
METHODIST BISHOPS AND ABOLITIONISM

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When the first ripples of abolitionism appeared in the Methodist Episcopal Church during the early 1830's, the leading personalities of that body recognized that the issue posed a serious threat to the harmony of the denomination. Almost instinctively, the bishops initiated a policy designed to prevent abolitionism from disrupting the institution. They considered abolitionism a threat to the peace and prosperity of the church and sought by means of their personal influence, their position as presiding officers, and their control of appointments to suppress it. As the attitudes of northern Methodists toward abolitionism moderated, the bishops made corresponding adjustments in policy but continued to seek institutional peace. In many ways, however, their actions may have fostered discord and schism. To charge the bishops with total responsibility for the schisms in 1842 and 1844 would be to ignore the complexity of the divisive social forces of the era; however, to fail to analyze the actions of men in responsible positions is to acquiesce in the hopelessness of a practical anarchism that denies the possibility of peaceful and amicable solutions to human social problems. Given the complexities within the society and within the Methodist Episcopal Church, the episcopal policy, while excluding abolitionism, unwittingly encouraged the growth of pro-slavery opinion which proved to be as disruptive as abolitionism. Partly as a result of episcopal policy, each extreme was allowed to follow its own logic without the restraining influences of opposing views and feelings. In effect, the bishops promoted discord and schism by preventing effective communication within the denomination.

At this distance, neither the bishops nor the abolitionists appear to have been either the incarnation of evil or the epitome of goodness. Both parties possessed those traits associated with their common humanity. The bishops, a little older and gentlemen of the old school, were charged with the responsibility of overseeing the Methodist denomination and thus, although men of moral integrity, were professionally more concerned with the welfare of the institution than with any single moral issue. The abolitionists, on the other hand, were "devout men of God" imbued with the spirit of the great revival. In fact, their great facility at winning converts, which was rapidly becoming the sole criterion of success among American Methodists and American Protestants generally, was a source of amazement and confusion to the bishops.¹ Nevertheless, on the subject of immediate abolitionism these two groups of serious minded and moral men came into open conflict.

The determination of the bishops to prevent the subject of slavery from being discussed was reflective of the general movement away from the strong antislavery heritage of early Methodism. John Wesley, an ardent opponent of slavery, in the General Rules of 1743 unconditionally prohibited his followers from owning slaves. Francis Asbury, equally opposed to slavery, in 1780 personally introduced and supervised the passage of a statement which called on Methodist preachers to work for emancipation. At the famous Christmas Conference in 1784 the itinerants voted to expel any of their number who would not emancipate their slaves. This policy, brought about at the insistence of Thomas Coke, was suspended six months later and replaced by a strong statement against slavery but with no provisions for disciplinary action.²

The history of Methodist legislation on slavery after 1800 reveals a steady compromise of earlier principles. From 1800 to 1832 the Methodists moved from opposition to slavery to a more neutral policy. In 1804 the General Conference decided to print two disciplines, omitting the section on slavery in the edition for southern states. This practice was continued in 1808 when each annual conference was given the power to determine the standing of members who bought and sold slaves. By 1816 the General Conference made it plain that Methodists were to be concerned with preaching, not with slavery. The 1828 General Conference refused to pass a resolution permitting the church to discipline masters who mistreated their slaves. By 1832 it appeared that the church could easily avoid all discussion of slavery; that General Conference easily tabled all proposals dealing with slavery, believing it "inexpedient to discuss the issue."³ Southern Methodists were satisfied with missions for the slaves, and the northern element was contented with active support of colonization. At the very time the majority of Methodists thought the disturbing issue of slavery had been safely relegated to insignificance, abolitionism made its appearance within Methodism.

New England Methodist ministers were among the first converts to abolitionism. William Lloyd Garrison began publishing the *Liberator* in 1831, and by 1834 abolitionism was well established among Methodist ministers. The most influential of these early abolitionists were La Roy Sunderland, George Storrs and Orange Scott.⁴ Abolitionism first entered official Methodist business in the New England Conference of 1834, when Scott moved to table a resolution supporting the Colonization Society. The motion carried and the matter was dropped.⁵ Apparently the abolitionists had planned to take some further steps, but for some unknown reason changed their minds.⁶

After this first timid appearance, abolitionism began to spread rapidly among Methodists in New England. Shortly after the conference of 1834 several strong antislavery articles appeared in *Zion's Herald* (July 18, August 6 and 13), a weekly newspaper of the New England Conference, and in October the first Methodist antislavery society was formed.⁷ In 1835 Orange Scott published a series of antislavery articles in *Zion's Herald*.⁸ The most significant action of the Methodist abolitionists was the publication of "An Appeal to the Members of the New England and New Hampshire Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church" in an extra edition of *Zion's Herald* on February 4, 1835. This lengthy statement called attention to the antislavery tradition of Methodism and asked all Methodist ministers to be faithful to that heritage by working for the immediate abolition of slavery.

