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The Pro-Slavery Argument in the Development of the American Methodist Church

Abstract

This article discusses the evolution of the Methodist church. It specifically focuses on the way that pro-slavery views were eventually supported by many members of the church, using the Bible to support these beliefs.

The Pro-Slavery Argument in the Development of the American Methodist Church

Kyle Painter

...and the truth will set you free. —John 8:32

Submit yourself ... to every authority instituted by men. —I Peter 2:13

In his most famous autobiographical narrative, Frederick Douglass gives an interesting account on how Methodism changed one of his former masters, Thomas Auld:

In August, my master attended a Methodist camp-meeting held in the Bay-side, Talbot county, and there experienced religion. I indulged a faint hope that his conversion would lead him to emancipate his slaves, and that, if he did not do this, it would, at any rate, make him more kind and humane. I was disappointed in both these respects. It neither made him to be humane to his slaves nor to emancipate them. If it had any effect on his character, it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways; for I believe him to have been a much worse man after his conversion than before.¹

Both here and in several other locations, Douglass notes how slave owners tended to become more cruel when they became involved in a church, especially if that church happened to be Methodist.

Despite what Douglass saw, support of slavery was not the only Methodist response to this peculiar institution. In fact, there was never really any consensus view of slavery throughout the history of antebellum Methodism, despite strong initial opposition to the concept of slavery by most of the early Methodist leaders. John Wesley, the founder of and greatest influence on Methodism, was against all aspects of the slave trade and slavery itself, as were nearly all of the early Methodist leaders.² But the original stands against slavery taken by men like Wesley and the first leader of the newly formed Methodist Episcopal Church, Francis Asbury, were eventually compromised and ultimately undercut, so that by the 1840's, Southern Methodist preachers, such as William Capers and William A. Smith, were composing biblical arguments in favor of slavery. These arguments defended slavery on several bases: first, that the Bible did not explicitly say slavery was wrong; second, that slavery actually seemed to be condoned by biblical writers like Paul; and third, that the institution of slavery was allowed by the government, and, since Christians are to submit to their governing authorities, they should have no problems with government-allowed slavery.

It is this last argument on which I will focus. The roots of this argument lay deep within Methodist history. One of the earliest and most famous of the Methodist preachers in America, George Whitefield, was very excited about seeing slaves becoming “convicted” and converting to Christianity, yet he also upheld the right of the government to allow slavery. In fact, he petitioned Georgia’s state assembly to pass a law to allow slavery in the state so that he could support an orphanage he was overseeing. His view of blacks seems paradoxical to the modern observer, because he defended the rights of blacks to be as educated as whites while encouraging the government to allow the slavery of those same men that he claimed to see as equals.

Later, when the Methodist church in America finally split from the Church of England, largely because of the political split between their respective nations, Francis Asbury and some of the other leaders tried to institute rules that restricted the ability of members of the church to own slaves. But Asbury was soon thereafter forced to compromise by modifying his stance to allow slaveholders to be members of the church.

The reason given for this action was that the preachers wanted access to the slaves so that they too could hear about Christianity; however, the large number and high status of slaveholders in the Methodist congregations made it extremely difficult to even attempt to kick them out of the church. It was these kinds of concessions that compromised the convictions of the early leaders and allowed preachers within the Methodist Church to biblically defend slavery.

Donald Mathews, in his book *Slavery and Methodism*, claims that from Asbury’s tenure as bishop to the 1840s, when slavery was thoroughly entrenched within the Methodist church, the “early and vigorous opposition to slavery was effaced by compromise.”³ While I am not strictly disagreeing with this claim, my focus will be more on the underlying view of and respect for the state than this trend of compromise. I think that a particular view on the sovereignty of the state existed from the beginning and tended to persist throughout, and hence it continued to push the Methodist Church closer to slavery.

Anyone talking about the origins of anything in Methodist history must begin with John Wesley. John Wesley and his brother Charles, having grown up in the Anglican Church, started a group at Oxford called the Holy Club, in which several students, including George Whitefield, got together for prayer and Bible study. Eventually from this group sprang the movement that is now known as Methodism. It started out as a movement of people within the Church of England. In fact, John Wesley remained loyal to the Anglican Church for his entire life. His goal was never to create a new church but to breathe new life into the existing one.

Early on, Methodist activity consisted of itinerant preachers being sent out to a certain area of the country to preach, often in the open air. The logical extension of this process was to send preachers to the American colonies; George Whitefield, possibly the most famous preacher in American history, took seven trips to America and made it a second home, eventually dying there. The efforts in America tended to be less organized than those in England, which themselves were never meant to be a separate ecclesiastical entity. Many of the early preaching missions left behind little or no recognizable society of Methodists. However, Methodism did eventually take to America in full force. John Wesley, though never leaving the Anglican Church, laid down the organization and theology of what would become the Methodist Episcopal Church. He was by far the greatest influence on the preachers of the early Methodist church in America. His tracts, journals, and sermons were widely published and read; his ideas were widely accepted within the Methodist Church, especially among the clergy.

