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The Methodist Episcopal Church and the Slavery Controversy, 1828-1844

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THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND THE SLAVERY CONTROVERSY
1828 - 1844

by
Harold C. Howard

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Introduction

The early 1830's saw the rise of two movements within the Methodist Episcopal Church which were destined to make the nation's largest Protestant body a battleground for the slavery controversy. The first one was the inauguration of plantation missions in the South and the other was the rise of modern abolitionism in New England. These two efforts arose independently of each other; they were to a great extent products of their environment; and they represented conflicting views of the slavery question.

The middle 1830's witnessed the collision of these two movements within the Methodist Church. The bishops, fearing disunion and a consequent disruption of the church's program, took a conservative position on the slavery issue. They were determined to keep the abolitionists from rocking the boat. The methods employed by the church officials to implement the 1836 General Conference resolutions on abolitionism gave rise to a controversy over conference rights. The 1840 General Conference rulings on the new issue were interpreted as a decisive defeat for the abolitionist forces.

The road to disunion may be dated from that 1840 General Conference. Certain events, some of them beyond the control of the Methodist Episcopal Church, served to move the conservatives over to the abolitionist camp. The South, now a definite minority, chose secession as the necessary course for them to follow.

This study is concerned with the slavery controversy within the Methodist Episcopal Church from 1828 to 1844. Its purpose is: to trace the development of the events which led to the schism in 1844; to place the slavery controversy within the
perspective of the total church program; to determine why the conservatives in the church changed positions during the years 1840 to 1844; to present some conclusions about the controversy.

The slavery controversy can only be understood in the framework of the church's total program. To know nothing concerning the denomination's extensive program of missions and education for these years must of necessity leave one with a distorted picture of the actual situation. The bishops of the church were concerned about the lack of funds for the missions to the Indians, Negroes, immigrants, and new settlements in the West. The new colleges and seminaries were in dire need of endowments. Consequently, the leaders of the church made their decisions on the slavery question through the eyes of the whole purpose and program of the church. The slavery issue was not considered as an isolated problem. In fact, they did not regard it as their responsibility at all. Slavery was a civil institution and as such, it was outside the church's domain. The church's task was of a spiritual nature, namely, missions, religious education, and the training of its clergy.

This subject is relevant to the study of the slavery question. In the first place, the antislavery campaign was more than an intellectual crusade for reform, it was also a religious movement. Barnes and Dumond have amply indicated that the antislavery campaign was an appeal to the consciences of men to reform their society and that this appeal received its heartiest and most sympathetic acceptance in the areas visited by the Finney revival. Religious leaders were the most outspoken proponents for the cause.1 Barnes contends that the religious revi-

vals released a mighty impulse toward social reform.\(^2\) Significantly, the scriptural argument was not only the earliest argument used by the pro-slavery proponents but it was more widely used than any other. The Bible was the cornerstone on which the religious element in the South built the moral defense of slavery and pro-slavery men in the political sphere rested their justification "upon the high ground of scriptural revelation."\(^3\)

Religion played a prominent role in American life during this period. All of the reform efforts were colored with religious qualities. Tocqueville, after observing American institutions, contended that there was no country in the world where Christianity had such an influence over the souls of men as in America.\(^4\) One author, after making a careful study of this period, concluded that the American clergy played a more dominant role than did religion. He offered some impressive evidence for his contention that "almost no other single class or group exerted as much prolonged and varied influence upon American thought and society as did the American clergy."\(^5\) Daniel Webster paid tribute to the role of the American clergy in shaping society.\(^6\) A number of the religious leaders were


aware of the responsibility of the church. Nathan Bangs, chief spokesman for the Methodist preachers prior to the 1844 rupture within the Methodist Church, warned the New England audiences that their denomination was "the chief religious and, in a sense, the chief social tie between the northern and southern states."7

The political leaders of this nation took a lively interest in the struggle going on within the Methodist Episcopal Church and the resultant division of that great body. Governor Hammon, in his message to the South Carolina Legislature, in December, 1844, said: "With becoming spirit the patriotic Methodists of the South dissolved all connection with their brethren of the North, and for this they are entitled to lasting honor and gratitude from us."8 Henry Clay, in a letter dated April 7, 1845, referred to the schism of the Methodist Church. He did not say that the church split would produce a dissolution of the political union of the states but the example "would be fraught with imminent danger." His concern was registered in these words: "Indeed, scarcely any public occurrence has happened for a long time that gave me so much real concern and pain as the menaced separation of the church by a line throwing all the free states on one side and all the slave states on the other."9

Calhoun and Webster mournfully recognized the possible future consequences of the church schism. Calhoun, in a speech

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delivered in the Senate on March 4, 1850 referred to the split of the "powerful Methodist Episcopal Church." To Calhoun, the church represented the strongest of the ties which bind the states together. With apprehension for the future of the political union, he observed that the powerful forces which held the Methodist denomination together had "not been able to resist the explosive effect of slavery agitation."10 Webster, some three days later, in his speech for the Constitution and the Union, expressed his sentiments on the Methodist tragedy. Concerning the influence of the Methodist Church, Webster said that "he looked upon that religious denomination as one of the great props of religion and morals throughout the country, from Maine to Georgia, and westward to our utmost western country."11

The history and nature of the Methodist Church in America is the final reason for the significance of this subject. It was the most successful of the churches in following the population as it moved westward.12 The first denomination to form a national organization was the Methodist Church.13 It was the first religious body to insert in its constitutional law a recognition of the new government, enforcing patriotism on its constituents.14

13 Ibid., p. 193.
During the early decades of the nineteenth century, the Methodist Church could boast of taking the lead in the expansion of membership. The church possessed a very efficient organization to which many have credited its unusual success. While it practiced a monarchical form of government, the church proclaimed a democratic message, one of free will and grace. It emphasized the equality of all men. The ministers were close to the masses of the people and had relatively little influence among the aristocratic classes, North or South.

Finally, no other church has been so largely influenced by the presence of the Negro in American life than has the Methodist Church. Its history in this regard is unique and serves to make it a most interesting subject for a case study of the slavery controversy. The Methodists were the earliest of the churches, other than the Quakers, after the separation from England, to take a definite anti-slavery attitude. Alfred North Whitehead credited the Methodists with one supreme achievement, namely, "They made the conception of the brotherhood of man and of the importance of men, a vivid reality. They had produced the final effective force which hereafter made slavery impossible among progressive races." The Methodist Church thus presented a tightly-knit organization with a warm humanitarian impulse.


The New England Methodists were among the best supporters of the abolition movement. Barnes contends that the Methodists and Baptists made up the strength of the abolition camp. "More than two-thirds of all the abolitionists in New England were either Methodist or Baptists." 19 Significantly, the Methodists in the South were the most active in providing religious instruction for the Negroes. The Lutheran Church paid tribute to the Methodists by admitting that the principal work done during "slavery days for the christianizing of the colored race was done by the Methodist Episcopal Church." 20 The Presbyterians added their note of commendation of the fine manner in which the Methodists have ministered to the colored population. They conceded that there was no other denomination "so fully devoted to this particular field." 21

Throughout this study, the term new or modern abolitionism will be used to designate that movement which arose in New England in the early 1830's and was identified with Garrison and the Liberator. It called for immediate and uncompensated emancipation. Slavery was "always, everywhere, and only sin." Conservatives or moderates will be used to identify those within the Methodist Church who took the position that slavery was not a sin under certain circumstances. They believed that slavery was evil and looked forward to the day when all slaves would be emancipated. As long as slavery was a civil institution protected by the laws of the states, there was nothing the church

19 Barnes, Anti-Slavery Impulse, p. 91.
20 The Lutheran Church Review, (1890), Vol. IX., p. 137.
could do to overthrow it. Consequently, for this faction, the mission of the church was to christianize both master and slave. The terms, Methodist Church and Methodist Episcopal Church will be considered synonymous, although the latter was the correct name of the denomination during the period under discussion.

The scope of this study will be limited to the years 1828 to 1844. For the purpose of a clearer understanding of the struggle during these years, the first chapter will give a historical background of the church's polity, program, and problems up to the starting date of 1828. This year seems to be the most appropriate point of departure for a number of reasons. Andrew Jackson's election to the presidency marked the rise of the common man and from this class, the Methodist Church won most of its converts. Within the Methodist Church, it was a period of calm for the slavery question so that it offers a good vantage point to review the situation before the controversy erupted and passions obscured the true issues. The year 1828 stands between the old antislavery movement and the new one. It is just one year before the inauguration of the plantation missions to the Negroes. It also marks the beginning of the greatest era of expansion for the church. 1844 is the terminal point mainly because the 1844 General Conference was the Conference at which the southerners withdrew and formed the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

Regarding the method to be employed in this study, some attention will be given to the political and social setting for this time span, although on a very limited scale. The Methodist churchmen were not immune to the influence of economic, social, and political pressures of their day. Frequently, these forces have more effect on the church's decisions than the issue at hand. Consequently, the primary purpose of this project, is to present the slavery controversy within the framework of the total program of the Methodist Church. The perspective is not
limited to the Methodist Church as an isolated unit of society but it is the study of the church within society and subject to its influences.
Chapter I.

The Methodist Episcopal Church - 1828

The year 1828 witnessed the election of the first United States president from the West, Andrew Jackson, and it marked the rise of the common man. General Andrew Jackson, while on his way from Tennessee to Washington to assume the duties of the presidency, visited the Methodist Church in Washington, Pennsylvania. Significantly, the Methodists had been the most successful in following the population as it moved westward and the denomination numbered the greater part of its membership from among the common people. The fiery Methodist preacher said he preached to the President as "I would to any other sinner."¹

The 1828 General Conference was the first such gathering to be held in a city west of the Allegheny Mountains.² This was a fitting symbol of the Methodist Church which had begun with the birth of the United States and was rapidly spreading all over the nation. The past ten years had seen a doubling of its membership.³ In their address to the 1828 Conference, the bishops underscored some of the accomplishments of the past four years. To them, "the great and extensive revivals of religion which we have experienced the last three years through almost

² Pittsburg, Pennsylvania.
every part of the work" was an indication that God had raised up the Methodists to "reform the continent, and spread scripture holiness over these lands."\(^4\) The bishops reviewed the polity, program, and problems of their growing denomination.

The Methodist hierarchy in America closely resembled the Church of England, maintaining a highly centralized authority. A regular gradation of conferences had supervision over all the interests of the denomination. The General Conference met quadrennially and was composed of delegates elected by the annual conferences. It had supreme supervision over all the departments of the church. It elected the bishops and was vested with full legislative power. It differed from the United States Congress in this respect: The latter had only such powers as were granted to it; the former had all the powers not denied to it. The term, annual conference, had a twofold meaning: It denoted a geographical location of the church and it was the annual meeting of all the traveling preachers within that connection. This annual gathering formed the administrative and judicial body for the annual conference under the authority of the General Conference. The district conference had supervision over the churches in a presiding elder's assigned area; the quarterly conference over a pastoral charge or a circuit of several preaching stations.

Similarly, the officers of the church were arranged under a plan of supervision. The episcopacy consisted of the bishops who were elected by the General Conference. Their duties included presiding at the General and annual conferences, fixing the appointments of preachers, changing and suspending preachers between the sessions of the conferences, traveling throughout the church and supervising its affairs. The presiding elder had charge of the preachers within a certain district which represented a sub-division of an annual conference. He

\(^4\) Ibid., Vol. III., p. 382.
presided at the quarterly conferences. The bishop appointed the elders and the latter kept the bishop informed of the affairs in his area. The bishops and elders decided all matters of law. An elder's decision could be appealed to the bishop and that of the bishop could be appealed to the General Conference. Traveling elders and traveling preachers were synonymous terms. Below the elder was the local preacher who had charge of one church or a circuit of several small churches. The smallest unit in the church was the local society, or church, with its congregation, its classes, class-leaders, stewards, exhorters, trustees, and Sunday school superintendents. Consequently, there was a tightly-knit system of supervision which reached into every part of the expanding denomination.  

The optimistic report of the bishops to the 1828 General Conference was representative of the spirit of Methodism during the 1820's. During this decade, many new projects were initiated. The Christian Advocate, a weekly periodical, then less than two years old could boast of having the largest circulation of any periodical in the United States. Several other weekly magazines were to be introduced within the near future. The Sunday School Union was organized on April 2, 1827, to promote the formation of Sabbath schools and within one year had enrolled over 63,000 students. The adoption and enthusiastic reception of the report on education at this conference in 1828,  


7 Ibid., p. 345.
was indicative of the change in attitude toward institutions of learning. For a number of years, the church leaders had encountered much opposition in their plans for a more educated clergy. Peter Cartwright, evangelist and presiding elder of the Methodist Church, discounted the need for education when it came to saving souls. In fact, he felt that theological education sometimes hindered the work of an evangelist. He attributed the gains made by Methodism to ignorant preachers like himself and minimized the work done by the "sapient, velvet-mouthed, downy D.D.'s" of the period. The bishops of the church had brought about a change in this approach to the needs of a minister and had launched the greatest college building era in the history of the church.

The Methodist Church was actively engaged in an energetic missionary outreach. In the year 1820, the newly organized missionary society became an integral part of the church's program. Its plans for the future were to include missions to all nations: "Our views are not restricted to our own nation or color; we hope the aborigines of our country; the Spaniards of South America, the French of Louisiana and Canada will be comprehended in the field of labour of our zealous missionaries." A number of missions had been established among various Indian nations. The first missionary for the Methodists to minister to

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8 Ibid., p. 107.
11 Bangs, History of Methodist Church, p. 89.
the Indians was John Stewart, born of free parents in Powhatan County, Virginia. Stewart established a mission among the Wyandot Indians on the Upper Sandusky River in Ohio. His interpreter was another Negro, Jonathan Pointer, who had been captured on the Kanawha when a boy. Some of the converts were 'Between-the-Logs', one of the chief counsellors of the Wyandot Indians, Mononcue, Hicks, and Scuteash. By 1828, missions had been organized among the Cherokees and Creeks in Georgia, the Choctaws in Mississippi, the Onondagas in New York, and the Mohawks in Canada. Methodist missions were established among the Dutch on the east side of the Hudson; the Welsh of the western part of New York state; in the Northwestern part of Ohio and in certain areas of the state of Michigan. The bishops could report to that 1828 General Conference that "vast regions of country have been formed into circuits and embraced in our regular work." 

During the past years, the church had been disturbed by two important issues. Since 1816, there had been controversies centering around the episcopacy, presiding elderships, and the rights of the laity. Under the circuit system and the plan of representation for the conferences, the laymen had no representation and the clergy had nothing to say about the election of their presiding elders. Small factions, from time to time, had agitated for a more democratic form of government. The bishops looked upon such attempts as dangerous and radical. By 1828,

13 Bangs, History of Methodist Church, p. 166, 352.
14 Ibid., p. 383.
15 Simpson, Cyclopaedia of Methodism, p. 125.
a small group of agitators who advocated greater freedom in the church government proceeded to acts of ecclesiastical insubordination, bringing on themselves the discipline of the church. Whereas a small number of the dissatisfied members left the church, most of the Methodists accepted the decision of the church and continued to work for the expansion of the Methodist Church. So far as numbers were concerned, Simpson contends that the secession "scarcely occasioned a ripple on the surface. The church, united, compact, and powerful was prepared for greater triumphs in the future." Although many Methodists still hoped for a church government with more freedom, the issue did not become divisive.

The slavery question had troubled the church since its inception. In order to place the slavery issue and its connection with the church in its proper perspective, it is necessary to study the background of both institutions. First, it must be noted that slavery was in this country one hundred fifty years before the Methodist Church. As the church grew it was susceptible in a degree to the force of the diverse and changing sentiments of the country on the slavery issue. Slavery was a civil institution protected by the Constitution and the laws of several southern states. Furthermore, during the latter part of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, a great change had come over the country relative to the slave problem. Between the years 1776 and 1804, seven of the northern states made plans for emancipation. Whereas in 1808 every northern state had abolished slavery, no southern state had done so. Needless to say, the slavery issue in 1828 had, by virtue of these developments, become somewhat complicated for the Methodist Church. As of 1828, a number of states did not allow slavery. There were others in which it was allowed and there were slaves, but the tendency of the laws and the minds of the majority of the people favored emancipation. There were other states, however, in which slavery existed so universally and was so
closely associated with the other civil institutions that the laws prohibited emancipation. A great number of the people in such states held it to be treasonable to talk of emancipation. The Methodist Church had constituents in all of these states. Its practice of speaking with a united voice only served to further complicate the problem.

It is important to note that the Methodist Church in its early years was largely confined to the colonies south of Pennsylvania. Prior to 1828, all the General Conference sessions were held in the city of Baltimore. Between 1777 and 1783, there was no appointment of ministers to areas north of New Jersey. During the early years, the church continued to expand much more rapidly in the South than it did in the North. Furthermore, the church had always maintained a policy of non-interference in the political affairs of the nation. In 1784, a rule went into the Discipline insisting on the loyalty of all Methodists to the laws of the federal and state governments. This was the very bedrock of Methodist polity.

From 1784 to 1828, the church policy on slavery went through several revisions. At the Christmas Conference in 1784, the Methodist Church adopted a rule providing that every slave-holding member must execute a legal instrument agreeing to free his slaves. All members had to comply with this ruling within one year or withdraw from the church. This was the most extreme antislavery legislation enacted by the church until the outbreak of the Civil War. This rule, however, was suspended within six

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17 Supra, p. 4.
months. A new provision on slavery was adopted in 1796 with the hope of restricting slavery within the church. It provided that official members must agree to emancipate their slaves and slave sellers were to be expelled. Preachers were to surrender their positions at once if they refused to free their slaves in those states where manumission was legal.

In 1800, at the General Conference in Baltimore, a committee was appointed to draft proper addresses to the state legislatures calling for the gradual abolition of slavery. Many such petitions were presented. In 1804 an elaborate plan was adopted by the church affirming the evil of slavery but its provisions did not apply to the states of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. In 1808 the rule which prevented slaveholding among private members of the church was dropped, leaving only the traffic in slaves as illegal. The General Conference of 1816 adopted the "compromise law" which became the law of the church on the subject for a score of years. It confirmed the recommendation of a committee which found "that in the South and West the civil authorities render emancipation impracticable and they are constrained to admit that to bring about such a change in the civil code as would favor the cause of liberty is not in the power of the General Conference." The committee then submitted to the conference this resolution: "Resolved: That no

18 This action was taken at the Baltimore annual conference, June 1, 1785. A resolution was passed "recommending to all our brethren to suspend the execution of the minute on slavery till the deliberations of a future conference." McTyeire, History of Methodism, p. 380.

19 Buckley, History of Methodism, p. 303.
slaveholder shall be eligible to any official station in our church where the laws of the state in which he lives will not admit of emancipation and permit the liberated slave to enjoy freedom."\(^{20}\) The official policy of the church on slavery conformed to the various state laws and refused to require its members to violate those laws.

In 1828, the General Conference tabled a resolution, which urged the church to deal with the slavery question, without any significant opposition. The status of the slavery issue up to 1828 was: Slavery was a great evil; the emancipation of all slaves had always been the hope of the church but the circumstances must dictate how and when that release from bondage shall come. All church members are obligated to obey the civil authorities and the laws of their respective states. The church did not require of its members manumission of slaves in those states where the laws prohibited it.

In 1828, the Methodist Episcopal Church stood at the threshold of a most promising future. It was entering upon an unprecedented era of prosperity.\(^{21}\) Future plans called for an expanding program of education; a continuing emphasis on a better trained clergy; an expansion of missions into all new territories; and one of the most extensive programs of literature of any religious body in the world. All of this was projected on the basis that the only business of the church was of a spiritual nature. Anything which threatened the disruption of this ministry had to be suppressed. Unfortunately, the Methodist Church was on the verge of a controversy which, within a few years, would leave it hopelessly divided. Plantation missions and modern abolitionism were destined to make the denomination a battleground for the slavery controversy.

\(^{20}\) *Journal of General Conference*, p. 169, 170.

\(^{21}\) McTyeire, *History of Methodism*, p. 574.
Chapter II.