This action provoked the first episcopal opposition. On April 8, 1835, another special edition of *Zion's Herald* contained "A Counter Appeal to the Ministers and Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the New England and New Hampshire Conferences." This statement, signed by several prominent churchmen and approved by Bishop Elijah Hedding, gave a different interpretation of Methodist history and listed a number of specific objections to abolitionist activities. These ministers argued that abolition tended to perpetuate slavery and was likely to become a political issue on which Methodist ministers should remain neutral. Further, emancipation was going to take a long time; if there were hopes for immediate abolition, all Methodists would aid the effort. Under the circumstances, however, the ministers of the South were best able to decide what steps should be taken toward emancipation. Finally, they dissociated themselves from the agitation and opposed specific tactics of the abolitionists.

To the "Counter Appeal" Bishop Hedding, formerly of the New England Conference and a bishop since 1824, appended this statement:

I have read the above "Counter Appeal," and, in general, I believe the arguments and statements are correct; particularly, those which refer to the acts of the General Conference. I have seen with much

regret, that several of our brethren in this country who write against slavery, do not understand its condition in the south, and that, therefore, they undesignedly misrepresent it. And I do most affectionately and earnestly entreat them to desist from the present course, being fully persuaded that such publications can afford no benefit to the slaves.

Thus, in the early months of organized Methodist abolitionism, Bishop Hedding declared himself opposed to it and sought by means of his personal influence to bring it to an end.

Hedding was soon joined in his efforts to suppress abolitionism by his colleague, Bishop John Emory of Maryland. At the New England Conference in June, 1835, Emory opened the sessions by admonishing the ministers to be "jealous of themselves" rather than of others, an obvious reference to the abolitionists. The conference was decidedly abolitionist in sentiment; it chose six abolitionists to serve on the seven-man delegation to the next General Conference. Hedding, presiding bishop at this conference, refused to put any of the several antislavery resolutions to a vote, thus adding his power as presiding officer to his personal influence as a means of stopping abolitionism. Although the conference officially apologized to the bishops for frustrating the regular business, the abolitionists were encouraged to carry their fight against slavery outside the official Methodist organizational structure: they organized the New England Wesleyan Anti-Slavery Society.⁹

Bishop Emory, presiding at the New Hampshire Conference in August, 1835, continued to oppose abolitionism. When the committee on slavery presented an abolitionist report, Emory refused to put it to a vote. The conference formed a committee of the whole and adopted the report by a vote of 57 to 8; since Emory was not in the chair, however, the action could not be considered a statement of the conference. This conference also formed an antislavery society, for it was now very clear that the bishops, or at least Hedding and Emory, were going to oppose the abolitionists at every step.¹⁰ Orange Scott, who helped to organize the new antislavery society, pointed out some contradictions in the position of the bishops. "This same bishop [Emory] ," he declared, "did not refuse to put anti-abolition resolutions in the Maine conference, a few days previous-no, nor did he refuse to draft those resolutions with his own hand."¹¹

The first official statement by the bishops, several months after the two conferences, came as a formal pastoral letter addressed to the New England and New Hampshire Conferences. Published in the *Christian Advocate and Journal* on September 25, 1835, and signed by Hedding and Emory, the letter indicated that such an address was necessary because the majority of the church was opposed to abolitionism, because abolitionist sentiment was prominent in only the two conferences, and because abolitionism tended to produce "pernicious results." In addition to the arguments advanced in the "Counter Appeal," the two bishops argued that each state was sovereign and that citizens of New England had no more control over the southern states than they did over a foreign country. They also contended that the New Testament did not condone the measures of abolitionism. But the most important reason for the bishops' refusal to allow the passage of abolitionist resolutions was that they would not "silently witness the arbitrary denunciations of one part of our charge by brethren of another part." Both the primary motivation and the policy appeared when the bishops admonished the ministers to do nothing that would disturb the peace of the church and advised the presiding elders to suppress abolitionism "by all lawful and Christian means."

