am so glad to hear that abolitionism is declining. I have so hoped, so far as I have been able to observe. They are now however driving it into politics. Political action they say is the only thing. Alas! how frail is human nature. When I forewarned them at the very outset of this business that it would run into party politics they almost thought I slandered them. It was a great moral question they said, and as such was proper business for ministers and Christians. And now this great moral question is to be decided by, as the Emancipator tells us, “looking well to the ballot boxes.” Not by looking to see whether the man be a sound upright man who is to be chosen to office; but whether he will answer certain specific questions to meet their views. This is everything—if he suits here, go for him—How many a venal office-seeker will be bought to pity the poor slave, and rant about philanthropy. What a pity that Methodist preachers ever engaged in this political crusade. 25

23Letter from Josiah Flourney to Fisk, April 11, 1835 (Fisk Papers).
24ZH, VI(March 27, 1835)12.
25Letter of Fisk to Daniel Fillmore, October 17, 1838 (Fisk Papers).
Fisk envisioned abolitionist sentiments spawning a similar divisive process within Methodism. By the fourth decade of the nineteenth century, abolitionism itself had begun to acquire the trappings of an institutional religion. Many who joined the abolitionist camp envisioned themselves as members of the "true Church." Many abolitionists wrote anti-slavery hymns, celebrated anti-slavery holy days, underwent persecution and martyrdom, and coupled anti-slavery meetings with a form of revivalism. Fisk shuddered at the thought of Christian faith being equated with abolitionism, or the Methodist Episcopal Church being identified with abolitionist anti-slavery societies. He became increasingly troubled by the potential divisiveness that abolitionism might introduce into Methodism's unique connectional system:

Now, sir, let this doctrine be carried out, and what would be the consequence? The most ruinous to the peace of the churches... It would be an entire dismemberment of these Churches [Protestant Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Methodist Episcopal]—not merely a grand division into northern and southern, but here in the north, we would be divided among ourselves, brother against brother, and society against society; and the work of God would be neglected and the spirit of devotion lost, in the schisms and contentions that would ensue... No church would suffer like ours—We are not only bound together by a common faith, a common discipline, and common ecclesiastical judicatories, but we are united also by a common pastoral charge, by which the whole flock is, in a manner, the property of each and every pastor, and each and every pastor is the property of the whole flock. Throw this spirit of disfellowship and schism into a religious community thus constituted, extending as it does, over our whole Union, and what would be the result? I know not, sir, but there may be zeal and infatuation enough among abolitionists, to rejoice at such an event; but I believe, that, aside from them, even infidels would weep at the consequences political, social and domestic that would follow such a schism.26

The important point here is not the relative accuracy of Fisk's predictions about schisms and political divisions, but rather that Fisk's opposition to abolitionism and support of colonization was rooted in his firm conviction that such schisms and divisions would be the unavoidable consequences of abolitionist fervor. In the preceding quotation there is an indication of Fisk's belief that a strong church is an essential contributor to the maintenance of the strong moral fibre of the American nation. None of the prospects of abolitionism frightened or dismayed Fisk more than those of a divided church and a divided nation. His advocacy of the gradual eradication of slavery through the process of colonization and a campaign of Christian moral persuasion directed at slaveowners was based in part on the opinion that those methods would ultimately eliminate American slavery while meliorating the condition of the slaves along the way.

But most importantly, Fisk did not believe that colonization efforts would generate anger and hatred, and he was confident that colonizationists would not divide the church or the nation. An unpublished letter to Benjamin Kingsbury, written by Fisk in 1834, indicates the extent

26Fisk, An Address, p. 20.
to which Fisk endorsed the "sure, safe, and steady" course of colonization:

I think the colonization enterprise important—very important—and important in anxious points of light. But because the Colonization society has my approbation it does not follow that nothing else can be done for the negro, bond or free. I am willing to do more. I am doing more continually. . . . But I cannot go with the immediate abolitionists. . . . The colonization enterprise avoids the exciting and for that reason the inefficient. . . . course of the immediatist, marches onward to the accomplishment of the desired objective, steadily, safely, and effectually. That it has done much in this way already the blaze of light that for the last fifteen years has been shed upon the Southerners respecting the rights of character of the negro is in proof. The missions that have been got up for the blacks within that period is in proof. The hundreds of slaves that have been emancipated of late and the thousands more that are ready to be emancipated whenever they can be provided for is in proof. 27

