

“TILL CHARITY WEPT”: 1844 REVISITED

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The four years [1844-1848] had been without precedent for stormy discussion and the spirit of revolution. During the whole period the Methodist papers, North and South, had been engaged in fierce controversies whose tendency was only to inflame and alienate. On the border, as it was termed, the war of passion raged till charity wept, and what had been a united, prosperous Church, now presented the appearance of two hostile armies.¹

“And now abideth faith, hope, and charity, these three, but the greatest of these is charity” [1 Cor. 13:13]. Charity was understood as Christian love, agape love, the kind that is patient and kind, not jealous or boastful, not arrogant or rude, that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, the kind that John Wesley pointed to as Christian perfection, the kind that Charles Wesley hailed as “love divine, all loves excelling.” The Wesleys believed, with Jesus (e.g. John 15:9-12), that it was the supreme hallmark of Christians. George Peck’s comments in the quotation above, referred to the division of American Methodism in 1844, which the South believed was a familial separation and which the North soon (but not initially) came to see as a secession. It began in anguish and mutual pledges of affection and respect, but ended in recrimination and bitterness lasting several generations. The children’s teeth were indeed set on edge by the sour grapes of 1844-1848. There were on both sides of the Ohio arrant suspicions, wrong-headed willingness to think the worst, arrogant self-righteousness, demonization of erstwhile brothers—the opposite of love, nothing at all befitting of the Church of Jesus Christ. Though there were traces of wisdom, occasional nobility, and abundant courage, there was not much “charity.” It was not Methodism’s finest hour.

Most students of American Methodist history are fully conversant with the basics of the events of 1844. That year, the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) met in Greene Street Church in New York on May 1, little suspecting that they would be there for six weeks, little suspecting the unprecedented drama that awaited them, little suspecting that they would emerge not as one church, but two. The North-South separation of the church was probably inevitable; it is the manner by which the deed was done that is so regrettable. This paper asks the question, “what happened to make the friendly separation turn so rancorous?” In 1845, as expected, the

¹ George Peck, *Life and Times of Rev. George Peck, D.D.* (New York: Nelson and Phillips, 1874), 319.

Southern annual conferences formed the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS). In 1848, as not expected (in 1844), the Northern general conference repudiated the action of 1844 and coldly rejected an MECS overture of friendly relations. And then things really got nasty. It ended up in the U.S. Supreme Court. But why?

Methodology

Those who contributed to this mess, however worthy in other contexts and times, are not blameless, but it may not be profitable to look for villains, since everybody was in some degree guilty of self-righteousness and arrogance. Much of the hatefulness was propagated in the press (especially the *New York Christian Advocate*, the Cincinnati *Western Christian Advocate*, and the *Nashville Christian Advocate*), so the editors (Thomas Bond, Charles Elliott, and John B. McFerrin, respectively) of the leading journals are as blameworthy as anyone. In the context of the nation, the bitterness was understandable, perhaps, but this was the church—Methodist preachers making covenant with other Methodist preachers and then, depending on how you looked at it, going back on their pledged words, or changing their minds, or being replaced by less conciliatory men, or following their consciences, or simply being consistent. If there is a lesson to all this, it is that words *do* hurt, that language translates into *action*, that intemperate denunciations (however satisfying at the moment) trigger *responses*. “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will . . . lead to further words and then to sticks and stones.” Demonization exacerbates rather than resolves. Verbal assault invites physical assault. Absolutist diatribes may result in wars. A decade and a half later, the same kind of vicious rhetoric did precisely that.

As another matter, we may leave out of the equation the degree to which we are incensed by the concept and practice of slavery. It is clear from almost any perspective that the North held the moral high ground on this issue, but it is worth remembering that a Biblical case can be (and was) made for slavery. No slaves were present at New York, nor did they help choose the delegates. What matters for this particular paper is not slavery per se, nor what *we* think, but what role it had in New York as seen by what *they* (the delegates and, later, their constituents) thought about it. The historian’s task is first of all to *understand* the milieu. We cannot entirely escape our bent to judgment, perhaps, but we ought not to embrace it either. We need to consider the events of 1844-1848 in terms first of all of understanding. Why did they do as they did?

Perhaps one can critique the morality of another era by asserting that morality is eternal and we now have it nailed down, that human perceptions have evolved to the point that the moral sensibilities of our time are superior. But in a highly influential book called *The Whig Interpretation of History*,² the English historian Herbert Butterfield argued that historians make a mis-

² Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1931).

take if they interpret humankind's journey as a matter of progress, that is, that succeeding generations are better than those of the past.

An extension of the "Whig interpretation" has been denounced more recently by David Hackett Fischer, one of today's best historians. Fischer criticized what he called "presentism," the habit of judging all others on the basis of present-day's values.³ The church would like think it speaks from absolute, unchanging, and eternal values, but the church is a human as well as a divine institution.

As a thought experiment, we could posit some future time when abortion and homosexuality (or sexual promiscuity—see Huxley's *Brave New World*) are affirmed as not only acceptable but even good. What would people in such a context think of us? Would they be right? In such a situation, we would want to be judged by the standards of our own time. As religious people, we would hope to transcend all temporal and ephemeral standards and speak prophetically (that is, on behalf of God). As reasonable people, we know that we are enmeshed in the finite human understandings of our own time. Looking back, then, at the crisis that erupted in New York, we must first judge those issues by the standards of 1844 before we can judge them by twenty-first century guidelines, accepting even then that we do not stand on absolutely stable ground.