Until this time the bishops had acted on their own initiative, but the General Conference of 1836 approved their handling of affairs and sanctioned further suppression of abolitionism. The General Conference voted overwhelmingly in favor of the resolution "That the committee appointed to draft a pastoral letter to our preachers., be. . . instructed to take notice of the subject of modern abolition . . . and that they let our preachers.,

know that the General Conference are opposed to the agitation of that subject, and will use all prudent means to put it down."¹² The committee, composed of Nathan Bangs, William Capers, and Thomas A. Morris, complied with this request, thus giving the bishops official sanction for a policy that they had already begun and were to pursue for the next four years.¹³

Although it would be impossible to determine the extent of episcopal influence on the actions of the General Conference, that body also refused to give the abolitionists a hearing in 1836. The General Conference condemned Samuel Norris and George Storrs for addressing an abolitionist meeting and even refused, by a vote of 120 to 15, a motion by Orange Scott to preface their censure with the traditional statement that Methodists were opposed to the evil of slavery.¹⁴ In this whole affair, Scott was convinced that the abolitionists' arguments had not been heard, and he promptly printed a pamphlet in which he hoped to state the abolitionist point of view and refute its opponents. For this, Scott was abused by Nathan Bangs and William Winans, a Mississippi delegate who called Scott a "reckless incendiary or non compos mentis." Winans offered a resolution which denied the honesty of Scott's pamphlet. The resolution passed 97 to 19.¹⁵ The bishops were hardly consistent in their refusal to allow "the arbitrary denunciation of one part of our charge by brethren of another part."

The General Conference of 1836 further strengthened the policy of the bishops by electing three antiabolitionist members to the episcopacy: Wilbur Fisk, Thomas A. Morris, and Beverly Waugh. Fisk was from the New England Conference, but received his nomination for the episcopacy from the South. He was the foremost opponent of abolitionism in the New England Conference. In 1835 he objected to the character of every abolitionist in the conference. He refused to accompany his abolitionist brethren to the General Conference and was not present when elected to the episcopacy. Although Fisk refused the office for reasons of health, he was an ardent opponent of abolitionism for the next several years.¹⁶

Morris, editor of the *Western Christian Advocate* from Ohio, was also a nominee of the southern delegates. In an editorial in the November 20, 1835, issue, Morris had declared himself to be "no friend of immediate abolitionism," and his part in the writing of the antiabolitionist pastoral letter had proven his sincerity. Waugh was from New York but had been transferred there from the Baltimore Conference. Although a known antiabolitionist before his election, he had not taken an active part in opposition to the abolitionists. After becoming a bishop, he joined wholeheartedly in the suppression of Methodist abolitionism.¹⁷

For several years after the General Conference of 1836 the bishops followed a consistent course of suppressing Methodist abolitionism. The New York Conference, which met just after the general sessions, voted approval of the antiabolitionist advice in the pastoral address and made submission to the policy of non-agitation a condition of ordination.¹⁸ The New England Conference in 1836 however, remained decidedly abolitionist. At the beginning of the conference, a resolution was offered to appoint a committee on slavery. Hedding, again the presiding bishop, objected but put the resolution to a vote. A committee was appointed and instructed by the conference to report at its earliest convenience. When the committee tried to present the report on several different occasions during the following days, Hedding refused to allow it. Finally, at 11 p.m. on the last day of the conference, he allowed the committee to read its report. Hedding responded with some extended remarks in which he said that there was much in the report which was inconsistent with Methodism and that he could not put the report to a vote. A motion to adjourn did not carry. Hedding then declared that there would still be no vote on the report, read the list of appointments, and closed the conference without a conference vote.¹⁹

At this conference Bishop Hedding intensified the policy of suppression by using his power over appointments to discourage abolitionism. La Roy Sunderland, who had just published a lengthy abolitionist work entitled *The*

Testimony of God Against Slavery (Boston, 1836), was brought to trial for his abolitionist activity and cleared by the conference. Hedding, however, refused to assign him to any station.²⁰ Orange Scott was also tried and acquitted for his actions at the General Conference. Bishop Hedding removed Scott from his position as presiding elder, an office of power second only to the episcopacy. Hedding, in a private conference with Scott, informed him that unless he would pledge to refrain from writing and speaking on slavery he would not be reassigned as presiding elder. Scott refused to submit and was assigned as pastor to Lowell, Massachusetts.²¹

The New Hampshire Conference, meeting immediately after the New England Conference, did not try to pass any abolitionist measures at their sessions in 1836. Hedding, however, continued to work against abolitionism through his control over appointments. Hedding's advisors requested that George Storrs be made presiding elder of a vacant district in the New Hampshire Conference. Hedding held a conference with Storrs and made the same demands that he had made of Scott. When Storrs refused to comply, Hedding reportedly said to him, "My obligations to the Church, then, will not allow me to appoint you presiding elder; for I should only be putting you in a more prominent place that you might do more mischief." Storrs asked to be located, thus removing himself from the itinerant ministry.²²

Bishop Hedding's refusal to allow a vote on any resolution with abolitionist sentiments provoked a constitutional question which became intimately connected with the abolitionist controversy: the question of conference rights. Shortly after the New England Conference of 1836, Scott, in a letter, accused Bishop Hedding of violating the rights of the conference. Scott was later brought to trial for writing this letter, which marked the initial attack on the power of the bishops in the context of abolitionism.²³

