"THE GLORY OF SOUTHERN CHRISTIANITY":
METHODISM AND THE MISSION TO THE SLAVES
HEATHER RACHELLE WHITE

An examination of the history of Methodism and slave religion introduces two disparate starting points, as distant from each other as the Holy Club of Oxford, England and the warmer regions of West Africa. The African slave in the United States approached Christianity, or specifically, Methodism, through a rich cultural tradition and heritage of African religion. The heritage of the dance rituals and spirit possessions of the Yoruba religions, along with the uprooting and distorting of those traditions by the exploitation of slavery, was the context into which African slaves appropriated Methodism as their own. Yet, the history of Methodism and slavery is also the story of John Wesley, Francis Asbury, Thomas Coke, and the Christmas Conference. Methodism was founded in the soil of the English colonies by participants in the politics and society that created and sustained the peculiar institution itself. The story of these intermingled histories is a history of paradox, irony, and duality. This paper explores these tensions in the antebellum-era developments in the Methodist Episcopal Church's stance toward slavery as an institution and its relationship with the slave peoples as converts and congregation members in its midst.

The first encounter of the disparate beginnings of African Methodism occurred at least as far back as 1737, when John Wesley recorded giving spiritual advice to African slaves in South Carolina. Some years later, he recorded another encounter in his diary, "I rode to Wandsworth and baptized two Negroes belonging to Mr. Gilbert, a gentleman lately from Antigua. One of these was deeply convinced of sin; the other is rejoicing in God her Savior, and is the first African Christian I have known. But shall not God in his own time, have these heathens for His own inheritance?" These first encounters are significant because they demonstrate Wesley's openness to the inclusion of black people in the Methodist movement. Not only did Wesley believe in including Africans, he also staunchly opposed the African slave trade, forming the "Society for the Suppression of the Slave Trade."

He surpassed many religious leaders of his day in his bold denunciation of the evil of human bondage. Wesley’s convictions were undoubtedly instrumental in forming early Methodism’s antislavery stance in the Americas. Although Wesley never formulated a conclusive plan to end slavery, he decisively supplied early Methodists with both the antislavery principle and moral activism to put it into effect.

The early conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church reflect Wesley’s antislavery commitment. In 1780 a conference of 17 Methodist preachers at Baltimore took up the question of slavery and declared that, “slavery is contrary to the laws of God, man, and nature—hurtful to society; contrary to the dictates of conscience and pure religion, and doing that which we would not others should do to us and ours.” Regarding those Methodists who owned slaves, the conference decided, “they shall be expelled, and permitted to sell on no consideration.” In response to the question of “local preachers who will not emancipate their slaves,” the conference decided: “try those in Virginia another year, and suspend the preachers in Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania and New Jersey.” Again, in 1784, the Methodists took an anti-slavery stand at the Christmas Conference, where they determined to “extirpate this abomination from among us,” and gave members twelve months to comply or withdraw from the church. Early American Methodism made a strong anti-slavery stand, and publicly required its leaders and members to do the same.

Early Methodism not only officially stood against slavery, but also many of its leaders, like Wesley, welcomed the inclusion of African descendants in the Methodist revivals of the Great Awakenings. The great awakening was a “dawning of the new day” in the history of slaves in Christianity. En masse conversions of African slaves and free-people to Christianity began during this era, and Methodism was a denomination at the forefront of the revivalist enterprise. George Whitefield, perhaps the most well-known evangelist and early contributor to American Methodism, recalled the events of a revival in Philadelphia where, “Nearly fifty Negroes came to my lodgings, to give thanks for what God had done for their souls. How heartily did those poor creatures throw their mites for my poor orphans. Some of them have been effectually wrought upon, and in an uncommon manner.” Blacks

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3Baldwin, 14–15.
5Weatherford, 86.
6Weatherford, 86.
9Raboteau, 128; Grant S. Shockley, “Methodism, Society and Black Evangelism in America; Retrospect and Prospect,” *Methodist History*, 12, no. 4 (July 1974), 152.
Methodist History

were an important part of the revivalism that was a part of the first stirrings of Methodism on the new continent. Francis Asbury recorded, after preaching in John Street church in 1771, "to see the poor Negroes so affected is pleasing, to see their sable countenances in our solemn assemblies, and to hear them sing with cheerful melody their dear Redeemer's praise, affected me much, and made me ready to say, 'Of a truth, I perceive God is no respecter of persons.'" Some preachers found black participants more responsive to the revival message than the whites in the congregation. Itinerant William Spencer noted his joy in preaching to a congregation that was "engaged," but felt troubled when he preached to "formalists" or "half-hearted Christians." He went so far as to compare the "engaged" and the "half-hearted" in racial terms, with a favorable, though condescending, appreciation for black people's participation: "In general the dear black people that profess religion are much more engaged than whites." Some preachers used black responsiveness to ignite an unresponsive crowd. Blacks could, and often did, take the initiative in evangelical meetings—often at a preacher's behest.

