

Early American Methodism and Slavery

by A. Glenn Mower, Jr.¹

The prophet Isaiah once urged his people to look to the rock from which they were cut. This is an admonition that can, with profit, be taken to themselves by members of the Susquehanna Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church; for, in doing so, they can gain a renewed grasp of who they are as people called “Methodists”.

The “rock”, for central and northeast Pennsylvania United Methodists, was Methodism as it existed in early colonial America: a Methodism that was characterized by a spirit of divine discontent. It was this spirit that led the Methodist preachers who spoke for Methodism at that time to challenge the status quo regarding its position on a troublesome issue of the day – slavery. The acceptability to Christians of this institution had been called into question by John Wesley when he joined with England’s William Wilberforce in advocating the abolition of the slave trade: a course in which Thomas Coke concurred.²

Coke took the anti-slavery stance when, in 1785, he joined Francis Asbury in a visit to George Washington [who was not President until 1789, but was at the time a leading citizen in Virginia], when he “responded favorably to the business they brought on this occasion: the abolition of slavery in Virginia.”³

Even before that, American preachers in the northern states had carried opposition to slavery a step further in 1780 when they required preachers holding slaves should set them free and answer “yes” to the question: *Does the Conference acknowledge that slavery is contrary to the laws of God, man and nature and hurtful to society, contrary to the dictates of conscience and pure religion, and doing that which we would not others should do to us and ours? Do we pass our disapprobation on all our friends who keep slaves and advise their freedom?*⁴

The anti-slavery position of the 1780 Conference rose to a higher level four years later when, in the Christmas Conference [that established the Methodist Episcopal Church in American as a separate denomination], the assembled preachers took action that “we therefore think it our most bounden duty to take immediately some effectual method to extirpate this abomination from among us”⁵

Under the legislation adopted as additions to the *Rules of Our Society* were the following:

¹ Rev. A. Glenn Mower prepared this article while a retired member of the Indiana Conference.

² Norwood, Frederick A., THE STORY OF AMERICAN METHODISM. Abingdon Press, Nashville TN, 1974. p. 58. Hereafter cited as Norwood.

³ Norwood, p. 120.

⁴ Norwood, p. 93.

⁵ Barclay, Wade Crawford, EARLY AMERICAN METHODISM 1769-1844. Board of Missions and Church Extension of The Methodist Church, New York NY, 1950. Vol. 2, pp. 72. Hereafter cited as Barclay 2.

1. Every Society member holding slaves was required to set them free, according to a time schedule based on their ages.
2. Every assistant serving the Society was ordered to keep a journal recording names and ages of all slaves held within his circuit, and the date of every act of manumission and the official records of such actions.
3. Every person within the Society failing to comply with these requirements was to “have liberty to quietly withdraw” from the Society; and should he fail to do so, he was to be “excluded” from it.
4. No one either thus withdrawing or excluded was to be allowed to share with Methodists in the observance of the Lord’s Supper until he obeyed the manumission order.
5. No slave holder was to be allowed into the Society until he had complied with the rules concerning slavery.⁶

As might be expected, this effort to reshape Methodist policy by making it officially anti-slavery encountered stiff opposition both during and after the Christmas Conference. According to historian Barclay, the action taken at that time was “by no means unanimous” and, in the words of one member, Jesse Lee, “private members, local preachers, and some of the traveling preachers” were opposed to the rules.⁷

Opposition to the anti-slavery legislation was expressed in many ways. Thomas Coke, for example, “encountered intense reaction” and threats of violence when, during a 1785 visit to Virginia, he spoke against slavery and called for emancipation – and other Methodist preachers were targets of similar threats. Opposition was shown by some Methodist preachers by leaving Methodist Societies, and by petitions presented in a 1785 Virginia Conference urging suspension of the new rules against slavery.

While no action was taken on these petitions, several months later a Conference in Baltimore voted to indefinitely suspend the rules, a decision that was seen by Coke to be “prudent” because of the “great opposition to the minute concerning slavery, and our work being in too infantile a state to push things to extremity.”⁸

Coke’s comment can be seen as justifying the conclusion expressed by historian Barclay, that the suspension of the 1784 rules on slavery was a compromise felt necessary if the young church was to grow. Expedient though it may have been, to Barclay this “first official concession made by American Methodism to slavery” constituted a failure on the part of those early American Methodists to be true to their Wesleyan heritage as exemplified in John Wesley’s refusal to compromise on a moral issue. It has also been viewed as a “loss of the

⁶ Barclay 2, p. 72.

