



DISCOVERY

edited by
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The Decision of A.M.E. Leader, James Lynch, To Join The Methodist Episcopal Church: New Evidence at Old St. George's Church, Philadelphia

by William B. Gravely

The Matthew Simpson Papers at the Philadelphia Conference Historical Society's depository at Old St. George's Church compose a body of in-coming correspondence to the bishop very similar to the larger collection of Simpson materials at the Library of Congress. In the Philadelphia collection there are three letters from the black preacher, educator, missionary and editor — James Lynch — relating to his decision in 1867 to leave the African Methodist Episcopal Church and join the Methodist Episcopal Church.¹

As noted in an article about Lynch published earlier in *Methodist History*², this decision was not a simple change of denominational relations within the Methodist movement. It evolved from the conviction that Lynch could serve his race in politics and in religion more creatively as part of the post-Civil War mission to the southern freedmen being developed within

1. See the author's biographical entry for James Lynch in Nolan B. Harmon, *et al*, eds., *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism* (Nashville, 1974), II, 1472.

2. "A Black Methodist on Reconstruction in Mississippi: Three Letters by James Lynch, 1868-69," 11 (July, 1973), 3-18.

the M. E. Church than he could within the independent black denominational tradition which the A.M.E. Church epitomized. As the following correspondence demonstrates, he was influenced toward that conviction by several northern Methodists, notably Gilbert Haven, editor of *Zion's Herald* and advocate of a radical Christian stand on racial equality and interracial fraternity.

The decision was further complicated by Lynch's position, as editor of *The Christian Recorder*, the denomination's weekly paper, and by his appointment, just as he was set to make his change in ecclesiastical relations, to the pastorate of the founding church of the A.M.E. tradition, Mother Bethel in Philadelphia. His break with the all-black religious heritage was, thus, all the more significant, for it represented a sacrifice of considerable prestige and power within the denomination.

At the time of his premature death at the age of thirty-three in 1872, Lynch had been a delegate to the General Conference and had served as a presiding elder and organizer of churches throughout Mississippi, so that he had become the most influential black leader in the M. E. Church. In politics he was similarly successful, as his position as secretary of state for Mississippi and representative to the Republican National Conventions of 1868 and 1872 show. His untimely death not only terminated a promising career in the church, in politics and as a racial leader; it also deprived us of knowing whether Lynch considered his decision in 1867 to have been vindicated.

The first two letters, penned in the spring of 1867, give an intimate account of Lynch's rationale for leaving the A. M. E. Church and the difficulties that he faced in disengaging himself for responsibilities which he held within the black denomination. The third letter is an initial report by Lynch to Bishop Simpson soon after his arrival in Jackson, Mississippi. It provides a link between the earlier correspondence and the exchanges in 1868 and 1869 which have already appeared in these pages.

Office of Christian Recorder
631 Pine St., Phila Pa
March 29 1867

Bishop M. Simpson;

Rev'd Sir: -- I called at your residence last evening, you were not at home. This evening Saturday taking the wrong direction I did not reach your door untill [*sic*] 9-15. I thought the hour unseasonable to seek an interview. As I leave town in the morning to attend the New Eng[land] Conference (M. E.) at Waltham Mass[achusetts] by invitation of Rev. Gilbert Haven, Rev. Dr. [Lorenzo R.] Thayer and others I beg leave to call your attention to these lines.

Since the changed status of my race, and the revolution of public sentiment, toward us -- the grand march of the grander idea of human brotherhood; I have felt that the Mission of the A.M.E. Church, as a seperate [*sic*] organization is drawing to a close. The idea of exclusiveness on account of color, which is our *vitalizing* force -- an idea only justifiable on the ground of stern necessity -- cannot make headway; nor should it, when the *necessity* is passing away.

By virtue of my church relation, in spite of my convictions I find myself running counter to the great current of thought which sweeps through the nation and seperating [*sic*] from the friends of the freedom and progress of my race: for seperate [*sic*] church organizations on account of color, have the sympathy of democrats, conservatives and Southern Methodists only.

My race cannot afford to refuse a union with their white friends in movements for their religious, moral and political elevation. We can help ourselves amazingly, and our salvation depends on such action, but we must be *helped* out of the turbid waters of our degredation -- we can *grasp* the rope and *hold* it, but it must be thrown to us and drawn upward. My denomination must for its own perpetuity and advancement set itself against such union. As political enfranchisement is not ample protection against political oppression, its full measure must be found in the development of our intellect and a fellow feeling with our white neighbors. I hold, that the relations being established in your denomination with colored men is indispensable to this development and contributes more than

anything else to beget this *fellow feeling*. With these views, how can I honestly fill to the acceptance of my bretheren the position of Editor of their church organ? *That, I do it now*, is not to my credit. I am dealing with my denomination as a lawyer deals with his client. I must be true to my church while in her pales. I indeed, owe her much. She has done more than most know of. I rejoice in her glory. Would to God my bretheren could appreciate the inexorable logic of events, and meet *the demand* of this hour. *They will not*; a hundred considerations will hinder. They are fully committed. Alliance with the Church South (Episcopal Methodist) grows stronger;³ and alienation from the the *M. E.* Church grows deeper and wider. Though you embody the Radicalism of the nation so largely, they turn from you. This is from no recreancy to Liberty's call, but the very result of our position.