Africans also directly influenced revival congregations by preaching to them. Black leaders, both slave and free were enlisted to preach in the Methodist revivals. "Harry Hoosier" or "Black Harry," a well-known preacher to both white and black congregations, often accompanied Francis Asbury. Hoosier was born a slave in North Carolina around 1750, and gained his freedom at a young age. He converted to Methodism under the preaching of Francis Asbury and later assisted Asbury as a traveling companion. Contemporaries described Hoosier as "a small, very black, powerful, keen-eyed man possessing great volubility of tongue," and Thomas Coke referred to him as "one of the best preachers in the world." Other prominent black Methodist preachers included Richard Allen, later founder of the A.M.E. church, Henry Evans, who organized a Methodist Church in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and John Steward, a later missionary to the Wyandott Indians in Ohio. Jarena Lee, for a while a member of Richard Allen's church, was a passionate revivalist who challenged both race and gender barriers of her day. These preachers were influential as leaders and spokespeople for the Methodist Episcopal Church, as well as gaining a voice that shaped the spiritual destiny of their people. Many of these leaders acted

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10Shockley, 153.
12Morgan, 429.
13Raboteau, 134; Baldwin, 24.
to confront white racism and to forward racial pride and African consciousness among their people.15

Methodism grew by leaps and bounds during the revivalism of the first and second Great Awakenings, and the number of black members grew just as rapidly. In 1786, the first year in which Methodists distinguished white and black members in their records, there were 1,890 black members out of a total membership of 18,791. By 1790, the number of black Methodists had increased to 11,682 and in 1797 the black membership stood at 12,215, or almost one-fourth of the total Methodist membership. The increase of black conversions was due partly to the individualist emphasis of revivalism, and its concentration on inward conversion Methodist preachers dramatized the message of sin and salvation in a way that enabled the hearers to feel sin's weight, to fear the threats of hell, emotionally pleading with them to accept Christ as their Savior. This plain doctrine and strong sentiment made the message accessible to uneducated slaves. Evangelicals were also ready to preach to mixed congregations and had no doubt that the slaves were capable of sharing in conversion.16 Historian Albert Raboteau also argues that Christian revivalism was attractive to African slaves because it offered an analogue to the practices of spirit possession in African religion. The rhythmic drumming, repetitive singing, and constant dancing that were characteristic of ritual ceremonies of Africa were replicated by slaves in their participation in the revivals. Some evangelicals praised slave sensitivity and receptivity to the spirit of the gospel; other anti-revivalist preachers decried the "Africanization" of Christianity. Regardless of their attitude, the expression of African traditional religion through the forms of revivalist Christianity is evident in one minister's account:

In the blacks' quarter, the colored people get together, and sing for hours together, short scraps of disjointed affirmations, pledges, or prayers, lengthened out with long repetitious choruses.... With every word so sung, they have a sinking of one or other leg of the body alternately, producing an audible sound of the feet at every step, and as manifest as the steps of actual negro dancing.... If some, in the meantime sit, they strike the sounds alternately on each thigh... the evil is only occasionally condemned and the example has already visibly affected the religious manners of some whites.17

The ecstatic behavior of black people and its adoption by white participants became a notable characteristic of many revivals. Revival leaders and congregations appropriated the dance rhythms of African religions within the evangelistic fervor, allowing African descendants to continue traditional practices within a context of new meaning.

In the American revivals, white and black participants shared in a glimmer of racial equality, though even that spark was partial and short lived.

