

DISUNITY ALONG THE COLOR LINE IN PROTESTANT CHURCHES IN AMERICA

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Unity was one of the ideals that the apostles, including Paul, strived to instill in the early church. Paul in his epistles stressed unity when it came to the *ekklesia* or church, specifically Paul encouraged believers to be in unity in Colossians 3:11 where he wrote, “In Christ there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all of these people.”¹ Despite this and other commands Paul gives toward unity, the church is a place that has faced numerous times of separation and splits along dozens of different lines. Church division has occurred along practical lines, along theological lines, and especially along the color line. It is because of this last line of division that the prominent twentieth century Christian theologian Dr. H. Richard Niebuhr writes, “The color line has been drawn so incisively by the church itself that its proclamation of the gospel of the brotherhood of Jew and Greek, of bond and free, of white and black has sometimes the sad sound of irony.”²

This division along the color line within protestant American Churches will inform the scope of this paper. With a word such as “division” used it would appear that the split was only a negative thing, something that should never have happened, but this is not necessarily the case. For two factors Black independent churches formed during the Reconstruction Era: the refusal of Whites to offer Blacks equality within the church in any form, and the will of Blacks to control their own lives including the spiritual aspects of their lives.³ This will demonstrate how substantial the division was along the color line, sets forth the reasons that segregation developed within protestant churches in America, records the reaction that both Blacks and

¹ Author’s translation.

² Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1957), 263.

³ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), 89.

Whites had to this segregation, and offers a short glimpse into the current state of affairs regarding the disunity along the color line for Protestant churches in both the northern and southern parts of America.

Background Information

From the time that slave traders brought slaves over on ships to the New World as early as the 17th century, one of the justifying arguments for enslaving these Africans was, the white man is bringing Christianity to these heathen people. These slaves were unable to read and the masters were careful to make sure that they would not learn, but this did not keep Whites from teaching their slaves about Christianity. The common understanding was that these slaves were inferior to Whites, and Christian pastors furthered this agenda through their “Christian teaching.” Prior to the Civil War Whites and Blacks worshipped together. Albert J. Raboteau, scholar and professor of African American religious history at Princeton, argues, “In fact it was common for slaves, seated in back pews or galleries, to outnumber white church members on any given Sunday in the Antebellum South.”⁴ Niebuhr reports, “It was the conviction of the essential equality of all souls before God which inspired the white missionary and an occasional master to share the benefits of the common gospel in a common church with members of the other race.”⁵

Additionally, most plantations had their own Black preacher who acquired knowledge of the gospel without the aid of being able to read scripture, but simply remembered what he had

⁴ Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 42; Niebuhr, *Social*, 247.

⁵ Niebuhr, *Social*, 288.

heard preached.⁶ He would lead private religious gatherings under the threat of severe punishment. Despite this he would instruct his fellow slaves in Christianity and these meetings became an occasion where the congregants could share their hopes and dreams without the watchful eyes of their masters and overseers.⁷

Substantial Division

When examining the scope of the segregation along the color line after the conclusion of the Civil War it is possible to see a relatively detailed account of the numbers of people who left biracial churches for racially independent churches. One can ascertain this because each denomination kept a fairly detailed record of the number of people in its denomination which was delineated by race. With his research on the Reconstruction Era, Eric Foner discovered some of these documents that revealed a detailed account of the emigration of Blacks from the Methodist Church. He writes, "By the end of Reconstruction in 1877, the vast majority of Southern Blacks had withdrawn from churches dominated by Whites. On the eve of the war, 42,000 Black Methodists worshipped in biracial South Carolina churches; by the 1870s, only 600 remained."⁸ The volume of this emigration is undeniably astounding, and while this example specifically points to the Methodist congregations it serves as an accurate portrayal of what the South experienced in the major church affiliations including those of the Baptist, Presbyterian, and Episcopal denominations in the five years following the Civil War.⁹

⁶ Raboteau, *Canaan*, 47.

⁷ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 89; Raboteau, *Canaan*, 43.

⁸ *Ibid*, *Reconstruction*, 91.

⁹ Gardiner H. Shattuck Jr., "One Fold and One Chief Shepherd," In *Vale of Tears: New Essays on Religion and Reconstruction*, edited by Edward J. Blum and W. Scott Poole, (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2005), 56.