In sum, there is a temptation to fix blame for the division of 1844, and the writer is obviously not immune to that temptation. Again, the real question to be addressed is this—*why* did Northern opinion change so quickly in 1844? At the General Conference of 1844, despite a few rather angry speeches and strong denunciations, the overall tone was civil and brotherly. The principal figures who wrestled with the problem were men of good will who sought to find an acceptable solution to a dilemma that was intractable and unsolvable, an issue that William Henry Seward a few years later would call "the irrepressible conflict." In anguish, in despair, in mutual frustration, in good faith, the negotiators finally agreed that a division of the church was probably the only acceptable way out and they voted for it in fear and trembling.

Then the situation quickly went sour and turned ugly. One aspect of that latter bitterness was an absolute flood of books, articles, speeches, letters, and other communications through which each side sought to justify its course and spin the narrative to its own purposes. In the process, they vilified, demonized, and denounced their counterparts "till charity wept."

The Historical Context of the 1844 General Conference

On May 1, 1844, the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church officially convened in New York City. It did not adjourn until June 11, one of the longest meetings on record. In that six-week span, other things were happening in the nation, some of which were germane to the confer-

³ David Hackett Fischer, *Historian's Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970).

ence. Several matters had been developing for some years. The overall context of the time was unsettled. An emerging crusading spirit, largely from New England, spawned reform movements right and left—temperance, educational change (Noah Webster, Horace Mann), women’s suffrage, eleemosynary reform (Boston School for the Blind, Dorothea Dix and the prisons, treatment of the insane), and, closely allied with several of the others, abolitionism. Mostly these movements arose in the 1830s and caught fire together in the 1840s, spreading westward across the North but not penetrating the South, except for temperance. In that fateful year of 1844, the abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison publicly burned a copy of the Constitution, calling it a covenant with hell. These movements were usually right and usually self-righteous.

There was a parallel surge of nativism, which would show up in the “Know Nothing” movement of the 1850s. It sought to suppress immigration, the rise of Catholicism, changes in moral standards, and anybody associated with those changes. Among many other things, this meant that while *most* Northerners might support emancipation of Southern slaves, they would *not* welcome a migration of freed blacks to the North. The pragmatic British plan of emancipation, put into effect in the 1830s, worked fairly well and might have served as a model for the U.S. It provided for gradual emancipation over a period of three or four years and for financial compensation to the owners. This practical process worked for the British, but did not fit with the moral absolutism of American abolitionism, and the two cases were sufficiently different (no freedmen moved to Great Britain, for example) that a similar American plan would have required adjustments.

Abolitionism caught hold among the Methodists of New England fairly early. Resolutions in the annual conferences calling for immediate emancipation were routinely suppressed by the presiding bishops during the 1830s. Attempts by New England delegates to raise the issue at the general conferences of 1836 and 1840 met a similar fate. A few frustrated members in New England and New York finally despaired of ever changing anything and left the MEC in 1842. The following year, those fragments coalesced under the leadership of Orange Scott, Luther Lee, and LaRoy Sunderland to form the Wesleyan Methodist Church. This development sent such a shiver of dread through the remaining New England Methodist churches that delegates from the region came to New York determined to do whatever was necessary to save their conferences from further defections. Failing some solution in General Conference action, there was talk among them of leaving the Methodist Episcopal Church and asking Bishop Elijah Hedding to come with them to form an antislavery Episcopal Methodism. Siphoning off the most vigorous dissenters into the Wesleyan Church did not weaken Methodist abolitionism. In 1844, it was even stronger.

But so too was Southern resistance. Three events led the South to a shift in its attitude toward slavery in the decade of the 1830s. The *first* was the emergence of militant abolitionism in New England with Garrison’s *The Liberator* in 1831. This prompted a defensive “equal and opposite reaction” in

the South. The *second* was the Nat Turner uprising in Virginia, also in 1831, in which slaves seized weapons and killed 55 whites. Although the rebellion was brutally suppressed, it put a scare into the South, especially in places like South Carolina, Mississippi, and Louisiana, where the slave population surpassed the white. *Third*, cotton was becoming increasingly profitable, and there was class of small farmers in the South who hoped to gain their share of the profits by having slave plantations of their own some day. They were not interested in solving “the problem” of slavery. Illustrative of the changed circumstances, there was in 1831 a long and full debate on slavery in the Virginia legislature, a discussion which decided little, but which allowed free and civil discourse with all possibilities up for consideration. By 1844, such open conversation was no longer possible in the South—the position had hardened far beyond recall.

This was all very important for the country at large, and political leaders like John C. Calhoun kept close watch on the General Conference proceedings. The Methodist movement, which had no organized congregations in 1760, had grown in the succeeding eight decades to become the largest religious denomination in the U.S., Protestant or Catholic. By 1850, the Roman Catholics were larger, based on a wave of Irish immigration after 1845 and on Germans fleeing the failed “Liberal Revolutions” of 1848. But when the MEC General Conference met in 1844, it represented the largest church membership in the country.

Several specific events in April, May, and June coincided with and impacted the meeting, some more than others. As the conference gathered, the Millerite excitement (Adventism) in upstate New York was subsiding, to the great relief of the delegates from that area. One William Miller had attracted a large following by prophesying that the end of the world would occur sometime between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844. The closing date came and passed without event, whereupon Miller advanced the time to April 18. But nothing happened then either. Miller then projected a fall date, which later became known as “the Great Disappointment,” but the disillusionment among some thousands of believers was already clear and some were straggling back to Methodism’s more orthodox views.