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15Baldwin, 24–25.
16Raboteau, 131–133.
Even in these mixed race congregations, blacks could be turned out of a crowded evangelical meeting to make room for whites, and over time, blacks and whites tended to meet separately.18 Joseph Pilmore was one of the first Methodist missionaries to note and practice racial discrimination in the treatment of black revival-goers. He recorded in his journal in 1770 that he "formed a separate class for Negroes," and again in 1772, he observed racial discrimination in a Sunday evening outdoor service in Norfolk, Virginia: "As the ground was wet they persuaded me to try to preach with appointed men to stand at the doors to keep all the Negroes out till the white persons were got in."19 Even early Methodist revivalism was flawed by the presence of racial inequality. This duality in attitude and action toward blacks Methodists would increase over time, as whites made their accommodations with slavery, and reversed or markedly diluted their antislavery stance in both church practice and church policy.

This decline from an early anti-slavery stance to a place of accommodation and compromise is nowhere more evident than in the evolution of Methodism's official policies. Though early American Methodism proclaimed an official antislavery stance, the rapid growth of Methodism in the American South brought increased resistance to these ideals. Less than a year after the anti-slavery declarations of the Christmas Conference, the Baltimore Conference suspended the rules against slavery. Coke stated, "We thought it prudent to suspend the minutes concerning slavery, on account of the great opposition that has been given it. . . ." The conference had to admit failure because of the resistance in the southern states.20 The anti-slavery statement of 1800 evidenced a more cautious approach. In confronting the question of "the extirpation of the crying evil of African slavery," the 1801 Discipline encouraged Methodist leaders, "to be exceedingly cautious what persons they admit to official stations, to require such security of those who hold slaves, for the emancipation of them immediately or gradually. . . ." Rather than requiring signed emancipation letters from slave-owners, the Discipline read, "No slave-holder shall be received into society, till the preacher who has oversight of the Circuit, has spoken to him freely and faithfully upon the subject of slavery."21

However, even this mitigated opposition to slavery provoked opposition from the growing number of southerners within the Methodist Episcopal Church. Anti-slavery statements angered Methodist plantation owners and instilled in them the fear that Methodist preachers offered dangerous instability to their slaves. In an address to the General Conference of 1800,

18Morgan, 434.
20Raboteau, Slave Religion, 144.
21Weatherford, 89.
one member greatly provoked the slaveholders of the South, and confirmed
to them that all itinerant Methodist preachers were abolition emissaries and
promoters of insurrection and rebellion:

We have long lamented the great national evil of negroe slavery which has
existed for so many years, and does exist in many of these United States.... the
whole spirit of the New Testament militates in the strongest manner against the
practice of slavery, and the influence of the gospel wherever it has long prevailed
(except in many of these United States) has utterly abolished that most criminal
part of slavery, the possessing and using the bodies of men by the arbitrary will,
and with almost uncontrollable power. 22

Such statements drew bitter reaction from southern Methodists, which grad­
ually led the Methodist Episcopal Church away from their early stance of
opposition. After 1800 Methodism’s official stance on slavery took the road
of evasion and compromise. 23

One reason for Methodism’s relaxation of its anti-slavery stance was not
only southerners’ suspicion of Methodism’s anti-slavery position, but also
slave-owners’ hostility to Methodist itinerants as abolitionist radicals. In
response to the perceived threat of “abolitionist radicals,” many southern
states legislated laws which forbade blacks to assemble, even with whites
present, “for the purpose of mental instruction or religious worship.” 24 These
codes increased the difficulty of missionaries obtaining access to the slaves
for religious purposes. Methodist leaders struggled with the realization that
Methodism’s anti-slavery stance prevented them from developing any pro­
gram for the amelioration of the conditions of the slave, especially the
development of slaves’ spiritual life, while slavery still existed. Francis
Asbury voiced his struggle with this recognition that gaining access to the
slaves was more difficult because of Methodists’ attacks upon slavery. He
lamented,

We are defrauded of great numbers by the pains that are taken to keep the blacks
from us. Their masters are afraid of the influence of our principles. Would not an
amelioration in the condition and treatment of slaves have produced more practi­
cal good to the poor Africans, then any attempt at their emancipation? The state of
society, unhappily does not permit this: Besides, the blacks are deprived of the
means of instruction; who will take the pains to lead them into the ways of salva­
tion and watch over them that they may not stray, but the Methodists? Well; the
masters will not let them come to hear us. 25

Asbury, Coke, and others soon concluded that reaching the slaves through
missions was easier when the emphasis was placed on conversion and per-

M. E. Church, South, 1893), 145.
23In the 1820’s, abolitionism arose again within some members of the M. E. Church, inciting
conflicts leading to the general conference split into North and South in 1844. Baldwin, 21.
sonal salvation instead of human equality and freedom. Thus, in time they softened their opposition to slavery and ceased to attack it with the same vigor. They approached the preaching of the gospel to the slaves by emphasizing the positive results of the slaves' conversion. Methodists defended their involvement with the slaves by arguing that conversion would improve the slaves' morality and thus improve slavery; that the Christian gospel could make better people and thus, better slaves.

