Chapter 138a – Slavery Divides The Sects Along North Vs. South Lines

Dates:
June 1844 – May 1845

Sections:
* The Methodist Episcopal Church Breaks Apart Over Slavery
* The Baptist Church Also Divides
* The Church Schisms Preview The Growing North-South Divide

****

Date: June 1844

The Methodist Episcopal Church Breaks Apart Over Slavery

In the summer of 1844, the Methodist Church breaks apart over a challenge to clergymen owning slaves.

The church founder, John Wesley, speaks out against slavery way back in 1774. While his followers at the time tend to agree, they conclude that the issue is too divisive to pursue at the time.

This official passivity continues for six decades, until three New England ministers fire up the internal debate.

One is the Reverend Orange Scott, who is born in Vermont in 1800, ordained at twenty-two, and rises steadily in the church hierarchy from then on. Scott is dedicated to reinfusing the spirit of John Wesley and acts in 1843 to do so by founding the Wesleyan Methodist Connection, "a new anti-slavery, anti-intemperance, anti-every-thing wrong, church organization." His words echo Garrison and Foster in offering a ringing indictment of those who would compromise in the presence of slavery.

> *...Though public opinion commanded Mr. Wesley to desist through the medium of mobs, still he stood it out! Shame on his compromising sons! The Methodists in all parts of the United States have braved, and, finally, to a considerable extent, changed public opinion. Every man's hand has been against us, and yet we have stood firm.*
>
> *But now comes up the new doctrine of compromise! Let it be banished from the breast of every patriot, philanthropist, and Christian…Shall we turn our backs upon the cause of suffering humanity, because public opinion frowns upon us? No! Never!!*
>
> *…The principle of slavery—-the principle which justifies holding and treating the human species as property, is morally wrong—-or, in other words, that it is a sin. The principle, aside from all circumstances, is evil, ONLY EVIL, and that CONTINUALLY! …no hand could sanctify it—-no circumstances could change it from bad to good. It was a reprobate—-too bad to be converted—-not subject to the law of God, neither indeed could be…Circumstances might palliate, and circumstances might aggravate, but no circumstances could justify the principle." "He who has*

made of one blood, all nations of men to dwell on the earth' [Acts 17:26] must look with disapprobation upon such a system of complicated wrongs, as American slavery...

In 1842, Scott officially withdraws from the Methodist Episcopal Church, to protest what he considers a refusal by the bishops to even allow open discussions of slavery at annual gatherings. He is joined at that time by two other vocal anti-slavery ministers, La Roy Sunderland and Jotham Horton.

The debate over slavery comes to a head at the quadrennial General Conference of church leaders which convenes in New York City on May 1, 1844. Three weeks into the meeting, regional tensions flare when two Northern elders offer a resolution "affectionately asking" that Bishop James Andrew of Georgia either divest his slaves or resign from the church.

This places Andrew in the awkward positioning of defending himself in public. He says that he never bought nor sold a slave on his own. Instead his first slave was inherited, while another four have come his way through two marriages. While Georgia law prohibits manumission, he claims that all have been told to "live wherever they so choose."

After making his plea, a vote goes against Andrew - and he volunteers to resign to quell the firestorm.

The Conference spends the next twelve days trying to find a compromise solution. Some argue that a judicial trial is needed to remove a bishop. Others propose that a final decision be delayed until the next meeting in 1848.

Along the way, however, attendees also learn that Andrew's case is not unique, that another 1200 or so Methodist clergymen are current slave owners.

At this point the conflict ratchets up, with Southern bishops digging their heels in to support Andrew, citing the now familiar arguments that slavery is sanctioned in the Bible and is a "positive good" for society.

This tactic finally pushes the Northern contingent over the edge. On June 8 they offer a "Plan of Separation" which passes, splitting the church into two wings.

Henceforth there will be the Wesleyan Methodist Church of the North and the Methodist Episcopal Church – South.

It will be ninety-four years before this breach is finally healed for the Methodists**.**

****

Date: May 1845

The Baptist Church Also Divides

Within a year of the Methodist schism, the Baptist Church also suffers a schism over a similar slavery-related issue.

The Church is founded in 1638 with a strong missionary tradition that sees it expanding rapidly beyond its original home base in Rhode Island. By the 1830's its membership ranks second in the nation, trailing only the Methodists.

The sect becomes especially strong across the South and on plantations – where some owners regard slave baptisms as proof of their virtue in bringing salvation to their black charges.

Because of this membership tilt toward the South, the Baptists are especially inclined to avoid controversy over slavery for as long as possible. But this strategy breaks down, as various Northern ministers begin to attack the institution.

One of them is Abel Brown, an intensely religious youth, who becomes a Baptist minister after studying at Hamilton College. His first cause is intemperance, and his approach to stamping out "demon drink" is to cite the names of known offenders in a public forum. For this he is attacked by a mob and run out of town in Auburn, New York. He turns his attention to slavery in 1838, speaking against it from the pulpit, carrying through to action by helping run-aways escape across the Ohio River near his home in Pennsylvania. He characterizes his efforts in military terms:

> *I have been in close action with the enemy. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, was one continued row. A mob drove me from the house on Friday night. Saturday night I could not get to the house unless through showers of stones, and Sunday, the house was found nailed up.*

Brown eventually becomes a leading figure in operating the Underground Railroad, joins the Liberty Party in 1840, and serves as an itinerant lecturer on behalf of abolition before his premature death in 1844 at age thirty-four.