A few years earlier, another religious movement originated in the same area. Sectarianism was so rampant in upper New York State that the region was called “the Burned-Over District” because successive waves of revivalism had converted the inhabitants to first this and then that religion. One such person was Joseph Smith, a sometime Methodist (among other things), who founded a movement called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, or Mormonism, in the 1820s. As the General Conference met, Smith was in jail in Illinois, accused of all sorts of things. He was murdered by a lynch mob before the month of June was out, an event that resulted in the Mormon exodus to Utah a couple of years later.

On May 24, an artist-inventor named Samuel F. B. Morse sent the first telegraph message, a coded series of short and long pulses of electricity. Dispatched over a wire strung from Baltimore to Washington, it asked sim-

ply “what hath God wrought?” Instant long-range communication was born even as the Methodist delegates wrestled with their own internal communication issues.

The Whig Party, excluding the incumbent Whig President John Tyler, met in Baltimore on May 1 and proceeded to nominate Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky for president on a platform that opposed the proposed annexation of Texas. President Tyler had only narrowly escaped death in a couple of weeks earlier when a new type of naval gun exploded during a demonstration, killing two members of his cabinet. The president was below decks at the time, providentially for the country, because there was no vice president. But Tyler, the first man to become U.S. president without being directly elected to the post when W. H. Harrison died a month into his term, was an embarrassment in the eyes of his party and not a candidate for re-election.

The Democratic Party met later in the month, also in Baltimore, and eventually nominated the first ever “dark horse” candidate, former Gov. James K. Polk of Tennessee. Polk, a one-time Speaker of the U.S. House, came to Baltimore to run (he thought) for vice president. Instead, he won the presidential nomination as a compromise candidate, largely because the heavy favorite, former president Martin Van Buren, came out against Texas annexation and alienated his supporters in the South. When the Democrats started using a nominating convention a few years earlier, they put in a “two-thirds rule,” effectively giving the South a veto over an unacceptable nominee. Not a simple majority, but rather a two-to-one margin, was required to make the nomination. The rule came into play again in 1860 and in 1912, affecting the outcome both times. The party did not rescind the rule until the 1930s. In 1844, Polk became the nominee with an expansionist platform.

On the western edge of the country that same month, wagon trains were making their way through Kansas and Nebraska, following the dim path of the one-year-old Oregon Trail. Westering parties did not leave Independence, Missouri until grass was growing and the early spring rains were over, usually April or May. “Oregon fever” was originally stimulated by reports of the glories of the Willamette Valley written by Jason Lee and other Methodist missionaries and published in the *New York Christian Advocate and Journal*. The emigrant trains of 1844 were among the first fruits of that publicity. The nation was genuinely a frontier society that stretched from the shores of the Atlantic to the eastern edge of the Great Plains. The Plains, though owned by the United States, had a population consisting of only a few thousands of Native Americans living as nomadic tribes. The United States had a claim, maybe, to the Pacific Northwest, but nothing you could put on a map and label “U.S.A.” Great Britain claimed the same area and there were Russian and Mexican claims to parts of it. Sure territorial claims ended at the continental divide. The migration would put the territorial ambiguities to an immediate test.

To the southwest, Texas was *de jure* a sovereign nation; *de facto*, it was the western frontier of the American slave empire. Mexico had failed to keep out legal and illegal immigrants from the United States in the 1820s

and 1830s, and those immigrants had made a revolution, gaining a precarious independence. Now, the Republic of Texas wanted to join the union, a plan opposed by many Northerners because it would extend the sweep of slavery and enhance slave state representation in the national legislature. The possible expansion of slavery was very much on the American mind. Methodism, outlawed under Mexican statute until 1836, grew in Texas in the succeeding years. Indeed, it grew so fast that the 1840 general conference created a Texas Annual Conference and the 1844 meeting saw the need to create a second one in the republic—the “Eastern Texas Conference.”

American Baptists faced the issue of slavery at the same time as the Methodists. In 1844, Baptist Southerners asked, as test cases, to have slaveholders appointed as missionaries by the Home Mission Board and by the Foreign Mission Board. When both boards declined to do so, Baptist leaders from the South met in Augusta, Georgia in May, 1845, to form a new association, the Southern Baptist Convention. The Methodist and Baptist church separations, followed later by the Presbyterians, were the first ties between North and South to break, visibly over the issue of slavery but silently over sectionalism, of which slavery was only a part. At New York, a fight over slavery was inevitable, but the deeper issues remained, even without a slaveholding bishop.

The Conference of 1844

The General Conference attracted almost two hundred delegates, all of them men, all of them preachers, from all over the United States and Texas. They came by every kind of conveyance, with heavy reliance on riverboats and coaches, but also by horseback, carriage, and train. They lodged in New York City as guests in the homes of local Methodists, and they stayed much longer than anyone, either guests or hosts, expected. The delegates, along with numerous visitors, came without much inkling of what lay before them, not anticipating the depth of feeling evoked by the slavery issue. They soon found out that matters outside their respective sections were much more intense than they imagined.

The bare facts of the meeting were that a number of issues of importance were up for debate in New York—expansion of the Course of Study, creation of new annual conferences, various missionary matters, the rule on spirituous liquors, election of bishops, and so on. These were the more-or-less routine matters that faced every general conference. The conference dealt with most of them in appropriately routine fashion.