Plantation Missions

In 1829, the southern portion of the Methodist Episcopal Church inaugurated a movement called plantation missions. The first missions were organized among the plantation slaves of South Carolina. A wealthy planter and South Carolina statesman, Charles C. Pinckney, had visited a Georgia plantation and had observed the good results of the overseer's concern for the spiritual welfare of the slaves. In the fall of 1828, Mr. Pinckney called on Dr. Capers, Methodist elder, to inquire if he could recommend to him a Methodist exhorter, to act as superintendent of his plantation on Santee. In the early part of 1829, a missionary was appointed to serve on the Pinckney plantation.¹

Plantation missions, however, were not the first attempt of the Methodist Church to reach the Negro. Ever since the organization of that denomination, the colored people had been the objects of its attention. Most of the churches had balconies for the slaves and special catechetical services were frequently held for the slaves.² In 1790 there were 11,682 Negroes in the Methodist Church, one-fifth of the total membership. In 1828, there were nearly 59,000 colored members. The progress


was fairly uniform and showed a proportion which also remained uniform through the years. The colored people had been served in the regular circuits and stations up to 1829.  

This new development within the Methodist Church is important to the slavery controversy for four principal reasons. First, it was a further indication of the changing economic pattern of the South and the increasing profitableness of slavery. The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 had made it possible for southern planters to produce profitably both the sea island cotton of the coastal plain and the short-staple cotton which grew well in the uplands. The profitable nature of cotton culture and the abundance of uncultivated land on which cotton could be grown soon brought a sharp acceleration in the demand for Negroes to work cotton plantations. The opening of the river bottoms of Louisiana to sugar culture had further increased this demand. As slavery expanded, the system changed from that of the small plantation with a few slaves to that of a large plantation with a gang of enforced labor.  

By 1829, the doubts concerning the economic desirability of slavery had vanished before the growth of cotton culture. The slave states had abandoned their criti-  

3 Elliott, Great Secession, p. 82.  
4 Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, American Negro Slavery, (Gloucester, Massachusetts, 1959), p. 371. Phillips presents a survey of the supply, employment and control of Negro labor as determined by the plantation regime. Considerable space is devoted to a description of plantations.  
5 There was a revolution in southern agriculture between 1790 and 1830. The invention of spinning and weaving machinery had contributed to the rise of a new cotton market in England. From 1791 to 1795, the southern states produced over five million pounds of cotton; from 1826 to 1830, more than three hundred million pounds. A Negro selling for $300 in 1790 would bring $800 in 1828, and $1200 in 1853. Homer C. Hockett, Political and Social Growth of the People 1492-1865, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1940), p. 619.
cism of an enforced labor system and were beginning to defend it as the sound basis of a social organization. The decision of the Methodist Church to establish missions on these large plantations was, in a sense, an admission of that change and an attempt to live with it.

Secondly, the plantation missions represented the answer of the church to the slavery question. The church had accepted the validity of the relationship between master and slave and was attempting to better conditions incidental to that relationship. It was an effort aimed at destroying the evils without abolishing the system. Most of the churches in the South, including the Methodist, took the position that slavery was an institution of the state, and on the principle of separation of church and state, the church had no business attempting to change the order of society. Its business was to ameliorate conditions and mitigate the hardships and cruelties of slavery. It was thought that the only political role proper for the church in a democratic state was the regulation of private conduct. The church must not seek by organized action to impose Christian principles upon laws and institutions. The church, it was thought, had no more warrant to preach the overthrow of slavery than it had to advocate the establishment of a monarchy or the overthrow of the republic. Although the church had no authority to interfere with slavery as a civil institution, yet it had a definite spiritual duty to perform in regard to the personal relationship of master and slave. The southern churches deplored the restrictions placed on this ministry by the plantation owners but they thought themselves powerless to do anything about it. For example, every southern state except Maryland and

Kentucky, forbade anyone to teach the slaves to read and write. The plantation owner prescribed the conditions under which his slaves could be instructed in religion. Rev. William Capers in a letter dated September 7, 1829, referred to the skeptical attitude of the owners toward this new venture. "Apprised of the principal points of jealousy or distrust on the part of the owners, we proposed to make each plantation a distinct preaching place, confining our congregations to the Negroes resident on the spot." What the owners feared was communication between the Negroes of the various plantations.

Plantation missions are important to our study because of the consideration given to them by the Methodist guides. The Methodist bishops, both North and South, considered these missions to be some of the church's most essential ministry. In 1830, Bishop Soule wrote, "Perhaps we have no work on our hands more important or more difficult than this." Some of the most able men in the denomination were assigned to supervise the work. Dr. Capers, a pioneer in the movement, was a presiding elder in the South Carolina conference and later a candidate for the office of bishop. Another leader was James O. Andrews, who became

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8 Capers belonged to one of the oldest families in South Carolina. His father was an educated and wealthy planter. Capers had a college training and served in the Methodist Church for nearly fifty years. Pierce, Methodism in Georgia, p. 115.
9 Elliott, Great Secession, p. 82.
10 Ibid., p. 83.
a bishop of the Methodist Church in 1836.

Finally, the fact that plantation missions became, in a sense, a point of conflict between the abolitionists and the leaders of the Methodist Church, makes them important to the study of the slavery controversy. Virtually every report of the bishops to the General Conference from this time on emphasized this endeavor and the necessity of expanding this effort to new plantations. Dr. Durbin, in an editorial in the Christian Advocate and Journal, under the date of February 21, 1834, reported the success of the southern minister in the missions to the Negroes. This success was credited to the discretion of the missionaries manifested through their obedience to the laws of the land. He then described the nature of the problem:

We are aware it is a great and a delicate work; but, hitherto, our brethren in the South have been wise to manage it. It would be cruel and wicked to throw any obstacle in their way; we would not do it for the world; and many persons and some papers in this part of the country; for want of understanding the matter, are not doing the cause of God service, by saying and publishing such things, as, in the nature of the case, must tend to shut out the missionaries from the southern plantations. Discretion and respect toward the condition and institutions of the South are binding on all good and orderly Christians.12

The leaders within the Methodist Church had reached certain conclusions on the slavery question by a careful consideration of the experiences of earlier bishops and the sentiments in the South regarding slavery. The southern men were convinced that this new plantation missionary movement represented the wisest approach to the problem. Their decision was based, first, upon the experiences of bishops Asbury and Coke. As early as 1785, because of open denunciation of slavery, these two Methodist leaders barely escaped bodily harm at the hands of a hos-

12 Elliott, Great Secession, p. 90.
tile Virginia mob. On another occasion Coke was indicted by a grand jury because of his antislavery activity. When Bishop Asbury saw how every act of ecclesiastical interference with a civil institution provoked new restrictions and prohibitions by civil power, and blocked up the way of the missionaries, he recorded in his *Journal* on February 1, 1809:

> We are defrauded of great numbers by the pains that are taken to keep the blacks from us. Their masters are afraid of the influence of our principles. Would not an amelioration in the condition and treatment of slaves have produced more practical good to the poor Africans than any attempt at their emancipation? The state of society, unhappily, does not admit of this; besides, the blacks are deprived of the means of instruction; who will take the pains to lead them into the way of salvation, and watch over them that they may not stray, but the Methodists? Well; now their masters will not let them come to hear us. What is the personal liberty of the African, which he may abuse, to the salvation of his soul; how may it be compared?

Both Asbury and Coke became more cautious in their public statements. More significantly, they had discovered that by advising the slaves to obey their masters, the masters were then willing to listen to what they had to say regarding their duties to the slaves. The main objective, even in the early days of Methodism, was to keep the way open for religious instruction of the Negro.

The church leaders were also well aware of the disastrous effects of the slave revolts on Negro missions. All the leaders of the three principal revolts between 1800 and 1831 were preachers of the "Word of God." In 1800, Gabriel, a slave of Mr. Prosser of Richmond, Virginia, had conspired with Jack Bowler, John Scott, and Sam Bird to secure the release of his kinsman from the yoke of slavery. Gabriel Prosser had a deeply

religious nature and was a student of the Old Testament. He considered himself a child of destiny who was raised up by Jehovah to bring deliverance to his people. All the whites were to be killed with the exception of the Quakers, Methodists, and French because "they believed in liberty." A number of the citizens blamed the insurrection on the principles of equality which the Methodists and Baptists had been preaching. Denmark Vesey, instigator of the 1822 revolt was also a student of the Bible. He preached to the slaves on the evils of slavery. He urged the slaves to free themselves by force and told them that God would help them. The records indicate that the chief participants in the insurrection were members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church located in Hampstead, a suburb of Charleston, South Carolina. Rev. Morris Brown, pastor of the church, was forced to flee to the North. Similarly, Nat Turner was well-versed in the teachings of the Bible. He possessed such an acquaintance with the scriptures, that the Baptist Church, to which both he and his master belonged, allowed him to act as a local preacher. His duties were to look after the spiritual welfare of the slaves. Turner declared that he had been chosen by God to lead the slaves in the 1831 rebellion. It is important to note that these three leaders took their right to revolt from passages of the Bible, some of which, had been taught by the white missionaries.

15 Ibid., p. 50.  
16 Ibid., p. 56.  
17 Ibid., p. 87; also, see Beverly F. Shaw, The Negro in the History of Methodism, (Parthenon Press, 1954), p. 36.  
18 Carroll, Slave Insurrections, p. 130.
As a result of these slave revolts, not only were slave codes more harsh, but the missionaries were restricted in their work to oral instruction of the Negroes. The churches had aroused suspicion among the plantation owners that they were promoting revolts. There was an apprehension on the part of the slaveowners that the plantation missions would become centers for the promotion of antislavery sentiment of the Methodist Church and thus result in insubordination and perhaps in insurrection. The legal restrictions prohibited Negro preachers; meetings of white preachers with Negroes without the slaveowner's permission; and teaching the Negroes to read and write.

The experiences of Methodist missionaries in urging emancipation of the slaves held by the Indians had resulted in the closing of their missions. Selah B. Treat, conducting an investigation for the American Board of Missions, found that slavery had presumably existed among the Cherokees, Choctaws, and Chickasaws since the middle of the eighteenth century, having been introduced through the marriage of Indian women to slaveholding white men. The missionaries for the Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists were accused of preaching abolition to the Indians and were forced to leave. Laws forbidding the missionaries to preach abolition or even to teach the slaves, had been passed by the Cherokees and Choctaws.

20 Ibid., p. 598.
23 Ibid., p. 110.
Finally, the reported success of the Methodist missionaries in the West Indies among the slaves had a decided influence on the development of the plantation missions in the South. In fact, the plan in many respects was a duplicate of the West Indian one. As early as 1817, the British Conference of the Methodist Church had drawn up a detailed list of instructions to govern the conduct of their missionaries in the West Indies. They were warned to not meddle with political parties or become involved in secular disputes. Article six of the instructions stated:

As in the colonies in which you are called to labor a great proportion of the inhabitants are in a state of slavery, the committee most strongly call to your re-collection what was so fully stated to you when you were accepted as a missionary to the West Indies, that your only business is to promote the moral and religious improvement of the slaves to whom you may have access, without, in the least degree, in public or private, interfering with their civil condition.²⁴

The missionaries were forbidden to visit the slaves of any plantation without the permission of the owner or manager and the times of services were to be designated by the owner of the slaves.

The fact that this plan had proved successful in the West Indies was attested to by numerous reports. In 1829, there were 29,060 colored persons in the Wesleyan societies in the West Indies.²⁵ The Negroes were instructed in the principles of the Christian religion and were governed by its morals. They became obedient to their masters and rendered their services without constraint or the use of the whip. The religious instructions had improved their minds. The significant issue here is that all this good was accomplished by preaching the Christian

²⁴ Elliott, Great Secession, p. 833.
²⁵ Ibid., p. 13.
message to master and slave alike, without any, even the least reference to the civil relations, except as the teachings of Christian morals impressed the minds of each person.26 This plan, which had proved rather successful in the West Indies, was the pattern used by Dr. Capers in the South.

The missionaries in the South were compelled to confine themselves to the mere elements of Christianity or give up religious instruction of the Negroes entirely. Governor W.B. Seabrook of South Carolina, admitted the importance of religious instruction but thought it should be done in the daytime and confined to those "prominent portions of scripture which show the duties of servants and the rights of masters."27 The missionaries used oral instruction, reading the Bible to the slaves, and teaching them hymns. For instruction, a number of sermons were compiled, together with specially devised catechisms explaining Christianity in the simplest terms of the slave and exhorting him to faithfully occupy his position in society.28

The bishops of the Methodist Church were pleased with the progress of the plantation missions during the early years and declared them to be a success. This acceptance of success served further to convince them of the propriety of this approach to the slavery question. In 1830, Bishop Soule wrote:

The missions to people of color have been successful, beyond our most sanguine expectations at their commencement; the good effects of which have been attested by masters whose servants are embraced in the several statements and by a number of these gentlemen a very liberal encouragement and support have been given to those missions.29

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26 Ibid., p. 319.
27 Elliott, Great Secession, p. 89.
28 Jenkins, Pro-Slavery Thought, p. 12.
29 The Christian Advocate and Journal, July 9, 1830.
Another report for the year 1832 referred to the salutary effect of the missions on the slave population and added that the missions were much appreciated by the planters. Many of the missions were patronized by the wealthy planters on whose plantations they were established.

In 1833, the results were said to have been more gratifying than in any previous year. A report dated April 10, 1833, emphasized the good results of these missions:

It is delightful to witness the great anxiety manifested by the planters for their slaves religious instruction, not only in their willingness to have them instructed, but in their attendance in giving them instruction themselves.31

One letter dated January 14, 1834, referred to further progress but manifested a concern because of the limitations placed on the work by the laws of the states:

We have no schools, teachers, nor scholars; for in this state there is a law prohibiting the teaching of letters to the slaves, selling or giving them books of any description whatever. Therefore we can only give them oral instruction.32

In 1834, the Methodist Church had twenty missions among the slaves of the South: Ten in South Carolina; nine in Georgia; and one in Tennessee. The church officials were confident that this was the church's answer to the slavery question. Reports seemed to confirm the contention that first the slave and master must be reformed by the Christian message before there could be emancipation. The slaves who responded to the religious instruction were reported to be more honest, obedient, truthful, temperate, and chaste. Many of the plantation owners seemed to evi-

30 Ibid., May 11, 1832.
31 Ibid., April 10, 1833.
32 Ibid., January 14, 1834.
dence some change of heart. In 1829, the movement of plantation missions had been in the experimental stage but in 1834, it was an established institution.

In summary, plantation missions was a further indication of the changing economic pattern in the South and the increasing profitableness of slavery. It represented the answer of the church to the slavery question. The movement was given special consideration by the bishops of the church. It was to become a point of conflict between the abolitionists and the conservatives within the Methodist Church.

The church officials had reached certain conclusions concerning their mission to the Negroes after a careful consideration of the experiences of early Methodist bishops and the changing sentiment in the South regarding slavery. These included the experiences of bishops Asbury and Coke; the effects of the slave revolts on Negro missions; the experiences of Methodist missionaries among the Indians; and the reported success of the West India plan of Negro missions.

From the beginning of plantation missions in 1829, the reports of the field missionaries served to confirm the wisdom of this new procedure. The bishops of the church, North and South, not only concluded that the movement was a success in itself, but saw it as the church's answer to the slavery question.
Chapter III.
The Rise of Modern Abolitionism

When Andrew Jackson took office in 1829, anti-slavery sentiment seemed to have spent its force, after some fifty years of activity. No longer did the churches lift up their voices in protest. Abolition societies were dying out and there was hardly an abolitionist militant in the field. The Colonization Society absorbed most of the public interest in the subject. In Congress there was only one anti-slavery member. While the first period of anti-slavery agitation was coming to an end, a new and more aggressive movement was about to begin.

This new phase of abolitionism, designated modern abolitionism, was uncompromising and defied all the constitutional and legal guarantees protecting the slavery system. It took no account of the difficulties and dangers involved in wholesale liberation and valued emancipation above the preservation of the Union. In contrast to this new abolitionism, the old movement had been largely negative and was regarded more as a theory to be held than a fact to be accomplished. In fact, the earlier form of abolitionism numbered slaveholders among its members and slaveholding church members supposedly voted for

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3 Sweet, *Religion in America*, p. 293.
resolutions calling for the abolition of slavery.

Modern abolitionism was to a great degree the product of a particular period and place in American history. The new phase of abolitionism owed much to the dynamic democratic idealism of the times and the awakened interest in social justice for all classes. It was in a sense the American counterpart of the world-wide movement which had achieved the abolition of human bondage in Mexico, and the other Spanish American republics in the preceding decade, and which inspired the British Parliament in 1833 to provide for gradual emancipation in the British West Indies.

This was a period of great reform efforts within the United States. William Ellery Channing, in the early 1830's, summed up the spirit of his age as an "age of great movements" which had a "tendency and power to exalt people." He declared: "Every age teaches its own lesson; the lesson of this age is that of sympathy with the suffering, and of devotion to the progress of the whole human race." Modern abolitionism arose with the common man. The westerners, in conjunction with the laboring classes of the seaboard states, exercised their newly acquired manhood suffrage in 1828, to bring about the Jacksonian Revolution and install "Old Hickory" in the White House. Andrew Jackson stated his creed in this manner:

I believe man can be elevated; man can become more and more endowed with divinity; and as he does he becomes more Godlike in his character and capable of governing himself. Let us go on elevating our people, perfecting our institutions, until democracy shall reach such a point of perfection that we can acclaim with truth that the voice of the people is the voice of God.


6 Tyler, Freedom's Ferment, p. 22.
While the period was important, so was the place in the United States that sheltered the new doctrine of abolitionism. The soil of New England had been prepared for its arrival in diverse ways. First, it must be noted that the Negro was not and had never been a social problem in New England to the degree that he was in the South. In fact, the end of the slave trade in 1808 had pretty well ended New England's interest in slavery except for the textile manufacturers. As Barnes has suggested, it was that section of the country that was remotest from slavery in distance and economic interest which was the most "deeply impressed with a sense of the duty of rebuke" to every slaveholder.

Revivalism had contributed its share in preparing the soil of New England for the new antislavery sentiment. One author contends that "the revivals produced the real opposition against slavery and provided the grass-roots strength to fight it." As Charles Whipple put it in one of his tracts, "The Anti-Slavery movement ... was at its commencement, and has ever since been, thoroughly and emphatically a religious enterprise." The nature of those revivals was also significant. They represented a break with orthodox Calvinism which had made salvation

7 The Negro population in New England always constituted a small minority. In 1700 there were not more than 1,000 Negroes; in 1715, there were 4,150 Negroes and 158,000 Whites; 1775, 16,034 Negroes, and 659,446 Whites; 1790, 16,872 Negroes and 1,009,206 Whites. The first three decades of the nineteenth century didn't change this picture appreciably. Lorenzo Johnston Greene, Negro in Colonial New England 1620-1776, (Columbia Press, 1942), p.

8 Barnes, Anti-Slavery Impulse, p. 88.


10 Cole, Northern Evangelists, p. 194.
the end of all human desire and fear of hell the spur to belief. Finney, leading revivalist in the Northeast during this time, had broken with the Calvinistic theology. He made salvation the beginning of religious experience instead of its end. It is Barnes' contention that this gospel "released a mighty impulse toward social reform." The results of the Finney revivals were far-reaching in their influence. Barnes declares that they "burst all bounds and spread over the whole nation, the greatest of all modern revivals." The converts set out to "save the American church and nation from the judgments of heaven by a spirit of expansive benevolence." For those who were "awakened" in the revivals of 1828-1835, such participation required a moral platform and the abolition of slavery was the one most ready at hand.

New England was the home of William Ellery Channing, the great spokesman for social movements and a friend of the slaves. The leading exponent of the Transcendentalist movement, Ralph W. Emerson, resided here. He declared that man was born with a spark of the divine instead of in sin. He raised the level of human achievement to the skies. For the Transcendentalist, perfection "was an objective to be reached in God's infinite time by a long road marked by milestones of educational and social achievement." Consequently, New England's religious environment was fertile soil in which to plant the seed of a new abolitionism.

