CHAPTER 3

SLAVERY TEARS THE CHURCH APART

William Wilberforce, in the midst of his monumental struggle in Parliament to abolish slavery throughout Great Britain, received a letter from John Wesley. In this, his last letter, (he died three days later), Wesley said, "Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? O be not weary of well doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of his might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it."[1] Wilberforce worked tirelessly for forty-two more years until slavery was abolished in 1833 in all British colonies, and an appropriation of millions of pounds voted to compensate the owners for their loss. Wesley's dream of extinguishing slavery in America, however, would not come true until the new country and the new church had been torn apart amid bitter controversy.

The Early Years

Wesley's position on slavery was reiterated at American Methodism's founding conference of 1784. "We view it (holding our fellow-creatures in slavery) as contrary to the Golden Law of God, on which hang all the law and the prophets, and the inalienable rights of mankind, as well as every principle of the Revolution, to hold man in the deepest debasement, in a more abject slavery than is perhaps to be found in any part of the world except America, so many souls that are all capable of the image of God."[2] The first rule voted by the convention was that adult slaves—those between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five should be emancipated, provided the laws of the state permitted. The second rule prohibited slave owners from admission to Methodist Societies and from partaking of the Lord's Supper; both laymen and ministers were subject to these rules. The very next year, however, the conference bowed to internal pressure and accepted the first of several compromises to this firm stance.

In 1787, a resolution was passed regarding the spiritual welfare of slaves. "We conjure all our Ministers and Preachers, by the love of God, and the salvation of souls, and do require them, by all the authority that is invested in us, to leave nothing undone for the spiritual benefit and salvation of the negroes... who appear to have a real desire of fleeing from the wrath to come, to meet such in class, and to exercise the whole Methodist Discipline among them."[3] In 1785, Francis Asbury and a companion called on George Washington at Mount Vernon and found that he agreed in principle with the Methodist proposal for gradual emancipation. On the occasion of the new President's 1789 inauguration in New York City, Bishops Coke and Asbury presented him with the formal congratulations of the whole Methodist society, including a declaration of loyalty to the U.S. Constitution. Representatives of other denominations hastened to follow the Methodist lead. The three men also discussed the difficulties of ending slavery in the new country. They agreed in principle, at least, to the idea of "gradual emancipation." At Washington's death, Asbury recalled their meeting with admiration, remarking that "In his [Washington's] will he ordered the manumission of his slaves, a true son of liberty in all points."[4]

Opposition to such a radical stance was angry and immediate, especially in southern states where the economy had grown more and more dependent on unpaid labor. Francis Asbury lamented that he was welcome to preach to white settlers, but those who owned slaves were often suspicious of him and sent their black laborers away where they would not hear any chance reference to emancipation. He worried that the slaves might be thus denied the offer of salvation and debated with himself on the complicated situation he himself had helped to bring about. He felt keenly the urgent priority of bringing redemption to the lost, but he had traveled all over the slave-holding regions and knew well the truth about slavery, especially the appalling conditions of sugar and rice plantations.

Francis Asbury went so far in 1812 as to ordain a young black man whose conversion and call to preach Asbury found convincing. Asbury was immediately criticized for ordaining a slave, but he was able to prove that the young man was legally free. Jesse Lee, who lost by four votes the election to bishop possibly owing to his stand against slavery, commented wryly on Asbury's uproar. "As in all unnatural excitements, a reaction had taken place. Instead of denouncing slavery, the Church was prohibiting the ordination of slaves."[5]

The question of what to do with a newly-freed slave population haunted the Methodists, as well as other protestant groups, especially the Quakers. Freedmen who farmed in rural areas had problems from neighboring whites, especially small farmers such as those in North Carolina's piedmont and west. In urban areas freedmen competed for business with white artisans. In 1840, 110 citizens of Raleigh signed a petition protesting the manumission of slaves because it increased the number of free negroes and "was calculated to produce dissatisfaction among our slaves."[6] A law requiring freed slaves to leave the state within ninety days had been sporadically enforced, but Lunsford Lane, a commercially successful freedman, was given only twenty days to leave. A talented tobacconist, Lane had bought his own freedom and lingered in Raleigh hoping to raise and save enough money to purchase his wife and six children from Benjamin B. Smith. Lane charged in his 1842 autobiography that Smith neglected to clothe and feed Lane's wife, knowing that Lane could provide these necessities. Lane's business was so successful that his white competitors were jealous. Though Lane was befriended by many moderate whites in Raleigh, including Joseph Gales, the influential editor of the *Raleigh Register*, public pressure forced Lane to leave. With the help of his friends, Lane garnered enough money to complete the purchase. When he returned to Raleigh early in 1842, he was tarred and feathered by an angry mob. Once he and his family made their escape to the north, Lane became an influential leader in the anti-slavery movement.