The central issue that emerged was anything but routine. It focused on two special cases, having to do with itineracy, and most delegates arrived in New York not really understanding the conundrum that awaited. The first case, which served as a guidepost for what came later, was an appeal from the Rev. Francis Harding, a traveling preacher who had been deposed by the Baltimore Conference for becoming a slaveholder by marriage. The Baltimore Conference had churches in the free state of Pennsylvania and

the slave states of Maryland and Virginia, so Harding could not be appointed across the breadth of the conference. Since he could not itinerate freely, the conference located him. The second matter concerned the whole denomination. Bishop James O. Andrew of Georgia had also become a slaveholder both by marriage and by bequest. Since he was a general superintendent who was supposed to itinerate throughout the length and breadth of the connection, that posed problems. The circumstance jeopardized his presidency over any Northern conference and made it certain that New England would not have him. There had been a tacit agreement in the church that no slaveholder would ever be elected bishop, but what would happen if a bishop became a slaveholder? Now the church would find out.

New Englanders and a few others wanted Bishop Andrew removed for his transgression and threatened to secede from the church if he remained. Southerners wanted Bishop Andrew left alone and threatened to secede from the church if he resigned or was removed. Both groups argued that Methodism in their respective sections would be ruined if their view did not prevail. Caught in the middle were Methodists from New York to Iowa (Northwesterners) who sought to find a compromise that would preserve the church. An alliance between any two of these three groups held the balance of power. When the two northern groups quickly agreed that Andrew had to be removed from office, they introduced and passed resolutions asking him to step down as long as "the impediment" existed. Andrew was inclined to acquiesce, but Southern delegates informed him that his resignation would trigger a wholesale defection in the South and so he did nothing.

As the debates progressed, as tempers grew shorter, as the solution seemed farther away, the bishops (minus Andrew) conferred and proposed that the matter be deferred for four years, giving the church time to weigh alternatives in a more deliberate fashion, and perhaps giving Andrew time to divest himself of the slaves. While the delegates considered this overnight, New England delegates explained to Bishop Hedding that any delay was unacceptable to them, so Hedding next morning withdrew his signature from the paper. In a very narrow vote, the conference declined the episcopal initiative. Most observers think that Hedding's withdrawal was decisive, but it is difficult to imagine that the plan would have done anything more than postpone the inevitable. The conference then proceeded to vote that Andrew be suspended. This result precipitated a second crisis, the decision to separate.

The outvoted Southern delegates denounced the suspension of Bishop Andrew and sought some other solution. When no acceptable compromise was forthcoming, a "Committee of Nine" recommended a plan for dividing the church into two separate but coordinate jurisdictions. This too was an agonizing decision for the delegates and was debated extensively. The delegates, with only a few exceptions, finally agreed that it was the only possible outcome. The plan called for an amicable split of the church along the slave state border, with boundary differences to be mediated as time went on. This was contingent on meetings of the Southern annual conferences to

see if they really wanted to leave. If they did, American Methodists would form two coordinate general conferences, each operating in its own section. Another proviso required amending the Sixth Restrictive Rule, but this was considered a *pro forma* matter. Division of border regions and missions would be worked out later. The proposal passed handily, with only a sprinkling of Northern dissent. It seemed a done deal.

On June 12, the day after adjournment, the Southern delegates caucused in New York and drafted a paper that asked the Southern conferences to discuss the matter and to send representatives to a meeting in Louisville in 1845, empowered to do whatever they needed to do. The paper did not call for separation, exactly, but it was clear that was the aim.

It soon became apparent that the two sections had differing understandings of what had been agreed upon—a failure to communicate that had a disastrous outcome. The North felt betrayed when the Southern delegates caucused immediately. Northerners felt that this was premature, and gave evidence that the Southern delegates had intended to lead a secession all along, without even consulting their constituents. The Southern representatives thought that what they were doing was well within the parameters of the plan and perfectly reasonable—they were together, they knew the issues, they were the elected leaders of their conferences, the Southern attitudes were already clear to them, so why wait? Besides, they explained, they did not actually call for separation, but only for a meeting to discuss the issue. Over the next few months, subsequent resolutions by many groups across the South proved that the general conference delegates read the Southern attitudes correctly.

The Southern annual conferences, meeting in the fall months of 1844, agreed to send representatives to Louisville with instructions to organize the Southern branch of the MEC. A general conference at Petersburg, Virginia in 1846 took the name “Methodist Episcopal Church, South,” elected bishops, and created denominational frameworks. Parallel to these developments was the outbreak of numerous squabbles along the border—Kentucky, Ohio, West Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware. The unresolved issues in the plan left plenty of room to push the envelope, plenty of room for misunderstanding.

One key component of the plan of separation was an amendment to the Sixth Restrictive Rule that would divide the Publishing House proceeds between the two coordinate churches. Southern annual conferences voted almost unanimously for it, but only a small majority of Northerners concurred. The matter failed because, in the final tally, only two-thirds of the annual conference members, instead of the required three-fourths, approved.

Based on all of this and on a growing Northern sense that the decision to let the South go was a mistake, the 1848 General Conference at Pittsburgh annulled the 1844 action and refused to receive the Southern messenger, Lovick Pierce, saying that it would be improper to recognize him while the two parties were so at odds. The MECS sued for the Publishing House proceeds and won in the U.S. Supreme Court in 1854. There was open hostility

between the two from then on, a hostility that was especially egregious during and just after the Civil War.

The South said that: (1) the disagreement was an issue of a runaway Northern majority trampling the rights of the minority by pushing violent anti-slavery talk that would disqualify Methodists from preaching to slaves; (2) the General Conference had no right to depose Bishop Andrew because the episcopacy was a coordinate, not a subordinate, branch of the church; (3) the General Conference was wrong to uphold the Baltimore Conference in the Harding case; (4) the decision to divide was a necessary one; (5) the Southern caucus after adjournment was only logical and violated no agreements; (6) the Southern annual conferences overwhelmingly ratified the need for separation in Louisville; (7) the end product was supposed to be two sister churches each occupying its own geographical space; (8) the border issues could be worked out; (9) the Northern repudiation in 1848 was a betrayal of the pledged word; and (10) the 1848 General Conference's rejection of Pierce was an affront. They felt justified in their position, given the U.S. Supreme Court decision on their behalf.