I now propose to resign my position as Editor of *Christian Recorder* and as a member of the A. M. E. Church at the next Philadelphia Annual Conference which meets 18th May 1867. If you will accept me as a member of your church and itinerancy. I would prefer to go South immediately, to Georgia, Alabama, Mis[sissippi] or Texas.

From my eighteenth year -- nearly nine years -- I have been devoted to the interests of my people as a preacher. My labors have been blest of the Lord, and my influence is far more extensive than generally comes to one of my years. That God is with me now, I most deeply feel. I have sought Him in prayer concerning the matter of which I now speak so freely to you. I can boast of *fixedness of purpose*, determined zeal, and great hopefulness as to results.

I hope dear Bishop you will answer this lengthy communication immediately. Please mark legibly on the envelope

3. At the General Conference of the M. E. Church, South, in 1866, and afterwards, a plan was attempted to have the A. M. E. Church absorb its remaining Negro members who were products of missions among the slaves and take over properties donated or bought as churches for blacks. Here Lynch refers to that attempt, as well as to a name, Episcopal Methodist, which some Southern Methodists wished to substitute for the regional designation for the denomination. The M. E. Church, South, refused to alter its original title and, after the alliance with the A. M. E. Church failed, established with and for its black members the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church.

which may enclose your answer "*Private*" as I write you in the strictest confidence.

Very Sincerely Yours,
James Lynch
Editor of Christian Recorder
631 Pine St

(Office of The Methodist Home Journal,
108 South Third Street,
Philadelphia,)⁴ Pa., May 28th, 1867

Rev Bishop M. Simpson:
My Dear Sir,

I suffered our Conference to adjourn without asking "location"; so much interest seemed to be invested in me that I feared the inquiries and regrets which would have followed the request, and also the censure of my determination. The sequel is: Bishop [Alexander W.] Wayman in compliance with a request of leading men and the permission of our Book Committee appointed me to *Bethel Church* in connection with my editorial duty.

I was not previously consulted and told him last night that I must resign the charge. He left in an hour afterward, for Macon, Ga. *I am now ready, Bishop, to present my "Parchments" and make application for membership in any Quarterly Conference you may [the word, nominate, is struck through] suggest -- to receive my travelling expenses -- a copy of your instructions, and proceed to Mississippi [sic].*

My whole heart says Do not abandon or postpone the matter about which I have so freely talked with you.

I fear a year's postponement, as it might prove the losing of grand opportunities not to recur again. I learn with pain that

4. This letter was written on stationery with the printed letterhead of *The Methodist Home Journal*, which was published as an "Independent and Progressive" weekly paper by Rev. Adam Wallace.

domestic bereavement shadows your homestead⁵ and would not personally obtrude a matter of busines [sic] on you and only *write* because I must act at once.

Will you dear Bishop drop me a line immediately. I am now waiting.

With high Regard I am Yrs
James Lynch 631 Pine St

Jackson Miss July 2 1867

Rev'd M. Simpson D. D.

My Dear Bishop,

I left Washington for Jackson via Louisville Ky on the 26th ult and arrived 1rst [first] inst. I was happily disappointed in finding Rev. Mr. [W. N.] Darnell here.

I have fixed my head-quarters here for the present.

I showed Bro Darnell your letters con'tg [containing] instructions and talked with him freely about the work.

There are three great railroads in the state, one, running its entire length from North to South in the Eastern section; another running the same course in the Western Section; another running from Vicksburgh to Meridian across the state from East to West. The country in the "South Mississippi District" is sparsely inhabited, millions of its acres are untilled, and pine barrens and swamps abound; though some points of interest may be found in the main [the phrase, the bulk of, is crossed out] the colored people are comparatively scarce. Brother Darnell suggests inasmuch as he cannot attend to his District in consequence of its extent, that it as is required should be divided thus: that he retain all the points along the Mississippi through the length of the state, all those along the rail-road [the words, along the line of, are marked through] in the eastern section of the state running from North to South,

5. This reference is unclear. In 1868 Simpson's elder son, Charles, died at the age of twenty-nine after several years of declining health. There are no other deaths in his immediate family mentioned for this period in the most recent of the biographies of the bishop. See Robert D. Clark, *The Life of Matthew Simpson* (New York, 1956), 290.

and all those on the rail-road crossing the state from East to West as far as Jackson. I would then have all the points along the railroad running from North to South, in the Western Section of the State: that is from Corinth to Mobile, Ala, this latter point I ought to visit. I would have also the points on the railroad running from East to West: as far as Brandon. I most respectfully ask your consideration and sanction of this arrangement. The people need my advice in political matters and as I want to reach them to the best advantage I shall be pleased to learn that you favor this plan. I will not fail to visit the "South Miss[issippi] Dist[ri]ct" also and do what can be done there. Traveling is exceedingly high in this country, the people worse than poor, and I most earnestly ask Bishop that you will have sent to me *immediately* two hundred dollars of my pay in advance. After sending my wife to Galena, Ill., paying my expenses to this point, express charges on my things I am without money. I need the above sum to start out on.

The Union Congressional Committee do scarcely anything in way of monies, they agree to pay me thirty-seven doll[ar]s per month for four months. I shall wait with anxiety the reception of the above named ammount [sic] as I want to be on the wing contributing my mite to carry the state for human rights and loyal methodism. So far everything I see adds to the enthusiasm I feel. I leave today for Vicksburgh where a convention is to be held. Please answer soon.

Very sincerely yours
James Lynch