

Methodism's tough initial stance against racism eroded throughout the 19th century in the MEC. The American theological arguments about race gradually shifted away from the image of God, coinciding with the decline of the class meeting and the rise of Sunday schools. This paper will explore the interconnection between issues of race and the rise of Sunday schools.

Class Meetings and the Image of God

After his time in Savannah where he converted several slaves, Wesley was convinced that Black Africans were human, created in the image of God. His acknowledgment of the humanity of slaves formed the basis of his anti-slavery stance. In *Thoughts on Slavery* he expounds upon the many evils of the slave trade concluding, "The blood of thy brother, (for whether thou wilt believe it or no, such he is in the sight of Him that made him) crieth against thee from the earth..."¹ Wesley's opposition to slavery was carried into the first *Book of Discipline* in 1785, which declared slaves "souls capable of Image of God"² On this foundation, the 19th century began with a Methodist desire to extirpate slavery as it was based on "sin and evil" pronounced after the General Conference of 1800.³ Over the next century the opposition to slavery and the acknowledgement of the humanity of people of color would wane.

By design, Methodist class meetings were focused on accountability, discipline and the Wesleyan view of salvation as being renewed in the image of God. Together in community, individuals sought to become more holy. As Methodist society members educated the poor, visited prisoners and served their neighbors, they could not help but encounter the humanity of

¹ Wesley, *Thoughts on Slavery*, accessed online http://moodle.garrett.edu/pluginfile.php/42454/mod_resource/content/0/Thoughts_Upon_Slavery_1774_.pdf, 27.

² Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: A Sourcebook, Volume II*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 84.

³ MEA II, 135.

others and themselves. The essential class question, “How is it with your soul,” is focused upon renewal of the image of God. “Class meetings provided the regular pastoring, discipline, guidance, nurture, instruction, mentoring and encouragement” that fueled the mission of spreading holiness in the newly formed country.⁴

Whites, free Blacks and slaves contributed to the growth of Methodism in the early 19th century. The class lists of John Street Church in New York list eleven of forty-six classes as “colored [sic].”⁵ Baltimore is cited as the foremost example of the bi-racial character of the Methodism with a surprising 40% of the membership listed as Black.⁶ This growth, fostered through class meetings, brought tension and division. By 1821, African Americans in New York proposed an “African Conference” that would ordain Black, itinerant preachers, stating that their “usefulness have been hindered.”⁷ While they use a deferent tone, praising White growth as the reason they have been “pressed back,” requesting to be under the “mother (white) church,” and criticizing Richard Allen’s separation from the MEC, the hope to grow their leadership and rolls is clearly hindered by the white church.⁸

Surprisingly, segregated class meetings contributed to Black membership growth. Some combination of the MEC’s opposition to slavery, the acknowledgment of the imago dei in African Americans, and the liberating power of the gospel proclaimed in class meetings nurtured was appealing. Richard Allen may have stated this best:

“We were in favor of being attached to the Methodist connection; for I was confident that there was no religious sect or denomination that would suit the capacity of the colored

⁴ Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: A Sourcebook, Volume I*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 24.

⁵ MEA II, 146.

⁶ MEA I, 93.

⁷ MEA II, 199.

⁸ Ibid.

people as well as Methodists; for the plain and simple gospel suits best for any people; for the unlearned can understand, and the learned are sure to understand; and the reason that the Methodists are so successful in awakening and conversion of the colored people, the plain doctrine and having good discipline.”⁹

This “good discipline” was supported by the class meeting structure focused upon the renewal of the image of God in all.

From Class Meetings to Sunday Schools:

By the 1820’s Class Meetings began to be replaced by missionary societies and Sunday schools.¹⁰ Where class meetings focused on the “heart” and renewal in the image of God, Sunday schools emphasized knowledge and character.¹¹ The rapid rise in Sunday schools, fueled by the Book Concern, coincided with the erosion of MEC stance on slavery. Sunday schools for whites became “nurseries of piety,” while mission to the slaves, complete with a catechesis, became a means of control.¹²

The pastoral letter from the Mississippi Conference in 1827 contains both a charge to implement Sunday schools and a call to provide religious education for slaves.¹³ The letter asks slave owners to teach slaves to read for the purpose of religion, citing duties of the master outlined by “St. Paul.”¹⁴ The letter makes clear that while the education of slaves, acknowledged as having “souls,” is a “delicate” matter, it is a mechanism for control and submission.

⁹ MEA II,, 119.

¹⁰ MEA I, 210.

¹¹ MEA I, 122.

¹² MEA I, 120.

¹³ MEA II, 209.

¹⁴ Ibid.