Ironically, Lunsford Lanes's advocate, Joseph Gales, was himself a slave owner. Wealthy and cultivated, Gales and his wife left Sheffield, England and settled in Raleigh with the intention of founding a liberal newspaper in the new capital. At first they were "horrified at the idea of purchasing slaves, of trading in the blood and sinews of our fellow-beings." Within a short time, however, "apparently from necessity, during our residence in Raleigh, we were induced to purchase several, both as House Servants, and to aid us in conducting our Printing, Paper-making, and Farming concerns."[7] Jesse Lee often urged his planter father to free his slaves, if only in his will. Instead, the older Lee made a will specifically bequeathing slaves to his various heirs. The Rev. Bennett Blake, who devoted most of his active years to the nurture of small, struggling missions, mostly black, owned slaves who worked his plantation in eastern Wake County. William Glendenning, once he settled in Raleigh and married, overcame his earlier aversion to slavery and, according to his will, owned several who worked in his house and store. The hospitality he offered Francis Asbury and Henry Boehm when they visited Raleigh for Annual Conference 1811 was enhanced by slave labor.

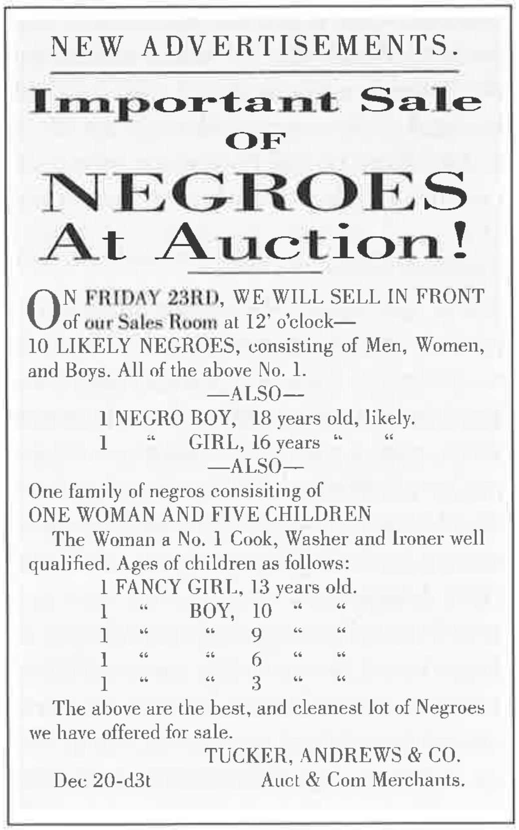
The American Colonization Society, active in North Carolina, favored transporting freedmen to Liberia. Raleigh's John Rex, donor of funds that eventually established Rex Hospital, freed his slaves in his will and provided generous funds to transport them to Africa. One declined the offer, and another who went to Liberia wrote back that the conditions were so poor in the colony that she wished she had never left Raleigh. John Hope Franklin in his well-regarded *The Free Negro in North Carolina 1790–1860* documented only 517 pioneers from North Carolina who took ship for Liberia. As the nation drew closer and closer to war, the number of immigrants decreased. The difficulty of providing for the basic needs of the South's freed population was addressed unevenly by the Freedmen's Bureau after the war, but the Bureau's influence prevailed only where federal troops enforced the new laws.