11 Barnes, Anti-Slavery Impulse, p. 11.
12 Ibid., p. 16.
14 Tyler, Freedom's Ferment, p. 46, 47.
The new abolitionism was launched in New England by William Lloyd Garrison. He began his abolitionist career with the publication of the Liberator. On January 1, 1831, in the first issue of the Liberator, Garrison announced that he expected to follow the same outspoken policy which had caused his arrest in Baltimore.  

He called for immediate and unconditional abolition:

I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject, I do not wish to think, to speak, or write with moderation... I am in earnest; I will not equivocate; I will be heard.

Tyler argues that it was the South's reaction to the Liberator that put Garrison on the map. The southerner connected that periodical with the Negro uprisings in the early 1830's. Mailed to the editors of more than a hundred periodicals, Garrison's Liberator aroused furious comment. In order to inform the southern whites of the abolitionist radical designs, the southern editors reprinted many of the Liberator's articles. Tyler concludes that "the educated Negro stood in far greater danger of acquiring noxious ideas from the local press than from the few copies of the Liberator circulating in the South." One example of southern reaction to Garrisonism was the act passed by the Georgia legislature on December 1832, which offered $5,000 to anyone who

shall arrest, bring to trial, and prosecute to conviction, under the laws of this state, the editor or publisher of a certain paper called the Liberator, or any other person or persons who shall utter, publish, or circulate, within the limits of this state, the said paper, called the Liberator, or any other paper, circular, pamphlet, letter, or address of a seditious character.

15 Barnes, Anti-Slavery Impulse, p. 29.
16 Tyler, Freedom's Ferment, p. 485.
17 Tyler, Freedom's Ferment, p. 486; also, Filler, Crusade Against Slavery, p. 56.
18 Elliott, Great Secession, p. 75.
The voice of Garrison roused the nation. No longer was it possible to remain indifferent to the slavery question. The policy of the Liberator and the action of the Georgia legislature indicated the nature of the battle shaping up between the extremists in the North and those in the South.

Modern abolitionism found ready support among the church people of New England, especially those within the rural areas. The Methodist strength was in the rural towns and countryside. It was here that solid congregations went over to the abolitionists. More than two-thirds of the abolitionists in New England were either Methodists or Baptists. Much of the organizational work of the abolition societies was done by members of these two denominations. 19

The uncompromising stand against slavery as a sin fitted well the pattern of the Methodist interpretation of perfectionism. Often referred to as the second blessing or sanctification, perfectionism resulted in the soul's complete cleansing from sin. It offered the promise of man's immediate perfectibility. This was not to be attained through education or reason, as claimed by the Transcendentalists, but through the operation of the Spirit of God. 20

The aspiration of Christian perfection, in many ways, complemented the social idealism which endeavored to reform the drunkard, elevate womanhood, banish poverty and vice, and free the slaves. It is significant that after 1825 the doctrine of perfectionism received an increasingly greater emphasis in the Methodist Church. This was in-

19 Barnes, Anti-Slavery Impulse, p. 90, 91. Stokes, Church and State, p. 152.

20 Smith, Revivalism, p. 25.
icated by the greater number of publications and statements of church officials. At the General Conference in 1832, the bishops called for a revival of this doctrine.21

The Methodists in New England, however, represented only a small segment of the denomination. The three conferences which constituted the abolitionist territory of the Methodist Church were New England, Maine, and New Hampshire-Vermont conferences. Out of the 472,000 members within the Methodist Church in 1832, these three conferences represented a total membership of 36,000. Similarly, these conferences had very few Negro members. In 1830, there were nearly 70,000 colored people in the Methodist denomination. The New England conference had only 245 of these Negro members; Maine had 10; and the New Hampshire-Vermont conference had 8.22 From these statistics, two observations can be made: Nearly ninety per cent of the Whites in the Methodist Church were outside the abolitionist territory, and virtually all the Negroes were.

The year 1834 was the year of beginnings for the Methodist abolitionists. This was the year that George Bancroft published the first volume of his History of the United States. Since that time, his volumes have been referred to as the history of the evolution of freedom in America.23 While Bancroft lifted the hopes of the common man, the modern abolitionists had resolved to bring freedom to the slaves. This year of 1834 witnessed some momentous events that had a decisive effect on the cause of abolitionism within the Methodist Church.24

21 Bangs, History of the Methodist Church, Vol. IV., p. 81.
23 Hockett, Political and Social Growth, p. 621.
24 Elliott, Great Secession, p. 90.
On August 1, 1834, provision was made to abolish slavery in the British colonies. A compensation of twenty million pounds was given to the slaveholders, and a period of apprenticeship set up for the former slaves which varied with several classes of hands from six to four years. This plan was intended to reassure white colonials against the dangers of social anarchy. This decision had a great effect on anti-slavery sentiment in this country. The common language, religion, and laws of the two nations served to heighten that effect. The new law had a disturbing influence on the Methodist Church in America. The British Antislavery Society included many leading Wesleyan ministers among its active and influential members. Credited with assisting in the overthrow of slavery in the British Empire, the sentiments of the British leaders were greatly respected by the abolitionists in this country. Unfortunately, the West India emancipation became a further source of conflict between the abolitionists and the conservatives in the church. Dr. Fisk, conservative spokesman, was of the opinion that that class of abolitionists corresponding to the Garrisonian and Thompsonian school in this country, could have no claim in effecting emancipation in the West Indies, but on the contrary, they had nearly succeeded in preventing it. He contended: "The emancipation in the West Indies was not immediate and absolute, but gradual; and as far as the masters were concerned, it was not emancipation, but a ransom, since they were compensated by the British government."

The situation was further distorted by the failure on

25 Ibid., p. 74; also, Filler, Crusade Against Slavery, p. 50, 51.
26 Matlack, Antislavery Struggle, p. 75.
27 Elliott, Great Secession, p. 151.
the part of both British and American abolitionists to realize the differences involved in the slavery question for the two countries. Parliament was sovereign over the British self-governing colonies as well as over the crown colonies. The British Antislavery Society proposed to abolish slavery by procuring a majority of votes in Parliament. In the United States, slavery was an affair of the states in which it was permitted by law. Consequently, effective agitation was limited to securing majorities for abolition in the slave-state legislatures or persuading the individual slaveholders to free their slaves.

There was a considerable contrast between the situation of the two countries in other respects. It was comparatively an easy task for the British government to legislate against slavery which was at a distance from the home government. In the United States, slavery was at our doors and in our homes. It was sanctioned and sanctified by law and religion and represented, according to Henry Clay, over a billion dollars in property values in 1839. Matlack, historian of the Methodist Church schism, emphasized the complexity of the slavery question in America:

To correct the false religious sentiment of a nation; to repeal the unjust laws of a hundred years, to annihilate their property claims in four millions of human beings, involved mounting difficulties to be removed and fierce discussions to be maintained, through long years of strife, which made the task appear an absolute impossibility with man.28

The inability or unwillingness to understand the difference in the two situations, Great Britain and the United States, made the struggle within the church more distressing. The missionaries in the West Indies were instructed to refrain

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28 Matlack, Antislavery Struggle, p. 43.
from any discussion of the slavery question. They supposedly followed these instructions. For the Methodist members and ministers in England, the opposite was the rule. For example, in 1825, the advocates of slavery in Jamaica were offended by the activity of the Methodist leaders in England in behalf of the antislavery cause. The pro-slavery group on the island retaliated by persecuting the missionaries. The latter were constrained to sign a declaration in favor of slavery and censuring the Wesleyan missionary committee in England. The committee responded by a public disavowal of the conduct of the missionaries and an assertion of their positive antagonism to slavery and their purpose to seek its overthrow. From this event until the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, the Wesleyan Methodists in England were not silent on the question. As a result the missionaries in the West Indies were persecuted; mobs assailed their dwellings and destroyed their chapels. In 1832, the British Conference passed a resolution urging the West India missionaries to "walk steadfastly by those excellent rules which are embodied in the printed instructions." In the same resolution, the church called for the abolition of slavery. Why is this confusion relating to the West India policy important to the controversy taking form within the American Methodist Church? It is simply this: The Methodist leaders in the South had patterned plantation missions after the procedure used by the missionaries in the West Indies. These missions to the Negroes represented the church's solution to the slavery question. The New England abolitionists of the Methodist Church
ignored the policy of the West India missionaries and insisted that the antislavery activity of the Wesleyan Church in England supported their approach to the slavery issue. Both factions, abolitionist and southern Methodists, had accepted that part of the Wesleyan Church policy which favored their approach to the slavery problem.

On August 5, 1834, Mr. George Thompson, agent of the London, Glasgow, and Edinburgh antislavery societies, opened his mission in this country in behalf of the modern abolitionist cause. He had been employed by the British Antislavery Society as a public lecturer several months preceding the Act of Emancipation in 1834. He opened his first lecture, to an audience of about a thousand people gathered in the Town Hall of Lowell, Massachusetts, with these emotion-packed words:

All eyes are now turned toward the United States of America, to see if that land of liberty, or republicanism, of Bibles, of missions, of temperance societies, and revivals, would direct her matchless energies to the blessed work of emancipating her slaves, and elevating her entire colored population.32

Thompson challenged the people of the North to consider it their duty to interfere with the institution of slavery in the South and demand immediate emancipation of all slaves. Although the British emancipation plan included compensation for the slaveholders, Thompson called for "immediate, entire, and unconditional emancipation, without expatriation, and the admission of the colored man into the unabridged privileges of the Constitution."33 Many of the New England Methodist clergy welcomed Thompson's mission to this country. He was to address their antislavery societies and the North Bennet-Street Methodist

32 Ibid., p. 95, 96.
33 Ibid., p. 96.
Episcopal Church invited Thompson to deliver the sermon on Fast Day. 35

The conversion of Orange Scott to modern abolitionism was the most important beginning for the Methodist antislavery movement. His entrance into the struggle made it impossible for the church to ignore the slavery question. He was the most powerful of the Methodist abolitionists. Orange Scott was a New Englander, the son of a Vermont laborer. When twenty-one years old, he had enjoyed the privilege of only thirteen months of schooling. In 1820, he united with the Methodist Church and within one year was licensed to preach. In 1822, he was received into the New England conference and by 1830, was appointed presiding elder of the Springfield district. He was, without question, the greatest revivalist of the Methodist Church in New England at this time. 36

The attention of Orange Scott was turned to the subject of slavery in the summer of 1833 as a result of a conversation with Rev. Hiram H. White. Sometime later, he purchased Bourne's Picture of Slavery, Mrs. Child's Appeal, Garrison's Colonization, and subscribed for the Liberator. For nearly a year he studied these publications before announcing himself for abolition. 38 At the close of 1834, Scott publicly confessed his

35 Matlack, Antislavery Struggle, p. 85.
36 Simpson, Cyclopaedia of Methodism, p. 791.
37 This book was one of the earliest protests against race prejudice. Written in 1833, "it added to the usual description of the horrors of slavery a moving appeal for education and decent treatment of the blacks." Tyler, Freedom's Ferment, p. 494.
38 Elliott, Great Secession, p. 101.
conversion to modern abolitionism at a public meeting in Boston. Barnes gives a vivid description of the man and his decision:

He was bluff and rude, with an undisciplined mind, warmed up with a heated fanaticism; but he had a lion's courage and a martyr's sincerity. At a meeting in 1834, he heard Stanton, fresh from the Lane debate, denounce slavery as a sin; and he rose from his seat in the audience to pledge his life to abolition.39

Following his public stand for abolitionism, Scott wrote a series of articles which were printed in the Zion's Herald, the New England Methodist publication.40 He also subscribed for one hundred copies of the Liberator and had them mailed to the preachers of the New England conference.41

Some observations must be made relative to Orange Scott. First, as far as can be determined, his information pertaining to slavery in the South was second-hand. He had never visited the South and his own conference had only 320 colored members in 1834. His district, Providence, had only 90 colored members that same year. In contrast, the South Carolina conference had 22,788 Negroes and 25,186 Whites on their membership rolls.42 Scott's information on the situation in the South was primarily from those who endorsed the Garrison brand of abolitionism. His lack of formal education possibly made it more difficult for the Methodist elder to study the subject critically. It must be admitted, however, that Scott was "a logician and an orator, and, particularly, when he had a theme that

39 Barnes, Antislavery Impulse, p. 90.
40 Zion's Herald was the official organ of New England Methodism. It was open to discussions of slavery and Scott was chosen to champion the abolitionist cause.
42 Minutes, Vol. II., p. 275.
moved him, 'and deeply moved he was', on the slavery question. 43

On December 19, 1834, the abolitionists of the Methodist Church opened their attack on the official church position on slavery by issuing an "Appeal" which was addressed to the members of the New England and New Hampshire conferences. This document opened a discussion that was to continue for thirty years, occupying the pens of bishops, editors, doctors, as well as pastors and laymen. The "Appeal" set forth the views of the abolitionists on the general question of slavery and its connection with the Methodist Church. The duty and responsibility of the church were clearly spelled out. The writers attempted to support the abolitionist position with testimony from the Bible, the Methodist Discipline, John Wesley, and the English Wesleyans. The signers of the "Appeal" contended that they had carefully studied the subject of slavery and had reached definite conclusions concerning the duty of every Christian in the matter.

43 Thomas B. Neely, American Methodism: Its Divisions and Unification, (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1915), p. 52. Neely cites a statement made by John G. Whittier, who was both poet and abolitionist, as to his impressions of Orange Scott. Whittier describes a speech which he heard Scott give at an abolition rally: "I never can forget the masterly manner in which he met the objection that abolitionists were blinded by prejudice and working in the dark. 'Blind though we be,' he remarked, 'aye, sir, though blind as Samson in the temple of Dagon, like him, if we can do no more, we will grope our way along, feeling for the pillars of that temple which has been consecrated to the bloody rites of the Moloch Slavery; and, grasping at their base, we will bend forward, nerved by the omnipotence of truth, and, overturning the supports on which this system of abomination rests, upheave the entire fabric, whose undistinguishable ruins shall yet mark the spot where our grandest moral victory was proudly won.' The climax was complete; the applause was unbounded as the speaker retired. Upon inquiry, we heard the name of Orange Scott, now so well known among the ablest advocates of the slave's cause." Ibid., p. 54.
The members and ministers of the church were censured for their connection with the "odious" institution of slavery. The Christian Advocate and Journal, official organ of the church, was called upon to apologize for this crime of the church. 44

The "Appeal" represented the case for the abolitionists and for that reason, it merits some consideration. Slavery was declared to be absolutely wrong:

We say that the system is wrong, it is cruel and unjust in all its parts and principles, and that no Christian can consistently lend his influence or example for one moment in support of it and consequently it should be abandoned now and forever. 45

They argued that the church was not and could not be in "a healthy and prosperous state, while it slumbers over and nurses in its bosom so great an evil." 46 To the abolitionists, the church would not continue to prosper unless it expelled the slaveholders and took the position which they supported. Under no conditions could the holding of slaves be considered right. "Neither war nor contract can give any man such a property in another as he has in his sheep and oxen. Much less is it possible that any child of man should ever be born a slave." 47

The signers of the "Appeal" virtually ignored the plantation missions. They appeared to be taunting their southern brethren when they accused them of not providing their own slaves with a Bible or permitting them to "learn one single letter of the alphabet." 48 The "Appeal" then urged all Christians to pray for the slave but there was still no recognition

44 Elliott, Great Secession, Document XVI., p. 857.
46 Ibid., p. 866.
47 Ibid., p. 872.
48 Ibid., p. 860.
of the work being done in the South for the spiritual welfare of the slaves.

In the last few pages of the "Appeal", the writers turned their attention to the West India situation and the abolitionist activity of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in England. The liberation of the West India slaves was credited to the antislavery activity of the churches:

And now the whole world knows that the liberation of eight hundred thousand slaves in the West Indies was effected by the influence of Christian efforts which were made on the distant island of Great Britain.\(^49\)

To further buttress their case, the writers of the "Appeal" quoted from the annual address to the Methodist societies of the British Conference. The address alluded to the act of Parliament which abolished slavery in the British West India colonies. The "Appeal" included the part of the address which urged other countries to follow the example of Great Britain but left out the paragraph which commended the missionaries in the West Indies for their labors among the Negroes.\(^50\) Why did the abolitionists chose to ignore the work of plantation missions in the South?

In summary, it may be said that during the years of 1830 to 1834 slavery was becoming increasingly important to the South. At the same time a bold and aggressive abolition movement was developing in the North. Whereas the southern Method-


\(^50\) The excluded paragraph spoke of the blessings of emancipation but indicated a greater appreciation for the spiritual results of the work of the missionaries. Elliott contends that the Wesleyans never got any help from the British abolitionists in promoting religious instruction of the slaves; on the other hand they were even hindered by them in carrying out their religious movements to full maturity. Elliott, *Great Secession*, p. 95.
lists had accepted the relationship of master and slave, the Methodists of New England were rapidly being converted to modern abolitionism. The southern leaders organized plantation missions as the church's answer to the slavery question while the New England Methodists demanded immediate emancipation of all slaves as the right solution to the vexing problem. The bishops of the church were caught in the middle of the two opposing forces. The church leaders were preoccupied with plans for expansion within the areas of membership, literary institutions, missions, literature, and Sunday schools. The bishops feared that the agitation of the abolitionists would not only occupy time and consume needed funds which were to be used for the spiritual activity but it would divide the church. A division of the church would not only disrupt their common interests as a denomination but would possibly lead to a civil rupture.

Orange Scott, the most powerful revivalist of New England Methodism had been converted to Garrison's movement. A great number of the New England Methodist preachers had followed Scott's example and joined the abolitionist movement. The New England conferences represented less than one tenth of the total constituency of the church and they had less than 400 of the 70,000 colored members of the Methodist Church. With the "Appeal" war had been declared on the position of the bishops, ministers, members, and official publications of the church. The next move was up to the bishops of the church and the Methodist instrument of authority, the General Conference. The conflict between the New England abolitionists and the Methodist Church is the subject of the next chapter.
Chapter IV.
The Church's Response to Modern Abolitionism
1835 - 1836

The action of the Methodist Episcopal Church during these two years was introductory to the momentous consequences of the ensuing twenty-five years. The early skirmishes in the 1835 annual conferences and the first real test of strength in the 1836 General Conference clearly indicated the response of the church to modern abolitionism. They also provided some clue as to the methods which were to be used to assure a united front in the church.

Reports for 1835 revealed a continued extension of the church program. The percentage of increase in the membership, however, was low compared to previous years. The percentage of increase in the membership, however, was low compared to previous years.1 Two weekly papers had been established so that the church now had four weekly periodicals besides the Methodist Magazine and Quarterly Review. The four magazines were well distributed with one in New York, and the others in Cincinnati, Charleston, and Nashville. Four additional weekly publications were under the patronage of annual conferences, namely, Zion's Herald in Boston, Maine Wesleyan Journal in Portland, Virginia Conference Journal in Richmond, and the Auburn Banner, Auburn, New York.2 A considerable amount of the denomination's literature had been translated into French.