A brief comparison of Wesley's *instructions for Children* and Caper's slave catechisms demonstrates how religious instruction of slaves taught a "gospel" of "law and obedience," rather than love and grace.¹⁵ Dehumanization is evident in the very first lesson of the slave catechesis which entirely omits Wesley's question, "Does God love you? *Yes He loves every thing which he has made.*"¹⁶ Also noticeably absent is the means of grace and the statement about the purpose of the creation of man, "to know, love and be happy in God forever."¹⁷ Instead of teaching the image of God found in each human being, the slave catechesis taught the "duty of servants."¹⁸ In white Sunday schools, linear curriculum, based on an emerging "intellectualist moral psychology," replaced emotion with knowledge.¹⁹ One review of 19th century white Sunday schools focuses on order, organization, and "arrangement," noting the "sweet little voices."²⁰ Another describes the studies for children which includes Bible, history and analysis.²¹ While Sunday schools regained the Wesleyan pairing of knowledge and piety, they appear to be lacking in the heart experience of holiness that class meetings nurtured.²²

This theological shift and declining opposition to slavery coincided with a growing and changing church structure. The Methodists began their own Sunday School Union in 1827.²³ Together with the Book Concern and the rise of station churches, "Methodism constituted itself a great national school and committed itself to bringing literacy to the masses."²⁴

This new larger, knowledge and morally focused institution emerged amidst rising tension in the church. Southern churches asserted that slavery was a civil matter rather than a

¹⁵ MEA I, p 160.

¹⁶ *Instructions for Children* p 5, MEA II, p 231.

¹⁷ *Instructions*, p 6-7.

¹⁸ MEA II, 235.

¹⁹ MEA I, 121.

²⁰ MEA II, 308-310

²¹ MEA II, 378.

²² MEA I, 120.

²³ MEA I, 110

²⁴ MEA I, 11.

religious one, avoiding the issue of human rights altogether.²⁵ Theological arguments are all but absent from the 1844 General Conference Documents. In the church split, the argument centered on the role of the episcopacy rather than the evils of holding a fellow person captive.²⁶ This differs greatly from the abolitionist arguments just ten years prior where evil, human rights and oppression were the focus.²⁷

Missions:

In the second half of the 19th century, with slavery abolished and the Church split and segregated, issues of race took on a new focus. At the same time, Sunday school was shifting focus from memorized catechism to doctrine of the church, evidenced by probationers classes and changing architecture.²⁸ This section will highlight the continuing theological shift in teaching even further away from the imago dei alongside Methodist missions.

Both probationers classes and architecture are evidence of the MEC's new understandings of Christian formation. Small class gatherings, once the staple of Methodism, were replaced by graded classes around large auditoriums, with "commodious passage[s]."²⁹ The new architectural style is evidence of a shift from discussion to lecture. Where once Methodism nurtured holiness through relationships and accountability, the new structure focused on doctrine and membership. Both the MEC and MECS adopted membership rituals which lacked the discipline of class meetings.³⁰

At the same time class meetings were becoming extinct in the latter half of the 19th century, Methodists were engaging in missions to Liberia, Native Americans, and others. It

²⁵ MEA II, 240.

²⁶ MEA II, 268-283.

²⁷ MEA II, 237.

²⁸ MEA 1, 249.

²⁹ MEA II, 451.

³⁰ MEA 1, 249.

appears again that the religious instruction for people of color is theologically different from the Wesley's *Instructions*. For example, in the description of mission work in Liberia, Ann Wilkins states that converted Africans "need special influence from on high to keep them Christians."³¹ She also hopes that Liberians might someday be "good and useful."³² These statements imply that Liberians lack the *imago dei*; they need special influence to become good.

Evidence in a theological shift is also evident in the treatment of Native Americans, who lost their citizenship rights in 1870. A massacre led by Methodist pastor John Chivington was followed by three decades of violence and conflict. Only one course document addresses the conflict from a stance sympathetic to Native Americans. Charles Fowler's editorial in the *Western Advocate* makes a legal argument, demonstrating that the disputed land belonged to Native Americans documented by treaty. While he certainly takes a stand for Native American land rights, he glaringly omits the revocation of citizenship in 1870 and any mention of ongoing violence.³³ Comparing Fowler's stance with the language of Wesley and the Methodist abolitionists demonstrates just how weak the theological argument for human rights, based on an acknowledgment of the *imago dei* in people of color, has become.

Conclusion:

This paper has outlined the correlation between the loss of the *imago dei* theology that included people of color and the decline of class meetings. While the causes of the theological shifts are complex, the replacement of the class meeting focus on holiness, discipline and accountability could not have helped. The rise of Sunday school and missions is just one of the ecclesiological changes that were shaped by race in the 19th century Methodist Episcopal Church.

³¹ MEA II, 262.

³² Ibid.

³³ MEA II, 386.

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