A second Baptist opponent of slavery is Reverend Elon Galusha, whose father and uncle have both served as Governors of Vermont. Galusha takes up the ministry after studying law, and serves his first sixteen years in Oneida County, New York, the hotbed of early revivalism and abolitionism. In 1839 he becomes the first president of the Baptist Anti-Slavery Society, whose constitution calls for the church to repent for its participation in sin:

> *Slavery is utterly at variance with the gospel of Jesus Christ….(It) is a sin in which the churches have largely and criminally participated, we feel it our duty to do all we can to induce repentance and by kind, prudent, prayerful, and persevering measures endeavor to exert a purifying influence upon the churches with which we are associated.*

In 1840 the Society turns up its rhetoric:

> *As Christians we can have no fellowship with those who, after being duly enlightened on the subject, still advocate and practice its abominations and thus defile the church of God.*

In response, Southern Baptist ministers fire back.

> *Our brethren at the South with great unanimity deprecate the discussion as unwarranted, the measures pursued as fatal to their safety and complain of the language occasionally employed as cruel and slanderous.*

An immediate crisis is delayed by the fact that governance of the Baptist Church is far less centralized than in other denominations. Each local church is free to operate as it chooses, as long as the principle of "baptism of professed believers through total immersion" is maintained.

The closest thing to a forum on national policy is a triennial "General Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States." It is formed to seek consensus on which missions – both domestic and foreign – the membership wishes to fund in the next three year period.

In 1841 the anti-slavery forces try to force the Triennial body to ban slave holders from holding missionary positions, but their pleas are brushed aside as too inflammatory. In 1843 a Northern Baptist Missionary Society is formed to continue to agitate for change.

As the 1844 cycle rolls around, Southern members decide to "test" the will of the Triennial board. They do so in April of that year through a Georgia Convention recommendation to appoint Elder George Reeves to a Home Missions position. The application states that Reeves is a current slave-owner.

The Alabama Convention follows by demanding a Triennial policy making slave-owners eligible for any missions being funded in part or whole by Southern members.

The Home Missions council is now forced to make a decision – and they choose to ignore the Reeves nomination on the basis that their policy is to remain neutral on any and all controversies over slavery.

This deflection hardly satisfies the Southern contingent.

In May 1845, they gather in Augusta, Georgia, and vote to abandon the Triennial Convention for good. Gentler souls depart in sadness:

> *With no sharpness of contention, with no bitterness of spirit, . . . we part asunder and open two lines of service to the heathen and the destitute.*

Others depart in anger:

> *We are no longer willing to work in societies where slave holders are called sinners and reviled as thiefs.*

Further efforts to repair the breech fail, and future governance of the church is split between The Southern Baptist Convention and the North's Triennial Convention.

****

Date: 1845

The Church Schisms Preview The Growing North-South Divide

Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lyman Beecher, and Henry Beecher

By 1845 all of the dominant Protestant denominations have divided over slavery.

While the Methodists and the Baptists are most visibly split along North – South lines, similar tensions also strike the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists.

Even families and friends diverge.

The conservative "Old School" Presbyterian icon, Lyman Beecher, witnesses his son and daughter, swing sharply to the abolitionist cause. The Unitarians are aligned in their opposition to slavery, but not on the remedy. The abolitionists are "too showy, too noisy" for Ellery Channing and "they would jeopardize peace with the South." Meanwhile younger hardliners such as Theodore Parker and Thomas Higginson begin to line up alongside those calling for effective, even violent, action over mere intellectual hand-wringing.

All of the church schisms have been played out in a relatively short time, largely between the 1833 founding of the American Anti-Slavery Society and the national convocations of 1844.

All appear to be over relatively minor policy matters.

It is not as if the Northern churchmen are demanding that the South free its slaves.

Nor does it signal any wish in the North to invite freed slaves into their midst, to embrace them and make them citizens. The schisms are not about abolition and assimilation. They are not about abandoning the anti-black stereotypes entrenched in American culture since Jamestown.

Instead they are more about appearances than substance. Perhaps the churches should not seem to be condoning ownership of slaves by its officials. So say the Northerners.

This is a subtle shift, but still sufficient in the climate of 1844 to blow apart the bonds of good will that have held the three major churches together.

As such, the church break-up presages the eventual collapse of the political Union.

Both Henry Clay and John Calhoun sense this outcome.

Clay says at the time:

> *The sundering of the religious ties which have hitherto bound our people together, I consider the greatest source of danger to our country.*

Calhoun's observation is even more ominous:

> *Now nothing will be left to hold the states together except force.*

Twenty years later, Abraham Lincoln wonders how the war has come when…

> *Both sides read the same Bible and pray to the same God.*

If the churches cannot hold, the political center cannot. It is now just a matter of time.