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1 Reported increase over 1834 was 13,823, an increase of 1834 over 1833 was almost 34,000 and the year previous to this was nearly 47,000 increase. Minutes, Vol. II., p. 275, 341.
2 Bangs, History of Methodist Church, p. 236.
Spanish, Portuguese, German, Dutch, and some of the languages of the North American Indians. 3

The missionary department reported a growing prosperity of Methodist missions "in our borders, among the aborigines of our wilderness, in the rising colony of Liberia in Western Africa and in some of the cities of South America." 4 New mission outposts had been established in the Pittsburg, Ohio, Kentucky, and Illinois conferences with the greater activity being in the latter one. 5 There apparently was no lack of funds for missionary activity because the reports showed an increase of $22,000 over any previous year. 6 "In the same proportion that we enlarged the sphere of our operation, did the means accumulate for carrying on our work." 7

The reports for 1835 showed a decrease of twenty-one for the Negro membership, whereas, there had been an annual increase of several thousand in previous years. 8 Some missions were temporarily suspended and in many areas the missionaries were viewed with distrust. The South Carolina conference reported a colored membership of 22,000 which represented a decrease of 1,000 over 1834. Some new missions were organized in

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3 Ibid., p. 453.
4 Ibid., p. 228.
5 Ibid., p. 187.
6 Ibid., p. 187.
7 Ibid., p. 186.
8 The annual report for 1834 showed an increase of nearly 5,000 over the preceding year. Each report since 1830 had indicated an increase of at least 2,000 a year in Negro membership. Minutes, Vol. II., p. 275.
Mississippi and Alabama while in other parts of these states, a number of missions were closed. This decrease in membership was blamed on the agitation of the abolitionists. The accusation was not without some foundation. For example, in July, 1835, a mob in Charleston, South Carolina, broke into the mails and burned the abolitionist literature which they had found in the post office. The rioters then called a meeting for the purpose of controlling the freedom of the mail. The Charleston Courier reported that "the clergy of all denominations attended in a body, lending their sanction to the proceedings." The slaveholders resolved:

That the thanks of this meeting are due to the reverend gentlemen of the clergy in this city, who have so promptly and so effectually responded to the public sentiment by suspending their schools in which the free colored persons were taught; and that this meeting deem it a patriotic action, worthy of all praise, and proper to be imitated by the teachers of similar schools throughout the state.10

Before this, the Methodists had been able to commence Sabbath schools and to extend them throughout the state, for the religious instruction of free colored persons and slaves. After the Charleston episode, many of these schools were forced to disband.

The sentiment of the people was summed up in a speech by Governor McDuffie of the state of South Carolina. He declared:

Domestic slavery, therefore, instead of being a political evil, is the cornerstone of the republican edifice. No patriot who justly estimates our privileges, will tolerate the idea of emancipation at any period, however remote, or on any conditions of pecuniary advantage, however unfavorable.12

9 Lazenby, Methodism in Alabama and West Florida, p. 255.
10 Elliott, Great Secession, p. 121.
11 Ibid., p. 121.
12 Ibid., p. 134.
The difficulties encountered did not dampen the zeal of the southern preacher in this work. A letter from a missionary of an Alabama mission underscored the attitude of the southern Methodists:

The South owes a great debt to the Negroes. The only way to discharge it at present, is to give them religious instruction. Under the influence of Christian principles they become, in every respect, more agreeable to their owners and more happy in themselves.  

That the missions to the Negroes were accomplishing their purpose was the consensus of opinion of both northern and southern leaders of the Methodist Church. Mr. Whedon, Methodist professor in the Wesleyan University in the North, contended that the slaves in this country were under a milder form of slavery than the West India slaves had been. He attributed this to the power of the Christian religion in the South, both among masters and slaves.  

The state of affairs of plantation missions in 1835 and 1836 influenced the General Conference decisions on abolitionism in 1836.

The Methodist abolitionists had virtually shelved the other work of the church and were energetically engaged in the antislavery crusade. Elliott puts it this way:

Slavery was talked and preached; prayed about, and little else; making the watchwords of the party the theme of the class meeting, the love-feast, and the prayer meeting, as well as the rostrum and the periodicals.  

On June 4, 1835, the New England conference organized an antislavery society on the basis of the immediate and unconditional abolition of slavery, and invited George Thompson to address them.  

13 Ibid., p. 135.  
14 Ibid., p. 115.  
15 Ibid., p. 230.  
16 Matlack, Antislavery Struggle, p. 85.
slavery society this year for the purpose of spreading "information concerning the slaves and colored people; and to bring about the abolition of slavery throughout the world." By the means of literature they hoped to "show the sin and evils of slavery and its remedy." 17 Orange Scott wrote a series of articles which were published in the Zion's Herald. The "Appeal" was published in that periodical's February edition as an extra. The North Bennet-Street Methodist Episcopal Church, in Boston, invited George Thompson to speak on Fast Sunday and received "warm words of commendation for their courage from the pen of William Lloyd Garrison." 18 Some of the Methodist ministers were employed as lecturers by the American Antislavery Society. The society had fourteen workers in the field. Although the Methodists insisted on having their own antislavery organizations, they were very active in the total program of the American Antislavery Society. Mr. Orange Scott had purchased several hundred copies of Bourne's Picture of Slavery, and expressed his desire,

17 Elliott, Great Secession, p. 123.

18 Garrison wrote: "In these days of slavish servility and malignant prejudices we are presented occasionally with some beautiful specimens of Christian obedience and courage. One of these is seen in the opening of North Bennet-Street Methodist meeting-house, in Boston, to the advocates for the honor of God, the salvation of our country, and the freedom of enslaved millions in our midst. As the pen of the historian in after years shall trace the rise, progress, and glorious triumph of the abolition cause, he will delight to record, and posterity will delight to read, the fact that when all other pulpits were dumb, all other churches closed, there was one pulpit that would speak out, one church that would throw open its doors in behalf of the down-trodden victims of American tyranny." Matlack, Anti-slavery Struggle, p. 36, quoted from Haven, Introduction to National Sermons.
if possible, to place a copy in every home in the country. At his own expense, he had subscribed for copies of the *Liberator* which were mailed to the New England Methodist ministers. He considered the *Liberator* "better calculated to give the needed information than any other paper I know of in this part of the country, as it is wholly devoted to the subject, and published on both sides." 19 The transfer of potential church funds to the Garrison crusade and the participation of some Methodist ministers in the American Antislavery Society obliged the General Conference of 1836 to consider this aspect of the problem.

In December, 1834, the Methodist abolitionists had declared war on the policy of the Methodist church on slavery. Through their "Appeal" they urged the official church publication, the *Christian Advocate and Journal*, to apologize for the church's policy. The church's case was presented in a "Counter Appeal" on March 27, 1835. The "Counter Appeal" and the resolutions adopted by a number of the 1835 annual conferences were the early skirmishes of the controversy which was destined to split the denomination.

The "Counter Appeal" was more than an answer to the "Appeal." It was an indication of the opposition which the agitation of the abolitionists was arousing in the church. The "Counter Appeal" was written by Professor Daniel Whedon, a prominent Methodist preacher and professor ancient languages and literature. One of the signers of the document was Wilbur Fisk, honor graduate of the University of Vermont and a student of law. In 1830, Fisk became the first president of Wesleyan University. He was one of the most important leaders in the college building program of the church. Whedon and Fisk led the conservative forces while Orange Scott headed up the abolitionists in the

19 Elliott, *Great Secession*, p. 117.
NetV' England controversy.

The "Counter Appeal" vindicated the church position on slavery. It expressed hope for the ultimate achievement of universal emancipation. The authority of the master over the slave, however, "should terminate so soon as its cessation would not produce more evils than would its longer continuance." Slavery was not in every instance a sin, Whedon argued, for in some instances it might do more harm to free the slaves than to retain them in bondage. The "Counter Appeal" disclaimed all purpose of defending the system or supporting its perpetuity; what it opposed was the dogma, "that all slaveholding is sinful and therefore should be universally and immediately abandoned."

The author warned against further political activity by the abolitionists:

Methodism, has, hitherto, been evangelically powerful, because she has been politically neutral. Let her become proud of her influence and impregnated with the spirit of politics and her beams are shorn, her strength departed, and her ruin is nigh. Are we prepared, then to pour through our conferences and churches the flood-tide of party strife?20

The author recalled the effects of political antimasonry on some denominations: "Many a church was swept by its tornado, piety was checked, and God departed." Harmony in the church and peace in the nation must be given primary consideration.

Whedon then called upon the abolitionists to place themselves in the position of their southern brethren. These ministers in the South are in the minority and under a government which supported the institution of slavery by laws which the preachers could not alter. The method used by the southern Methodists, that of preaching to the slaves, was scriptural and true to Methodist policy. Whedon attempted to prick the con-

20 Elliott, Great Secession, p. 396.
science of the Northern critics by urging them to take care of the Negroes in the North:

Particularly would we commend to earnest attention a charity, in which our assailed brethren of the South, have, in their permitted measure and sphere, far outdone us; the bestowing of the blessings of education, religion, and privileges of citizenship upon the hapless colored man of the North. 21

The "Counter Appeal" represented the first response of the church to abolitionism. It justified the church's conservative practical approach to the slavery problem. The methods employed by the plantation missionaries were declared to be according to church tradition. The abolitionists were warned against involvement in politics. The abolitionists were challenged to begin their crusade for the betterment of the Negro in their own backyard.

A number of the 1835 annual conferences passed resolutions which clearly indicated their attitude toward modern abolitionism. The New England conference convened in Lynn, Massachusetts, on June 3, 1835. A committee was appointed to draft a letter which was to be sent to the members of that conference. The writers challenged southern church members to violate the laws of their state in order to emancipate their slaves: "Let them obey God rather than man." The conference then elected a slate of abolitionists to serve as their delegates to the 1836 General Conference. With them were forwarded the first anti-slavery memorials that the General Conference had seen for a long time. Matlack called this action a "skirmish-line in advance of the solid columns of after years." 22

The New Hampshire conference assembled on July 29, 1835

21 Elliott, Great Secession, Document XVII., p. 379.
22 Matlack, Antislavery Struggle, p. 91.
and immediately adopted a report on slavery. The Christian Advocate and Journal turned down their request to publish the resolutions. The Zion's Herald, another Methodist weekly, published them on September thirtieth. The same arguments used in the "Appeal" were presented. They insisted that the men of the North have much to do with the slavery question. Abolitionists were elected to serve as delegates to the 1836 General Conference and memorials were prepared urging action on the slavery issue.

On August 20, 1835, the Baltimore conference went on record opposing the activity of the abolitionists in the Methodist Church. They requested that

those individuals north of us who are agitating the question of immediate abolition, to desist from sending to us any of their inflammatory periodicals, or other publications on that subject, as we never ordered or desired them.

The Baltimore conference endorsed gradual and ultimate emancipation. The modern abolitionists, they argued, were doing the southern Methodists great harm and bringing "untold afflictions and dangers, both temporal and spiritual on the colored population."

The Ohio conference on August 25th adopted a report avowing strong antislavery sentiments but disapproving of abolitionism. The conference endorsed the efforts of the plantation missionaries and stated:

When abolitionists shall have proved the goodness of their cause, by producing more than that number of converts to Christ among the colored people for whom they profess so much sympathy, and their sincerity in advocating it, by undergoing all the drudgery, and performing all the kind offices of faithful missionaries and pastors to these unfortunate people, we shall be prepared to bid them God-speed.

23 Elliott, Great Secession, p. 122.
24 Ibid., p. 129.
25 Ibid., p. 130.
26 Ibid., Document XX., p. 907.
The Kentucky conference took a position similar to the Ohio report. The influence of slavery was regretted and the Kentucky delegates pledged their efforts in order to bring about freedom for the "slave without infringing on the rights of others, constitutionally secured in the Constitution of the Federal Government."

The Tennessee Conference adopted a series of resolutions in which they contended that the course of the abolitionists was "fraught with danger to the peace, union, and very existence of this republic." They expressed their approval of the Ohio and Kentucky conferences' actions and called upon the churches to use their best efforts to advance "the temporal and spiritual welfare of the blacks."

On September 10, 1835, bishops Hedding and Emory addressed a letter to the preachers of the Methodist churches in the New England and New Hampshire conferences. Both men had traveled rather extensively through the South and, as a result, had reached some conclusions on the slavery question. Since each state within the union had the right to maintain "exclusive control of its internal and external affairs", the North had no right to interfere with slavery as an institution in the South. After conversing freely with "intelligent men of all parties", the bishops had concluded that nothing had tended so seriously "to obstruct and retard, if not absolutely defeat the cause of abolitionism" as the activity of the abolitionists. Hedding and Emory agreed that the abolitionists had made the work of plantation missions most difficult. They discussed the dissimilarities between slavery in the West Indies and the United States. The letter ended by asking the preachers not to speak

27 Elliott, Great Secession, Document XXI., p. 908.
28 Ibid., p. 131.
on abolitionism from the pulpit and not to leave their appoint-
ments to agitate on the subject. The bishops requested that all
pulpits and homes be closed to the activity of the agitators. 29

The early skirmishes delineated the response of the
annual conferences and the bishops to the abolitionists. Aboli-
tionism was considered harmful to the Negro, the church, and the
nation. The abolition territory of the Methodist Church was
within the two conferences of New England and New Hampshire.
The bishops feared that once a preacher joined the abolitionist
crusade, the work of the church would suffer. So far as can be
determined, many of those converted to Garrison's crusade, had
little time for the main ministry of the Methodist Church, namely,
missions and education.

The General Conference convened in the city of Cinn-
cinnati on Monday, May 2, 1836. It witnessed the first real
test of strength between the abolitionists and the conservatives.
The New Hampshire and New England conferences were armed with
petitions designed to induce the Methodist Church to change its
rule on slavery. The dilemma of the denomination can be best
appreciated as it is seen within the framework of the signi-
ficant developments preceding that Conference.

On March 6, 1836, Santa Anna, revolutionary Mexican
leader, stormed the Alamo at San Antonio and murdered its de-
defenders. This bloody episode angered the insurgents beyond
measure, and with the cry, "Remember the Alamo", the leaders
aroused the people to a desperate struggle for freedom. In the
same month a convention declared independence and adopted a
constitution. Overtures were made to the United States for
annexation. To the antislavery men in the North, the whole
history of the settlement and revolt in Texas bore the appearance

29 Ibid., Document XVIII., p. 898.
of a plot to increase the slave area of the United States.

The failure of the antislavery pamphlet campaign of 1835, resulted in a determination to flood Congress with petitions urging Congress to abolish slavery in Washington, D.C. By 1836 the petition campaign headlined the news and indicated that the abolitionists were soon ready to enter vigorously into the field of political action. A mammoth memorial to Congress, two hundred feet long, bearing the names of 3,050 New England clergymen and beginning "In the name of Almighty God", was presented against the proposed extension of the domain of slavery. In the next few months some one hundred twenty-five separate petitions came from the ministers of the New England states. Calhoun declared that the petitions represented a northern conspiracy against the institutions of the South, and he moved against their reception. A motion known as the Pinckney Gag recommended that all petitions relating ... to the subject of slavery or the abolition of slavery, shall, without being either printed or referred, be laid upon the table, and ... no further action whatever shall be had thereon. 30

The procedure adopted by Congress for suppressing antislavery agitation was later employed by the Methodist Church for the same purpose.

The conference city of Cincinnati was in some respects an image of the Methodist Church. There were three Methodist churches in the city but only one of the three reported colored people in its membership. The combined memberships showed nearly 1,500 Whites and 127 Negroes. 31

One third of the 7,500 Negroes in the state of Ohio resided in Cincinnati. Many of them were free and emancipated. The city authorities had tried by various means to control the constantly augmented colored population. In 1830 there was a

30 Stokes, Church and State, p. 153, 154.
31 Minutes, Vol. II., p. 354.
series of bloody riots between the whites and the colored people.

Cincinnati had also become a center for abolition activity. During the early 1830's students of the Lane Seminary had made an attempt to elevate the free Negroes. Libraries and Sabbath schools had been established. In 1834, however, the Lane Seminary authorities decided to abolish the student abolition society. Angered by this decision, most of the students left the school and moved to Oberlin College. In the month of April, 1836, James G. Birney, recently converted to Garrisonism, moved to Cincinnati and began publishing the Philanthropist. Later that year his press and office were destroyed by a mob. Consequently, the sentiments of the people of Cincinnati had some influence on the 1836 General Conference decisions on abolition.

As the reports filtered in, prior to the 1836 General Conference, it became quite obvious to the church leaders, that the program of the church was in serious trouble. One of the surest signs of a crisis was the decrease of nearly 2,000 in membership over the previous year. The 1835 annual report had indicated an increase of nearly 14,000. The bishops reported:

Though we have had a very considerable increase during the four last years, yet for the one year past a diminution in the number of church members appears on the Minutes of the conference.

The prosperity of the church for the years 1830 to 1835 was

32 Dumond, Anti-Slavery Origins, p. 20-36; Barnes, Anti-Slavery Impulse, p. 67.
33 Barnes, Anti-Slavery Impulse, p. 71.
34 Hart, Slavery and Abolition, p. 193.
35 From 1830 to 1835, the church membership increased nearly 165,000 whites and 15,000 colored. Minutes, Vol. II.
36 Bangs, History of Methodist Church, p. 251.
credited to the "unusual peace and harmony prevailing" in the church during those years. This decrease in membership was considered to be a most serious matter and "led to serious inquiry into its causes." The conservatives argued that

the agitations consequent upon the discussions respecting slavery and abolitionism, no doubt tended to distract the minds of many, and to prevent the growth of experimental and practical religion.37

The abolitionists had their own interpretation of the cause for the loss of members. Mr. Scott insisted that the decrease in members was the result of the church's soft policy toward slavery.38 Regardless of which faction's diagnosis was correct, the majority of the annual conferences agreed with the conservatives. Consequently, the action on abolitionism at the 1835 Conference was an expression of displeasure toward a small segment of Methodism, New England abolitionism, that was disrupting the church program.

The crisis was further evidenced by a decrease in support for the missionary outreach of the denomination. The New York conference reported a twenty-one per-cent decrease over the previous year's giving. The Troy and Maine conferences were down thirteen per-cent over 1835. The New England conference indicated a decrease.39 The conferences of New York, Maine, and Troy bordered on the abolition territory of the Methodist Church. It is impossible to fully ascertain the cause of these decreases in missionary giving. The significant aspect is the interpretation placed on the situation by the conference leaders. As long as the church officials thought abolitionist activity

37 Ibid., p. 268.
38 Elliott, Great Secession, p. 156.
39 The total giving of the New England conference was down nearly fifty per-cent. Minutes, Vol. II., p. 385.
hindered the work of the church, it was rather easy for them to reason that this crisis in giving and membership was the result of abolitionist agitation. From the records of that 1835 Conference, it is impossible to draw any other conclusion. The issue was the crisis in the church program. It is important to keep in mind that eighteen annual conferences reported a total missionary giving of $44,260.06 for 1836. Seven of the eighteen conferences gave two-thirds of the total amount. These conferences were: Pittsburg, Ohio, South Carolina, Virginia, Baltimore, New York, and Oneida. Two of these are in the South and the other three are border conferences. The two conferences of the abolition territory gave only eight per-cent of the total amount, $3,634.12. Consequently, the financial strength of the church favored the conservative position on slavery and opposed the abolitionist agitation. Not only did the crisis in the church program exercise a controlling influence over the 1836 Conference decisions but so did the opinions of those annual conferences that provided the largest amount of the financial support for the church's ministry.

The church's educational institutions were in financial straits in 1836. The bishops called attention to the work of the "higher branches of education." A real need for sufficient endowment of the colleges was most evident. The denomination had to "depend chiefly upon its own resources" for the continuance and prosperity of the schools. The church officials considered this period to be a most critical one for the denomination's college building program. The 1836 report warned:

If indeed, at this crisis of our history, when these literary institutions have just begun to put forth their energies, and to exert their improving influence upon our youth, and upon the church generally, they should be allowed to languish for want of pecuniary means, the effect would be to throw us back for years in this branch of intellectual and moral culture.40

40 Bangs, History of Methodist Church, Vol. IV., p.254.
The bishops had just cause to be concerned about the lack of funds for education. Methodism's early attempts to establish colleges had failed because of financial reverses. The first college, Cokesbury, was established on the main stage route between Philadelphia and Baltimore in 1792. The college was destroyed by fire in 1795. Wesley wrote in his journal:

We have now a second and confirmed account that Cokesbury College is consumed to ashes, a sacrifice of about ten thousand pounds in about ten years. Its enemies may rejoice, and its friends need not mourn. Would any man give me ten thousand pounds a year to do and suffer again what I have done for that house, I would not do it. The Lord called not Mr. Whitefield or the Methodists to build colleges.

