

The slave girl who divided a church

The divisions in The Methodist Church have been many, but the years have seen a healing of the wounds. Now the Church looks ahead as it stands on the threshold of a union with one of its spiritual branches which dates to the time of our country's founding.

J. Marvin Rast

How could a slave girl, Kitty Andrew, in the obscure village of Oxford, Georgia, in the mid 19th century know that she was to be the issue provoking the major division of the Methodist Episcopal Church?

How could she in her wildest conjecture dream that she would be buried in Oxford Cemetery, called the "Westminster of Georgia Methodism," and that she inscription [sic] on her cenotaph, in another part of the cemetery, would be the longest there, far longer than the epitaph of her master, Bishop James O. Andrew, on whose lot she was buried?

Kitty's cenotaph tells much of the story of the slavery-abolitionist struggle which in 1844 led to the separation of Methodism in North American and the establishment of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. There were other causes such as the legal and constitutional aspects of church government, but obviously slavery was a basic cause. The cenotaph placed by the late H.Y. McCord of Atlanta, Ga., carried this inscription:

SACRED
TO THE MEMORY OF
KITTY ANDREW SHELL

Kitty was a slave girl bequeathed to Bishop James O. Andrew by a Mrs. Powers of Augusta, Georgia, in her will when Kitty was 12 years of age, with the stipulation that when she was 19 years of age, she was to be given her freedom and sent to Liberia.

When she reached the age of 19, Bishop Andrew had Dr. A.B. Longstreet, who was then president of Emory College, and Professor George W. Lane to interview Kitty. They did. Kitty declined to go to Liberia, saying she preferred to remain with Mrs. Andrew at Oxford, Georgia.

Under the laws of Georgia at that time, Bishop Andrew could not free Kitty unless she would agree to leave the state; so he built for her a cottage in his back yard and told her, "You are as free as I am."

Kitty lived in that cottage a free woman — until she married a man named Nathan Shell, and went to her own home.

The ownership of this slave was the cause of the division of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1844.

Only these Remain

[Picture of “Kitty’s Cottage”; caption: Left: “Kitty’s Cottage,” a neat white cabin, stands at Salem Camp Ground as a memorial to the slave girl who unwittingly caused the division of the Methodist Episcopal Church.]

[Picture of Catherine Boyd’s Cenotaph in Oxford Georgia Historical Cemetary; caption: Below: a few miles away in an Oxford, Ga., cemetery is Kitty’s cenotaph, with the longest inscription in the cemetery.]

For a full history see The Life and Letters of James O. Andrew by Rev. George G. Smith, D.D.

Miscellanies by Bishop James O. Andrew

History of the Organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South by A.H. Redford, D.D.

Kitty’s cottage was purchased by H.Y. McCord and moved to Salem Camp Ground in 1938.

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James Osgood Andrew, the central figure around whom the storm clouds gathered, was born of Methodist parents May 3, 1794, in Wilkes County, Georgia, near the town of Washington. He died in Mobile, Ala., March 2, 1871. His father, John Andrew, was a local Methodist preacher and a schoolteacher. It was chiefly from his father’s school that James received his early literary training for a long and useful ministry as itinerant Methodist preacher and Bishop. From a poor pioneer family he came, but it was one of Christian integrity, conducive to James’ making open profession of religion and “joining society” when a little over 15 years of age.

Joins S.C. Conference

Of his being licensed to preach and joining the South Carolina Conference there is this sketch in Smith’s Life and Letters of James Osgood Andrew:

“The Presiding Elder [at the quarterly conference] put him up to preach; Moses Andrew gave him a text. How well he succeeded is evidenced by the word of John Marks, one of his father’s life-long friends: ‘Jeems,’ he said, ‘I voted for you to be the preacher, but if I had heard that sermon I wouldn’t have done it.’ But he was licensed and he sent by Lovick Pierce his name to the conference in Charleston for admission, and in 1812 he was admitted on trial. He was in his nineteenth year.”

[Portrait of Andrew; caption: Bishop James O. Andrew]

Appointments

He was assigned to the Salt-ketcher Circuit in South Carolina.

At the Conference session in Milledgeville, Ga., in December 1814 he was ordained deacon by the venerable Bishop Francis Asbury; he was ordained elder at the Conference in Columbia in 1816.

His other appointments were to Bladen Circuit, N.C.; to Charleston as junior preacher (where at age 23 he departed from Methodist custom for preachers and married the charming and pious Amelia MacFarlane); pastor at Wilmington, N.C.; Columbia, S.C.; Augusta, Ga.; Savannah, Ga.; presiding elder, Charleston District; pastor at Charleston again; Greensboro and Athens, Ga. — all these appointments, it should be remembered, in the South Carolina Conference.

Elected bishop

It was in 1830 that the South Carolina Conference was divided and the Georgia Conference was set off. James O. Andrew was appointed to Athens to serve that charge and the church at Madison, Ga. He was next appointed to Augusta, Ga. At the General Conference of 1832 along with John Emory of New York, he was elected bishop on the first ballot.

It was at Oxford, Ga. Where he was making his home as bishop that the controversy of 1844 culminated in the division of the church.