Politics v. Principle

Early Methodism's solid anti-slavery stance confronted almost immediate attack. In 1785, owing to Southern pressure, the conference formally suspended the execution of the motion on slavery adopted the year before. In 1796 a more moderate plan was adopted, requiring those who bought slaves to allow them to work out their purchase price and win their own freedom. Then the General Conference of 1804 exempted southern states from even this mild stricture, and the rule governing the buying and selling of slaves was left to individual annual conferences. New Jersey was the last of the northern states to do away with slavery; its 1804 law provided for gradual abolition. The anti-slavery party within the church regarded with horror this relaxation of the old Wesleyan credo, but others saw it as a way to preserve the unity of the Methodist Church in America. Bishop Thomas Coke, Asbury's colleague, spoke energetically against slavery, but always deferred to the laws of the various states. Jesse Lee commented that, "They (our fathers) would never have suffered the great evil of slavery to produce the still greater evil of rending the seamless garment of Christ in twain. They would have preserved the unity of the church [in spite of] all evils of slavery."[8]

Canellum Hines, assigned to the Raleigh church after the Annual Conference in 1811, joined Henry Boehm and seven other ministers appointed to discuss the problem of slavery at the General Conference of 1816. Their report was included in Boehm's autobiography. "After mature deliberations they are of the opinion that under the present existing circumstances in relation to slavery that little can be done to abolish a practice so contrary to the principles of moral justice. They are sorry to say that the evil appears to be past remedy, and they are led to deplore the destructive consequences which already accrued and are yet likely to result therefrom."[9] The resultant clause in the new Discipline read, "There-fore no slaveholder shall be eligible to any official station in our Church hereafter where the laws of the state in which he lives will admit of emancipation and permit the liberated slave to enjoy freedom."[10] The church, in one final effort to preserve its unity, had yielded this last authority to the several states.

Meanwhile, in Raleigh as throughout the South, proslavery attitudes hardened. Southern speakers who favored any kind of abolition risked public obloquy. Gales' *Raleigh Register* stood up for the rights of freedmen, but every issue of his paper advertised rewards for the return of runaway slaves. Northern abolitionists who came south to open free schools for black children (some had the poor judgment to call themselves "missionaries") were especially hated, and were frequently met with mob violence. Abolitionist pamphlets were confiscated from the mails before they could be delivered. Moreover, the preachers of many denominations defended slavery from their pulpits. "Southern theology would not admit that slavery was sinful. It was sanctioned in the Bible."[11] Thomas Meredith, leader of the North Carolina Baptist State Convention and editor of *The Biblical Recorder,* argued that the apostles did not condemn slavery, and they certainly would have if they



NEW ADVERTISEMENTS.

Important Sale
OF
NEGROES
At Auction!

ON FRIDAY 23RD, WE WILL SELL IN FRONT of our Sales Room at 12' o'clock—
10 LIKELY NEGROES, consisting of Men, Women, and Boys. All of the above No. 1.

—ALSO—
1 NEGRO BOY, 18 years old, likely.
1 " GIRL, 16 years " "
—ALSO—

One family of negros consisiting of
ONE WOMAN AND FIVE CHILDREN

The Woman a No. 1 Cook, Washer and Ironer well qualified. Ages of children as follows:

1 FANCY GIRL, 13 years old.
1 " BOY, 10 " "
1 " " 9 " "
1 " " 6 " "
1 " " 3 " "

The above are the best, and cleanest lot of Negroes we have offered for sale.

TUCKER, ANDREWS & CO.
Dec 20-d3t Auct & Com Merchants.

Notice of slave auction in the Raleigh Daily Progress, *December 21, 1864.*

considered it in any way sinful. In 1835 a Quarterly Conference for the New Bern station resolved that abolitionists were "presumptuously tramping upon the express commands of Almighty God."[12]

Writing from Chapel Hill in 1892, Kemp Battle, who had lived in Raleigh from 1854 to 1875, recalled an idyllic picture of race relations in Raleigh. "I am proud to state that the treatment of slaves in Raleigh was generally kindly and wise. Nowhere was there a more agreeable feeling between the races. Masters and mistresses did their best to train their servants [slaveholders seemed reluctant to use the term *slave*] into habits of virtue and industry. Their efforts met with much success. Nowhere were better cooks, seamstresses, housemaids, mechanics, and hostlers."[13]

The value of black labor, slave or free, was fully appreciated in the marketplace. A notice in the *Raleigh Register* (January 1, 1853) announced that in Goldsboro the turpentine business was flourishing to such an extent that there was a large demand for hands of all ages, and "prices for men ranged from $125 for common to $200 for extra.... These prices are higher than have ever been known heretofore in this section of the country."

Within the Raleigh Methodist church the races coexisted, at least for a while. The 1812 membership reported in conference minutes was seventysix: forty-four black and thirty-two white. Most of the black members were probably slaves, but some were certainly freedmen. "While accurate and complete statistics are not available, there can be no doubt that a considerable number of free Negroes belonged to the organized religious life of North Carolina."[14] In 1831, the year Melville Cox left Raleigh to spread the gospel in Africa, the membership included eighty-five white members and one hundred thirty-five black. At that time, the total population of Raleigh was close to 1,700, about half black and half white.