Asbury had spent a good deal of his time raising funds for the college. He accepted the destruction of the school as a possible indication that the Lord did not want the Methodists to have such institutions of learning. A second attempt, however, was made to reestablish Cokesbury College in 1796. The new building was destroyed by fire a short time later. A third attempt failed "for want of money ..." 41 The 1820 General Conference recommended to the annual conferences the establishment, as soon as practicable, of education institutions under their control. The Pittsburg Conference made plans to open Madison College, named in honor of ex-President Madison. Unfortunately, the money did not come in and the faculty was not adequately supported. The college was forced to close in 1829 only a short time after its opening. Several colleges had been established and struggled to keep their doors open. McKendree College in Illinois was organized in 1830; Wesleyan University of Connecticut in 1832; La Grange in North Alabama in 1831; Randolph-Macon of Virginia in 1832; and in 1835 the Indiana conference voted to establish

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a Methodist college in Indiana. In 1836 they were engaged in raising endowments for professorships.\textsuperscript{42}

Consequently, the Methodist bishops were determined that no obstacle should be placed in the way of the educational program of the denomination. The Methodist Church was already behind most religious bodies in this respect and the future of the church in America necessitated the raising of the church's educational standards.

Plantation missions reported the closing of certain missions and the 1836 records indicated a decrease of nearly one thousand in colored membership. This downward trend which began in 1835 resulted in a careful study of the effects of abolitionism on the missionary efforts in the South. Some of the bishops travelled extensively through-out the southern states. They carefully surveyed the situation. There was no doubt in the mind of the church leaders concerning the harmful effects of abolitionist agitation on plantation missions. This was most evident in the report submitted to the General Conference of 1836:

\begin{quote}
We have in evidence before us, that the inflammatory speeches, and writings, and movements, have tended, in many instances, injuriously to affect his (Negro's) temporal and spiritual condition, by hedging up the way of the missionary who is sent to preach to him Jesus \ldots and by making a more rigid supervision necessary on the part of his overseer, thereby abridging his civil and religious privileges.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

This report was significant for two reasons: It was based on an extensive survey of the southern situation and it supported the southern contention that abolitionism was disrupting the efforts of plantation missions.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., p. 214-222; Bangs, \textit{History of Methodist Church}, Vol. IV., p. 68.

\textsuperscript{43} Bangs, \textit{History of Methodist Church}, Vol. IV., p. 43.
\end{flushright}
In addition to the membership and financial reverses in the church program, was the loss of the Methodist Book Concern in February, 1836. The entire property, valued at $250,000 was destroyed by fire. "The buildings, all the printing and binding materials, a vast quantity of books, bound and in sheets, a valuable library, which the editor had been collecting for several years, were in a few hours consumed." What made the fire more disastrous was the fact that only a small portion of the assets were insured, some $25,000. The New York City fire, two months before, had prostrated most of the insurance offices, making it impossible to get insured in New York "with any safety for some time," and it "was next to impossible to get insured elsewhere on any terms."44 This loss, a considerable sum for the denomination, only intensified the critical condition of the Methodist Church situation in 1836.

The defiant attitude of the abolitionists was not conducive to any practical settlement of the controversy. On January 1, 1836, the Methodist abolitionists issued the first edition of the Zion's Watchman. The purpose of the weekly was to defend the Discipline of the Methodist Church against "the sin of holding and treating the human species as property." It was assumed that the periodical would be as much an "official organ of the Methodist Episcopal Church as the Christian Advocate and Journal." Attacks were made on the church, its bishops, ministers, editors, and members.45 The establishment of a periodical to state the abolitionist position; the election of a slate of abolitionist delegates to the 1836 General Conference; the determination of a small segment of the denomination to force its will on the entire General Conference, were all considered

44 Ibid., p. 441-444.
45 Elliott, Great Secession, p. 137.
to be fraught with danger for the denomination.

Within the framework of financial and membership reverses, the General Conference of 1836 began its deliberations on May second. The customary fraternal address of the British Conference was read. It affectionately but frankly set forth its opinion that slavery was inconsistent with the spirit of the Gospel and intimated that American Methodists ought, on that account, to take steps toward the position that the British church had adopted. Resentment was caused by the address and a rather noncommittal reply was devised in which it was said, "Had you been as well acquainted with the subject as we are ... your tone of sympathy for us would have been deeper and more pathetic! Mr. Orange Scott, abolitionists' spokesman, immediately moved to have the address printed in the church publications. Dr. Bangs, conservative, opposed the motion and it was laid on the table. The vote for a decision on whether or not to print the report was 59 to 59. In the event of a tie, no decision was made.47

On Thursday, May 10th, a protracted debate on slavery erupted on the floor of the Conference. Two of the abolitionist delegates had lectured at an abolition meeting in Cincinnati on May 10th. A resolution was proposed for the purpose of censuring the two lecturers. The preamble recited that the country had been profoundly stirred by the activities of abolitionism. It also stated that two members of the Conference had increased the excitement in Cincinnati by lecturing in favor of abolitionism. Such a course, the resolution stated, would bring upon the General Conference suspicion and because of this, the Conference

46 Elliott, Great Secession, p. 157; Bangs, History of Methodist Church, p. 242, 245.
47 Ibid., p. 158.
must issue a full statement of its position on abolitionism. After considerable debate, the General Conference adopted the following resolutions: In the first one, the church voiced its disapproval of the conduct of the two members of the General Conference who are reported to have lectured in this city, recently, upon and in favor of modern abolitionism.

The second resolution stated that the General Conference was decidedly opposed to modern abolitionism, and wholly disclaimed any right, wish, or intention to interfere in the civil and political relation between master and slave, as it exists in the slaveholding states of this Union. By a vote of 120 to 14 the Conference voted to adopt the two resolutions. The printing question's tied vote may be attributed to the fact that the acceptance of the report of the British address did not censure the abolitionists nor condemn slavery. It was not a vote against abolitionists; it was nothing more than an endorsement of the British greetings. The subject of the two resolutions against abolitionism demanded that every delegate take his stand on the "agitating" question of modern abolitionism. The debate on the two proposals had delineated the real issue at the Conference. That issue was not slavery but it was the disruption of the peace and harmony in the church and a consequent decrease in membership and financial support. Mr. Orange Scott contended that the peace of the church needed to be disturbed:

The peace of the church which is disturbed by agitating views of slavery, ought to be broken. It may not, perhaps, be always best that the church be at peace ... . The Methodist Episcopal Church has an unholy alliance with slavery; she ought not, therefore, give herself any peace until she cleanses her skirts from blood-guiltiness. Shall the dearest interests of undying millions be sacrificed upon the altar of the peace of the church?


49 The fourteen negative votes were cast by the abolitionist delegates from New Hampshire and New England conferences.

50 Matlack, Antislavery Struggle, p. 96, 97; Bangs, History of the Methodist Church, Vol. IV., p. 248.
Dr. Capers, founder of plantation missions, narrated several instances that evidenced a great need for prudence in order to prevent persecution of the southern preachers working among the slaves. A number of conservative spokesmen maintained that abolitionism was the cause of the critical situation in the church's program. The interests of the abolitionists and those of the plantation missionaries had collided at this Conference. For the abolitionists, purity of the church is the issue; for the plantation missionaries, the agitation of abolitionism is the problem; for the conservatives, the crisis in the departments of education, publication, and missions is the issue. Consequently, the main task of this Conference was to get the denomination moving forward again.

On May 20, a report of the committee on the Judiciary on slavery accented the problems of a border annual conference, namely, Baltimore. This conference had always refused to receive slaveholding preachers, or to ordain local preachers who were slaveholders. A petition from the Lancaster and Westmoreland circuits asked that this practice be discontinued so that slaveholders could be ordained. These circuits, although in the Baltimore conference, were in the state of Virginia. The petitioners pointed out the fact that it was impracticable to emancipate slaves in their state. For this reason, it was argued, they came under one of the exceptions to the general rule of the Discipline on slavery. The Discipline stated that

no slaveholder shall be eligible to any official station in our church hereafter, when the laws of the state in which he lives will admit of emancipation and permit the liberated slave to enjoy freedom.51

The committee ruled that the Baltimore conference should be per-

mitted to act as it desired in this matter.

On May 22nd, the report of the committee on slavery was presented and adopted by a vote which represented ninety per-cent of the delegates. The abolitionists had attempted to persuade the General Conference to change the rule on slavery and restore the earlier provision. This request aroused a reaction, which, according to Peter Cartwright, both threatened secession and a proposal to have the rule stricken out altogether.52 Although this was a private caucus, it evidenced mounting strife on both sides of the controversy. The committee reported,

That it was inexpedient to make any change in our book of Discipline respecting slavery, and that we deem it improper further to agitate the subject in the General Conference at present.53

The abolitionists had two members out of the seven on the committee.

The southern delegates had accepted the conference action on abolition as "indicative of a determination on the part of the Methodist ministry throughout the North not to interfere with the domestic institutions in the South."54 The election of bishops on May 24th greatly disturbed this southern assurance. Dr. Capers, candidate from the South, was rejected because of his connection with slavery. The three newly elected bishops all came from the North. The southern leaders were enraged by the rejection of their man. A second event which influenced this reaction of the South was the circulation of an abolition pamphlet on the eve of the election. The author, Orange Scott, raised all the arguments of the abolitionists and denounced the position of the Methodist Church on slavery. One of Scott's statements

52 The earlier rule was more strict and was adopted in 1784, but due to its strictness, was suspended in six months.
was most alarming to the southern delegates:

My view of abolitionism is as strong and incendiary as can be found in the Garrisonian school, because it is the very same. I have read all the abolition authors and therefore know what abolition is.54

As a result of these developments, the southern delegates had a meeting and discussed the possibility of secession. At least, this was the declaration of William A. Smith, delegate from Virginia.55 On July 30th, following the General Conference, a circular was published by Smith. In surveying the decisions of the 1836 General Conference, he gave recognition to the resolutions on abolitionism but contended that a "large majority voted on the principles of abolitionism in the election of bishops." He remonstrated that the highest qualified man was set aside because of his connection with slavery, not for want of proper qualifications. Smith called upon all southern preachers to rally around the interests of the South. Furthermore, he argued, that unless these difficulties were adjusted by 1840, the South might find it wise to establish their own General Conference.56

The decisions of the 1836 General Conference were interpreted as a decisive defeat for the abolition forces. The election of bishops left the South dissatisfied. The Conference deliberations were influenced by the state of the nation, slavery sentiments of the city of Cincinnati, the crisis in the church program, and the obstinate attitude of the abolitionists. The order of events on the agenda proved to be most significant. Had the election of the bishops preceded the resolutions on abolitionism, the possibility of a split in 1836 would have been more imminent. The Pastoral Address, prepared by a committee,

55 Ibid., p. 144.
56 Ibid., p. 145.
signed by all the bishops, and published by order of the General Conference, exhorted the delegates to "abstain from all abolition movements and associations, and to refrain from patronizing any of their publications." The manner in which the bishops implemented the wishes of the General Conference in the next four years, raised a new issue and pushed the slavery controversy into the background. The new question was concerned with conference rights.

57 Matlack, Antislavery Struggle, p. 102.
Chapter V.
Conference Rights

The Methodist Church in 1836 had voiced its disapproval of modern abolitionism. The general rule on slavery remained unchanged. All further agitation of slavery was condemned. The executive and state administrative officers were urged to act in with the General Conference on these matters.

During the ensuing quadrennium, the slavery controversy within the Methodist Church intensified. In almost all of the annual conferences it was discussed and resolutions were adopted. The abolitionists were a small but determined minority. Abolitionist lecturers traveled to many of the northern conferences with the hope of winning converts. The immediate objects of the abolitionists were: Expressions of antislavery sentiments in the annual and quarterly conferences; the enactment of prohibitory rules against slavery by the General Conference; the ultimate extirpation of slavery from the land. In order to secure their aims, agitation of the church was considered imperative. It was this agitation that the bishops determined to crush. They feared that it would seriously disrupt the peace and unity of the church and nation. The leaders of the church sought to allay the excitement by discouraging and suppressing discussion of the subject. The methods employed in these efforts gave rise to a new issue, that of conference rights.

The conference rights issue had several facets with one

1 Matlack, Antislavery Struggle, p. 89-90.
2 Ibid., p. 90.
principal objective, namely, to cut out of the Methodist body the
cancer of radical abolitionism. Armed with the mandate of the
General Conference, the church leaders began their work immedi­
ately following the 1836 General Conference. All discussion of
the subject of abolitionism was to be suppressed and every mini­
ster was to refrain from any connection with the movement.

On July 13, 1836, the New England conference 3 convened
and immediately appointed a committee on slavery and abolition.
Although the report on abolition of slavery was ready several
days before the conference adjourned, the bishop refused to allow
it to be read. Finally, on the last day of the conference, near
the hour of midnight, Bishop Hedding asked for the committee's
report. He refused to entertain a motion for its adoption until
it could be re-read and discussed in detail. Obviously, it had
to be withdrawn. This action of Bishop Hedding initiated the
conference rights controversy, which was to continue for several
years. In a letter to the bishop, Orange Scott disputed the
right of Hedding to cause delay of action or to object to any
part of a report. Queried Scott, "What right had you to say that
the report on slavery should not be presented till all the other
business of the conference was finished?" He then questioned
Hedding's refusal to put a motion for the adoption of the report.

On the eve of the 1837 annual conference of New Eng­
land, the abolitionists held a meeting and resolved that they
would decline to do any business until the petitions on slavery
had been presented. All other questions were to be laid on the
table until the president granted their request. If the presid­
ing officer refused to do this, the conference would be forced
to adjourn. Bishop Waugh, president, refused to honor their re-

3 The majority of the delegates in this conference were
abolitionists.
4 Elliott, Great Secession, p. 179.
quest. The petitions were not referred to a committee; no appeal could be made to the conference from his decision; and a request for an expression of opinion by the conference on the matter was rejected.\(^5\) The abolitionists, however, did not go ahead with their plan so that the conference did continue its work. The same procedure was pursued by the abolitionists in the New Hampshire conference with virtually the same result. The presiding elder declined to accept the slavery report and explained that,

if, in the judgment of the president the report of said committee shall contain any article contrary to the Discipline of our church, or contrary to the advice of the General Conference, as expressed in the pastoral address of that body, bearing date May 26, 1836, it is understood and admitted that he, the said president is under no obligation to put to vote any motion to adopt said report.\(^6\)

The gag rule of the Methodist Church applied only to the discussion of the abolition of slavery. Most of the other conferences adopted reports on slavery during these years. The most explosive resolution was accepted by the Georgia conference in 1837. It was declared that "it is the sense of the Georgia conference that slavery, as it exists in the United States is not a moral evil ..." The conference expressed its gratitude to the General Conference for its attempt to suppress abolitionism.\(^7\) The South Carolina conference in 1838, endorsed the Georgia resolution and added more fuel to the fire by contending that it represented the sentiment of the ministers of the whole South.\(^8\)

In summary, within the abolitionist territory, no motions on slavery reports were allowed to be voted on and the subject was ruled out as a part of annual conference business.

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\(^5\) Ibid., p. 174.
\(^6\) Ibid., p. 175.
\(^7\) Ibid., p. 190.
\(^8\) Ibid., p. 191.
At the same time, most other conferences were permitted to discuss the question of slavery and place resolutions on record opposing abolitionism. In some instances, slavery was declared not to be a moral evil. To the abolitionists, this was only a further indication of the partiality shown by the church hierarchy. To them it was abundantly clear that there was a concerted effort for repression on the part of the church officials.

The second facet of the suppression strategy concerned itself with the punishment of those ministers who strayed from the General Conference policy on abolitionism. The manner of discipline varied from conference to conference. The 1836 General Conference had laid down a pattern for the annual conferences by defining the responsibility of the minister to the conference. No member was "to engage in agencies not known or recognized in the Methodist Episcopal Church." The presiding elder was not allowed to release a preacher from his assigned church to engage in agencies of any kind not recognized by the Methodist Church. No member was permitted to participate in political strife.9

Many of the annual conferences adopted rules for the purpose of keeping their ministers in line with conference policy. The New York conference forbade its members to attend antislavery conventions, to deliver abolition lectures, to form antislavery societies, or "in any way agitating the subject so to disturb the peace and harmony of the church …."10 The 1837 conference ruled that none "ought to be elected to the office of a deacon or elder in our church" unless he pledged to refrain from discussing the abolition viewpoint.11 Charles True, a mem-

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9 Bangs, History of Methodist Church, Vol. IV., p. 266.
10 Elliott, Great Secession, p. 193.
11 Matlack, Antislavery Struggle, p. 112.
ber of the New York conference, was suspended from all the func-
tions of a minister by a vote of ninety-one to thirty-seven. He
was accused of violating the pledge of slavery of the conference,
attending an antislavery meeting, and assisting in the publi-
cation of an antislavery tract. The suspension was removed upon
his promise to abide by the conference rules on abolitionism. 12

The Philadelphia conference, beginning in 1837, asked
all candidates for admission the question, "Are you an aboli-
tionist?" All those who gave an affirmative answer were re-
jected. 13 Lucius Matlack was unable, because of his abolitionist
activities to get full membership in the Philadelphia conference.
In 1837, when he was presented with high recommendation, one of
the presiding elders said:

Mr. President, the abolitionists are radicals. This
young man is a radical. These radicals deny your
authority and the authority of the General Conference.
He has been spoken of as a young man of talents and
piety. If he were as pious as St. Paul and as talented
as an angel, he should never enter this conference as
an abolitionist if I could prevent it. 14

Matlack was unanimously voted out of the conference in 1838 as a
result of his abolitionist connections.

Paul R. Brown was accused of attending the Utica Anti-
slavery convention and brought to trial. He refused to recant
and after being publicly rebuked by the bishop, he was moved to
a distant field where "he suffered much inconvenience and many
privations." 15

The abolitionists, unable to express their sentiments

12 Ibid., p. 113.
13 Ibid., p. 117.
14 Buckley, History of Methodism, p. 6,7.
15 Matlack, Antislavery Struggle, p. 114.
in the annual conferences, moved their agitation to the convention hall. On August 3, 1837, a Methodist antislavery convention was held in Cazenovia, New York. Resolutions were adopted on subjects of slavery and conference rights. On the conference rights question it was maintained that the annual conference should be the judge as to what "business the interests of the church require to be done." The 1838 convention held in Utica, New York, elected delegates to represent the Methodist abolitionists at the Canadian and British conferences. The convention which met in Lowell, Massachusetts, in November of 1838 adopted resolutions censuring the methods resorted to by the bishops and the General Conference. It was pointed out that "southern conferences may take any ground they please in favor of slavery."

The abolitionists had reached the conclusion that unless the church's position on slavery was changed before 1840, the General Conference would continue the present policy. The New England conference adopted a resolution which called for a change in the church's rule on slavery. The annual conferences were asked to pass judgment on the proposed alteration which would consider not only the buying and selling of slaves a sin but the holding of them as well. The Genesee conference rejected it with a vote of sixty to thirty. The Pittsburg conference reported five votes in favor of the new regulation. All of the other conferences outside New England gave less than two votes for the proposal. The conventions and the New England conference resolution represented a desperate attempt to force

16 Elliott, Great Secession, p. 179.
17 Matlack, Antislavery Struggle, p. 126.
18 Buckley, History of Methodism, p. 12.
the abolitionist views on the church. As the church approached the 1840 General Conference the ministers and annual conferences were marching, with few exceptions, in line with the official church policy on slavery. The abolitionists had been suppressed and in some instances expelled from the church.

Two important developments exercised a marked influence on the 1840 General Conference decisions. The first one had to do with the situation within American abolitionism. The House of Representatives in 1840, passed a gag rule which not only shelved abolition petitions but denied their reception. The petition campaign had been one of the most extensive propaganda drives in our nation's history.19 The Methodist abolitionists had contributed their share of time and money to the crusade. Congress' action was interpreted as a major setback for the movement. Garrison and Birney had created more trouble for the Methodist abolitionists by waging a furious campaign against the churches and the ministry. The Methodist, Baptist, and Congregational preachers in the antislavery society had urged Garrison to dissociate his magazine, the Liberator, from its official connection with the society. Garrison continued to denounce the churches. He declared,

the corruptions of the church, so-called, are obviously more deep and incurable than those of the state, and therefore, the church, in spite of every precaution, is first to be dashed to pieces.20

Birney made his attack on the American churches while on a speaking trip in England. He called upon the British people to use their influence to persuade the American churches "to purify themselves from a sin that has greatly debased them, and that threatens in the end to destroy them."21 Public reaction against

19 Barnes, Anti-Slavery Impulse, p. 133.
20 Smith, Revivalism, p. 20.
21 Elliott, Great Secession, p. 212.
Garrison's and Birney's attacks reacted favorably to the conservative position of the Methodist Church.