The conflict over rights of the conferences came to the foreground during the New England Conference of 1837 where the presiding bishop was Beverly Waugh. According to Scott, "He took higher grounds in opposition to conference rights, than any other of our bishops have ever done."²⁴ Prior to the meeting of the conference, the New England Wesleyan Anti-slavery Society had met and appointed a committee to confer with Bishop Waugh. They hoped to present to the conference memorials on slavery which had been signed by over three thousand New England Methodists. The committee wrote to the bishop:

"We respectfully ask it as our right as a Conference, to appoint a committee to consider and report on the said memorials, as also the right to act in a Conference capacity on any report from such committee."²⁵ The committee was now claiming as a right what the bishops had denied the conference in its two previous sessions.

Bishop Waugh's reply was a rejection of the concept of conference rights. He said, "I cannot... admit the doctrine which you have set up in your communication, when you say that it is your right." In this context, Waugh defended episcopal policy toward abolitionism. He argued that he could not allow an annual conference to take any action which was opposed by the General Conference. Since there were no slaveholders in the New England Conference, it could not make any statement concerning slavery. Even if the conference had such a right, Waugh noted, it would not be expedient because such action would destroy the unity of the church as well as the civil government and would injure the slaves. He would agree, however, to allow the conference to read and act on the petition if they would limit their action to a memorial to the General Conference of 1840 and would not publish the memorials at any time or place.²⁶

The committee, not willing to accept these conditions, asked bluntly in a second communication, "Will you as President of the New England Conference, oppose any proposed acts of that body, by which it may express and

publish an opinion on the subject of slavery?" In his reply Bishop Waugh again denied the doctrine of conference rights and announced firmly, "I shall. . . decline to put to vote any question of reference on memorials which seek to keep up an excitement, and produce agitation."²⁷ At the conference, when a motion was made to refer the memorials to a committee, Waugh refused to put the motion to a vote and disallowed an appeal from his decision.²⁸

There is some indication that the abolitionists were not unreasonable. Toward the close of the session, Bishop Waugh addressed the conference and expressed gratitude for the spirit of the conference. He indicated that the spirit regarding slavery was much better than he had been led to expect. The correspondent to *Zion's Herald* raised the question in the issue of July 5: "Who gave Bishop Waugh to understand that the New England Conference was anything but what he found?" The most probable source was Bishop Hedding, who had presided over the New England conference for the preceding two years and who had developed a personal dislike for the leading abolitionists.

In fact, Hedding was on hand at this conference, which, because of its abolitionism, was thought to require the presence of two bishops. Hedding's primary activity at this conference was to wage what amounted to a personal war with Scott and La Roy Sunderland. He spoke an entire afternoon on the personal injury that he had suffered from the writings of Scott. The speech caused formal charges to be brought against Scott, but the two were able to settle their differences for the time being.²⁹ Such controversy was more characteristic of Hedding than of Scott.

On the other hand, Waugh's activity seemed to represent a considerable change from his earlier position. In a letter to the Baltimore Conference in 1824, signed by Waugh and Emory among others, Waugh had agreed that "it will appear necessary that something should be done to check the authority... of the Bishop."³⁰ The young man who had feared the authority of bishops later had that authority and used it to create an uproar. The report of the New England Wesleyan Anti-Slavery Society in *Zion's Herald* (June 28, 1837) contained a lengthy paragraph, "opposition experienced from high sources," an obvious reference to the activity of the bishops. A month later Scott thundered in a letter to the editor of *Zion's Herald* (August 2, 1837), "A Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church may refuse to let an Annual Conference express an opinion... on a moral question... and a member of that conference may not utter a sentence on the subject."

The New Hampshire Conference of 1837 followed much the same course as the New England Conference just preceding it. When a motion was made to appoint a committee on slavery, Hedding, the presiding bishop, gave a short speech against abolitionism and requested that the motion be put aside for several days. When the motion was again brought forward, Hedding read several previously prepared conditions which had to be met before he would allow a committee on slavery. He insisted that no action be taken on any report when he was out of the chair and asked the conference to concede that he was under no obligation to put to a vote any report which he opposed. His conditions were rejected by the antislavery society-which was the New Hampshire Conference minus Hedding and a few other members-and there was no committee on slavery. The society now turned its efforts to introducing a resolution declaring that an annual conference had the right to express an opinion on a moral question.³¹