Among Wesley's tracts was a pamphlet entitled *Thoughts on Slavery*.⁴ This essay was written in 1774. In it, Wesley outlines the reasons that are used to justify slavery, followed by his own counter-arguments. One popular argument that he debunks is that the countries from which slaves are taken are "horrid, dreary, and barren" in addition to being populated with uncivilized brutes.⁵ Wesley counters this by saying that maybe Africa's civilization is not quite as cultivated as Europe's, but their residents are often more well-mannered than the European slave traders, in that they do not drink and they tend to the welfare of disadvantaged neighbors. He later asserts that any "uncivilized" or violent behavior found in the residents of Africa can usually be attributed not to some natural defect in character but to the actions of the slave traders.⁶

He attacks the claim that the law upholds slavery by asking whether a human law condoning slavery can change or justify its evil nature. His response was a simple "By no means. Notwithstanding ten thousand laws, right is right, and wrong is wrong still."⁷ His tract ends with a plea for all slave traders to cease their employment and for all slave owners to release their slaves with all due haste, so that this abomination can be extricated from this earth.⁸

One thing to note about *Thoughts on Slavery* is that Wesley "[sets] the Bible out of the question" and tests whether slavery can be defended "on the principles of even heathen honesty;" instead of making a biblical defense he appeals to a sense of "natural justice" by which slavery can be found completely reprehensible.⁹ Two things can be said about this. First, this tract was most likely meant for a wide public distribution, given not only to Methodist preachers but to common people on the street as well. In an age that tended to favor reason over faith, a logical argument for the abolition of slavery was given, to which biblical passages could certainly have been added

by Wesley if he so chose. Quoting Bible verses would not change the mind of someone of either a different faith or no faith, but this kind of logical argument could be accepted by anyone regardless of religious affiliation. Second, by not giving biblical support to his arguments, Wesley may have left open room for later preachers like Smith and Capers to use the Bible to defend slavery. However, their inspiration could easily have come from a different source, as we shall soon see. Consequently, his refusal to use biblical proof also kept him from having to explain away any passages in the Bible that did seem to allow for slavery.

We also get an idea of how abhorrent slavery was to Wesley and how important this issue was to him in his letters. The last letter that he ever wrote was sent to William Wilberforce. Wesley encouraged Wilberforce in his efforts to oppose and outlaw the slave trade in the Britain, which he eventually succeeded in discontinuing in 1807. Having recently read the slave narrative written by Olaudah Equiano, Wesley reacted violently to slavery by calling it an "execrable villany, which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature."¹⁰ He also refers to the American form of slavery as "the vilest that ever saw the sun."¹¹ Just five days before his death, Wesley was still crusading for the abolition of slavery.

It may be hard to measure his exact influence on the early Methodist leaders on the slavery issue, but Wesley did have immense influence over his preachers. As Mathews relates it:

Methodists made it a habit to read the work of Wesley, their spiritual father; although Wesley never proposed a plan for getting rid of slavery, he did provide early Methodists with an incipient antislavery sentiment as well as the moral urgency to enforce it.¹²

As noted earlier, nearly all of the early Methodist leaders were firmly against slavery. The only one who was at all in favor of slavery was George Whitefield.

George Whitefield was possibly the most famous and effective preacher of the Great Awakening. He preached to large outdoor crowds because no building could hold the number of people who wanted to see him; he attracted up to 10,000 people at times. He has always been very closely associated with America, but he never enjoyed anywhere near the same influence over Methodist leadership that Wesley did. But whereas Wesley had a deep influence over the clergy, Whitefield, by virtue of his powerful charisma, had a broad influence over the American people. His disagreement with Wesley on the issue of predestination is well-documented, but their divergent stands on slavery deserve to be looked at as well. It is important to understand his views on slavery to understand how the issue of slavery developed within the

early American Methodist church. At the same time that Wesley was attacking the evils of slavery, Whitefield supported the nation's right to allow slavery. He even owned slaves himself. Though I have not located any explicit defense of slavery in Whitefield's writings, he not only supported it but also sought to extend it. His approval of slavery is the first to be found within the Methodist leadership, and when the biblical pro-slavery arguments began to emerge, they looked a lot like what Whitefield had implied. Even if Whitefield did not directly influence the later proponents of slavery, the roots of the Methodist pro-slavery arguments lay with him.

But Whitefield's view on slavery is not as easy to figure out as it may initially seem. In fact, early in his preaching career in colonial America, Whitefield railed against the cruelty of many slave owners. Looking at his first several years of ministry in America, we find little or no pro-slavery bias. In fact, he was overjoyed when the slaves reacted to his preaching and became "convicted." In the course of his preaching tours, Whitefield had many encounters with slaves and came to have compassion for them.