The Methodist Episcopal Church answered the conflict brought by ministering to American slaves by eschewing an involvement with the institution of slavery and adopting a restricted concern for the spiritual welfare of the slave. Thus, by 1808, the way was paved, in both practice and theology, for the Methodist "Plantation Mission." The conference of 1808 made official missionary appointments. Asbury recorded these in his journal, "We appointed three missionaries—one for Tombigbee [M. P. Sturdevant], one to Ashley and Savannah, and the country between [James H. Mellard], and one to labor between Santee and Cooper Rivers [James E. Glenn]." In 1824, the General Conference made provisions which made it the duty of the preachers to impress upon Christian slave-holders their responsibility to teach their slaves to read the Bible and to allow them to attend public worship. The emphasis was on the duty of the slave owner to meet his responsibility to God for the slave. American Methodism had shifted its concern from the injustice of slavery to the personal spirituality and behavior of the slave, thus opening the doors to a theology that accommodated slavery and increased Methodism's vested interest in slavery as the number of slave and slave-owner converts increased.

The outreach of the plantation missions grew again in 1828, when Charles Baring, the owner of a large rice plantation on Combahee River, invited Methodist preachers Moore and Samuel W. Capers to preach to his slaves. Baring was so pleased with the results that he joined with plantation owner Col. Lewis Morris in making a request to the South Carolina Conference for missionaries to be sent to their plantations. At the same time, Hon. Charles C. Pinckney requested that William Capers, the South Carolina Superintendent of Missions, also send missionaries to his plantation on the Santee River. Capers complied with these requests, and in the following year, three appointments were made: John Honour was sent to the plantations south of Ashley River, John H. Massey was sent to Santee River, and James Dannelly was sent to the regions of Savannah and Broad Rivers. Their work proved successful in gaining converts. According to the report of

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26Baldwin, 21.
29Matthews, 517.
the Missionary Society in January 1832, after the first year these missions had gathered 657 church members; after the second year, they gained 1,077, the third year they had reached 1,235.30

While the missions work prospered numerically, contemporary Methodists also commented on the rigorous and dangerous call it was for the missionary. John Honour, missionary to the plantations near Ashley River, survived less than a year in the swamps. His grandson remembers in a letter, "In this cause [of mission work] he successfully labored until the fall of 1829, when he contracted malarial fever, on the Combahee, of which he died September 19, 1829."31 Missionaries, like John Honour, were portrayed as martyrs by the Methodist Episcopal Church for withstanding the serious health hazard of the swamp-like climate of the rice plantations. In 1840–41 the Missionary Society reported:

Our missionaries are still laboring on in the service of the slaves upon the rice fields, sugar, and cotton plantations. ... In no portion of our world ... called to endure greater privations, or make greater sacrifices of health and life, than in these missions among the slaves. ... And yet, notwithstanding so may valuable missionaries have fallen martyrs to their toils.32

One Methodist article about the swamp missions lamented the danger of the missions, because the “swamp plantations are so unhealthy for whites. ...” The author commended the “devotion, faith, and zeal” of the missionaries required to go into such work “ready, not to be bound only, but also to die. ...”33 The role of the missionary was romanticized as “noble, disinterested work,” which “our brethren in the south have managed this delicate and difficult matter to great advantage, so that hundreds and thousands of those who sat in darkness have seen great light, and have experienced the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.”34 The focus of the mission on slaves’ spiritual welfare and the myopia of racism allowed Methodists to proclaim missionaries’ physical hardships as evidence of their devotion, while ignoring the involuntary suffering the plantation slaves.