Hedding further frustrated the abolitionists when they attempted to express their formal opposition to a resolution of the Baltimore Conference. The resolution, passed in June 1837, while Bishop Waugh was presiding, declared that the rule on slavery "be taken, construed, and understood so as not to make the guilt or innocence of the accused to depend upon the simple fact of purchase or sale of any such slave or slaves, but upon the attendant circumstances of cruelty, injustice, or inhumanity."³² On the grounds that it would tend to bring the two conferences into conflict and reduce the church to a state of chaos and anarchy, Hedding refused to put to a vote a

resolution opposing this interpretation.³³ Prior to this, the bishops had insisted that the New England and New Hampshire Conferences be consistent with the General Conference, but Hedding now made the will of one southern conference binding on all others. The abolitionists were quick to discern this change.³⁴

Because he had played the most conspicuous role in suppressing Methodist abolitionism, Hedding faced considerable opposition. In September 1837, Hedding published a lengthy defense of his policy, which was called *The Substance of an Address*.³⁵ In the preface Hedding stated "a strong reluctance to publishing anything on this subject, but he is unavoidably brought into circumstances which seem to render the measure necessary, in vindication of a course which he believes to be his duty." Hedding first attacked the doctrine of the rights of a conference. He argued that a conference had the right only to do its "proper business" and that any business allowed beyond that was through the courtesy of the bishop. The bishop was more responsible for the actions of a conference than was the conference itself. Hedding based this position on the section of the Discipline which permitted the bishop to set the day for ordinations and allowed the conference to sit for at least a week. Hedding then emphasized the personal abuse that he had suffered and concluded that "The men who have written against me, have written against the General Conference also.

With regard to abolitionist resolutions on slavery, Hedding argued that they would be useless, wrong and injurious. They would tend to injure other conferences, the slaves, and missionary efforts to the slaves. Further, such resolution would be against the wishes of the General Conference and would tend to disturb the peace of the church. They would imply censure of southern church members "for the simple act of holding a servant." Hedding defended the right of church members to hold slaves on the basis of the "Golden Rule." He said, "If one case can be found where a man may hold a slave . . . and in that act obey this rule, then there may be ten such cases, or ten thousand. And that there are many such cases among our brethren in the southern states, I firmly believe." According to Hedding, holding slaves was a sin or not on the basis of the circumstances and the treatment of the slave. The simple holding of slaves could not be proven a sin "unless you can produce a precept of the Divine law equal to this, 'Thus saith the Lord, THOU SHALT NOT OWN A SLAVE!'"

The remainder of the address was an interpretation of Methodist history in which Hedding sought to demonstrate that every great Methodist figure took substantially the same view toward slavery as he had. Hedding concluded:

If you feel as much benevolence for the slaves as our brethren in the south do-if you are willing to labor as hard, and to suffer as much for the benefit of the slaves as those preachers do, go and help them-there is work enough for you all.

I think now you cannot fail of perceiving that I am on the ancient Methodist ground in relation to this subject-the ground trodden by Wesley, Coke, Clarke, Benson, Watson, Asbury, Whatcoat, Garrettson... and you must not be astonished if I cannot admit the new speculations which have lately been presented to us, under the specious pretensions that they are ancient Methodism.

Hedding's published address, while well received in the conferences of New York, drove the New England and New Hampshire conferences to increased extra-ecclesiastical activity. Just three weeks after the pamphlet was published, Scott and Timothy Merritt issued a call for a Methodist Anti-Slavery Convention to meet at Lynn, Massachusetts, on October 25, 1837. The announcement called for all Methodist ministers who believed that the annual conference had a right to express an opinion on a moral question to come and "remonstrate against recent attempts to prevent Annual Conferences from hearing their testimony against slavery."³⁶ When that convention met, it adopted a report on conference rights that filled seven of the twenty columns of *Zion's Herald* of December

6, 1837, and attempted to refute the arguments lately published by Hedding. The touchstone of the abolitionists' position was that the bishop was to preside but not to rule.

In spite of the efforts of Hedding and Waugh, abolitionism continued to grow among the Methodists of the Northeast. An antislavery society was formed that year in the Maine Conference and the *Maine Wesleyan Journal* was opened to the discussion of slavery.³⁷ Abolitionism was growing in the Oneida and Genesee Conferences to the point that Hedding found it necessary to address those conferences on the subject. The bishops were clearly worried. In one of the few letters that has been preserved, Waugh wrote to Hedding:

I hope that you are enjoying good health of body, and great peace of mind, the teasings of the abolitionists to the contrary notwithstanding. Not that I would present this matter with levity, for I very much fear, not for myself, nor for you, but for the Church, for the Nation, and for the slave or Coloured race. But for these aspects of the case it would be not a little amusing to see the sober and calculating East and North so excited and so convulsed because two Methodist Bishops would not admit that they were their *slaves* in carrying on a war of extermination against the slavery of the South. You know New England habits and character. What will all this uproar end in?³⁸