While in South Carolina in the summer of 1740, he noticed that there were several slaves who finished their work more quickly so that they could go to see Whitefield's preaching. He also noted that "many of their owners, who have been awakened, have resolved to teach them Christianity."¹³ But Christianity was not the only thing that Whitefield wanted to teach them. He wrote, "Had I the time and proper schoolmasters, I might immediately erect a negro school in South Carolina, as well as in Pennsylvania."¹⁴

After some amount of contact with them, he had become convinced that blacks were just as intelligent as whites and deserved the same education that white children enjoyed. About a month after this incident, he had already convinced some residents of Charleston, S.C., to start a school there, and had also found his first teacher.¹⁵

He stated in his journal that not only were slaves good candidates for being educated, but they seemed just as smart as their master's children. On December 27, 1739, he talked to the slaves about Christianity, which was his "usual custom."¹⁶ Two of the negro children "said their prayers after me very well," which led Whitefield to believe "that negro children, if early brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, would make as great proficiency as any white people's children."¹⁷ Concurrent with what Wesley stated in his *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, Whitefield believed that race did not play a part in intelligence. In thinking this, Whitefield was far ahead of his time.

More solid evidence of Whitefield's stance on slavery can be seen in his actions surrounding the founding of an orphanage. One of his pet projects in the colonies was the Bethesda orphanage he started in Georgia. He mentioned Bethesda several times in his letters, often asking for prayer for the success of the institution. However, at least twice he linked slavery to the orphanage. In

one letter, dated March 15, 1747, he wrote to a now-unknown benefactor about the progress being made at Bethesda, relating that "it is impossible for the inhabitants [of Georgia] to subsist themselves without the use of slaves."¹⁸ In Whitefield's view, slavery seemed to be an economic necessity for both the state in general and his orphanage in particular. However, at this time, Georgia did not allow slavery. Whitefield was forced to get support from benefactors in South Carolina, who purchased a plantation and slaves with the sole purpose of supporting Whitefield's orphanage. Later in the letter, Whitefield also mentions that he had been given a slave and that he was planning on purchasing more within a week's time.

About a year and a half later, Whitefield wrote a letter to the Trustees of the colony of Georgia. This letter, dated December 6, 1748, is a plea for the colony of Georgia to sanction slavery. He claimed that "very little proficiency [has been] made in the cultivation of my tract of land [on which Bethesda is located], and that entirely owing to the necessity I lay under of making use of white hands."¹⁹ He actually blamed much of Georgia's economic woes, not just his own, on the lack of slavery. He continued by asserting, "Had a negroe been allowed, I should have had a sufficiency to support a great many orphans, without expending above half the sum which hath been laid out."²⁰ The lack of slavery in Georgia cost Whitefield money that could have been used to help more orphans. However, Whitefield was willing to comply with the law. He wrote, "I am determined that not one of mine shall ever be allowed to work at the Orphan-house, till I can do it in a legal manner..."²¹ Whitefield was willing to submit to the legal authorities on the question of slavery, though he was still trying to influence, bargain with, or perhaps even coerce, that authority. He promised the Georgian trustees that his orphanage would be "not only a receptacle for fatherless children, but also a place of literature and academical studies,"²² continuing his former zeal for stressing education in the South.

In 1770, the year of his death, we find that Whitefield's attempts to legalize slavery in Georgia were successful. In a sermon delivered in that year to the Georgia trustees, Whitefield thanked them for allowing him to use slaves to support the work at Bethesda.²³ Also, Whitefield's papers contained a list of the assets found at Bethesda. Interestingly, there were sixteen orphans who were living at the orphanage in April 1770, yet there were seventy-five slaves.²⁴ This seems a rather disproportionate number of slaves to devote to the support of a mere sixteen orphans.

In a way, we could say that Whitefield truly believed that slaves and free men were equals, at least in the areas of education and religion. He thought that "negroes are indeed, by nature, no worse nor no better than whites."²⁵ Although they both had equal aptitudes, however, they did not necessarily, according to Whitefield, enjoy equal standing under the law. Herein lies the

apparent contradiction within Whitefield, for he claimed to see the slaves as equals, yet he wanted to see them as economic commodities as well.

There is some amount of debate on whether he actually did hold both of these views at the same time, or whether he changed his mind from opposition to slavery to support of it. Historian Stephen J. Stein, thinks that Whitefield initially was against slavery, but he later changed his mind.²⁶ He claims that Whitefield had a "deep-seated fear of the blacks," which he supports by showing that Whitefield was wary of a slave uprising in a part of the country that had experienced insurrection the previous year.²⁷ It seems a bit of a stretch to confuse watching out for one's safety with "deep-seated fear." He may have feared a slave uprising while traveling at night, but this surely did not contribute to his support of slavery.