The North said that: (1) Andrew had forfeited his right to be a bishop by owning slaves, and thus New England would secede if the matter were left unchallenged; (2) slave-holding was increasingly unacceptable among Northern Methodists (though the Baltimore Conference objected to this line of thought in respect to lay people); (3) the General Conference was the final authority over bishops, who were a subordinate branch to the General Conference, which could depose them without a trial because episcopacy was an office, not an order; (4) if the South wanted to leave over the matter, some Northerners felt that it was their affair, but the act would be a secession, not a mutual parting of the ways, with no property arrangements necessary; (5) the Southern caucus was a betrayal of the agreement; (6) the Southern "aggressions" on the border were intolerable; (7) the Restrictive Rule amendment did not pass by the required majority thus the Publishing House proceeds could not be divided; (8) the General Conference of 1844 should not have agreed to the separation; and (9) the General Conference of 1848 could and should declare it void, officially declaring the MECS to be a real secession. Most in the North initially felt that the split was sad but necessary, but a fair number of these changed their minds.

Both sides flung wild charges back and forth, and both appealed to legal, practical, moral, and emotional reasons why the other had reneged on the pledged word. Gallons of ink were spilt, then and later, and the vituperation of the editors and other writers was vicious.

Analysis of the Issues

The Practical Issue

If the general conference allowed Andrew to continue, New England would have seceded from the church, if not officially, then by individual decisions, following the Wesleyan Methodist example. There could no longer

be a Methodist Church in New England if the denomination was tainted with slavery. Sympathy for the abolitionist viewpoint was simply too strong and the delegates were in no mood to wait. Such a separation would have been attended by bitterness and recriminations.

If the General Conference suspended Andrew, the South would have seceded from the church, if not officially, then by individual decisions—or more likely *en masse*. There could be no anti-slavery Methodist Church in the South. Among other things, such a circumstance would have immediately blocked all Methodist access to the slave ministry. Such was the dilemma faced by the conference.

The men of the conference explored the issue from every angle and found only one acceptable way out. The only solution, the majority felt, was the anguish of mutually-agreed separation. A few delegates, like Peter Cartwright of Illinois, thought the issue should be pushed to the logical conclusion, and if the South did not accept majority rule, then upon them would be the onus (moral and practical) of seceding; the great majority of Northerners were not willing to go that far. New Englanders understood that, under different circumstances, they might have been the ones pushed out. Ultimately, of course, the conference reached an agreement that *could* lead to separation under certain conditions. Unfortunately, the two sides did not understand those vague conditions in quite the same way. In June, 1844, practical considerations outweighed all others.

The Moral Issue

The Southerners said that while slavery may have been a moral matter, and they themselves felt slavery was an evil, it was outside the purview of the church. It was a civil matter in which all Americans were equally trapped. In later years, the MECS insisted that the MEC was a “political church” precisely because of its stand on what the South saw to be a secular, civil, and political issue. The South insisted that the church should stick to the business of spreading scriptural holiness, rendering unto Caesar the things that were Caesar’s and to God the things that were God’s.

Rev. Harding, Bishop Andrew, and numerous others held slaves through circumstances beyond their control, and could not very well be held morally culpable. (Nobody inquired very deeply into those ministers who held slaves by their own purchase, or who sold them for their own profit.) The main thrust of the Southern argument was that institution of slavery was an evil, but slaveholding was not a sin in itself. It may be added that there were a few Southerners, notably William Winans of Mississippi, who pronounced that slavery was a positive good. That notion was a red cape waved in front of all Northerners and some Southerners.

The Northerners saw slavery as an evil, and thought it was one that the church should attack head-on. The time for half-way measures was gone. If Wesley were still around, there would be no more equivocation. Where the laws permitted slavery, the laws should be changed—or disregarded. Harding and Andrew could move some place where manumission could be

accomplished. That they chose not to do so was abundant evidence of their unacceptability for the itinerant ministry. The uncompromising abolitionists among the delegates were getting more and more Western delegates to see it their way. The middle ground on slavery (that is, to temporize) eroded in the church before their very eyes. In the months after the conference, the moral issue trumped all others.

The Legal Issues

Two principal legal controversies emerged for debate during the conference meeting and after. The first was whether the General Conference had authority over the bishops. Clearly this was the case if charges were brought and a trial held, but it was not at all obvious without a trial. The South argued that the deposing of Andrew was unconstitutional, directly violating the Fourth Restrictive Rule guaranteeing the right of trial to every accused Methodist, lay or clergy. The North likened the episcopacy to the office of presiding elder. A presiding elder could be, and often was, removed and returned to the pastorate without trial, with his rights as a clergyman intact. The South said the two were not the same—presiding elders were not elected, did not receive consecration, did not hold lifetime appointments. By vote, the Northern perspective prevailed.