Fisk remained convinced of the propriety of his colonizationist stance until his death in 1839. The persistence and sincerity of Fisk's advocacy of colonization are perhaps best represented by a scene from his death bed:

When he was asked his views of the COLONIZATION SOCIETY, he replied, "The same they have ever been. I regret that I did not join that society sooner. I rejoice that I joined it when I did. It is the cause of God, and will prevail. . . . I advocated that cause from principle: it was not blind impulse or passion, though I may sometimes have erred in spirit. But they [abolitionists] have been unbrotherly in imputing to me motives that were never in my heart." 28

The preceding passage becomes particularly poignant when one recognizes that Willbur Fisk's leadership status in the New England Conference diminished dramatically because of his advocacy of colonization and concomitant opposition to abolitionism. Furthermore, Fisk's friendships with many of the Methodist brethren with whom he had developed intimate personal and professional bonds were strained or severed as a result of those stances. The first evidences of such strain appeared in the 1835 New England Conference during the process of electing delegates for the 1836 General Conference. Of the 104 votes potentially attainable by any one person, Fisk garnered but 69. In 1827 and 1831 he had been within several votes of being unanimously elected to the delegation. And while his 69 votes did indeed earn him a spot in the New England delegation, Orange Scott, a leading abolitionist, was to head the delegation after having received 94 votes. When Fisk found out that the eight other delegates from the New England Conference were of pro-abolitionist persuasion he resigned from the delegation "on the ground that 'the entire delegation, with the exception of himself, had been carried on party principles, such principles as ought not to be brought into an election in this Conference.'" 29

27 Unfinished letter of Fisk to Benjamin Kingsbury, 1834 (Fisk Papers).
28 Holdich, pp. 448-49.
The mantle of New England Methodist leadership was beginning to pass from Fisk to those ministers who favored abolitionism. Fisk's dynamic work on behalf of Wesleyan theology, denominational higher education, Methodist missions, and temperance reform came to be overshadowed in the closing years of his life, at least in the eyes of many New England Methodists, by his refusal to embrace abolitionism. By electing Fisk to the episcopacy and by naming him to represent American Methodists at the 1836 British Wesleyan Conference, the General Conference reaffirmed the national respect among Methodists for Fisk's exceptional work in the church. But in the New England Conference, the most radical pro-abolitionist conference in American Methodism at the time, Fisk came into increasing conflict with both beloved and more distant Methodist brethren.

Fisk's most bitter conflicts over the colonization/abolition issue occurred in his verbal entanglements with La Roy Sunderland and Orange Scott, two New England Methodist ministers who had stood shoulder-to-shoulder with him in the battle against intemperance. Although Fisk had never been exceptionally close to either man, the acrimonious exchanges concerning abolitionism which took place between the three of them are difficult to understand or to rationalize. One of the most biting attacks upon Fisk's leadership and integrity was written by the abolitionist element of the New England Conference (led by Sunderland and Scott) and sent to the 1836 British Wesleyan Conference in the form of a memorial. The intent was to undermine Fisk's credibility in the eyes of British Methodists, and the memorial did in fact cause Fisk to have to defend his position on colonization, in great detail, at the Conference. An excerpt from the attack appeared in the newspaper *Zion's Watchman*, which was edited by Sunderland:

*Present state of feeling on the subject of slavery.* March, 1835, a number of ministers published a document called "Counter-Appeal"—in defence of the present "rightful existence of slavery"; as this paper contains the most labored argument which we ever saw in favor of slavery, we take the liberty of sending several copies to your conference.

*Wesleyan University—Admission Policy.* Such is the prejudice which prevails among us against the colored man, that he is not permitted to enter our colleges for mental instructions; and until a few days before the President of Wesleyan left this country for Europe, a resolution had existed on the records of its Board of Trustees—*forbidding* the entrance of any colored person into that university.30

Despite the fact that Fisk genuinely opposed slavery and that he had been the moving force in changing the discriminatory Wesleyan admission policy, attacks such as this eroded his leadership status in New England and tarnished his reputation in England. A more potent attack came from the pen of Scott later in 1836:

30*Zion's Watchman (ZW),* July 13, 1836.
These are strange times! Never till late has a Methodist minister dared to lift his voice, or pen, in defense of slavery; but now our doctors of divinity and Presidents of Colleges can write labored “Scripture arguments” in defense of the “great evil.” Now the manstealers and robbers find apologists and defenders among the Methodist preachers... Our church is stained with blood, and haunted with the groans of deathless spirits. Dr. Fisk gives as his opinion, that one cause of our decrease of members is our agitation on the subject of slavery. By “our agitation” is meant, I suppose, abolitionism. If it were affirmed that an opposition to abolitionism has been a curse to the Methodist Episcopal Church, the assertion would be supported by too many facts to admit of successful contradiction. But when it is intimated that an opposition to slavery has produced a decrease of members, stubborn facts are contradicted. The New Hampshire and New England Conferences have been the hot beds of abolition; and in both these conferences there has been, during the last two years, a net gain of 2241 members.