Stein also accuses Whitefield of changing his stand on slavery because of the near financial failing of his orphanage. He states, "Under the threat of economic disaster he offered a somewhat different perspective upon human bondage."²⁸ According to Stein, slavery was Whitefield's cure-all for "Bethesda's mismanagement and lack of productivity," the way for him to bail out an impoverished humanitarian institution.²⁹ Both these arguments, especially the one on fear, are used by Stein to link Whitefield to an anonymous letter published in London that upheld the right of men to own men. While it is probable that Whitefield wrote this letter, it need not be seen as evidence of a "[carefully] ... formulated ... homiletical method which enabled him to steer between the Scylla of condoning brutality by the masters and the Charbydis [sic] of inciting rebellion by the blacks."³⁰

Contrary to Stein, William A. Sloat II traces the impact of pietist thought on Whitefield's beliefs, and does not find the contradiction that Stein found between the earlier views of Whitefield and the later.³¹ Whitefield's utmost concern, according to Sloat, was the conversion of the slaves; the issue of slavery was unimportant by comparison, for men could not be truly free physically if they were never free spiritually.³² Whitefield was definitely much more worried about a person's eternal destiny than he was about their current status in the world. It has been a debate throughout the history of the church as to what the relative stress between social justice and personal salvation should be. It is clear that Whitefield, like many of the pietists before him, emphasized the latter at the expense of the former. Whitefield created a captivated audience by supporting slavery.

George Whitefield was a man filled with contradictions. He believed that masters and slaves were "equal," in some respects, yet he also was in favor of slavery. He was a humanitarian who built schools and orphanages, yet he was a slave owner. He believed that black people could (and should) be converted to be his own brothers and sisters in Christ, yet he also held that the state could decide whether or not an entire race of human beings could be treated

as property. And he cared so much about the salvation of the slaves that poet and former slave Phyllis Wheatley was led to write a memorial to him when he died, praising him for bringing the message of God to the Africans³³, yet he also petitioned the Georgia government to extend the practice of slavery. It is these kinds of contradictions that remained within the Methodist Church for years to come. Even as some of the later leaders were trying to limit slavery within the church, the view of the state which they inherited from earlier leaders kept them from eradicating slavery from the church.

It is apparent that George Whitefield had a very different outlook on slavery from that of John Wesley. They both were against abuses by masters and thought that slaves should be given the right to learn about God and Christianity. However, Wesley thought that slavery was an evil that was so detestable that the state had no right to allow it. Whitefield, on the other hand, believed that the state did in fact have the privilege to legalize and regulate the practice of slavery, which led him to become an advocate for the spread of slavery. This argument on the state's place of deciding on the question of slavery was one that plagued the church for years to come and eventually divided the Methodist Church into several separate denominations.

The separation of the Methodist Church in America from the Church of England took place much sooner, and was not caused in any way by the issue of slavery. It did, however, have implications for slavery as it was to be practiced in American Methodist churches. Before 1784, there really was no such thing as a Methodist Church. Methodism had been what would more properly be called a movement in England, and was even less organized in the colonies. The preaching tours of the Wesleys and Whitefield brought "conviction" to a great many people, but little organization was brought with it. In the 1760s, laymen in America started to organize the Methodists, an occurrence that Wesley knew nothing about until one of them sent a letter to him in 1768!³³ These beginnings of Methodism in America, did not produce much set structure. But in 1769, Wesley, himself a very systematic person, started to send missionaries to the colonies, in part to impose some semblance of order on the newly arisen societies of Methodists (for what would a *Methodist* be without some amount of order). The Methodist Societies that missionaries such as Joseph Pilmore set up were, in his words, "never designed to make a Separation from the Church of England or be looked upon as a Church."³⁴

This initial objective, however, became impossible to continue after the Revolutionary War. The Methodist Societies were groups which operated for the most part within the Church of England. However, the future of these Societies within the Church of England was brought into doubt by the revolution. Because of their link to the Anglicans, the Methodists were often accused of having Tory sympathies. In fact, Wesley was a staunch supporter of the monarchy, seeing it as a legitimate government instituted by God.³⁵ The

pressure on the Methodists was so great that all of Wesley's missionaries except Francis Asbury left the American colonies, and even Asbury had to hide in a swamp at one point to avoid legal prosecution.³⁶ At the Annual Conference in 1779, the Methodist preachers decided that Asbury would be the leader for this group of Societies, which were becoming institutional churches in the wake of the political, and therefore ecclesiastical, break with England. The eventual break was tumultuous for the American Methodists because they had to change their entire outlook on what they as a group were, how they would be structured, and how they would deal with issues such as the sacraments.

It should be noted that at this time, "the antislavery movement within Methodism steadily gained momentum ..., leading to a brief but dramatic attempt to completely rid the movement of slavery."³⁷ In 1783, Asbury said that everyone at the annual conference was "agreed in the spirit of African liberty."³⁸ At the next annual conference, in May, 1784, the Methodist movement reached its "high water mark" in the fight against slavery, deciding to expel any member who shall "buy with no other design than to hold them as slaves."³⁹ Even before the break with the Church of England was officially accomplished, the Methodist leadership was trying to rid the movement of this wicked institution.