Still, plantation missionaries had extensive responsibilities. One missionary wrote in a letter about his circuit that the mission, “embraces 11 plantations, which are visited every week—200 children divided into 11 classes, which I instruct orally. By the aid of brothers Davis and Quentock Divine service is held on from 4 to 6 plantations every Sunday. We have 310 members that continue to evince their desire of salvation. ...”35 Another missionary told of the duties of his mission: visiting each plantation, cate-

30Schipp, 450; Shockley, 158.
31Harrison, 156.
32Barclay, 271.
33“The Swamp Missionaries” Christian Advocate and Journal 8, no. 5 (27 September 1833), 19.
34“The Swamp Missionaries,” 19.
chizing the children, teaching classes, praying with the old and sick. He wrote, "I have lectured or preached every night, and three or four times each Sabbath, beginning at sunrise."36 The official records of the 1832 Georgia Conference established as the responsibilities of the missionaries to "consider them [the slaves] his special charge . . . to carefully instruct them in the doctrines of Christianity and bring them under the discipline of the church . . . ."37 The success of the mission was proclaimed by its numbers of converts, "in 1833 two additional missions stations were established; in 1834, they numbered 5; in 1835, eight; in 1836, nine; in 1837, ten; and ten years afterwards, viz., in 1847, there were seventeen missions, served by twenty-five efficient preachers of the Conference."38

This work by the missionaries was also marked as successful in the eyes of many slaveholders. Regarding the cooperation of the plantation owners in a letter written by missionary Samuel J. Bryan in May 4, 1835 regarding the mission in the swamp of the Savannah River:

In 1833, when I was appointed to this mission, I found but three persons disposed to open the way of the missionary to their slaves. Through that year our object and plan became better known, and in December forty-four planters desired their slaves should be taken into the mission. The conference of 1834 appointed two other missionaries to this important work. The planters built several churches, asked for two additional missionaries, and contributed over $800 to the missionary society. At this time I am authorized to say, if two or three missionaries can be obtained, the planters will provide for their support . . . .39

Another article in the Christian Advocate and Journal favorably reported the planter’s cooperation with the missionaries, "The missionaries . . . generally find ready access to the plantations, with privilege, and often aid, in the religious instruction of the negroes and their children. . . . Many of the planters are satisfied with the good effects of the Gospel among them, and often facilitate the missionaries’ work."40 Slaveholders, at first suspicious and resistant to the missionaries, now believed their work to coincide with the work of the plantation. The Missionary Society reported that several wealthy South Carolina planters "had become so impressed with the duty of furnishing their slaves with Christian instruction" as not only to ask for a missionary but also to pledge full support of the mission."41 Planters’ favorable impression of the missions was not necessarily the rule. Though many planters had favorable attitude, the work of the missionaries was still hedged by many restrictions. In some states, legal restrictions went so far as to prohibit the assembling of black peoples; some communities required a white

36Barclay, 270.
37Barclay, 270.
38William M. Wightman, 197.
39Bryan, 158.
41Barclay, 270.
man to be present in order for a slave to preach. With the exception of Sunday, many slaves were not free to attend any religious services during the day, and almost universally, instruction was not permitted beyond the roughest rudiments of reading and writing, and even this was generally discouraged. These restrictions placed severe limitations upon the labors of the missionaries, and in some instances, the general protest was so strong that the missions were discontinued. At the 1838 South Carolina Conference T. D. Turpin was appointed to the Cambridge and Flat Woods Mission. Within a few months a remonstrance was sent to the missionary, signed by 353 persons, protesting against the mission. Mr. Turpin relinquished his appointment. The document asserted that the “mental improvement and religious instruction” of slaves was incompatible with slavery.

Verbal instruction will increase the desire of the black population to learn. We know of upwards of a dozen negroes in the neighborhood of Cambridge who can now read, some of whom are members of your societies at Mount Lebanon and New-Salem. Of course when they see themselves encouraged, they will supply themselves with Bibles, hymn books, and Catechisms! Open the missionary sluice, and the current will swell in its gradual onward advance. We thus expect that a progressive system of improvement will be introduced, or will follow from the nature and force of circumstances, and, if not checked, (though they may be shrouded in sophistry and disguise), will ultimately revolutionize our civil institutions . . . Intelligence and slavery have no affinity with each other.

Thus, the mission, even though gaining support of the planters, was not without opposition. Even a Christian message taught in partnership with the slave system was perceived by some to contain dangerous liberationist forces from which the slaves must be shielded.

These suspicious slave-owners were not the only ones who charged that Christianity was incompatible with slavery. Christian abolitionists, though they fought against a different evil, also held that Christianity and slavery had no affinity with each other. Abolitionists argued that slavery denied the slaves access to God’s word, and that the word they were taught was a “mutilated gospel” and “an instrument of bondage and degradation.”

In answer to both ends of opposition to the mission to the slaves, Christian slave-owners responded that Christianity functioned to improve the life of the slave, and that slavery allowed the slave access to Christianity. Defenders of the slave mission believed these two institutions, Christianity and slavery, to be mutually compatible.