Party spirit engendered by the abolitionist controversy continued to infest the New England Conference, with an increasing number of Methodists coming to spurn Fisk’s leadership and adopt abolitionist viewpoints on the issue of slavery. Between 1836 and 1838 Sunderland and Scott brought charges of uncharitable and un-Christian conduct against Fisk, while Fisk challenged the ministerial credentials of both men, claiming that their condemnation of devoted colonizationists was divisive of the church and loaded with inappropriate animosity.

But the series of incidents in this controversy that most dismayed Fisk, and that attested most distinctly to his declining influence in the New England Conference, was his exchange of letters, shortly after his return from Europe, with Timothy Merritt. Merritt had been one of Fisk’s closest friends and colleagues in ministry since their collaboration in the early 1820s in the defense of Wesleyan theology against Calvinist theologians. Together they had battled vigorously against intemperance, mutually supported Methodist missionary endeavors, and published theological treatises. But when Fisk returned to Connecticut from Europe in 1836, he received word that Merritt had come to favor abolitionism as the most effective means of eradicating American slavery:

Their (abolitionists) object is the abolition of slavery—and that should be our object. If I cannot go all lengths with them in all these measures they adopt, I feel that I ought not to prejudice the cause, by doing nothing... I must, to be consistent, act with the abolitionist in respect to the object (slavery) though I may differ from them in regard to some of the measures adopted for the accomplishment of that object... I cannot go all lengths with the abolitionists. Their opposition to the colonizing of emancipated slaves, has produced much opposition to abolitionism, and has greatly weakened the cause. But I can go with them much better than with their opponents.

The implications of Merritt’s change in position were painfully clear to Fisk. His friend and former ally in so many Methodist concerns had switched his allegiance from the colonizationists to the abolitionists. In so
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doing, Merritt was deploying his considerable influence in undermining Fisk's leadership in the New England Conference. Fisk attempted, through an exchange of letters with Merritt that appeared in several Methodist newspapers (including Zion's Herald), to convince his friend that his (Merritt's) new position was truly not in the abolitionist camp of Sunderland and Scott. Merritt replied forcefully that he had indeed become an abolitionist, and that he was disappointed that Fisk would attempt to make it appear otherwise. Merritt believed that there were only two sides in the controversy over slavery, and he was both confused and disappointed by Fisk's attempt to maintain a mediating position:

You labor hard to make it appear there is but little difference between you and myself after all, and call upon me to show wherein I am more an abolitionist than you are. . . . I can act with the abolitionists, though I do not go with them to the full extent of their measures. Must we wait till we and the abolitionists see eye to eye on all matters, before we unite in putting down the greatest evil the sun has ever shown upon? Alas! we must wait till millions of human beings are born and die in slavery, before that time will come. . . . I cannot be surprised at anything, since I have seen good men stand aloof from the cause of abolition, in these United States. . . . There are two sides, and only two sides of this course,—abolition and slavery; and that we are aiding one or the other of them. There cannot be a third.63

Unlike the disputations with Sunderland and Scott, Fisk's differences with Merritt did not lapse into bitterness and acrimony. While the differences did not destroy the men's friendship, they saddened Merritt and nearly extinguished Fisk's "light of leadership" in the New England Conference. By the time of the New England Conference session of 1838, the last of his life, Fisk had all but lost his position of preeminence among New England Methodist ministers. The colonization/abolitionism controversy was largely responsible for a considerable amount of friction and bitterness within the Conference as a whole. In a letter to his wife from the 1838 Conference, Fisk paints a sad and disheartening picture of the controversy and of the extent to which his own leadership position had disintegrated:

The abolition heat is about equal to that of the atmosphere and I know not what will be the result. Your distinguished husband has the honor of two ecclesiastical prosecutions pending against him—one by L.R. Sunderland and the other by J.N. Murise, both for slander. Only think of an abolitionist prosecuting another for slander!! Is not this like Satan rebuking sin? They have the majority and can do what they please—what may be the result I cannot say but it is supposed there are some who are determined to put a mark upon us if they can. Be it so; it may be, if it please God, that the iron with which they attempt to brand me will burn the hands that use it. At any rate I await the issue without trepidation or alarm. There are eight or ten arrests of character mostly growing out of abolitionism. It is thus that this wretched fever of malice under the name of negro philanthropy is destroying the peace and prosperity of the church.64

63ZH, VIII(February 8, 1837)6.
64Letter of Fisk to Ruth Peck Fisk, June 11, 1838 (Fisk Papers).
On several occasions it has been noted herein that Willbur Fisk carried his antipathy for abolitionism and his endorsement of colonization with him to the grave. It is important to add to that observation that within six months of his death Fisk expressed the hope that abolitionism would not supplant colonizationism, at least among Methodists. In a letter to Daniel Fillmore he wrote:

They will quit however. I have that confidence in the great whole of my brethren to believe they will not follow their object into the political shambles where consciences are bought and sold, for a morbid philanthropy...I am encouraged for the church [that peace is coming and abolitionism waning]; although it will be long, very long, before we get rid of the disorganizing,...authority despising spirit which this wretched, wretched business has introduced into the church! O how many are the devices of Satan!36

We are well aware that Fisk's prediction that abolitionism was fading from the American scene proved to be inaccurate. What were not inaccurate were those of Fisk's predictions which stated that slavery and the abolitionism/colonization conflict bore the potential for bringing controversy, bitterness, and division to both the nation and the Methodist Episcopal Church. Scott and Sunderland, angered by Methodist Episcopal Church foot-dragging with respect to endorsing abolitionist principles, withdrew from the Church to form the Wesleyan Methodist Connection in 1843. That schism was followed by the 1844 trauma that severed the Methodist Episcopal Church into North and South divisions—with slavery again being the issue engendering divisive friction. And finally the "slavery question" was integrally involved in inciting interregional political strife and the ultimate North-South divisions that led to the American Civil War.

Methodist advocacy of colonization as a means to eliminate slavery subsided dramatically after the schism of 1844. Northern Methodists, no longer worried about attempting to keep southern slaveowners in the connection, and increasingly convinced that colonization—with its emphasis upon gradualism and persuasion—was ineffective in emancipating slaves, were drawn more and more into endorsement of abolitionism. Southern Methodists, with tacit approval of slaveholding by their own separate General Conference, lost enthusiasm for any organized program of slave emancipation.

And yet, if Fisk’s writings in support of colonization theories and practices reveal nothing else, they reveal that in the two decades prior to 1844 there were American Methodists who perceived colonization to be an appropriate, effective, and moral option to employ in the eradication of American slavery. For many of those people, particularly those from the North, acceptance of colonizationist principles involved a concomitant belief that slavery was evil and un-Christian. Hence their disagreements

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36Letter of Fisk to Daniel Fillmore, October 17, 1838 (Fisk Papers).
with abolitionists were over methodology for slave emancipation and not over whether slavery was right or wrong (though there certainly were many shades of grey in the various perceptions of slavery that were held by colonization supporters).

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The particular endorsement by Willbur Fisk of colonizationist practices still elicits compassionate acceptance and angry denunciation, even in this century. Mathews offers the judgment that Fisk's involvement on behalf of colonization enterprises was "motivated by a genuine concern for Negroes uncomplicated by a conscious prejudice."36 Others such as Emma Lou Holloway contend that "evidence leaves little doubt that Fisk, like many Americans of his day, had difficulties reconciling the humanity of blacks. . . . It is clear that Fisk may not have been as free from prejudice as Donald Mathews would have one believe."37

The available evidence suggests that Mathews' judgment is the more accurate, but certainly there can be no absolutely correct judgment with respect to that issue. What might be ascertained from the available evidence, however, is that Fisk implicitly argued, in his support of colonization and opposition to abolitionism, that the union of the nation and of the Methodist Episcopal Church were more important than the freedom of black slaves. It is that implication which is most troubling about Fisk's pro-colonization stance. There is no doubt about the sincerity of Fisk's beliefs that colonization would lead to emancipation of slaves and that slavery was intrinsically evil. We are today distressed by the apparent judgment by Fisk that divisions of church and nation were greater evils than slavery, for we cannot accept the idea that the unity of any institution is more important than the freedom or basic human rights and dignity of any human being.