The final break with England came in the same year. Since it had become nearly impossible either for John Wesley to continue to exercise control over the Methodists in America or for the Methodists to remain loyal to a church that was so closely linked to their political enemy, Wesley decided that the American church needed a separate ecclesiastical structure. His attempts to get Anglican officials to ordain preachers for America were denied, so he ordained two himself and sent them to America with Dr. Thomas Coke, who was to become the joint superintendent (with Asbury) of the newly created church in America.⁴⁰ In the letter that he sent with Coke, Wesley gave his justification for ordaining preachers⁴¹ and advised them to use his "prepared ... Liturgy little differing from that of the Church of England (I think, the best constituted National Church in the world), which I advise all the travelling preachers to use..."⁴² Thus was the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) born, "the first distinctly American denomination."⁴³ But as we shall see, although the MEC emerged out of a revolution which stressed freedom from an oppressive state, it never was able to wholeheartedly seek the freedom of its parishioners who were in the chains of slavery.

The first and founding conference of the MEC was an ad hoc gathering of ministers during the last week of 1784. During this "Christmas Conference," the ministers made decisions that related to issues of ordination and church government. The new church was admittedly structured after the Church of England, as conference attendee Thomas Ware noted that "the plan of general

superintendence ... was a species of episcopacy.”⁴⁴ The conference resulted in the writing of the first edition of the *Discipline*, a book that detailed the specific beliefs and practices of the church. The organizers originally took a severe stance against slavery: those in the church who did not free their slaves according to the rules in the *Discipline* were denied communion and could be thrown out of the church.⁴⁵ This was, in fact, the only change that the preachers made in regards to the Lord’s supper. According to Don Mathews, “the prophetic message was clearly a departure from previous suggestions and ‘disapprobations.’ Hereafter Methodist laymen as well as preachers ought not and would not hold slaves.”⁴⁶

The Christmas Conference was optimistic that the laymen would accept these regulations regarding slavery. However, it did not take long for friction to occur. Since over half of America’s almost 15,000 Methodists in 1784 lived in Maryland and Virginia,⁴⁷ and many others lived elsewhere in the South, many members of the new church would have already owned slaves, perhaps for a couple generations. Apparently Maryland’s residents were somewhat amenable to the regulation, but many Virginians “raised a resounding furor” in response to this attempt to limit their freedom.⁴⁸ This uproar eventually forced the hand of Methodist leader, who called another conference to be held in Baltimore in June 1785. This conference suspended the regulation for laymen while retaining it for clergy. The new American denomination had taken the first step in what Mathews describes as the Methodists’ compromise against their own conscience in favor of a looser policy on slavery.

One may question why the Methodist leaders allowed themselves to yield to the popular outcry. First, the Methodist Church was based on revival, so it tended to be a popular movement. Preachers rode around their circuits gleaned new members wherever they went. In such a context, it became increasingly difficult to regulate an activity practiced or supported by so many of the intended converts. If the church took a softer stance on slavery initially, it would be able to attract more people to the church and hopefully change their minds on slavery later.

Second, the main goal of the Methodist preachers was to save men’s souls. This led them to believe that while slavery was an important issue, it was not *the* important issue. Of the utmost import was to get as many people as possible to hear the gospel message. Often, the only way for a preacher to gain access to the slaves was to have his master in the congregation. Viewed from this angle, it seemed a small price to pay to allow a man to keep his slaves as long as the slaves could be taught Christianity. This was partly the argument that Asbury was forced to concede, saying “I am called upon to suffer *for Christ’s sake*, not for slavery.”⁴⁹

Third, and most important for this essay, the Methodist Church had a view of the state as supreme and instituted by God. Some of the more extreme

interpreters of this stance held that since the state allowed slavery, it was morally acceptable for a Christian (and therefore, a Methodist) to own slaves, as long as the master was not cruel. This is about the same view of slavery that George Whitefield had held. This view may have had its roots in Methodism's predecessor, the Anglican Church. The Church of England was a national church, and as such was supported by and in turn gave support to the state. The Methodist Church, having such identifiable Anglican roots, kept much of the structure and views of the old church, including at least part of its view of the state.

One obvious example of bowing to the state's regulations was the rule on manumission. Preachers who either had or came into possession of slaves were told to manumit them immediately, as long as the state allowed such a release. Had the Methodists truly held to the American ideal of liberty, they would have not cared about how the government would react if they tried to manumit against the law to serve a higher moral good. Granted, this was before Thoreau expounded on the notion of civil disobedience, but after a revolution against a tyrannical government, the American Methodists had more than enough precedence to fight such an evil as slavery. Gary B. Nash, in his book *Race and Revolution*, says that this was the "opportune time for abolishing slavery," especially since "it was the era when the sentiment for ridding American society of the peculiar institution was the strongest."⁵⁰ The revolutionary fervor had brought with it the idea that all men, slaves included, should be free.