⁷ Barclay 2, p. 73.

⁸ Barclay 2, pp. 73f.

adventurous spirit of the earliest years and a surrendering of an opportunity for courageous, independent thought and action.”⁹

The suspension of the anti-slavery rules on the grounds of expediency was certainly a negation of the spirit expressed by Coke and Asbury in saying that “our grand object is to raise and preserve a holy and united people. Holiness is our aim; and we pay no attention to numbers, but in proportion as they possess the genuine principles of vital religion.”¹⁰

Although the anti-slavery rules adopted in the 1784 Christmas Conference were suspended, they were not rescinded. And the determination to place American Methodism in open opposition to slavery remained throughout the Eighteenth Century, during which “the young church did not know an hour of peace.”

The persistence of opposition to slavery was apparent in Asbury’s recording that, in a Conference held in Virginia in November 1794, “we had great siftings and searchings, especially on the subject of slavery. The preachers, almost unanimously, entered into an agreement and resolution not to hold slaves in any State where the law will allow them to manumit them – on pain of forfeiture of their place in the itinerant connexion.” Moreover, when several local preachers were presented for ordination, this was withheld “till they gave their obligation to the humane society for the emancipation of their slaves – to which they readily consented.”¹¹

Additional evidence that anti-slavery sentiment was still alive within American Methodism as the Eighteenth Century came to a close is present in action taken in the General Conference of 1796 declaring slavery to be a “great evil” and recommending that yearly conferences, quarterly meetings, and supervisors of districts and circuits be careful who were given official responsibilities and require those holding slaves to move toward their emancipation.

Other anti-slavery measures included in this action gave further indication of the continuing vitality of the anti-slavery spirit. The Conference, however, failed to pass controlling legislation – being content to do no more than state what could and should be done, leaving it up to annual conferences and local churches to take positive action.¹²

Although abortive, the effort made by early American Methodist preachers to alter the status quo concerning their church’s position on slavery by making this position positively and officially anti-slavery is significant because

1. It forced the church to face the fact that its silence on the question of slavery exposed it to credible attacks on moral and spiritual grounds, and

⁹ Barclay 2, pp. 74f.

¹⁰ Barclay 2, p. 79, footnote.

¹¹ The above comments on the late Eighteenth Century Methodist experience with slavery are based on Barclay 2, pp. 78f.

¹² Barclay 2, pp. 80f.

2. It was a test of the church's moral fibre, posing as it did the question of whether or not the church was ready to assume the role of the prophet when doing so could risk the loss of members.

The experience of the early American Methodist church as its spokesmen-preachers confronted the issue of slavery can thus be seen as a case study in the vital area of the definition of priorities. And while those who placed adherence to moral/spiritual principle above compromise on grounds of expediency were initially rebuffed, they were not forever silenced – carrying the campaign for a strong anti-slavery stance into the ensuing century. In doing so, these prophetic voices set an example of commitment to principle that could serve as an inspiration to all those who, in subsequent years, would find themselves involved in the ongoing struggle over the definition of their church's priorities.

The effort to effect a change in late Eighteenth Century Methodism through the adoption of a positive anti-slavery stance is also significant because it was a demonstration of social activism that was not characteristic of either Methodism's founder or his early American followers. While John Wesley and his English disciples performed many acts of social service on behalf of their country's poor and needy, he, as Frederick A. Norwood notes, "was no reformer." According to this historian, the facts that Wesley was aware of the changes accompanying the Industrial Revolution and that Wesleyan Societies were mainly composed of working class people most directly affected by the factory system "would lead one to expect that he would be in sympathy with movements designed to restructure society... but such was not the case."¹³

What could thus be deemed a "narrowly circumscribed social perspective" was also characteristic of Wesley's most active American disciples, the circuit riders. While these men, like Wesley and his followers in England, found ways to be of practical help to people enduring many kinds of economic and physical needs, they did not challenge the social/economic institutions of their day – failing, as Barclay alleges, to "recognize that sin not only found expression in the acts of men, but also became inwrought in the warp and woof of the social order."¹⁴

The fact that the advocates of a positive, official anti-slavery position were able to act despite the limited sense of social responsibility characterizing the Methodism of their day is further testimony to the power of the spirit of divine discontent that led early American Methodists to challenge the status quo as it concerned a major institution in the social order of their day.

This spirit is thus a part of the heritage which can serve as an inspiration for members of the Susquehanna Annual Conference as they face issues and problems in the society of which they are a part.

¹³ Norwood, pp. 57f.

¹⁴ Barclay 2, pp. 3f.