It is difficult to label Fisk's endorsement of colonization enterprises as "moral" or "immoral." Fisk seems to have harbored doubts that free blacks could "make it" in American society, and for that reason Fisk might well be condemned as a racist. On the other hand, Fisk condemned the racism of the nation as he identified that racism as precisely the reason why free black persons would probably not "make it." As twentieth-century persons still struggling with racism we might do well to note that Fisk dealt more seriously than did abolitionists such as Sunderland and Scott with the prospects of freed slaves for living happy, dignified and prosperous lives after their emancipation (Sunderland and Scott never acknowledged that emancipation would not do away with racism).

Colonizationists such as Fisk might also be criticized for not having recognized that they were in league with a large number of slaveholders

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who joined colonization societies not for the purpose of supporting colonization for its own sake, but rather for the purpose of deterring the onrushing abolitionist movement from achieving its goal of legislating slavery out of existence. Furthermore, colonization as Fisk understood it was never tried on a large scale, and it failed miserably in its quest to free slaves from bondage. Still it is difficult to brand Fisk as an immoral person, for there is strong evidence that he hated slavery and genuinely believed that colonization would ultimately lead to the abolition of slavery. Perhaps it is fair, at least from our twentieth century vantage point, to say then, that Fisk did not hate slavery quite enough.

It is intriguing to note that colonization was not a phenomenon unique to the thinking of ante-bellum white Americans. Several black leaders of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries advocated African colonization as a means of freeing black Americans from the evils of discrimination and prejudice experienced in this country long after the abolition of slavery. Marcus Garvey, the most famous of these proponents of colonization, had his greatest influence on black Americans of the early 1920s. Many people have questioned whether or not Garvey could ever have accomplished the colonizing that he envisioned, but few have questioned whether or not his vision was moral.

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One additional question might well be asked: to what extent are moral judgments concerning the colonizationist position transferable to positions held by people with respect to other social and political issues? For example, in his struggle on behalf of temperance reform, Fisk came to believe that it was morally wrong to approve of anything less than total abstinence with respect to the consumption of alcoholic beverages because of the evil to which such consumption led. Was Fisk’s “total abstinence” position consistent with his refusal to adopt the comparably extreme position of abolitionism with respect to the evil of slavery? If not, does that inconsistency necessarily make one or the other of Fisk’s positions morally wrong?

We might also ask the question of ourselves. If we condemn Fisk for not advocating and not working on behalf of abolitionism with respect to the slavery issue, are we saying that only comparably extreme positions, with respect to other issues, are morally right? Must we, for example, advocate unilateral disarmament of our nation in the realm of nuclear weapons if we judge said weapons to be contrary to the teachings of the Gospel? Or must we hold fast to a thoroughgoing pacifism if we believe that violence, war, and killing are evil? It is not far-fetched to compare these extreme positions—which Fisk would call examples of
“ultraism”\textsuperscript{38}—to that of abolitionism. Perhaps we need to examine how difficult it is for us to arrive at moral decisions related to the pressing social and political issues of our day before we quickly condemn those of other historical eras for the moral decisions they made in the face of the pressing concerns of their own time. We \textit{must} make judgments about the morality of actions taken by our foreparents, but we should do so cautiously.

My life and research into the life and works of Willbur Fisk has allowed me to become acquainted with a distinguished, respected, and intelligent leader who was continually striving to live out his faith without running away from the turmoil of early nineteenth century social and political problems. In doing the research on Fisk’s pro-colonization position I encountered the same man of integrity I had found before, though I found myself saddened by his unconscious racism and by the controversy which impinged upon his leadership role in New England Methodism in the late 1830s. But I also encountered a man whose pro-colonization thinking provided me with an intriguing glimpse of arguments used in defense of colonization and in opposition to abolitionism by someone who genuinely considered slavery to be an evil. That glimpse alone affords American Methodists an intriguing and important insight concerning a “painful” and seldom-discussed portion of their history.

\textsuperscript{38}In \textit{The Burned-Over District}, Whitney R. Cross describes the manifestations of “ultraism” in reform movements such as temperance reform, abolitionism, moral reform, educational reform, women’s rights movements, peace movements, and perfectionism. Outside of primary source material, Cross’ illustrations provide the most concise and insightful descriptions of the zealous, fervent, and radical actions which nineteenth century persons labelled “ultraism.”