Even though abolitionism was now widespread among Methodists, the policy of the bishops continued with only minor alterations in the annual conferences of 1838. While loud cries of usurpation and tyranny were being raised in New England, the actions of the bishops met with warm approval in the South. In January the Georgia Conference, with Bishop Morris presiding, passed a resolution approving the course of the bishops in "suppressing attempts to get up and protract an excitement in the church and country, on the subject of abolitionism."³⁹ The happy Georgians as well as the frustrated New Englanders knew that the bishops were trying to suppress Methodist abolitionism. Taking advantage of this situation, the Georgia Conference resolved that "slavery was not a moral evil," and Bishop Morris offered no protest.⁴⁰

The New England Conference had been so difficult for several years that the bishops called on senior Bishop Joshua Soule to help preside over the sessions in June 1838. Soule, primary author of the Methodist constitution of 1808, was the most ardent defender of the authority of the bishops. Although the General Conference of 1836 had released him, because of ill health, from any duties except those he chose, he responded to his colleagues' wishes.⁴¹

Hedding was also on hand to continue his war against the abolitionists. With Soule in the chair, Hedding personally charged Scott with not abiding by their agreement of 1837. He further charged that Scott had spoken of the bishops in an unbrotherly and disrespectful manner which was not proper for a Methodist preacher. The conference cleared Scott on both counts. Having failed with Scott, Hedding then brought five charges against La Roy Sunderland. All Hedding's charges were concerned with Sunderland's activities as editor of the abolitionist *Zion's Watchman*. As in the case of Scott, the conference acquitted Sunderland of every charge.⁴²

The primary function of Bishop Soule at the 1838 conference was to support a so-called "Plan of Pacification," which had been devised by G. F. Cox, editor of the *Maine Wesleyan Journal*. This plan, actually harmful to the work of the abolitionists, would have required the abolitionists never to attack an officer of the church, never to leave their own area to give abolitionist speeches, and never to establish an abolitionist newspaper. They would not be allowed to form or participate in Methodist antislavery societies, and they could join other antislavery societies only if they did not violate any other article in the agreement. They would be allowed to offer public prayer for abolition, but only if they used apostolic language, and they would be allowed to explain to their congregations the

teaching of the Discipline on slavery only once a year. Finally, they would be allowed to petition the General Conference only on subjects which directly concerned the conference doing the petitioning. Most of the statement were phrased positively, and the hour-long plea by Soule, who presented the plan as a great compromise, led some of the delegation to favor its adoption. The indomitable Scott, however, believed that the plan would support the position already taken by Hedding and Waugh. On the basis of Scott's arguments, the New England Conference rejected the plan.⁴³

At this conference the abolitionists were less successful in their attempts to take a stand against slavery than they had been the year before. Hedding would not even allow the memorials from the laity to be presented and be laid on the table. In a sly move, while Hedding was presiding, Scott introduced verbatim the two resolutions on slavery that had been passed by the Genesee Conference the previous year. Hedding refused even to put these to a vote. He explained that he was not sure that they were exactly like the Genesee resolutions and that he did not have sufficient time to investigate the matter.⁴⁴ Hedding was determined to keep this insubordinate conference from making any statement on slavery. Some time later, a friend of Hedding's told him that he had lost his patience at this conference and was unduly oppressive. In a long letter, Hedding explained that he appeared in that light only because of excessive fatigue, the heat, the offensive nature of conference business, and because of a great sense of wrong done him by members of that conference.⁴⁵

Bishop Morris presided over an abolitionist conference for the first time in New Hampshire in 1838. Morris had not desired to become a bishop and dreaded the responsibility so much that he would have resigned in 1840 if circumstances had permitted. His primary concern was for the salvation of souls and he decidedly preferred the open country to the noisy debates of annual conventions. He was therefore much less jealous of episcopal authority than were his colleagues. Thus, while following the general policy for the most part, he was considerably more tolerant of the abolitionists while presiding over their conference.⁴⁶

Morris ruled out of order a resolution declaring that abolitionist activities were not immoral and did not militate against a minister's character. Morris differed from his colleagues, however, in that he allowed his decision to be appealed on the simple condition that his decision be recorded along with his statement on the resolution. The conference did not object to the bishop's conditions and his decision was appealed by a vote of 89 to 1. Thus, for the first time since before 1835, the New Hampshire Conference was allowed to state an opinion on slavery and abolitionism.⁴⁷

Morris, not sure that his course would be pleasing to Hedding, immediately wrote to explain his action at the New Hampshire Conference. He wrote, "With their abolitionism I am not pleased; but there are many excellencies among them, and upon the whole, I like the preachers . . . much better than I expected. They had a net increase of over eighteen hundred members the past year."⁴⁸