This constitutional issue was epitomized by the positions of two men, the senior bishop Joshua Soule and an obscure Ohio delegate named Leonidas L. Hamline. Soule was a New Englander and a fervent disciple of the Asburian episcopacy. When the church moved to a delegated General Conference in 1808, it was Joshua Soule who was the principal author of the new structure, including the six Restrictive Rules. These reserved certain basic decisions to the total membership of the annual conferences, thus curbing the absolute power of the General Conference. Without a two-thirds vote of the General Conference and a concurring three-fourths vote of the aggregate membership of the Annual Conferences, the General Conference could not:

- (1) change the Articles of Religion or establish new doctrine;
- (2) change "our Confession of Faith;"
- (3) eliminate episcopacy or destroy the itinerant general superintendency;
- (4) do away with right of clergy and lay members to trial;
- (5) change the General Rules;
- (6) Appropriate the net income of the Publishing House, the book concern, or the Chartered Fund for anything but ministerial pensions.

The 1820 general conference elected Soule to the episcopacy and, in almost the same breath, authorized an elected presiding eldership. He declined to be consecrated bishop under that kind of limitation. The conference, stunned by this stand, voted to suspend activation for four years, but Soule returned to the pastorate anyway. In 1824, the General Conference rescinded its previous action and elected Soule again. With the elective presiding eldership out of the way, Soule accepted. In 1844, Soule found ways to let

his attitude be known, though bishops were not supposed to participate in debate. According to what we may call the Soule Doctrine, the episcopacy was a coordinate branch of the Methodist governance structure, answerable to the general conference *only* via charges and trial. Norman Spellmann calls this “the Constitution Party.”⁴

Hamline, who stood sixth in the Ohio delegation, enunciated a contrary understanding. According to the Hamline Doctrine, the General Conference was the supreme authority in the church and bishops were a subordinate branch. The General Conference, he proclaimed, had legislative, judicial, and executive powers. The conference elected bishops, but only to an office, not an order. The conference could, at its discretion, unmake a bishop, not for crimes or immorality, but merely for unacceptability. (One can see echoes of this idea in the impeachment proceedings against President Andrew Johnson two decades later.) The General Conference made bishops and could as easily unmake them. Spellmann refers to this group as “the Conference Party.”⁵ The speech in which Hamline laid out this understanding brought this heretofore unknown preacher such acclaim that the conference promptly elected him to the episcopacy.

Inevitably, the Northern majority of the General Conference bought into the Hamline Doctrine because that was the only way they could deal with Bishop Andrew. Equally inevitable, Soule left the church rather than submit to such an arrangement. From this issue, the Southern episcopacy was always stronger and more autonomous than the Northern episcopacy. And since both churches prospered about equally, given their circumstances, the difference in the power of the episcopacy probably made little difference.

The second major legal issue was the General Conference’s power to divide the church. The delegates in 1844 obviously thought they could do so, pending Annual Conference approval of the suspension of the Sixth Restrictive Rule. In 1848, a new general conference declared, based on the Hamline Doctrine, that it could rescind the 1844 action, and proceeded to do just that. In fact, the 1848 group judged the 1844 action to be unconstitutional. This raises the question of why the 1848 General Conference was all-powerful, but the 1844 General Conference was not. But nobody asked that in 1848. Since the annual conferences did not agree to change the Sixth Restrictive Rule by the required majority, the matter should have been moot. If that precondition for separation was not met, then the whole plan was void for that reason alone. But by 1848, it was far too late for that to matter.

Was the Sixth Restrictive Rule the right one to be the focus? It would seem more appropriate to suspend the Third Restrictive Rule, pertaining as it did to the itinerant general superintendency. The Publishing House proceeds could continue to go to the proper recipients even in a divided church, but the general superintendency would be radically affected by the division,

⁴ Norman W. Spellmann in Emory Bucke, ed., *The History of American Methodism, Vol. II*. (New York, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964), 77.

⁵ Spellmann in Bucke, Vol. II, 70.

at least legally. As a practical matter, Andrew was not supervising New England conferences anyway and the bishops offered to itinerate him only in the South if necessary, clearly turning a blind eye to the Third Restrictive Rule.

The Aftermath of 1844—Questions

At least four questions emerge from the Northern turnaround that have not been clearly explained in the literature of the event. The first of these is, were the annual conference votes on the Sixth Restrictive Rule consistent with the way their respective delegates voted in New York? The answer to that is counter-intuitive. It was no surprise that the total vote on the Sixth Restrictive Rule was overwhelmingly favorable in the Southern annual conferences. It was said that the *early* Northern conferences voted for approval, but the *later* conferences began to vote no with increasing fervor. That was true. Given the votes and attitudes expressed in the 1844 General Conference, one would expect that the New England conferences would have been the ones to vote negatively on the change of the Sixth Restrictive Rule. That turned out *not* to be true.

The pattern of holding annual conferences was different in 1844 from later years. There were only a few bishops at the time and the distances were vast. Thus the conferences did not all meet in the fall, as was later the case, but rather were spread throughout the year. Probably as an accommodation to climate, the New York and New England conferences met in June-August, with only one as late as September, the Western and Border conferences a bit later (five in July-August, six in September), and the Southern conferences in the fall and winter. The annual conference cycle concluded in the early spring with the Delaware Bay area.

The conferences in the heartland of abolitionism and of hard-line voting, New England and New York, met in the summer and ratified the change, for example, New York in June, 148-138; Providence in July, unanimously in favor; Rock River (in Illinois) in July, 45-10. The western and border conferences that met a little later rejected the plan, for example, Ohio in August, 2-86; and Illinois in September, 22-38. In March, 1845, Baltimore said no, 40-148; in early April, Philadelphia rejected it 12-104; and in late April, New Jersey was even more emphatic, 2 yes and 110 no. In the Southern conferences, obviously, there were only a tiny handful of negative votes.