Larry E. Tise, historian of the pro-slavery movement in America, lists this "ascendancy of Revolutionary ideology" as one of the keys that allowed the northern states to emancipate their slaves despite some pro-slavery opposition.⁵¹ He says that in the north, "not a single proslavery voice of the stature of a ... Whitefield arose to resist the trend" of emancipation, implying that the influence of preachers like Whitefield may have been one of the reasons why the South did endure in this era of anti-slavery philosophy.⁵² Thanks in part to the voice of pro-slavery clergy like Whitefield, some men in the Methodist Church were able to ignore the implications of this ideal of freedom, since there was no denunciation of slavery in the Bible and therefore no stated higher moral good on this issue than the state's policy. The Methodists in America eventually allowed their previously high ideals to be more and more influenced by this over-inflated sense of respect for the state.

If we trace the various editions of the *Discipline*, we can find this trend of gradual acquiescence toward slavery and those who practiced it. The tenth edition of the *Discipline*, published in 1798, contained about the same procedures issued from Baltimore in 1785. Initially, they declared that they are "more than ever convinced of the great evil of African slavery which still exists in these United States."⁵³ Overseers are told to be cautious when selecting

people for high positions in the church. Those chosen to have "admission to official stations" must, if they have slaves, emancipate them "immediately or gradually, as the laws of the states respectively, and the circumstances of the case will admit."⁵⁴ The regional conferences were given some latitude in dealing with this regulation, but a major factor in the enforcement of this principal was the particular policy of the state the church was in. This rule effectively allowed for preachers meeting certain geographic specifications to keep their slaves. Even new enlisted preachers could own slaves in some states, even though the church could easily have made it a rule to not allow this for new preachers. But the church chose to remain subordinate to the state on this issue.

Also in the *Discipline* is a rule regarding new members that owned slaves. Concerning them, it is written, "No slave holder shall be received into society, till the preacher who has the oversight of the circuit, has spoken to him freely and faithfully on the subject of slavery."⁵⁵ The hard stance taken by the Christmas Conference to disallow all slaveholding by members had now become merely a slap on the wrist. There was no sanction of any kind against slaveholders, though, of course, nothing could stop an isolated preacher from speaking out against slavery.

But even though there were no consequences for those owning slaves, there were for those who chose to sell a slave. Anyone who sold a slave was to be excluded from society immediately.⁵⁶ The reasoning here is most likely that a slave owned by a Methodist would have a chance to hear the gospel and would hopefully not be treated with cruelty (although Douglass tells us that this was not always what happened), whereas a slave that was sold could fall into a comparatively much worse situation. There were also provisions for the buying of a slave. The owner was allowed to keep a person in servitude for a number of years corresponding the purchase price. In addition, if the slave was female and had children, the owner was allowed to keep possession of that child until it had reached a certain age; these age requirements are reminiscent of laws on slavery which had recently been passed in Virginia and Pennsylvania.⁵⁷

Finally, the clergymen and members were

requested to consider the subject of negro-slavery with deep attention...; and that they impart to the general conference ... any important thoughts upon the subject, that the conference may have full light, in order to take further steps towards the eradicating this enormous evil from that part of the church of God to which they are united.⁵⁸

It appears that the General Conference was leaving the options open for further action on the issue of slavery, but in fact what happens is that the

policies become increasingly more lax, as seen in later editions of the *Discipline*.

In the thirteenth edition of the *Discipline*, published only seven years later, the authors insist that they are "as much as ever convinced of the great evil of slavery," yet they have softened their stand toward it.⁵⁹ They did insert a clause in reference to traveling preachers who become owners of slaves. Such a man would "forfeit his ministerial character" until he could accomplish, "if it be practicable, a legal emancipation of such slaves, conformable to the laws of the state in which he lives,"⁶⁰ which was yet another show of subservience to the state. Later, when manumission is discussed, explicit mention is made of the states with laws against manumission, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee, whose residents are said to "be exempted from the operation of the above rules" that provide for emancipation.⁶¹

One positive addition is found in this edition: masters were allowed to sell slaves in the instance of the slave requesting to be sold.⁶² However, this was overshadowed by the new command for the preachers to "admonish and exhort all slaves to render due respect and obedience to the commands and interests of their respective masters."⁶³ This was the same kind of sermon that slave narrative writer Harriet Jacobs reported hearing while she was enslaved.⁶⁴ Not only did this kind of preaching give the slave little hope for freedom, and many might say a skewed view of the Bible, it also tended to uphold the master's right to own slaves, at least in the eyes of the master. Overall, this edition of the *Discipline* shows a general decline in the general Methodist anti-slavery stance.

Only three years later in the fourteenth edition, we find a further wearing of the anti-slavery stance.⁶⁵ The phrase on how they are convinced that slavery is evil remains, but the rules regarding the buying and selling of slaves are omitted in favor of a note which "authorises each annual conference to form their own regulations."⁶⁶ The rule about traveling preachers found in the 1805 edition remains, but the one regarding men in "official stations in the church" that was in the 1798 edition has been deleted, as has been the section requesting preachers to "consider" slavery with "deep attention."⁶⁷ After comparison with the 1798 version, the 1808 *Discipline* looks rather pathetic for a church which had once tried to take a tough stand on the issue of slavery. Almost all the changes point toward an attitude of Methodist subordination to the power of the state. The Methodist Episcopal Church had allowed itself to compromise its own ethical values to those of the state.