The New Hampshire Conference of 1838 marked the end of the episcopal policy of suppression of Methodist abolitionism. At the New Hampshire Conference of 1839 Hedding, who had been determined that that body should make no statement on slavery, explained that he believed slavery "wicked and the laws that sustained it abominable and cruel and ought not to exist."⁴⁹ Because of this change both abolitionist conferences were allowed to present memorials to the General Conference of 1840 asking that the rule on slavery be changed so as to prohibit slaveholding.⁵⁰

Although Hedding carried his personal quarrel with the leading abolitionists to the General Conference, the

bishop's address to that body in 1840 clearly reflected this change of attitude. After justifying their actions in the "Northern and Eastern Conferences," during the preceding four years, the bishops mentioned that many of the abolitionist ministers in those conferences followed a course considerably different from those who had adopted "ultra principles and measures in this unfortunate, and . . . unprofitable controversy." There was now strong evidence "that the unity and peace of the church are not to be materially affected by this exciting subject."⁵¹ Further, Hedding took exception to the report of the committee on itineracy which condemned the abolitionism of the New England and New Hampshire Conferences. In defending the report, William A. Smith, an ardent defender of slavery, declared that nothing could justify the "unchristian course of the New England Conference." Bishop Hedding, however, personally asked the General Conference to drop that part of the report which condemned those conferences. As his reason for the request, he reported that the excitement was diminishing and nothing should be done to stir it up. He added that the Georgia resolution, although misunderstood, had provoked much of the action. The conference dropped its censure.⁵²

What produced such a change of attitude on the part of the bishops? In their address to the conference, they explained that the extreme measures of some abolitionists had produced a reaction and that many had withdrawn from the enterprise. In addition, they noted that the most radical abolitionists had withdrawn from the church and that others would probably soon follow their example.⁵³

In part, the bishops' estimation of the situation was correct. The early solidarity of Methodist abolitionism was disintegrating. When abolitionism became intimately associated with certain points of Methodist polity, many Methodist ministers absolutely refused to go along.⁵⁴ Partly as a result of the bishops' policy toward abolitionism, the more radical abolitionists had begun to work for a more moderate episcopacy, the election of presiding elders by the annual conferences, and a lay delegation in the General Conference.⁵⁵ In addition to this purely Methodist phenomenon, the leading Methodist abolitionists were involved in a conflict in the general abolitionist movement concerning the use of political power for abolitionist purposes.⁵⁶

Another reason for the decline of the disruptive tendencies of abolitionism was its success. As a result of the abolitionist campaign, antislavery feeling in the North had increased considerably. Abel Stevens, editor of *Zion's Herald and Wesleyan Journal*, seems to have had remarkable insight when he wrote in the issue for the December 15, "It may be paradoxical, but we ascribe the decline of abolitionism to the prevalence of abolitionism, and do not consider it an unfavorable indication. The excitement of novelty and first convictions has indeed passed away, but the public mind has settled into a decided, though sober, hostility against slavery." Abolitionism had become so routine that the New England Conference of 1839 turned most of its energy to theological education.⁵⁷

The decisive concern of the bishops, however, seems to have come from the rampant growth of pro-slavery feeling in the South. This is best illustrated by Hedding's response to the Georgia resolution declaring that slavery was not a moral evil. In a letter to Fisk he wrote, "I did hope we should get along better 'til I saw those wretched Resolutions from the Georgia Conference. I had no idea that any conference could pass such Resolutions; I see not how they can be justified." He added, "If the southern conferences can be restrained and corrected, we may yet live after (perhaps) losing a part of New England."⁵⁸ Hedding had come to believe that the pro-slavery southerners posed the greatest threat to the peace of the church. But just as it was too late to heal the wounds of six years of bitter strife and prevent the leading abolitionists from leaving the denomination in 1842, it was too late to halt the growing aggressiveness of the South. The South was too powerful and could not be "restrained." When the General Conference met in 1844 the southern delegates were far more aggressive than they had been in 1840 and the northern delegates were in no mood for compromise. In this tense situation, Bishop Soule read the episcopal address. "According to our ecclesiastical organization you are, under God, the constitutional body in which the

conservative elements of the peace and unity of the Church repose; and consequently. . . all your acts should be the result of calm deliberation, and calm analysis, guided by enlarged and enlightened views, and accompanied with much prayer."⁵⁹ The bishops would have done well to heed their own advice ten years earlier; the denomination was now split into two factions too large to coerce and the bishops had helped create an atmosphere in which communication and compromise were impossible.

The irony and tragedy of the whole episode was evident in the most prominent feature of the General Conference of 1844, which ended in schism. The fight focused on Bishop James O. Andrew of Georgia, who had been elected bishop in 1832 because he was a southerner who did not own slaves.⁶⁰ Afterward, Andrew inherited several slaves, which according to the most incisive historian of these events, made him "the perfect example of a man caught in a situation over which he had no control."⁶¹ Since the law of Georgia forbade manumission within that state, Andrew's choice was to retain the slaves or send them either to Liberia or to a free state, neither of which would have been acceptable to the slaves. Andrew the bishop was encumbered with human possessions contrary to the tradition of the denomination, which required more of its bishops than of its ministers or members. Andrew wished to resign and end the trouble, but the aggressive southern caucus refused to allow it.