A second significant development concerned itself with the prosperous program of the church in 1840. The remarkable growth of the past four years was attributed to the successful crushing of the agitation within the annual conferences. The membership had increased nearly 90,000 in three years. This was interpreted as a further indication of the wisdom of the plan to suppress the agitation of the abolitionists. The Methodist Church now had seventeen colleges and twenty-one academies. The need for proper endowment was still great. It was also felt that there should be some central control of all the educational institutions of the church. Four hundred thousand dollars had been appropriated for missions during the quadrennium. The giving for 1840 more than doubled that of 1839. Missions had been established in Ohio and Pennsylvania German communities and among the French in New York. Several new missions had been organized in Mexico. In addition to the regular giving, more than six hundred thousand dollars had been pledged for missions and education during the Centenary celebrations in 1839. The sentiments of the

22 The order of this increase is significant. The 1837 annual report showed an increase of 5,149 Whites and a decrease of 5,639 Colored. Although recorded in 1837, an annual report covers part of the year before. The 1836 General Conference left both the abolitionists and southerners very disturbed for reasons already discussed. This dissatisfaction possibly accounts for the discouraging report of 1837. From the 1838 report through to 1840, the picture is radically different. In 1838, there was an increase of 40,135 in Whites, and 2,996 in Negroes; in 1839, 35,140 Whites, and 7,196 Negroes. Regardless of the many factors involved in this increase, the bishops observed that as the agitation in the annual conferences diminished, the church prospered. Journals, Vol. II., p. 154; Minutes, Vol. II.

23 Bangs, History of Methodist Church, p. 353; Journals, Vol. II., p. 140.
church officials in 1840 were expressed by McTyeire: "The prospect was full of hope; the time, propitious. So true it is, that the church has nothing to fear from foes without, if there is peace within." 24

It is at this point that we have the key to the understanding of the 1836 and 1840 General Conference decisions. The decrease in membership for 1836 greatly troubled the church leaders. The issue at that time was not slavery; it was the sad condition of the church program and the necessity of taking proper measures to correct the situation. By 1840, prosperity had returned and the healthy condition of the church was interpreted as an endorsement of the methods used to restore peace and harmony. 25

The General Conference convened in Baltimore on May 1, 1840. Two of the important matters before the delegates were: The conference rights controversy which had been debated in most of the annual conferences; and the old issue of slavery. The former had arisen as a result of the methods used by the conference executives to implement the 1836 General Conference resolutions on abolitionism. The bishops assured the assembled preachers that they had endeavored "both in our official administration and in our private intercourse with the preachers and members", to carry out the policy of the General Conference. For the most part, they reported, "our efforts in this respect have been generally approved and your advice received and practically


25 It is interesting to note that New England's conference giving dropped 40% in the 1837 report; in 1838 it rose nearly 60% and continued to rise during this four years. Conference officials must have noted that their enforcement of the General Conference rule on abolitionism did not discourage the missionary giving of the abolition conference.
observed in a very large majority of the annual conferences." Anticipating the conference rights discussion on the conference floor, the bishops delineated the principal points of disagreement. The issue was simple: The abolitionists contended that the annual conference had the right to "decide what business they will do", and the bishops insisted that the "president has the right to determine questions of order subject to appeal" according to the policies of the General Conference. The General Conference by a large majority, voiced its approval of the course pursued by the bishops in quelling the agitation. The General Conference then ruled that the "bishop in an annual conference, and the presiding elder in a quarterly meeting conference shall decide all questions of law." Furthermore, the president of an annual or quarterly meeting "has the right to decline putting the question on a motion, resolution, or report, when, in his judgment, such motion does not relate to the proper business of the conference." So far as the Methodist Church was concerned, this was the end of the conference rights controversy. For the abolitionist forces, it was another defeat.

The slavery issue was still very much alive in the 1840 General Conference. The supremacy of the anti-abolitionist forces was demonstrated by the legislation. The committee on slavery advised that

it is inexpedient to express any opinion, or to adopt any measures to control or modify slavery as it exists in the United States, other than those now recognized in our book of Discipline.

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27 Ibid., p. 137-140.
28 Ibid., p. 121, 122.
29 Bangs, History of Methodist Church, Vol. IV., p. 389
Matlack, Antislavery Struggle, p. 133.
An appeal of Rev. Silas Comfort from a decision of the Missouri conference provoked a rather intense debate on slavery. The charge against Comfort was maladministration, admitting Negro testimony in the trial of a white man. Mr. Comfort contended that the Discipline contained no special rule on the case; and the 88,000 Negro members of the Methodist Church would be offended. The Missouri conference ruled that the church could not accept colored testimony as long as the courts of Missouri refused to honor it. Various resolutions were voiced by the delegates. The one adopted stated that

*it is inexpedient and unjustifiable for any preacher among us to permit colored persons to give testimony against a white person in any state where they are denied that privilege in trials at law.*

Anticipating the opposition of Negro church members and the abolitionists, the Conference later passed a second resolution which suggested that it was not the intention of the Methodist Church to "express or imply any distrust or want of confidence in the Christian piety or integrity" of its Negro members.

A petition to the General Conference from the Westmoreland district was similar to the one it had presented in 1836. Westmoreland was a circuit in the Baltimore conference but lay within the bounds of the state of Virginia. Certain preachers in that district had been refused ordination in the conference solely on the ground of being slaveowners. They argued that Virginia should be included among those states for which exception was made in the Methodist Discipline, since it was a state whose laws forbade manumission. The General Conference hesitated to apply the general rule to the Westmoreland situation for two reasons: There was some question as to whether slaveholding was the only

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reason for refusing these preachers ordination; and the General Conference had permitted the annual conferences to determine the requirements for ordination. The case came before the General Conference on June third near the hour of midnight. The resolution was adopted with very little examination of its contents. It stated that

under the provisional exception of the general rule of the church on the subject of slavery, the simple holding of slaves, or mere ownership of slave property, in states or territories where the laws do not admit of emancipation, and permit the liberated slave to enjoy freedom, constitutes no legal barrier to the election of ordination of ministers to the various grades of office known to the ministry of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and can not be considered as operating any forfeiture of rights in view of such election and ordination. 32

This hurried action of the General Conference became the stronghold in favor of a slaveholding episcopacy in the 1844 General Conference.

The decisions of the 1840 General Conference were received with satisfaction in the South. For the abolitionists, there was virtually no judgment of that Conference which could be interpreted as favoring their cause. The delegates had refused to censure Georgia for its 1837 resolution which declared that slavery was not a moral evil. 33 Considered within the framework of the total church picture, the results were not unusual. The prosperity of the denomination from 1836 to 1840; the sentiments of more than nine-tenths of the annual conferences; the situation within the American abolition camp all favored the conservative policies of the Methodist Church in 1840.

In reviewing the conference rights controversy, it must be admitted that both sides in the struggle exceeded the bounds of truth and charity. The officials of the church were charged

32 Ibid., p. 171.
33 Buckley, History of Methodism, p. 13, 14.
with responsibility of executing the wishes of the 1836 General Conference. The mandate called for the suppression of all agitation. More than ninety-per-cent of the annual conferences supported this policy. One small section of the church could not be permitted to dictate the policies for the whole denomination. When a minister became involved in the abolition crusade, his church responsibilities were neglected. Income and energy which normally would have gone for church activity were channeled into the crusade for abolition. Agents traveled to the various annual conferences stirring up opposition to the presiding bishops and disrupting the business of those assemblies. Pulpits were sometimes occupied without permission of the preacher in charge. "Money is wrung from the sympathies of women and children, by a detail of tragic stories, in circuits where the preacher can scarcely be supported. The cycle is the same, agitate to get money, and get money to agitate."34 Should this crusade become contagious and infect the whole of the northern conferences of the Methodist Church, the bishops feared it would seriously cripple the denomination.

To the abolitionists, purity was more desirable than the peace and harmony of the church. Orange Scott contended that "abolitionism, the purifying process, ought to be carried out in all its practical operations, whatever the consequences to the church."35 Agitation, it was felt, was necessary in order to wake up the church to its responsibility to the Negro. The church officials did discriminate against the abolitionists. The latter's status in the conference was often determined on this one matter alone, regardless of character and devotion as a minister. Some were cut off from the conference, and others were suspended until they agreed to fulfill certain conditions.

34 Elliott, Great Secession, p. 186.
The abolitionists, however, unfairly attempted to place their opponents on the proslavery side. All those who questioned the measures used by the agitators, were listed as proslavery men. Abuse was resorted to in many instances. Bishop and Mrs. Hedding were made the objects of a burlesque slave auction in many of the abolitionist speeches.

The 1840 General Conference may have ruled on the conference rights controversy, but it did not resolve the slavery question. Abolitionism may have been knocked out but it was far from dead. The ensuing four years witnessed events which changed the thinking of the conservatives in the church. In 1840, the abolitionists were a helpless minority. In the 1844 General Conference they sat on the sidelines and joyfully watched the conservatives in the church defend the abolitionist position.
Chapter VI.
Road to Reunion

The quadrennium of 1840 to 1844 witnessed a remarkable change in Methodism's official policy toward slavery. The legislation of the 1840 General Conference was perfectly satisfactory to the South. All the factions in the church believed that conservatism had won and the unity of the church had been preserved. The abolitionists considered their situation hopeless. Orange Scott responded, "There is therefore no alternative but to submit to things as they are or secede."¹ Four years later, the situation was reversed. Every decision of the 1844 General Conference was considered a victory for the abolitionists. The conservatives, who had formerly voted with the South, threw their support to the cause of the abolitionists. The South, a definite minority, chose secession as the most prudent course for them to follow. The cause of the conservatives's shift in position is the central theme of this chapter.

The Methodist abolitionists, in the fall of 1840, held a convention in New York City for the purpose of rallying their divided forces. The abolitionists criticized the 1840 General Conference for its failure to disapprove of the Georgia and South Carolina resolutions which declared that slavery was not a moral evil. The Conference was also censured for its resolutions on the testimony of colored people and its refusal to restore the earlier and stricter rule on slavery.² The convention, however,

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did not accomplish its purpose. During the years of 1840 to 1842, abolitionism had a sickly existence. The American Antislavery Society was divided as a result of disputes concerning the rights of women, the non-resistant sentiments of Garrison, and the attacks on the churches and the Constitution of the United States. These disagreements splintered the movement. The abolitionist periodicals were no longer self-supporting and many said that that abolitionism was dead. A number of the agitators went into retirement. Orange Scott withdrew from the controversy and settled quietly in Newberry, Vermont. Bishop Hedding, in the fall of 1842, observed: "The antislavery excitement in the church is at an end."

Although abolitionism was sick, it was not dead. The year 1843 saw a great awakening in the abolitionist camp and among the conservatives within the church. Prior to 1842, no annual conference was permitted to express abolitionist sentiments. After 1843, annual conferences were allowed to adopt resolutions expressing any view of slavery without the objection of the presiding elders. In order to ward off secessions of abolitionists, conventions were held in Boston; Hallowell, Maine; and Claremont, New Hampshire in 1843. The Boston meeting resolved that "slaveholding is sin; that every slaveholder is a sinner, and ought not to be admitted to the pulpit or the communion; that the Methodist Episcopal Church is responsible for slavery within its pale." The Maine Convention reported that there were within the Methodist Church "200 traveling ministers holding 1600 slaves; about 1,000 local preachers holding 10,000; and about 25,000 members holding 207,900 more." The third con-

3 Ibid., p. 148.
4 Ibid., p. 140.
5 Matlack, Antislavery Struggle, p. 140.
ference of abolitionists resolved that "the only way to prevent entire dissolution among us as a church is in an entire separation from the South."\(^6\) According to Matlack, a plan was agreed upon for memorializing the General Conference to divide the church, North and South, or to set off the New England conferences by themselves.\(^7\) Finally, the Christian Advocate and Journal, official organ of the church was opened to the discussion of slavery in 1843. Dr. Bond, spokesman for the conservatives, began an attack on the ultras in the South in the editorial columns of that paper.

The infusion of new life into the antislavery movement and the reversal of official church policy toward abolitionism, resulted from a series of diverse developments, beginning with the 1840 General Conference. The resolution rejecting Negro testimony had been a source of continual controversy in the North. Dr. Elliott observed, "The colored members of the church were greatly afflicted. This matter had ... done great mischief."\(^8\) A resolution prepared by the official members of the Sharp Street and Asbury churches in Baltimore urged the General Conference to "wipe from the Journal this odious resolution."\(^9\) One author contends that this action on colored testimony "stirred abolitionists to the highest pitch of excitement."\(^10\) This was the result at the 1840 General Conference, but the aftereffects of this action contributed to the reversal of the conservative's position on slavery in 1843.

The resolutions of the Georgia and South Carolina conferences which declared that slavery was not a moral evil, had

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7 Matlack, Antislavery Struggle, p. 152.
8 Elliott, Great Secession, p. 223.
9 Matlack, Antislavery Struggle, p. 149.
10 Baumer Swaney, Episcopal Methodism and Slavery, (Boston: 1926), p. 103, 104.
greatly disturbed the conservatives. It was an indication of the changing sentiment among southern churchmen toward slavery. After 1840, there was an increasing tendency, in the South, to present slavery as part of God's plan. Abolitionism was frequently linked with atheism. No member of any southern college faculty could speak against the institution of slavery with impunity. Dr. Bond, editor of the Christian Advocate, in 1843 charged that among southern Methodists "there was ultramontanism not less dangerous to the common welfare than that of the abolitionists." He contended that the southern position left no room for hope of a better state of things; "for slavery must not only be endured, but purposely propagated." He concluded his editorial by declaring that should the church demand that he advocate or defend the opinion contained in the Georgia and South Carolina resolutions, he would resign as editor. Furthermore, the conservative spokesman declared that should the church ever cease to declare slavery to be a moral evil, he would seek a "more pure community." Dr. Bond's discussion of slavery and the expression of his personal opinions represented not merely a new position but also a different procedure or method.

The conservatives's decision to discuss the controversy dates back to the winter of 1841 and 1842. The slaveholding interests of the state of Maryland held a convention in the winter of 1841. They recommended to the state legislature a course of action which would have resulted in driving from the state or reducing to bondage the free Negroes. Some of these Negroes were members of the Methodist Church. The passage of the bill by the Maryland House of Representatives brought a vigorous protest from the Methodist conservatives. Whereas the bill was

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11 Stokes, Church and State, p. 156.
rejected by the Maryland Senate, it awakened the conservatives of the church to the importance of publicly expressing their sentiments on such issues. The following week, Dr. Bond, published an editorial in the Christian Advocate which overflowed with indignation "at this movement of the slaveholders' convention." His next statement indicated a new procedure for the conservatives: "The questions which we were told it was dangerous to discuss are now forced upon us by those who conjured us to be silent for the sake of mercy and humanity; ... we will discuss them to the hearts' content of the slaveholders convention." 

The remarks of Dr. Bond and other conservatives in the Methodist Church, revealed to the South in 1843 that the tide had changed in favor of the abolitionists. Dr. Wightman, editor of the Southern Advocate, observed that the antislavery feeling was gaining ground in the North and winning converts. It was this group, he concluded, which "will hold the balance of power at the approaching General Conference, and will then decide the destiny of the church for good or evil." 

The aftermath of the 1840 General Conference decisions and the Maryland episode did not represent the only causes of the conservatives' change of heart. In 1843, several thousand laymen and pastors withdrew from the church and formed the Wesleyan Methodist Church. Some authors contend that the awakening of the antislavery sentiment and the new policy of the church resulted from this secession. Matlack insisted that "it became necessary to remove all cause of dissatisfaction with the position of the church to prevent secession." Swaney shared

14 Matlack, Antislavery Struggle, p. 150, 151.
16 Ibid., p. 151.
this view: "That which the agitation of a decade had failed to accomplish, the secession of those who formed the Wesleyan Methodist Church brought to pass. For the policy of the Methodist Episcopal Church changed immediately when the secession movement began to gain momentum." 17

Swaney and Matlack, it appears, have oversimplified the reasons for the Methodist Church's new policy on slavery. One can only conjecture as to how much influence the 1843 secession exerted on the church guides but it was not the only factor involved. Small groups of abolitionists seceded from the church as early as 1839. Orange Scott, the abolitionist evangelist, left the church in 1842. 18 At the formation of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in 1843, the total membership was 6,000. Eighteen months later, this had increased to 15,000. 19 In 1843, the membership of the Methodist Church reported 154,624 additions and in 1844, 102,831. 20 The loss of 6,000 members is not a sufficient explanation for a change in policy which risked the loss of 500,000 members in the South. The church conservatives formerly had been concerned about the southern reaction to abolitionism. Would the loss of a few thousand members or the possible secession of several thousand more, in itself, explain this change in attitude? The South had threatened to withdraw from the church as early as 1836. This threat had been renewed at various intervals since that conference.

Furthermore, it must be kept in mind that the 1843 secession was accepted by some conservatives as the only solution to the church's slavery controversy. According to a letter pub-

18 Elliott, Great Secession, p. 229, 246.
19 Matlack, Antislavery Struggle, p. 141.
20 McTyeire, History of Methodism, p. 612.
lished by Matlack, Dr. Bond, editor of Christian Advocate, had come to the conclusion that the only way "to save the church in New England was to get these men (abolitionists) out of the church, bring on the crisis as soon as possible, and change the issue of the controversy so as to divide the antislavery men of New England ..." Bond, then, published a series of articles designed to accomplish that goal. It was thought that the secessions, however, developed and crystallized a latent antislavery spirit of the church into action.

Perhaps more important than all the preceding causes, was the changing attitude in the North toward slavery and the abolitionist program. In 1840, the Whig party elected William Henry Harrison to the presidency. Harrison died a month later and Tyler became president of the United States. Florida was admitted as a slave state on the first day of Tyler's administration. During this time period, Texas was seeking admission to the United States. The abolitionists opposed it on the contention that the new territory would strengthen slavery sentiment. Great debates in Congress on the subject were stirring that legislative body and the country during this quadrennium. The Texas question, with the possibility of huge annexations of southwestern territory, had initiated an acute phase of the slavery quarrel. Up to 1843, slavery had merely asserted its right to continue unmolested where it existed. It had been limited by the Missouri Compromise. When it declared its right to expand, a host of northerners rose in opposition. They had believed that kept within its bounds, slavery would ultimately decay. It was certain that Texas, having slavery, would enter as a slave state. In 1843, the Washington government took the initiative in reopening the question of Texas annexation and by

21 Matlack, Antislavery Struggle, p. 145.
1844 it had become uppermost in American politics. While the Texas question was being debated, abolitionists more and more constituted a pressure group in a constantly increasing number of northern communities. "They captured control of the local offices, particularly the school boards, the justices of peace, the sheriffs, and the county courts. Their influence was felt in the state governments."22

The conservatives in the church looked forward to the day when the slaveholder would be willing to emancipate his slaves. Similarly, many in the North believed that kept within its present limits, slavery would ultimately decay. The annexation of Texas, it was believed would infuse new energy into the despised institution of slavery. The debates on the Texas question caused the northerner, including the churchmen, to re-think the question of slavery, and exercised considerable influence on the conservative shift in position.

The ninth delegated General Conference of the Methodist Church met in the Greene Street Methodist Church in New York City on May 1, 1844. This was destined to be the last one for ninety-five years in which all Episcopal Methodists were to meet together. It was one of the longest and momentous sessions in the history of the church. The question of slavery which had been disturbing the church's peace for nearly sixty years was brought to a conclusion. At this eventful meeting, the church was divided into two separate ecclesiastical bodies; the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

Deciding the fate of the denomination were 130 delegates from the thirty-three annual conferences. The bishops opened the session with obvious reluctance. The controversy which was foremost in everyone's mind was avoided as long as

22 Dumond, Antislavery Origins, p. 64.
possible. The Episcopal Address did not mention slavery, although it dwelt at length on the missions to the Negroes. The plantation missions were on a firm foundation and only the lack of funds prevented further expansion in the southern and western states. The bishops reported: "Confidence in the integrity of our principles, and the purity of our motives, which for a time was shaken, is restored."  