In their first (1811) building, black and white Methodists inhabited a small frame structure, fifty by sixty feet, facing Edenton Street. When the building burned in 1839, both races worked to replace it with a much larger one, but black members were seated in an upstairs gallery. In 1845 several white families left this congregation to start a new city mission on Person Street. This church was later called Central Methodist Church and eventually merged with Trinity Methodist Church. At about this time, the name *Edenton Street* was employed, especially in conference minutes, to distinguish the original church from the City Mission.

By 1853 both races in the Edenton Street church had combined their efforts and raised enough money to buy a lot on the northeast corner of Edenton and Harrington Streets. The congregation of Christ Episcopal Church a few blocks away had recently replaced its original wooden building with the stone structure that stands today. At the urging of Daniel Culbreth, both black and white members of Edenton Street worked together to raise sufficient funds to buy the old building. The vestry of Christ Episcopal Church transferred ownership of this 1828 building, including the pews and interior gallery, to the Methodists. Daniel Culbreth, the white minister assigned to the Raleigh African Mission, and a group of enthusiastic volunteers had the wooden structure raised from its foundation and rolled on logs across the capitol grounds and down Edenton Street to its new home on the corner of Harrington Street. According to tradition, the move was made by torchlight on a cold winter night, the volunteers having worked all day at their regular jobs. At the time, there were no ordained black preachers, and Daniel Culbreth, affectionately called "Uncle Culbreth," served the black congregation for one more year, followed by James Reid, who preached to this black congregation until 1858. Later, the African congregation united with the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and at that time, the trustees of Edenton Street transferred the church property to their conference.

The 1853 North Carolina Annual Conference Minutes reported that 240 black members moved their membership to the church that eventually became St. Paul's African Methodist Episcopal Church. John Bassett in his *North Carolina Methodism and Slavery* emphasized the mutual good will attending this separation. The blacks rejoiced to have their own building, the first for a separate black congregation in Wake County. Speaking to the convention that commemorated the first hundred years of Methodism in North Carolina, A. W. Mangum said, "The history of religion among the colored people in Raleigh would make a highly entertaining sketch. For several years before the [Civil] war they had their own church. Some of the best and ablest men in our Conference were their regular pastors.... I fear that the day will never return, when there will be such mutual interest, trust, and christian affection between the white and colored Methodists, as existed between the white and colored Methodists in those days."[15]

The Methodist Episcopal Church, South

The 1844 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church adjourned in defeat at midnight on June 10. Hours of heated debate on slave holding at this and previous conferences had not produced any compromise that would satisfy the opposing sides, and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South was born. A Georgia bishop, James O. Andrew, had acquired slaves from three different sources. Some were outright gifts, and others belonged to his second wife. Georgia law forbade manumission of these slaves, and when New England delegates threatened to withdraw unless disciplinary action was taken against him, Bishop Andrew, a modest man of singular humility, offered to resign his office. The angry southern block refused even to consider the idea. Some histories maintain that slavery was not the cause of the division, but it is hard to imagine a breach of such magnitude born of any issue less compelling. A detailed 1884 history by Holland N. McTyeire (*A History of Methodism*) recorded the arguments raised by Bishop Andrew's predicament, but stressed the large number of Annual Conferences throughout the United States, sectional rivalries, and especially northern intransigence, as the cause of the break-up.[16] McTyeire was later elected to the office of bishop in the southern church. Under the Plan of Separation specific conditions for organizing the conferences in slaveholding states were set up, and those delegates made plans to meet in 1845 in Louisville to inaugurate a new church. Four of the six North Carolina delegates had at some time served Edenton Street Church: Canellum Hines, Peter Doub, Bennett Blake, and John T. Brame. The new Methodist Episcopal Church, South held its first General Conference in Petersburg, Virginia the next year. Its proceedings were published in a 245-page book. The principal branches of Methodism did not come back together until the great 1939 Conference of Union.

"Slavery was too strong for Methodism in 1784, ... but it will succumb to the power of the gospel of Christ. Its doom is written, but 'the time is not yet.'"[17]

Leroy M. Lee, nephew and biographer of Jesse Lee, 1848.