It was fitting and symbolic that a bishop was coerced into standing at the center of the controversy which ended in schism, for it was episcopal policy that had helped prepare the stage for these events. While the North and South fought over slavery and the related institutional questions, the abolitionists remained aloof and the bishops tried in vain to preserve the peace and unity the denomination.

NOTES

1. D. W. Clark, *Life and Times of Rev. Elijah Hedding* (New York, 1855), pp. 529-30.
2. Donald B. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845* (Princeton, 1965), pp. 1-61.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 62-115.
4. Lucius C. Matlack, *The History of American Slavery and Methodism from 1780 to 1849* (New York, 1849), p. 98.
5. James Mudge, *History of the New England Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1776-1910* (Boston, 1910), p. 279.
6. *Zion's Herald*, June 18, 1834.
7. Mathews, p. 121.
8. January 7, 21, 28, February 11, 18, 25, March 4, 11, May 20, 1835.
9. Mudge, pp. 279-281; Mathews, p. 132.

10. *Zion's Herald*, August 12, 1835.
11. Orange Scott, *An Appeal to the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Boston, 1838), p. 84.
12. *Journals of the General Conference*, I, 443.
13. *Christian Advocate and Journal*, June 17, 1836.
14. Scott, p. 52.
15. *Journals of the General Conference*, I, 479, 486; Mathews, p. 143.
16. Mudge, pp. 280-281; *Zion's Herald*, January 18, February 8, March 1, 8, 29, April 5, 1837.
17. Mathews, p. 145.
18. *Christian Advocate and Journal* July 1, 1836.
19. Clark, pp. 495-496; Scott, pp. 84-85.
20. Mudge, p. 254.
21. Lucius C. Matlack, *The Life of Rev. Orange Scott* (New York, 1847), p. 37; Clark, pp. 493-495; *Christian Advocate and Journal*, August 26, 1836.
22. Quoted in Clark, p. 497. See also Scott, p. 85.
23. Clark, pp. 498-503.
24. Scott, p. 85.
25. *Zion's Herald*, June 28, 1837.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*, July 5, 1837.
29. Clark, pp. 499-503.
30. Beverly Waugh, *et al.*, Letter to the Baltimore Conference, January 1, 1824.

31. *Zion's Herald* August 2, 1837.
32. *Ibid.*, June 14, 1837.
33. Clark, p.505.
34. Scott, p. 87.
35. Elijah Hedding, *The Substance of an Address* (New York, 1837).
36. *Zion's Herald* October 18, 1837.
37. Scott, p. 87; *Zion's Herald* August 2, 1837.
38. Beverly Waugh to Elijah Hedding, Baltimore, December 17, 1837.
39. *Zion's Herald*, February 28, 1838.
40. *Ibid.*, January 24, 1838.
41. Horace M. DuBose, *Life of Joshua Soule* (Nashville, 1916), pp. 71, 189-191.
42. Clark, pp. 524-527.
43. *Zion's Herald*, June 13, 20, 27, August 29, September 5, 1838; March 6, 1839.
44. *Ibid.*, March 6, 1839.
45. Clark, pp. 531-532.
46. John F. Marlay, *The Life of the Rev. Thomas A. Morris* (Cincinnati, 1875) , pp. 165-169, 137-139; Thomas A. Morris, *A Discourse on Methodist Church Polity* (Cincinnati, 1860), pp. 15, 54; Thomas A. Morris, *Miscellany: Consisting of Essays, Biographical Sketch and Notes of Travel* (Cincinnati, 1854), pp. 237, 263.
47. *Zion's Herald*, July 18, 1838.
48. Quoted in Clark, pp. 529-530.
49. Quoted in Mathews, pp. 194-195.
50. *Zion's Herald*, May 13, 1840; *Journal of the General Conference*, II, 19.
51. *Journal of the General Conference*, II, 134-135.

52. *Christian Advocate and Journal*, June 12, 1840.

53. *Journal of the General Conference*, II, 135.

54. *Zion's Herald*, July 22, 1840. The *first* indication of this came as early as 1837; see *Ibid.*, September 20, 1837.

55. *Journal of the General Conference*, II, 14-20.

56. Mathews, pp. 170-171.

57. *Zion's Herald*, August 14, 1839.

58. Quoted in Mathews, p. 184.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 249.

60. *Ibid.*, pp. 116-117.

61. *Ibid.*, pp. 256-259.

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