Apologists of the slave mission argued that the mission did have a benefit for the slaves, for it provided a pastor who was concerned for the slaves, and passed on a message of hope and consolation. The conversion of slaves

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42 Barclay, 270.
43 Barclay, 271 and footnote.
44 Matthews, 529.
Methodism was cited as substance of the claim that the mission was the best and most moral way to help the African slaves. Other defenders pointed out that although Methodism was blatantly subservient to the slave system, the reality was that without the master’s support, the preachers were powerless to do anything. Consequently, the mission enterprise stood in the paradoxical position of claiming to benefit the slave with a Christian life, a more stabilized relationship with the white master, and Christian moral concern, while at the same time standing within the institution that denied those slaves their freedom.

The conflicts within this defense are evident on one southerner’s defense of the slave mission. He described the condition of the slaves, “the most ignorant and degraded portion of the realm of Paganism; enslaved, many of them, in their father-land; victims of debasing superstitions,” and he asked, “what recuperative element was there to be found in their condition?” His answer for their “wretched” condition of enslavement and superstition, was that the hope of the slave was “the inscrutable providence of God . . . [who] allowed an exodus of hundreds of thousands of Africa’s children to the shores of this country, where, under the mild form of servitude known in the Southern States, they . . . [are] environed with the light and saving influences of Christian civilization.” It was the divine responsibility of the slave master to concede in his slaves a “moral capability” and an “immortal destiny” and to provide for them the gospel, “the precious boon of the bond as well as the free.” This southern apologist positively assessed slavery as a means by which African peoples were civilized and converted, and he charged slave-owners with slaves’ spiritual welfare. In response to abolitionists’ accusations of the slave mission’s “mutilated gospel,” Methodist slave-holders touted the evangelical zeal of their missionaries and the efforts of the plantation missions as the South’s conscientious alternative to anti-slavery action.

In answer those who opposed Christian instruction of the slaves as a threat to the South’s civil institutions, apologists of the mission found many ways in which Christianity functioned for the betterment of the master as well as of the slave. The slave owner had many ways in which the “Christianization” of his slaves could work for his own self-interest. Many owners believed Asbury’s defense of using Christianity as a means of training and pacification, of making “better slaves,” and used the mission as a mechanism for social control. The regular content of the missionary’s preaching was obedience to the master. In 1837, the South Carolina Conference reported the function of the slave mission that, “the negroes were pointed

Matthews, 522, 511.
Wightman, 293.
Wightman, 293.
Wightman, 294.
Matthews, 511.
The Glory of Southern Christianity

from earliest infancy to a MASTER in heaven, whose eyes see in darkness as in light." Bishop Capers’ biographer, boasted that “our missionaries inculcate the duties of servants to the masters, as we find those duties stated in the Scriptures . . . . We hold that a Christian slave must be submissive, faithful, and obedient . . . .” He reported to his satisfaction that the missionaries were successful in these measures, “the testimony of masters and missionaries goes to show that a wholesome effect has been produced upon the character of the negro population generally. A change for the better is visible everywhere.”

Thus, the Plantation mission, apart from its stated intentions to work for the spiritual care of the souls of black slaves, worked both practically and ideologically for the interests of the slave-owners. It functioned as a means of social pacification of the slaves and of assuaging slave-owners’ fears against defiance and insurrection. The mission also served the slave-holder as a response to the moral accusation of northern abolitionists by providing the slave-owner with ideological grounds for security and moral superiority for providing moral service and spiritual support to the slaves.

Yet, even as Methodist slave owners used Christianity for their own interests, Christianity functioned subversively. Christianity’s emphasis on the slave’s humanity subtly eroded the legal conception of the slave as property. Albert Raboteau argues that keeping the egalitarian tendencies of Christian instruction safely within the boundaries of slave management was an impossible task: “labor as they might, the missionaries could not yoke together the goals of slave instruction and slave control into a stable and permanent union.” Slave owners were at least partially right in their fears that Christianity, put into the hands of the slaves, would ultimately undermine their civil institutions.