The expansion of membership for the past four years had exceeded anything in the previous history of the church with a record increase of nearly 375,000.  

Every department of the church was in a prosperous condition.

On the third day of the conference, a motion to appoint a committee on slavery survived a motion to table it. Antislavery memorials from ten different conferences were referred to this committee for consideration.  

The first series of debates on slavery began on May 7th, with the appeal of Francis A. Harding, minister of the Baltimore conference. In February, 1844, he had married a lady who owned a family of five slaves. At the session of the Baltimore conference in March he was required, according to the regulations of that body, to manumit them. Failing to comply, he was "suspended until the next annual conference, or until he assures the episcopacy that he has taken the necessary steps to secure the freedom of the slaves." From this decision, he had appealed to the General Conference. The case for the appellant was argued by Dr. William A. Smith, and for the Confer-

24 McTyeire, History of Methodism, p. 612.
25 Buckley, History of Methodism, p. 30, 31. Some of the conferences were: Maine, New England, New Hampshire, New York, Black River, Pittsburg, North Ohio, Ohio, and Rock River. Memorials related to colored testimony, the general rule on slavery, appointment of slaveholders to various offices of the church, etc.
ence by Rev. John A. Collins. Smith insisted that the laws of
Maryland did not allow emancipation and that whatever the policy
of the Baltimore conference, the discipline of the church ex-
cepted ministers in such states that forbade manumission, from
any requirement in the matter. Collins argued that no slave-
holder had ever been a member of the Baltimore conference; the
offending member knew this when he entered it, and he had the
fact before him when he married; that this regulation of the con-
ference had been uniformly insisted on in the case of others.
Furthermore, it was maintained that notwithstanding the stringency
of the state law, slaves had often been manumitted in Maryland
and remained undisturbed. When the final vote was counted there
were 117 in favor of upholding Baltimore's decision with 56
opposed. Only two southern delegates voted with the majority.26

The vote on the Harding case was significant in that it
confirmed in the southern delegates' apprehension that they had
lost the conservative support. It revealed a clash between the
two irreconcilable views on slavery with the opponents of slavery
in the majority and determined to use their power. It was an

26 "The division was portentous. But two votes from
southern states were cast in favor of affirming the decision of
the Baltimore conference, one from Texas and the other from
Missouri. Among the fifty-six who voted to reverse the action of
the Baltimore conference were one from the Rock River and three
from Illinois, including the famous Peter Akers. The Philadel-
phia conference divided, three voting to reverse and two to sus-
tain. The New Jersey divided, three voting to sustain, two to
reverse. But the New York, New England, Providence, Maine, New
Hampshire, Troy, Black River, Oneida, Genesee, Erie, Pittsburg,
Ohio, North Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, and Baltimore conferences
voted unanimously to sustain the action of the Baltimore con-
ference; and the Kentucky, Holston, Tennessee, Memphis, Arkansas,
Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Virginia, South Carolina, and
North Carolina conferences voted unanimously the other way, with
three of the four from Missouri, and one of the two from Texas."  
Buckley, History of Methodism, p. 33.
indication of the inevitability of the coming division; it showed the impossibility of moving in any direction at the General Conference without damaging some great interest. Dr. Capers, pioneer of Negro missions, lamented: "We are in trouble, and know not what to be at, but to pray for the divine direction." Dr. Leroy M. Lee, delegate from Virginia, observed: "The decision is regarded here as the knell of division and disunion." 27

With the lines clearly drawn between the North and the South, the second series of debates focused on the Bishop Andrew's case. A resolution on May 20th requested the committee on episcopacy to investigate the report that "one of the bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church" had become connected with slavery. On May 22nd, that committee brought in a report which included a written statement from Bishop Andrew in relation to the matter. The gist of the confession was that several years prior to the 1844 General Conference, a lady of Augusta, Georgia, bequeathed to Andrew a mulatto girl, stipulating that when she should be nineteen, but then only with her consent, she should be sent to Liberia. In the event of her refusal to go, Bishop Andrew was to keep her and make her as free as the laws of Georgia permitted. When the time came, the girl refused to be sent to Liberia or to go to another state, and as the laws of Georgia did not permit manumission, Andrew was a slaveholder but not by his own choice. Furthermore, the bishop's wife had inherited a Negro boy. When Mrs. Andrew died (1842) without a will, by the laws of the state of Georgia, the boy became her husband's property. Finally, the second wife, whom he married in 1844, was a slaveholder, having inherited slaves from her former husband's estate. The bishop had taken the following legal action:

Shortly after my marriage, being unwilling to become their owner, regarding them as strictly hers, and the law not permitting their emancipation, I secured them to her by a deed of trust.

Consequently, Bishop Andrew was a slaveholder but he had never bought or sold a slave.28

The first motion following the receipt of the committee's report called for the immediate resignation of the bishop.29 It was later modified by the Findley substitute which stated that it is "the sense of this General Conference that he desist from the exercise of this office as long as this impediment remains."30 The debates continued for two weeks serving to illustrate the dilemma of the Methodist Church.

The North took the position that the whole tenor of the Discipline was against a slaveholding bishop. Although slaveholders had been tolerated in the church, it was only through necessity. The practice of the church had been against a slaveholding bishop; Dr. Capers had been refused the office of bishop in 1836 because of his connection with slavery.31 As a matter of expediency, a slaveholding bishop could not travel in certain areas of the Methodist Church. Furthermore, it was argued, the action against Andrew was not punitive but temporary. His name was to remain in the Minutes, Hymn book, and Discipline. Finally, the General Conference had full authority to make any new rules it deemed advisable. Since there was nothing in the restrictive laws which prohibited the removal or suspension of a bishop, the General Conference had the power to do it.

The South contended that Bishop Andrew had violated no

28 Journals, Vol. II., p. 65, 73.
29 Ibid., p. 64.
30 Ibid., p. 65, 66.
31 Matlack, Antislavery Struggle, p. 100; Journals, Vol. II., p. 98.
rule of the Discipline in his becoming involved with slavery. The only provision in the Discipline which permitted action against a bishop related to character. It was agreed by all of the delegates that the bishop was a man of stainless personal character and one who had been zealous for the spiritual welfare of the Negroes. It was argued that the 1840 General Conference ruling on the Westmoreland petition allowed officials of the church in certain states to own slaves. The southern spokesmen interpreted this as applying to bishops. Furthermore, if Andrew had done wrong, he could be deposed only after formal charges were presented and an ecclesiastical trial conducted. This had not been done. Finally, the South insisted that the bishop had acted in accordance with the spirit of Christianity in his refusal to turn his slaves out without their permission.

As the debates continued, the crisis deepened. The bishops proposed a postponement of the whole matter for another quadrennium hoping to avert a split. Some of the bishops who had originally concurred in the proposal later withdrew their names, having discovered that it would not accomplish its purpose. The proposal was tabled with a vote of ninety-five to eighty-four. Immediately, thereafter, the vote was taken on the Findley substitute which called upon the bishop to "desist from the exercise of this office as long as the impediment remains." The Findley substitute was passed by a vote of 110 to 68. Several days later the delegates of the slaveholding conferences made a declaration to the effect

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33 *Supra*, p. 74.
that the continued agitation on the subject of slavery and abolition in a portion of the church; the frequent action on that subject in the General Conference; and especially the extra-judicial proceedings against Bishop Andrew, which resulted, on Saturday last, in the virtual suspension of him from his office as superintendent, must produce a state of things in the South which renders a continuance of the jurisdiction of this General Conference over these conferences inconsistent with the success of the ministry in the slaveholding states.34

The southern delegates continued in the General Conference until the final adjournment and, immediately after the close of the Conference, plans were underway for the formation of a separate General Conference in the South. The official withdrawal came in May of 1845, at which time, thirteen of the conferences in the farther South withdrew from the Methodist Episcopal Church and formed the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.35

Looking back over the 1844 General Conference proceedings, two powerful factions, the slaveholding South and the northern abolitionists, confronted each other in a struggle which resulted in the tragic rupture of the Methodist Church. Between the two opposing forces were the conservatives who had formerly cast their vote with the South on the slavery controversy. For more than a year, those who made up this fast vanishing faction, had been rapidly assuming an attitude of antagonism toward the South.

The Episcopal Address, in opening the 1844 General Conference, had attempted to sidestep the issue by dwelling at great length on the work of plantation missions in the South. The appeal of Harding provoked the first series of debates on the slavery issue. The vote on this case was a striking victory for

34 Buckley, *History of Methodism*, p. 84.
the antislavery forces and indicated to the South that the conservatives had deserted them. The Bishop Andrew case was a continuation of the debates which thrashed out moral, ecclesiastical, and constitutional questions. All of the issues which had been the focal point of controversy during the past fifteen years were thoroughly and passionately discussed. As the weeks of debates continued, it became more certain that the parting of the way had come.

There were not many of the participants who evidenced an understanding of the true situation. Stephen Olin's speech was the only one which exhibited a full comprehension and just estimate of all sides of the subject. Olin, delegate from New York, was as familiar with the South as he was with the North. He explained the rise of abolitionism in New England and the northern states and insisted that "the measures which seem at this time to unite the North in sympathy have not originated with abolitionists, usually so called." For example, the New York and Troy conferences were not and "never had been abolition conferences; they had firmly opposed that movement"; and that generally speaking, northern Methodists regarded "slavery as a great evil, though not necessarily a sin." Olin then referred to the cause of the antislavery sentiment in the North. He credited it to the environment, newspapers, election campaigns, and political literature. He concluded his analysis of northern sentiment by observing: "The difficulties of this question, then, do not arise chiefly from its relation to abolitionism in the church, but from the general condition of feeling among the people of the non-slaveholding states." In other words, the conservatives in the church deserted the South and joined hands with the abolitionists because the conservative view was now more in agreement with the cause of the abolitionists than with that of the South.

Finally, Olin analyzed the situation in the South and
the difficulties confronting the Methodist Church in view of the changing attitude toward slavery. The South, he argued could not accede to the wishes of the northern brethren:

if they concede that holding slaves is incompatible with holding their ministry, they may as well go to the Rocky Mountains as to their own sunny plains. The people would not bear it. They feel shut up to their principles on this point. 36

The predominant issue of the 1836 General Conference was the critical situation of the church program. The slavery controversy was considered in the light of its effect on the spiritual mission of the church. The overshadowing question of the 1840 General Conference was conference rights. The prosperity of the past quadrennium was attributed to the procedure followed by the bishops in suppressing abolitionism. The 1844 General Conference became the forum for the discussion of the slavery question which had often been submerged by what appeared to be more important matters. Although the bishops tried to evade the issue of slavery in 1844, it could not be pushed aside. Regardless of the consequences, this General Conference was forced to face the issue and as Olin stated: "I do not believe, that if our affairs remain in their present position, and this General Conference do not speak out clearly, however unpalatable it may be, we cannot go home under this distracting question without a certainty of breaking up our conferences." 37 The delegates accepted the distressing task and within a few weeks the largest Protestant denomination in America had to announce that sectional division was their only answer to the slavery controversy.

37 Ibid., p. 55.
Chapter VII.
Retrospect

Pierre Renouvin, dean of diplomatic historians, stresses certain profound forces that influence the decisions of diplomats. Religious leaders are not immune to the effect of these pressures which frequently have more influence on decisions than the issue at hand. The 1836 crisis in the Methodist Church's program dictated much of the action against the abolitionists. Similarly, the 1840 General Conference legislation on conference rights was determined with the church prosperity in mind. It was not mere coincidence that the Methodist conservatives gave their support to the abolitionists at the same time the Texas question was uppermost in American politics. Some knowledge of these movements, often submerged in the study of a particular issue, is essential to a clearer understanding of the question under study. This chapter, then, is primarily concerned with diverse developments behind the scenes.

The slavery question was considered to be an intruder into the affairs of the Methodist Church. It was not a legitimate part of the spiritual activity of the church. After a forced entry was made, the church officials made a desperate attempt to prevent the interloper from disrupting the important mission of the church. The church guides maintained that the ministry of the church benefited civilization. It had been adopted as a maxim from the beginning of the Indian mission work that "Christianity must precede civilization." The task of the minister,

1 Bangs, History of Methodist Church, Vol. IV., p. 293.
however, was not to teach "human science, or to train people in domestic and political economy." His mission was of a different character. It was to "inform the understanding and reform the heart and life, by the application of divine truth to the conscience and to the judgment." Once this had been effected, the rest would follow as a consequence.

The Methodists were obsessed with the idea that they had a special mission to perform in this country, namely, "we have from the beginning believed it to be the design of God in raising us up, to aid in spreading Scriptural holiness over these lands." For this and other reasons, they refused to join in with the proposed national missionary and benevolent combinations because the latter "threatened for a while to swallow up, and absolutely to annihilate, every other plan of operation in our country." Barnes contended that the Methodists refused to join these united efforts because "they cared more for their sectarian peculiarities and less for the great and substantial interests of society." He called them "inveterate schismatics" and observed that they were highly censured by the other denominations for their refusal to unite in the national societies. As a result of this sectarianism, the Methodists had their own Sunday schools publishing activities, which, Barnes concluded, was a "loss to the nation, the Methodist Church, efficiency, and the national benevolent movement." It is rather difficult to determine as to whether this is a fair judgment. This sectarianism was the driving force behind many of the church's new projects. For example,

2 Ibid., p. 294.
3 Supra, p. 27. Bangs, History of Methodist Church, p. 9.
4 Ibid., p. 9.
5 Barnes, Antislavery Impulse, p. 18.
6 Ibid., p. 241.
in order to prevent the Methodist children from being "brought under the influence of doctrines and usages which we honestly believe will be injurious to their present and future happiness," it was necessary to build their own schools. In 1820 all the colleges of the land were under the direction of theological foes of Methodism. It was feared that the Methodist youth might lose their spirituality in a state university and their "antipathy to Calvinism" in other church colleges. 8

Sectarianism, however, necessitated a constant vigilance on the part of the church bishops. A revival of religion in a church of another denomination might result in the loss of many members from the Methodist Church. It might also gather in a host of unchurched people that normally the Methodists could have claimed. This was a highly competitive activity. The failure to provide convenient places of worship in the more populous villages of the West resulted in the loss of members. Bangs, church historian, wrote that others came in and took possession, drawing the "population around them before we were aware of it, and thus circumscribed the sphere of our influence in these particular places." 9 Consequently, in order to hold on to the present constituency and to secure new members, the Methodists had to keep pace with the other religious groups in the building of new churches and in keeping the "revival fires burning."

The acquiring of funds for the Methodist Church projects was a perpetual problem. The Methodists, to a great extent, had to depend on the voluntary offerings of the members. Furthermore, their constituency were mostly of the common people. All during the nineteenth century, the bishops had difficulty in

7 Bangs, History of Methodist Church, p. 253.
9 Bangs, History of Methodist Church, p. 268.
procuring sufficient funds to endow the colleges and seminaries. The scarcity of support was partially due to opposition on the part of some Methodists to an educated clergy. At the 1832 General Conference a discussion erupted over whether or not ministers should accept doctorates from educational institutions. The issue was debated for a week and as Brunson observed, "it amounted to nothing." It did, however, indicate that there was still a degree of antagonism toward formal education. The money problem was intensified by virtue of the fact that the Methodists were in competition with other institutions that were endowed with large funds and assisted both by annual contributions and occasional donations. For example, the growth of southern state universities in the number of students and resources was of grave concern to the Methodist leaders. These large universities were outstripping the church colleges and the ecclesiastical influence in those state institutions was decreasing. What disturbed the churchmen more was the irreligious atmosphere of those schools.

How did the pressures of competition and fund-raising affect the thinking of Methodist churchmen on the slavery question? The success of the church depended on a common and mutual interest of preacher and congregation. The sentiments of the constituency regarding slavery had to be recognized by the bishops of the church. For example, the abolition territory of the Methodist Church represented less than one-tenth of the membership and total giving of the denomination. Consequently, the issue was not so much abolitionism as it was the determination of a small segment of the church to dictate the policy of the whole denomination. The 1836 decrease in membership was attributed to the minority's agitation and the prosperity of 1840 was credited

10 Brunson, Western Pioneer, p. 392, 393.
to the majority's policies toward the abolitionists. Throughout the entire period of the controversy, the question was not slavery, it was the threat which the unwelcome intruder posed to the total program of the Methodist Church.

To what degree was the Methodist Church in the South responsible for the proslavery argument and the perpetuation of slavery? The minister has been charged with making his preaching conform to the taste of the social order and becoming an ally of the existing economic system.\(^\text{12}\) Sweet, church historian, contended that the influence exerted by the church on political conditions was never so potent as during the slavery controversy, the Civil War, and the reconstruction period.\(^\text{13}\) W.G. Brownlow, Methodist minister in South Carolina during this period, was most critical of his fellow preachers. Although he agreed with their stand on slavery, Brownlow was opposed to Calhoun's doctrine of nullification and the right of secession. Said the preacher:

\begin{quote}
I bring the charge of political preaching and praying against the great body of clergymen in the South, irrespective of sects; and I have no hesitation in saying, as I do now, that the worst class of men who make tracks upon southern soil are Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, and Episcopal clergymen, and at the head of these for mischief are the southern Methodists. I mean to say that there are honorable exceptions in all these churches; but the moral mania of secession has been almost universally prevalent among the members of the sacred profession.
\end{quote}

He accused them of bringing the howl of secession "into their prostituted pulpits every Sabbath."\(^\text{14}\) It is important to note...

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\(^\text{13}\) William Warren Sweet, "Methodist Church Influence in Southern Politics", *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. I. Sweet's article is concerned primarily with the Civil War and Reconstruction period.

that Brownlow based his accusation on the fact that Methodists were greater in number and as a result had more influence. He maintained that the southern statesmen could not have carried the mass of the people with them had the preachers been against them of if they had been neutral.

These judgments have far reaching implications and must be studied critically. The Methodist Church in the South was very close to the masses of the people but its influence among the aristocrats was most limited. It must be remembered that the South had a stratified society. Only a minority of southern whites were slaveowners and only a small number of those held slaves in any large numbers on the southern plantations. Out of the five or six million white people in 1841, only about one-third were in slaveholding families. Approximately two per-cent of the slaveholding families owned great plantations and fifty or more slaves. This small minority formed a highly privileged class, maintaining its primacy by force of intellect and political acumen. Below this class were the farmers who owned only a few slaves, and the professional classes, the lawyers, physicians, clergymen, and teachers. These people were dependent upon the aristocracy for their incomes and were in close alliance with them. Most of the farmers, however, were unprogressive and made up a somewhat lower stratum in society. The political power lay with the aristocracy, and with this class, the Methodists had little influence. Elkins contends that the church could do nothing: "Its rural congregations were full of humane and decent Christians, but as an institution of authority and power it had no real existence." It can be argued that the church was

respected not because of its message but for whatever support it might render to the civil institutions of the South.

The traditional policy of the Methodists was to remain politically neutral. The mission of the church in the world was of a spiritual nature. It was the responsibility of all Methodists to obey the civil authorities. The church had no commission to reconstruct society afresh or "to adjust its elements in different proportions, to rearrange the distribution of its classes, or to change the forms of its political constitutions." 17 Slavery, as a civil institution, was outside the domain of church authority. The church had no more right to urge its extermination than it did to advocate the overthrow of the republic. This was not a policy that had been hurriedly adopted when the slavery question became acute; it was as old as the denomination.

The southern Methodists apparently yielded to the pressure of what they thought to be the interests of their section. They evidenced a sincere concern for the common man. The Methodists in the South, from their earliest days, had manifested a genuine concern for the spiritual needs of the Negro. This work among the colored people was not just an individual expression of a few clergymen but it represented the broad humanitarian character of the denomination in the South. 18 The plantation missions, it must be admitted, were at the mercy of the wealthy owners.