The final tally saw the measure fail to reach the constitutional level of three-fourths approval. There were a total of 2,135 affirmative votes to 1,070 negative ones. In the Northern conferences only, it carried by a narrow margin, 1,164 to 1,067. Two-thirds of the preachers voted for the division, but that was well short of the constitutional requirement.

The final outcome is clear enough, but a question remains: why did the vote turn negative over the course of time? In the summer, it seemed that the North would agree to the separation. If New England bought into it, surely everyone else would do the same. On the basis of the early vote, the deal was

already done, so why did the voting pattern change? In retrospect, we know that the plan would ultimately be rejected by the annual conference vote on the Sixth Restrictive Rule. But that knowledge came later. One cannot conclude that the deal was voided merely because of the Restrictive Rule vote, because the results were not in yet. But Northerners were already arguing it was void before the annual conference voting was done; in fact that is one reason why the plan ultimately failed to receive the constitutional minimum. Cause and effect are commingled here.

What seems to be the case is that the Northern hardliners, led by the editors in New York and Cincinnati, were more effective propagandists than their more moderate peers. Absolutists are much more likely to write letters to the editor than persons with more balanced views, and more likely to be passionate about their positions. While the post-conference caucus of the Southern delegates was not necessarily evidence of a cabal, the hardliners made it seem that way. The *Advocates* swayed public opinion enough to evoke reconsideration by some of the very men who had voted for the plan. The brotherly atmosphere of the General Conference dissipated before the onslaught of denunciation. Rational discussion gave way to passionate partisanship, so that even respected moderates like Nathan Bangs could not stand before it. Over the last months of 1844, Northern opinion changed from reluctant acquiescence to outright rejection. By the spring of 1845, the Northern attitude was set in granite. In fairness, precisely the same things could be said about the South, though that affected no votes. In both cases the loudest voices prevailed to define opinion.

In 1848, despite its rough handling of the Southern Church's representative, Lovick Pierce, and despite its outright repudiation of the 1844 agreement, the MEC General Conference did display some openness to negotiation. The Northern church's adjustment commission on Publishing House funds announced that they would have been willing to arrive at a mutually acceptable agreement as a matter of simple equity. However, the committee members felt that the vote on the Sixth Restrictive Rule had tied their hands, so that they were legally bound not to negotiate.

Was the vote a plebiscite on the whole matter of dividing the church, or more narrowly on giving the South a share of the Publishing House proceeds and property? On the face of it, it seemed to be only a fiscal matter, representing perhaps \$300,000. But the 1848 General Conference Committee on the State of the Church believed the Southern delegates of 1844 had agreed "that a vote on the change of restrictive article was understood to be a vote on the merits of the Plan *as a whole*."⁶ If this Northern perception was correct, then these two were indeed combined *in the mind of the church*, but that was not what was proposed *on paper*. Rejection of the change of the Sixth Restrictive Rule by itself did not mean anything except money and did not overtly touch on the 1844 act of division. The 1848 conference formally

⁶ Italics in original. *Journal of the General Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church, 1848*, 159.

dealt with that, by declaring the South in secession and entitled to nothing, including, perhaps, any church property whatsoever.

The same legal issues probably affected the reception accorded Lovick Pierce, a respected Southern moderate who was the official representative of the MECS to the 1848 MEC General Conference. The Pittsburgh meeting extended a warm welcome to messengers from British and Canadian Methodism, but rejected Pierce outright, extending him, as they said, all personal courtesies but refusing him in his official capacity. And Pierce would not beg, nor would it have done any good. The conference was afraid that receiving Pierce officially would compromise the matter that would soon be in the courts, and grant the MECS a legitimacy that the North felt it should not have. The humiliated Pierce, as he left, served notice that the Southern church would not again offer the hand of friendship. Only the Northern church could initiate further communication. Pierce's parting shot was perhaps satisfying to wounded Southern feelings, but it otherwise only served to widen the gap between the two and could better have been left unsaid.

The second question is, was there a purge of Northern delegates who had voted in 1844 for separation, a purge that led to election of an anti-South majority in 1848? Maybe, maybe not. Turnover of General Conference delegates from session to session was routinely high, though a few key men did keep getting reelected quadrennium after quadrennium. The years 1836-1852 were not exceptional. The 1844 General Conference delegates from the North represented 30.8% repeats from 1840. That figure may have been a bit low, since some of the delegates of 1840, such as Orange Scott, were now withdrawn into the Wesleyan Methodist Church. The 1848 delegates, where the purge was alleged to have occurred, actually had a slightly higher return rate of 31.2%.

In 1852, when the dust presumably had settled, 39.5% of the General Conference delegates were veterans of the 1848 conference. Further, twelve more were members in 1844 who missed 1848, evidence of a short purge, perhaps. The most famous of these was Nathan Bangs of New York, who was indeed excluded from 1848 because he was a member of the Committee of Nine and because he staunchly defended the 1844 actions. By 1852, all was forgiven. The prominence of Bangs may be a major source of the idea of a purge.

Twenty-two delegates in 1844 could be termed "hardliners," those consistently opposed to Harding, Andrew, and the split. Most were New Englanders, but one was the famous Peter Cartwright of Illinois. Of these, fourteen were returned in 1848, a pretty strong endorsement of their actions. By contrast, eighteen northerners voted against the suspension of Bishop Andrew and occasionally with South on other matters. They could be seen as "softliners." Not one of them was re-elected in 1848. One might call that a purge, but it was based on the Andrew vote, not on support of the division. The great majority of the 1844 Northerners, who voted against Andrew and Harding but for the separation, experienced only the normal attrition in 1848. A number of them, like Matthew Simpson of Indiana, reversed their posi-

tion after New York, explaining the change of heart by saying the South had broken the covenant. In the South, where they believed no such thing, such men were regarded as having broken their pledged word. Was there a purge? The answer seems to be that there was one of sorts, but not the wholesale repudiation that may be supposed, and based principally on the votes in the Andrew and Harding cases, not on the vote to split the church.