It may be that slave owners made the first link between Christianity and liberation from slavery when they emphasized the contextual nature of scripture, that the Biblical text spoke to and interpreted the situation of the slave. The contextual message of scripture in the perspective of white masters was “slaves, be obedient to your masters;” the contextual message according to the experience and perspective of the slave was “Pharaoh, let my people go!” Slaves’ heritage of African religion and world view, and their experience of the hardships of bondage and oppression lent them a unique lens from which to hear and interpret the gospel message of the Christian church. This led to the creation of separate religious entities within slave communities which served as avenues of resistance, as expressions

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Matthews, 521.
Wightman, 196.
Wightman, 301.
Raboteau, Slave Religion, 171.
of a communal religious life that countered and critiqued the racism and hypocrisy of Methodism as "white man's religion." These entities of resistance took shape within "the invisible institution" of slave religions and the visible institution of the black Methodist churches. Raboteau, in *Slave Religion*, researches and recreates the ways which slaves transformed the officially sanctioned form of Christianity in their meetings in the brush arbors and hush harbors late at night. Here, slaves met and practiced a particular form of religious expression that fitted Christianity to the experience of the slave community. The result was "the invisible institution" of slave religion, a rich religious life that was never fully incorporated by the white church. The source for slave religion was Christianity redefined and reshaped by the slave. Thus, it may be argued that it was not whites who gave Christianity to the slave, but slaves who gave Christianity to the whites. In slave religion, African descendants took a biblical faith and rejected the racist distortions of white society and culture. They fashioned a new expression of Christianity that valued personhood more than materialism, a faith that later found its chief expression in the black institutional church.

The Methodist Episcopal Church's mission to the slaves was an endeavor of paradox and contradiction. At its inception, the mission to the slave was grounded in a history of anti-slavery zeal, a conviction which effectively barred its preachers from their proposed converts. To continue the mission, Methodist missionaries taught Christian catechesis and ritual form rather than the liberating heart of the gospel. They substituted charity on behalf of the slave for justice for the slave. Though the mission was an effort founded upon a belief in the humanity and rationality of its participants, it cooperated with slaveholders to secure the continuance of an inhumane system of human bondage. Yet even the "mutilated gospel" of the slave-owner was appropriated and transformed within the life of the "invisible institution" of slave religion, an institution that would live to confront and challenge the hypocrisies of white Christianity. In this paradox, hypocrisy, and contradiction, Methodism stands within a history of benevolent intention, scathing injustice, and courageous resistance. Here is where history lives with us, where today's Methodism must come to accept fully the challenge and hope in the heritage of its relationship with the African Americans in its midst.

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57 Baldwin, 11.
Bibliography


REGISTER OF HISTORIC SITES

Arranged By States

(as of August 1, 2000)

Historic sites are established by the vote of an Annual, Central, or Jurisdictional Conference in session. The numbers below indicate the order of registration with the General Commission on Archives and History. The Commission issues a numbered plaque for installation at the specific site.

Names in boldface indicate sites that are now Heritage Landmarks by General Conference action. Those places listed without a number are Heritage Landmarks that were so designated before the inauguration of the Historic Site program.

ALABAMA
110 McIntosh UM Church, McIntosh, AL
114 Place where Ebenezer Hearn began his ministry, Blountsville, AL
115 Tuscaloosa First UM Church, Tuscaloosa, AL
116 Huntsville First UM Church, Huntsville, AL
117 Corn House Camp Grounds, near Wedowee, AL
118 Ford's Chapel UM Church, near Huntsville, AL
120 Montevallo UM Church, Montevallo, AL
131 Asbury Manual Labor School and Mission, Fort Mitchell, AL
153 First UM Church, Gadsden, AL
156 First UM Church, St. Stephens, AL

ALASKA
350 Jesse Lee Home, Unalaska, AK
368 First UM Church, Ketchikan, AK

ARIZONA
261 Community UM Church, Williams, AZ
279 Greenwood Memory Lawn Cemetery grave sites, Phoenix, AZ
319 First UM Church, Tucson, AZ
329 First UM Church, Prescott, AZ
330 Central UM Church, Phoenix, AZ

ARKANSAS
231 Washington UM Church, Washington, AR
247 Soulesbury Institute, Batesville, AR
289 Mt. Zion ME Church, South, Vanndale, AR
322 Old Philadelphia Church, Melbourne, AR
333 Quitman College, Quitman, AR
334 Eli Lindsey Church, Strawberry, AR
370 Salem Spring, Washington County, AR
373 Camp Aldersgate, Little Rock, AR

CALIFORNIA
13 Grave of Isaac Owen, Santa Clara, CA
14 Site of First Methodist Church, Coloma, CA