The purpose of the missions to the plantations was to destroy the evils without abolishing the system. The missionary did accept the validity of the relationship between master and slave. The argument which insists that the plantation missions became the chief moral barrier to abolition is not without some foundation. 19 It must not be forgotten, however, that the good work accomplished

19 Jenkins, Pro-Slavery Thought, p. 12.
by the missions was thought to be possible only by an acceptance of the slavery institution. The tendency of the Negro to associate his religion with his politics made the work of the missions more perilous. A.W. Tourgee wrote:

The helplessness of servitude left no room for hope except through the trustfulness of faith. For this reason, the religious and political interests and emotions of this people are quite inseparable. Wherever they meet to worship, there they will meet to consult of their plans, hopes, and progress. Their religion is tinged with political thought and their political thought is shaped by religious convictions. 20

Partly because of this, certain passages of the Bible were considered off-limits to the white missionary, especially, the story of the Hebrews' liberation from Egyptian bondage. 21

Although the efforts of the plantation missionaries were fraught with obstructions and hazards, the southern Methodists did more for the religious instruction of the slave than did northern Methodists for the Negro freedman. 22 R.W. Bailey of South Carolina called this fact to the attention of Asa Cummings, abolitionist editor in Maine. He pointed out that in South Carolina only one-ninth of the whites over against one-seventh of the slaves were church members. He added:

You have in New England 20,000 and in the free states more than 100,000 Negroes. I should be glad to see a comparison of their religious condition with our slaves in this one item. Do you believe that one-twentieth of them are church members? And will you find, in New England, as here, a greater proportion of blacks than whites in the churches? 23

The Episcopal Address to the 1844 General Conference lashed out at the church's treatment of Negroes in those states where slavery did not exist. There were four conferences without a colored

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22 Supra, p. 28.
23 Bode, Protestant Clergy, p. 146.
member; eight others with an aggregate number of 463; and that in fifteen, almost half of the conferences in the Methodist Church, and some of them among the largest in both ministry and membership, the total number of colored members was 1,309. For example, "in the city of Baltimore alone there are nearly four times the number of colored people in the church that we find in the fifteen conferences referred to ... " In 1844 there were 68 plantation missions; 71 missionaries; 21,063 members and a budget of $168,450. From 1830 to 1865, more than two million dollars was expended in this missionary endeavor. So far as can be determined the abolitionist conferences contributed no financial assistance to the plantation missions and refused to recognize them in virtually every annual conference session.

Although the Methodist abolitionists did hinder the progress of plantation missions, they cannot be held responsible for the failure of any southern progress toward the disappearance of slavery. Many southern clergymen were convinced that encouraging efforts had been made toward the destruction of slavery, or at least its mitigation, but that this progress was being destroyed by the effects of abolitionist literature. Jenkins points out that the positive defenses of slavery on the basis of scripture began appearing in the late 1820's which would place such pro-slavery support prior to the rise of abolitionism. Tyler concurs in this view, "the full southern defense of slavery was formulated before, rather than after, the attacks of the abolitionists." Brunson, delegate to the 1832 General Conference,

25 Buckley, History of Methodism, p. 28.
26 McNeilly, Religion and Slavery, p. 33.
27 Jenkins, Pro-Slavery Thought, p. 77.
28 Tyler, Freedom's Ferment, p. 475.
said there was such a sensitiveness at that time in the public mind on the subject, "especially in the slave regions, that the slightest allusion to the race in bondage, whether church or state, was like the spark thrown upon powder, explosion was sure to follow." 29 Charles S. Sydnor agrees with this interpretation:

Although the abolition movement was followed by a decline of antislavery sentiment in the South, it must be remembered that in all the long years before that movement began, no part of the South had made substantial progress toward ending slavery. The free and full discussion in Virginia in 1832 was not clear enough to warrant prophecy as to what the South would have done, had it not been disturbed by the abolitionists, but it is at least certain that before the crusade began, southern liberalism had not ended slavery in any state. 30

Furthermore, the South, some authors contend, put Garrison on the map in the North: "The Liberator was not widely read in the North, nor did Garrison's position win many supporters there. In its first year it had fifty white subscribers and two years later only four hundred." Tyler then concluded that it was the "southern enemies" that made the Liberator famous. The furious comments of the southern editors, coupled with a "reprinting of its most radical statements in the editorial columns of every important southern paper" that gave the southern educated Negro access to the "obnoxious ideas" of the Liberator. 31

Consequently, the influence of the Methodist Church in the South when viewed in the light of the highly stratified southern society, was comparatively small. The policy of non-involvement in political affairs and the Methodist traditional conviction that man must be submissive to the laws and government ruled out any attack on slavery. There was cause for

29 Brunson, Western Pioneer, p. 391.
30 Sydnor, Southern Sectionalism, p. 243.
31 Tyler, Freedom's Ferment, p. 486.
legitimate criticism of the southern churchmen's position on slavery, but it must be admitted that the Methodists in the South did more for the spiritual welfare of the Negroes than did the northern Methodists for the freedman. Although the abolitionists were not the cause of the failure of antislavery efforts in the South during the early nineteenth century, the abolitionist agitation did imperil plantation missions. Finally, in attempting to curb the supposedly radical propaganda of Garrison, the southerner unwittingly helped spread the abolitionist doctrine in both the North and South.

The abolitionist was considered to be the trouble-maker in the Methodist slavery controversy. The slavery issue, to the modern abolitionists, was all moral. It could not be considered in terms of expediency or compromises. It was a problem of the conscience. Parrington's description of Garrison is representative of the movement:

There were no shades in his thinking, but only black and white, righteousness and sin. Expedience was not in his vocabulary. He was as narrow as he was intense. He was a religious soul and he measured all things by the principles of primitive Christianity.  

The primary concern of the abolitionist was not the abolition of slavery; it was "the duty of rebuke which every inhabitant of the free states owes to every slaveholder." The first step was to denounce the evil, "reforming the evil was incidental to that primary obligation." Revivalism was greatly responsible for the abolitionist determination to root out the evil of slavery. It may also have contributed to the movement's inability to comprehend the complexity of the social,

33 Barnes, Antislavery Impulse, p. 25.
political, and religious aspects of the slavery question for the nation, and particularly, the South. Revivalism "reduced everything to a matter of simple choice, Christ or the devil, sin or goodness, infidelity or faith ... but there are issues in life, even in faith, which are not always a simple matter of choice." Brauer wisely observed: "Simplifying the issues through emotional appeals made choices easier, but it overlooked many basic problems." Abolitionism took no account of the difficulties and dangers involved in wholesale liberation of the slaves. The agitators were mindful of the rights of man but unmindful of the union which was necessary to attain and preserve those rights. The attacks on the institutional structure of the church and the federal government manifested an appalling ignorance of the value of these national bodies. Consequently, when the war came "there was no church with a national scope, which in its concern with the nation's morals would be forced to operate on intersectional terms." Had the church remained united, the situation might have been less tragic.

The abolitionist's condemnation of slavery often bore the marks of hypocrisy. He could make this decision against slavery since it did not counter but actually coincided with his economic interests. In the "Appeal" published by the abolitionist conferences of the Methodist Church, it was urged that everyone pray for the slaves. In the same publication, there was no recognition of the practical efforts of the plantation missionaries and no offer of financial support to make more such projects possible. Furthermore, during all the years of abolitionist agitation, every little was done for the religious instruction of

34 Brauer, Protestantism in America, p. 113.
35 Elins, Slavery, p. 201.
the Negro except by the church in the South. Some would contend that the abolitionist radical did more harm than good and that the conservative antislavery faction in the Methodist Church rescued the abolitionist cause. Emerson's estimation of the reformer's attack on institutions is a fitting characterization of the modern abolitionists:

The criticism and attack on institutions which we have witnessed has made one thing plain, that society gains nothing whilst a man, not himself renovated, attempts to renovate things around him; he has become tediously good in some particular, but negligent or narrow in the rest; and hypocrisy and vanity are often the disgusting result. 36

Underneath the slavery controversy within the Methodist Church, there were pressures which reached far beyond any particular religious body. For example, there was a deep and fundamental religious cleavage between the North and South during this period. By the 1830's New England's William Ellery Channing and Unitarianism had captured the greater churches of Boston. Channing rejected the orthodox doctrines of the divinity of Christ and salvation by grace. The major dogmas of Calvinism; total depravity, predestination, and a God of wrath were abandoned. Transcendentalism taught that man was born with a spark of the divine and not in sin; it raised the level of human achievement to the skies. Theodore Parker, in May, 1841, preached a sermon on "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity" in which he rejected a supernaturalism established on the authority of the Scriptures. He adopted the conception of an evolutionary theism: "God progressively revealing himself to the developing faculties of men and speaking through the conscience." 37 His political philosophy represented a blending of English and


37 Parrington, Main Currents, p. 417.
French libertarianism of the 17th and 18th centuries, from "Sidney, Locke, and Rousseau, the greatest leaders of the natural rights school."\(^{38}\)

At the same time that liberalism and rationalism were invading New England, conservative orthodoxy was becoming master of the South. By 1830, Deism and skepticism, in one generation, had practically been erased from the South.\(^{39}\) Conservative orthodoxy's remarkable success has been traced to three primary causes: First, the aggressive efforts of the Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches; secondly, the excesses of the French Revolution encouraged the orthodox to wage a campaign against all infidelity. The third contributing factor to the success of orthodoxy in the South was the support which a literal interpretation of the Bible gave to the pro-slavery argument. Only a minority of southern whites were slave-owners and only a small number of those held slaves in any large number on the great southern plantations. Consequently, the pro-slavery men had to devise some foundation for slavery which would win the support of a majority of people in the South who had no slaves of their own to preserve from emancipation. Schlesinger argues that the Jacksonian movement did not at first overthrow the control of the planter aristocracy within the older states of the South.\(^{40}\)

In the exciting presidential election of 1832, only one-third of the white males voted.\(^{41}\) Eaton maintains that it was the aristocracy with large property at stake that was responsible for the policy of silence enforced in the southern states. This policy,

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38 Parrington, Main Currents, p. 417.
41 Eaton, Freedom of Thought, p. 85.
he contends was fixed in the 1830's. While it is true that the
common man was becoming politically minded, the aristocrat was
still in control and powerful enough to dominate the government
and temper of society. 42

The low standards of education and prevailing attitudes
toward the importance of learning in the South, made the aristo-
crat's rule somewhat easier. Franklin comments that "in many
quarters the pursuit of education was regarded as a reckless
waste of time." In 1837, the Governor of Virginia reported that
one-fourth of all those who applied for marriage licenses in
ninety-three counties of that state could not sign their names. 43

The Methodist Church had its greatest success among the
common people. There were no educational requirements for enter-
ing the Methodist ministry at this time. Quite often the minis-
ter was distinguished more for zeal than for learning. Many of
the preachers could not give their undivided attention to spirit-
ual duties for they had to 'supple' their scanty pay by farming
or some other occupation. 44 During this period, 1828 to 1844,
the power of the Methodist Church in determining the pro-slavery
policy of the South was small. This was not necessarily true
after 1850 for the future leaders of the South, the non-aristo-
crat planters, fully nine-tenths of them, were members of the
Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches. 45

42 Ibid., p. 37, 38. In Kentucky and the four seaboard
states above Georgia, democracy was not instituted in the county
government during the first half of the 19th century. South
Carolina had a highly centralized government with the power in
the legislature. North Carolina made no important concessions;
Virginia made only a few changes. Changes were taking place in
Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Texas during the
first half of the 19th century. Governments were popularly elected
and the county government became democratic. Sydnor, Sectionalism.


44 Sydnor, Sectionalism, p. 41.

The church became a convenient instrument in the hands of the aristocracy for the most effective weapon of the pro-slavery men was the Bible. It was the cornerstone on which the moral defense of slavery rested. Whereas the philosophical argument would not have reached the common man, the words of the Bible were already part of his limited vocabulary. The South became the citadel of conservative theology. With pride, it pointed to this conservatism, to its freedom from Mormonism, Millerism, Shakers, Rappists, Dunkers, Socialists, Fourierists, and rationalists. William Miles, southern spokesman, attributed this to domestic slavery. He said, "There is no material here for such characters to operate upon." The South considered itself the last great bulwark of orthodox Christianity. "From the pulpit the word went forth that infidelity and a new paganism masking under the name of science was sweeping the world. The God of the Yankee was not God at all but the Anti-Christ loosed at last from the pit." The South's religious leaders professed to be shocked at the unorthodoxy of New England; its Unitarianism, Transcendentalism, and the curious religious and social experiments, particularly in upstate New York. Furthermore, the South resented being told that they were sinners by the North, especially by New England whom most of them believed to have rejected the fundamental tenets of Christianity.

The higher law argument of the North presented a problem to the pro-slavery men. The Missouri Debates had been epochal in the history of the slavery question. Northerners had contended that the antislavery doctrine represented a law higher than either the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution.

46 Sydnor, Sectionalism, p. 337.
47 Cash, Mind of South, p. 80.
48 Sydnor, Sectionalism, p. 295.
Slavery was incompatible with natural laws, with divine will, and with the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution. The higher law approach clearly implied to the South that their conscience was corrupt and unreliable as a guide in comparison with the superior moral and religious insights of the abolitionists. The South then attacked abolitionism as a doctrine of infidel origin. The spirit of rationalism rather than that of Biblical Christianity formed the basis of the modern speculation concerning the rights of man. The southern aristocracy had reference to the European ideas which had stimulated the New England reformers. The Age of Enlightenment accented the inalienable rights of man to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Rousseau, Schelling, Schlegel, Lessing, and other Romanticists had influenced American thinking. Saint Simon looked forward to the reorganization of society on the new principles of socialism. In order to bring to the support of slavery all the white elements in the South, there had to be "some powerful justification based on race superiority." For this reason, "the 'facts' of history, the 'teachings' of the Bible and the 'principles' of economics, had to be redefined."49 Men were not born free and equal; Calhoun declared that they "are born subject not only to parental authority, but to law, and institutions of the country where born."50

Finally, the moral argument became the basis for secession. The justification for southern secession drew much from the school of the moralists. They held that secession was as much a moral as a political necessity, for no people could work out their destiny in a nation pervaded with rationalistic and atheistic principles, such as the old government was founded upon.51

49 Ibid., p. 46.
50 Franklin, Militant South, p. 81.
51 Jenkins, Pro-Slavery Thought, p. 239.
The orthodox clergymen joined in the attack on the exaltation of reason and the declaration that all men are equal. The ruling order of the South had latched on to a weapon whose effectiveness must have amazed even the aristocracy. Contributing to the success of the instruments, the Bible and orthodox religion, was the "idea that the spirit of rationalism exemplified by abolition would inevitably lead to a repetition of the French Revolution ... "52 It is interesting to note that, whereas the southern churchmen directed their attack against the New England liberals, the abolitionist strength in the 1830's was centered more in the Baptist and Methodist groups who had accepted the literal interpretation of the Bible and were vigorous opponents of the Unitarians and Transcendentalists.

It has been said that history is the result of man's interaction with his environment and of man with his fellow man. The role of environment is often a clue to the economic and social organization of a given people. For example, the southerner was forced to see slavery in the concrete, while the New Englander saw it in the abstract. Slavery was part of the social life of the South. It was an integral part of the domestic and industrial institutions of society. Slavery was recognized and regulated by civil law.

For one hundred years the ships of Bristol, Liverpool, and Boston had been unloading captive slaves upon the shores of what is now the United States and the unquestioned usages of Christian kings and governments, of churches, of ministers, and people had wrought them into the fabric of the community.53

The policy of slavery had been riveted upon society in the South without any consideration of the wishes of the people.

52 Jenkins, Pro-Slavery Thought, p. 240, 241.
53 McTyeire, History of Methodism, p. 225.
Similarly, the climate of New England made antislavery sentiment easy to endorse. New England was considered a "fertile seed plot" for fads and extravagances. There were sane and progressive social movements but there was also a tendency toward fanaticism. Furthermore, communications with Europe, and a greater interest in education made European ideas more powerful here than in the South. As one writer said:

They are abolitionists naturally and inevitably, because they breathe the atmosphere of this country ... because the sea is open to free adventure, and their freighted ships bring home periodicals and books from all the countries of Europe, tinged, or if any prefer, infected with these views.54

The role of environment was evident in the 1844 General Conference debates relating to the office of the bishop in the Methodist Church. The South saw in the effort to unseat one of their bishops an attack upon the episcopacy as well as upon their own social institution. Neither side was able to realize the ideas and forces which separated them. The North took the position that the bishop was simply an officer of the General Conference with no extraordinary powers inherent in himself.55 The South contended that the episcopacy was a coordinate part of the church's government, just as was the General Conference. One branch could not destroy the other and only after due process and trial with a proven charge of personal or official dereliction could a bishop be removed. There were greater pressures behind this controversy. "The bishop through the years had come to occupy a proportionately stronger position in the South than in the North." The very name, bishop, had meant more in Virginia than in Massachusetts. The social organization of the South with a small ruling class would be more friendly to "bishop as be-

55 Ibid., p. 116.
longing to the traditional class than could be expected in the
democratic North." The thinking of the Methodist delegates at
the crucial conference of 1844 was not divorced from their
cultural and social traditions.

The play of environment was intensified by the limitations of communication between the North and South. The methods of ascertaining public sentiment in different areas of the nation was much circumscribed. The Methodist preachers in 1844 knew very little about conditions outside their own annual conference. In a situation of this kind, misunderstanding was widespread. One participant observed that only one speaker at the 1844 General Conference evidenced a full comprehension of the controversy which split the denomination. This confusion as to the intents of the various factions is demonstrated time after time. The northern societies did very little to incite the slaves to revolt but it was enough for the southerners to believe that the abolitionists were active and might become more dangerous. Franklin Baumer has suggested that ideas influenced action in history as much by people's misunderstanding of them as by their understanding of them. Had there been better means of communication between the North and South and had those lines of information remained open, the Methodist Church might have reconciled its opposing factions.

Although economic, social, political, and religious forces play an important role in the decisions of men, they do not rule out the significance of the individual. The Methodist Church was made up of people who entertained certain convictions. These beliefs, to a certain degree, determined their actions.


Each of the ministers considered some issues of greater importance than others. For the Methodist abolitionists, purity of the church was more essential than unity, peace, and harmony. Purity, as defined by them, would require the church to completely sever itself from all who were connected with slavery. The consequences of such an act were not to be considered. The conservatives, however, insisted that unity and peace were the most necessary for only then could the spiritual mission of the church be accomplished. Where did these churchmen receive these conflicting convictions? Why did one demand purity and the other unity?

Another question involved in this controversy was: To what degree were any of the opposing factions concerned about the welfare of the Negro? Some have argued that the abolitionists were desirous only desirous of voicing their disapproval of slavery and condemnation of the slaveholder. If the Methodist abolitionist were full of compassion for the Negro, why didn’t they devise some practical plan for emancipation? Why didn’t they try to understand the complexity of the problem from the southern viewpoint? Why did they do so little for the Negro in the North? These are questions which demand an answer.

Attempting to determine the true designs of men is another difficulty encountered in a study of this nature. For example, did the planter support plantation missions because a limited amount of religious instruction made the Negro more submissive or as a result of a genuine concern for the slave? Was the church a force in southern society because of the moral direction it might offer or for the endorsement which it gave to the civil institutions? Was the southern reaction to New England liberalism a consequence of deep orthodox convictions or did it stem from a fear that the destruction of orthodoxy would seriously imperil the pro-slavery argument? Obviously, these questions cannot be decisively answered.
All factions in the Methodist slavery controversy claimed the support of God; both insisted that the Bible sanctioned their position. In the Methodist Church, it was not a controversy characterized by a dispute over orthodoxy. Both groups supported the literal interpretation of the Bible. This made the issue more difficult; in a sense, it ruled out any hope for a settlement, for as Sweet has so ably phrased it:

Of all the classes of men Protestant ministers, and especially Methodist ministers, are least liable to compromise on questions which they consider moral and a majority of the northern Methodist preachers having made up their minds that slavery was a sin, no amount of argument could induce them to consent to any compromise. On the other hand, the southern preachers being equally convinced that slavery was not a sin, no amount of argument could persuade them to change their views.

Compromise between good men is always possible when they believe the issue is not that of absolute right and wrong. But, when, in their opinion, right meets wrong at right angles, no compromise is possible.58

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 Approval Sheet

The thesis submitted by Harold C. Howard has been read and approved by three members of the Department of History.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

13 Nov. '63

Date

Signature of Advisor