Now that we have seen the roots of the concessions given in favor of slavery and have seen how near the turn of the century slavery was allowed to creep into the church, I will turn my attention to a pair of later Methodist preachers who not only were in favor of slavery, but took the ultimate step of

using the Bible to support slavery. Two of the most prominent men in the Methodist Church who argued in favor of slavery were William Capers of South Carolina and William A. Smith of Virginia. According to Harmon L. Smith, a theoretical basis for the Church's defense of slavery did not develop until the 1830's when Capers and Smith came to prominence.⁶⁸ However, when they did develop this defense, their arguments closely resembled Whitefield's beliefs. The two men had different styles of approaching the issue but both of them came to the same conclusion about slavery, that is was Scripturally correct and was a positive good for the country and the Church.

One of their objections to the anti-slavery argument was based on passages like 1 Peter 2.13, which states, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men."⁶⁹ The Methodist Church was to, as William Smith said, "[acknowledge] the supreme authority of the state in all civil matters," and that "while the Discipline deprecates the evil of slavery, it requires the members of the Church within those states to conform their action to the rules or laws of those states in which they live."⁷⁰ The Methodist Church had placed itself in a position under the state from which it was unable to lift itself without turning its back on some of its stated doctrines. The decision on slavery was solely to be decided by the government. "From this standpoint," offers Harmon Smith, "it is, indeed, irrelevant to discuss the morality of slavery as an institution of the state."⁷¹ Capers went so far as to declare that "the Church has nothing to do with the question of the *evil* of slavery."⁷² He readily admits that slavery is an evil, at least in some sense of the word, yet since it is not the Church's place to do anything about it, the Church can have no policy against it. This attitude toward the state is the same that has been growing within the Methodist Church ever since George Whitefield.

William Smith produced some more philosophical arguments for slavery as well. Smith was greatly influenced by Aristotle, from whom he learned that "the state of a thing ... may, under one set of circumstances, be considered wrong while under other conditions in can be interpreted as to be right."⁷³ In other words, slavery could be right or wrong depending on the context. In a context where it is "apparent" that men are unequal in intelligence and ability, then the "naturally superior" people have a right to be in a position over those who are "inferior." This, of course, is the way that God made men. The Bible, inspired by God, is man's sole source for morals and "all questions of abstract morality ... forever."⁷⁴ There are several examples of God allowing his chosen people, the Jews, to have slaves. Therefore, since slavery was "never formally abolished" in the New Testament, as Capers notes, slavery must still be right for men to practice in the nineteenth century.⁷⁵

In a series of lectures published in 1856, William Smith makes several assertions about slavery, including saying that "the great abstract principle of

slavery is right, because it is a fundamental principle of the social state.”⁷⁶ The particular circumstances in the United States allowed slavery to be practiced without sinning against God. However, Smith did not give masters the right to treat their slaves with cruelty. He said that “it by no means follows that the conduct of all masters, in the exercise of their functions as masters, is proper.”⁷⁷ Slavery was allowed, but mistreatment of slaves was not. His justification was biblical, as he cited Colossians 4.1, which says, “Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal,” and Ephesians 6.5-9, where the master is reminded that he too has a master in heaven, so he needs to treat his slaves on earth with respect.⁷⁸

Smith ended this part of the lecture with this warning: “Each one is held to a strict accountability for the faithful performance of his duty the one to the other—‘for there is no respect of persons with God.’”⁷⁹ It is a somewhat contradictory idea that the concept of slavery can fit with the notion of there being “no respect of persons with God,” because slavery itself creates a huge distinction between the master and slave. Yet this should not surprise us, as this is the same apparent contradiction that we found in George Whitefield, who believed in the “equality” of slaves, yet also defended the institution of slavery. Smith held about the same view as Whitefield on the sovereignty of the state in deciding on the issue of slavery, and he also agreed with Whitefield’s ideas on the treatment of slaves while retaining the superstructure of slavery.

Both Smith and Capers finally argued, along with John Calhoun, that slavery could be seen as a positive good, lifting up the Africans from their wretched lives and helping them to gain a semi-intelligence and a knowledge of God.⁸⁰ Slavery, though perhaps a temporary institution, was necessary and could be helpful for everyone involved. And in addition to that, it was sanctioned by God, the ultimate authority for any good Methodist.

The debate over slavery in Methodism was long and complex, reaching back to its roots in the Church of England and including many contradictory views. The history of the Methodist Church in America reveals an initial crusade against slavery by the church’s leaders, followed by gradual acquiescence to the slaveholders in the church. This tension between the pro-slavery and anti-slavery factions would lead to several splits within the church, the largest being the split between North and South denominations in 1844, which did not reunite until 1939.⁸¹ But the beginnings of the arguments of these two factions can be traced back to the beginning of this movement that eventually became the Methodist Church. One of the main reasons that slavery was able to last so long within the Methodist Church is because of a respect for the state, inherited from the Church of England, which accepted the existence of a “humane” form of slavery when the government allowed it. Not all Methodists held this view, but enough did so that slavery could not be removed from the church and would in time be defended by it.