Tender solicitude

The tender solicitude of Bishop Andrew for Kitty's welfare found expression in one of his letters to his wife, Amelia, after they had moved to Oxford. It was written from Vicksburg, Miss., December 5, 1840. "Tell Kitty," He wrote, "I wish I could drink a cup of her best coffee this morning. I hope she is going well and will preserve herself chaste in Oxford. She will be greatly exposed to temptations, and I hope will be carefully guarded in her conduct." [superscript 1]

Another glimpse of the affection existing between Kitty and the Andrew household is revealed at the death of Mrs. Amelia MacFarlane Andrew:

"Calling to Kitty, who had nursed her with the affection of a daughter, she said, 'Kitty, you have been very kind to me, and I love you as if you were my own child. Be pious, serve God, and promise me that you will meet me in heaven.' The pledge was given, and now she said, 'Come kiss me,' and the Negro slave placed her ardent kiss upon the lips of her dying mistress." [superscript 2]

Ministry to slaves

And it should be further said to the credit of Bishop Andrew that he along with William Capers, James L. Belin, and other Southern ministers of that era not only ministered to late numbers of Negroes in their congregations,

(Continued on Page 10)

(1) Smith: The Life and Letters of James Osgood Andrew p. 303

(2) Ibid. p. 308

The slave girl who divided a church

(Continued From Page 9)

but carried on extensive mission work among the slaves.

Andrew Chapel, a church in Orangeburg District, South Carolina Conference, and Andrew College, Cuthbert, Ga., which was dedicated by Bishop Andrew in 1856, are continuing memorials to this esteemed church leader.

Andrew had been a delegate to the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church from 1820 on. Opposition to slavery had registered expression from John Wesley's notable condemnation of the slave trade, in a strong deliverance on the subject of slavery and directions for emancipation in the organizing conference of the Church at Baltimore in 1784, in many annual conferences thereafter and in virtually each succeeding general conference.

Church divisions

Other divisions there were besides that of 1844: the first called "Primitive Methodists," led by an English Methodist clergyman, William Hammett, in Charleston in 1791; he refused to accept the authority of the American Methodists. This was followed by the O'Kelly schism in 1792 involving the bishop's power of appointments; the Primitive Methodist Church in 1829; the Methodist Protestant Church in 1830 calling for the mutual rights of ministers and laymen in the Methodist Church; the Free Methodist Church in 1860, opposing "membership in secret societies, the wearing of jewelry and fashionable clothing, and the use of tobacco were forbidden. This church was also opposed to slave-holding by Methodists". [superscript 1]

(1) Garber: The Methodists are One People, p. 33.

Other branches

Of special interest at this time was the formation of the Church of the United Brethren organized at Asbury's suggestion by Philip William Otterbein in 1800, and "The Newly Formed Methodist Conference" organized in 1807 by Jacob Albright – subsequently called the "Evangelical Association" and later the Evangelical Church. It is these branches of originally German-speaking Methodists that in 1946 came together to form the Evangelical United Brethren Church and are this month, April 1968, to join with the Methodist Church in forming The United Methodist Church.

There should be mentioned also such branches of Methodism as the Union American Methodist Episcopal Church established in 1813; the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the largest Negro Methodist Church; the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in 1820; the Methodist Episcopal Church in Canada in 1828; and many Negro Methodist churches, including the Colored – now Christian Methodists Episcopal Church, 1870.

The first split involving slavery and sectionalism came in 1843 with the organization of the Western Methodist Church. It adopted a rule which forbade “buying or selling of men, women, or children, with intention to enslave them, or holding them as slaves, or claiming that it is right so to do.”

The big debate

But the big debate and the big separation came at the General Conference which convened in Greene Street Methodist Church, New York, N. Y., May 1, 1844. There Bishop Andrew’s slavery connection was the major issue.

Bishop Andrew became involved in slavery in an unusual manner, as Kitty’s cenotaph states. Besides having Kitty, Mrs. Andrew’s mother bequeathed a Negro boy to her daughter, and when Mrs. Andrew died, the slave became property of Bishop Andrew. Then Bishop Andrew re-married and his wife owned slaves. Hence though he had not bought slaves, Bishop Andrew was an unwilling slaveholder. These facts he explained to the General Conference, but after prolonged debate the vote came 110 to 68 requiring Bishop Andrew to desist from officiating as a bishop until he had separated himself from the institution of slavery.

Plan of separation

The Southern delegates proceeded to formulate a committee report which became known as the Plan of Separation. This was adopted by a decisive majority – and the rest of the story is well known: the Louisville Convention of 1845 setting up the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, which the first General Conference meeting in Petersburg, Va., May 1, 1846.

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I have always felt closely drawn to Bishop Andrew from the time as a high school boy in Louisville, Ga., a grandson of his, the sainted and beloved Rev. J. M. Lovett was my pastor. And then as a student in Emory College, Oxford, Ga., I at one time roomed in the home place of Bishop Andrew. As I looked out of my window at the rear of the house onto Kitty’s Cottage in the back yard, my thoughts were often of the regrettable events and influences which Bishop Tigert said created a situation beyond the power of those confronting them to control.

(See “The Slave Girl” Page 15)

The slave girl

(Continued From Page 10)

The vital issues

Into the record should go the statement in the “Report of Debates to the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, held in the City of New York, 1844” (New York: Lane and Tippet, 1844) -- pages 26, 27, 44 – that “the majority of the Southern delegates acknowledged the evil and curse of slavery.” Gross Alexander, a historian of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in *A History of the Methodist Church, South, in the United States* (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1894) -- page 34 – wrote: “Thus, then, it was not for slavery that they [the Southern delegates] contended, but for security from the molestation in preaching the gospel to slave-owners and to slaves without running the risk of being denied access to both classes by interfering with existing institutions and civil relations.”

The road ahead

And now we have lived since 1939 in an era of The Methodist Church which found a way to unite three separated branches of Methodism, including the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. We stand on the threshold of the United Methodist Church. Is it not time for fervent prayer that the events and influences to follow will through the empowering of the Holy Spirit find us equal to them – find us manifesting Christian attitudes, adaptations, and adventure in the human relations and for the human needs of this our day?

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References:

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This document has not been transcribed word for word. Spelling errors have been fixed for accessibility and readability.