The third question is, was there a generation gap? Two sociologists, William Strauss and Neil Howe, published in 1991, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584-2069*.⁷ In the book, they argued that American history could be understood in terms of terms of birth cohorts, that people born in the same 20-25 year period could be expected to share attitudes to a high degree—the “GI (Greatest) Generation,” the “Silent Generation,” the “Boomers,” “Generation X,” the “Millennial Generation,” and so on. According to this theory, American politics was dominated from about 1830 to about 1855 by people like Daniel Webster and Henry Clay, the so-called “Compromiser Generation” (born 1767-1791). They engineered the Missouri Compromise, the Compromise of 1833, the Compromise of 1850 and a various other accommodations. When they passed from power, a younger group emerged, filled with passion and certitude. Strauss and Howe called the newcomers the “Transcendental Generation” (born 1792-1821). These were the men who brought on the Civil War and led the Reconstruction.

The question here is whether such a phenomenon was present between 1844 and 1848 in the Methodist Episcopal general conferences. Was there a generation gap between the men who engineered the compromise of 1844 and those who repudiated it in 1848? Here the data are a little more suspect, since the birth year of every delegate was not available, but about three-fourths of them could be found. This turned out to be a futile line of investigation. The average birth year for the 1844 delegates was 1797. Their mean age was 47. Only one out of five were from the “Compromiser Generation”—the rest were those feisty “Transcendentals.” The average age for the 1848 delegates was 48, with a mean birth year of 1800. There is not enough difference between 1797 and 1800 to be significant. Both mean birth years fall in the Strauss-Howe generation called Transcendental. And the men of 1848 were not youngsters, though they seemed radicalized; in fact they were, on average, one year older. The Strauss-Howe thesis did not fit this issue. A generation gap would not explain the turnaround of Northern opinion.

The fourth question is, given the apparent legal advantage of the MEC's claims (the Restrictive Rule vote should have settled it legally), why did it turn out otherwise? When the 1848 General Conference turned a cold shoulder on the South, the matter of the Publishing House revenues went to the civil courts. Eventually, the United States Supreme Court ruled in 1854

⁷ William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584-2069* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1991)

for the South in almost every particular.⁸ The MEC eventually and grudgingly granted to the MECS the revenues and property allotted in the judicial decision.

Why did the court hold as it did? Maybe the justices were convinced on the merits of the Southern case, but maybe there was bias. No one should be surprised at this. These were the same nine justices, six from the South and three from the North and none from New England, who ruled in the 1857 decision of *Dred Scott vs. Sanford* that slaves were property, had no standing to sue, and could be taken into free territories and held in bondage there. The Court found merit in the Southern case because it wanted to find merit there.

Conclusion

So we return to the original question: what happened in the second half of 1844 and following to turn agony into bitterness in the MEC? The answer to the question was there all the time. But it was not simple. It was buried under a landslide of vituperation. And worse, the answer was so unexpected, that men of wisdom and goodwill and religion on both sides should fall to such depths of hatred, misunderstanding, insensitivity, arrogance, and narrow-mindedness. This was perhaps American Methodism’s lowest hour, unless what followed in the next few years exceeded it in the depths.

There were several underlying causes for the shift in Northern opinion. The first was the nebulous plan, with plenty of room for different interpretations, and an easy opportunity for hardliners to find evidence to support their claims. This was especially true in “border” situations, where occasional injustice was bound to occur. With charity and goodwill, this could have been resolved even though the plan for the border was vague and susceptible of multiple interpretations. Annual conference boundaries overlapped state lines in several cases (the Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Philadelphia conferences, for example). There were good reasons why the Methodist Episcopal Illinois Conference should retain appointments in a German district in slave state Missouri. But the Plan’s provision for local churches to go one way or the other on the basis of votes of their own and of their neighbors was confusing. Such language as “interior” appointments left unclear which was interior and which was not. It would have been better to have simply based it on state lines, or perhaps to have allowed for some border overlap, joint occupation, as it were.

Secondly, the newspaper war was the greatest contributor to changed Northern attitudes. Southern editors and contributors denounced the North in vigorous language. The Northern papers reciprocated in equal measure and at the same time. Letters to the editor tended to be from extremists because moderates or conciliators seldom got so worked up that they wrote. A later generation would call this “trash talk.” The poison was already there, and impassioned (and irresponsible, not to mention uncharitable) editors and

⁸ *Henry Bascom, et al. vs. George Lane, et al.*

orators made things worse. The moderate Methodists of the day allowed the hardliners to define the discussion when they discounted the philippics of the extremists as though their words were somehow not representative, as though those diatribes would not take root. Verbal or written excess was morally culpable, and so was silence.

The annual conference voters did not understand the pressures on the General Conference delegates. They had not experienced the agony of the debates, had not felt the burden of responsibility, had not been face-to-face with their brothers, had not confronted the passing of time. So there was a fair amount of what could be called “Monday morning quarterbacking” in evidence. As we say today, “You had to have been there.”

Partly it was a confrontation that had to happen, given the deeply entrenched attitudes on both sides; partly it was a failure to come to a clear agreement on what the Plan involved. But most of all, it was a failure of Christian charity.

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