Endnotes

- ¹ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., (New York: Mentor, 1987), 287.
- ² Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, (New York: Abingdon, 1974), 186
- ³ Donald Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1965), 4.
- ⁴ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 11, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1872), 59-79.
- ⁵ *Ibid*, 60-61.
- ⁶ *Ibid*, 65-66.
- ⁷ *Ibid*, 70.
- ⁸ *Ibid*, 75-79.
- ⁹ *Ibid*, 70.
- ¹⁰ John Wesley, *Selected Letters of John Wesley*, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 237.
- ¹¹ *Ibid*.
- ¹² Mathews, 6.
- ¹³ George Whitefield, *George Whitefield's Journals 1737-1741*, Gainesville, Fla: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1969, 444.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, 451.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, 377.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*.
- ¹⁸ George Whitefield, *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield, M.A.*, vol. 2, (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1771), 90.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*, 208.
- ²⁰ *Ibid*.
- ²¹ *Ibid*, 209.
- ²² *Ibid*.
- ²³ *Ibid*, vol. 6, 385.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*, vol. 3, 496.
- ²⁵ William A. Sloat II, "George Whitefield, African-Americans, and Slavery," *Methodist History* 33, no. 1 (Oct 1994), 5.
- ²⁶ Stephen J. Stein, "George Whitefield on Slavery: Some New Evidence," *Church History* 42, no. 2 (June, 1973), 243-256.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, 246-7.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*, 245.
- ²⁹ *Ibid*.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*, 248.
- ³¹ Sloat, 3-13.
- ³² *Ibid*, 13.
- ³³ Norwood, 65.
- ³⁴ Quoted in Norwood, 71.
- ³⁵ Norwood, 84.

- ³⁶ Norwood, 85-87.
- ³⁷ John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 139.
- ³⁸ Wigger, 139.
- ³⁹ Wigger, 139.
- ⁴⁰ Frederick C. Gill, ed., *Selected Letters of John Wesley*, 202.
- ⁴¹ Technically, Wesley did not hold the traditional office needed to ordain clergymen; thus he repeatedly appealed to the Bishop of London to do it. However, Wesley believed he had the right to ordain as well: "Lord King's *Account of the Primitive Church* convinced me many years ago that bishops and presbyters are the same order, and consequently have the same right to ordain." He had been asked to do this very thing for many years, but until 1784 had refused, "because I was determined as little as possible to violate the established order of the National Church to which I belonged." Wesley, *Letters*, 203.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 203.
- ⁴³ Terry D. Bilhartz, *Francis Asbury's America: An Album of Early American Methodism* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1984), 28.
- ⁴⁴ Quoted in Norwood, 100.
- ⁴⁵ Mathews, 10.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 10-11.
- ⁴⁷ Norwood, 74.
- ⁴⁸ Mathews, 11.
- ⁴⁹ Quoted in Mathews, 26, emphasis his.
- ⁵⁰ Gary B. Nash, *Race and Revolution* (Madison: Madison House, 1990), 6.
- ⁵¹ Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1987), 34.
- ⁵² Tise, 34.
- ⁵³ *The Methodist Discipline of 1798: Including the Annotations of Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury*, 10th ed., ed. Frederick A. Norwood (Rutland: Academy Books, 1979), 169. Hereafter "1798." An editorial note on p. 198 says this about this entry on slavery: "The Christmas Conference of 1784 maintained the strong early witness against slavery. The rules here given were introduced in 1798. The bishops (Asbury and Coke) have no comment (even though they added comments to several other entries)."
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 170. For laws regarding slavery, see "Pennsylvania, An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery (1780)" and "Virginia Manumission Law of 1782," both found in Nash, 112-116.
- ⁵⁸ 1798, 170-1.
- ⁵⁹ *Doctrine and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 13th ed. (New York: W. C. Robinson, 1805), 215.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 216.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 215-216.

- ⁶³ Ibid, 216.
- ⁶⁴ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Mentor, 1987), 397-401.
- ⁶⁵ *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 14th ed. (New York: J.C. Totten, 1808).
- ⁶⁶ Ibid, 211.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid, 210-211.
- ⁶⁸ Harmon L. Smith, "William Capers and William A. Smith," *Methodist History* 3, no. 1 (Oct 1964), 23.
- ⁶⁹ *New International Version*.
- ⁷⁰ Harmon Smith, 29.
- ⁷¹ Ibid, 29.
- ⁷² Ibid, 28, emphasis mine.
- ⁷³ Ibid, 26.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid, 26.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid, 26.
- ⁷⁶ William A. Smith, "Is Slavery Sinful?," in *Sourcebook of American Methodism*, ed. Frederick A. Norwood (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 264.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid, 265.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid.
- ⁸⁰ Harmon Smith, 32.
- ⁸¹ Norwood 197, 383.