There was a contingent of African Americans that viewed this substantial division as a blessing from God, one which would usher in a better time for African American history. Also, black people achieved equality not just in civil matters but in religious matters, too. Great African American preachers spurred on and promoted the newfound independence and freedom of the black man.¹⁰

And yet, despite the widespread and substantial migration of Blacks out of white churches there were still sometimes calls for unity, or at least for church integration. Bishop Gilbert Haven, who became a bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1872, was one of the few examples of white men who advocated integration until his death in 1880. Most bishops, however, accepted the failure of integration and thus were resigned to watching how the races would practice a segregated Christianity.¹¹

The Reasons Segregation Developed

Whites and Blacks in the United states did not seek division along the color line in every area of life at the same time. Instead, the church became the first institution that Blacks were able to wrest from the complete control of the white man and it signaled the shift to being able to take control of their very lives.¹² Niebuhr highlights the social sources of denominationalism when he writes,

“The segregation of the races into distinct churches, was not, therefore, wholly a retrogressive step, involving the decline of a previous fellowship. Sometimes it was a

¹⁰ Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 45.

¹¹ H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image But...: Racism in the Southern Religion, 1780-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1972), 237.

¹² Foner, *Reconstruction*, 92.

forward step from an association without equality, through independence, toward the ultimately desirable fellowship of equals.”¹³

Niebuhr can make this statement that the church was an association without equality because of the role that African Americans played in both the North and the South. They were not full fledged members of the biracial churches that they attended. They had either to sit in the back of the church or in a raised gallery which excluded them from Holy Communion.¹⁴ It follows with the prior limits placed on African Americans, Whites also denied ordination or a place in church government to Blacks until Blacks left the churches that were dominated by Whites.¹⁵ Even before the complete segregation of the the two groups within the church, sometimes the separation extended past sitting in different sections during the church services. In some churches the pastor would conduct a white service on Sunday mornings and follow it up with the Black service on Sunday afternoon or at a different time during the course of the week.¹⁶

Now that it is established that the segregation of the races within protestant American churches was not wholly a negative thing, it logically follows that a historian should look to find the reason that Blacks and Whites sought segregation. One must understand that the perceived unity between Whites and Blacks being part of the same congregation was not one based on equality, but was instead practiced so that white ministers would teach the black slaves that they must be subservient to their masters and thus promoted White superiority and Black

¹³ Niebuhr, *Social*, 252.

¹⁴ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 88.

¹⁵ Niebuhr, *Social*, 260

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 254.

inferiority.¹⁷ Blacks and Whites did not seek complete segregation immediately, but instead, this developed over decades and with varying degrees of separation enroute to complete schism between the white and black races.¹⁸ However one thing that most Christians agreed on was, regardless of whether someone was from the North or South, whether Black or White, whether Methodist or Baptist, that separation into racially distinct churches was necessary. The reasons for this decision varied greatly, but it is possible to examine some of the reasons and attitudes that resulted in this separation.

Considering the improved lifestyle that African Americans enjoyed in the North over the South during the early 19th century including free Blacks not being snatched back into the clutches of slavery, it might come as a shock to some that segregation of the church along the color line developed a half century earlier in the North than it did in the South. This occurred when Blacks established independent Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches.¹⁹ The pioneering denomination was the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which emerged out of the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816.²⁰ The man who would become Bishop Richard Allen and other Blacks founded this church when the white parishioners forced the Blacks to sit in a newly constructed balcony. This was not the only reason for the founding of the AME. A variety of reasons led to the development of this new denomination over a span of two decades. One of the reasons, which may still be a point of disagreement today, was the

¹⁷ Niebuhr, *Social*, 252-253.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 253. Niebuhr develops this idea by hitting every degree of fellowship that Blacks and Whites shared. "The series of steps from fellowship to schism includes complete fellowship of White and Negro Christians in the local church, segregation within the local church, segregation into distinctly racial local churches with denominational fellowship, segregation into racially distinct dioceses or conferences with fellowship in the highest judicatories of the denomination, and, finally, separation of the races into distinct denominations."

¹⁹ Raboteau, *Canaan*, 24.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 23.

behaviors and modes of worship that each group found appropriate for the worship of God. Specifically, within Methodism, white Methodists were not comfortable with the way that Blacks worshipped on Sundays and viewed them as a nuisance in the church. This led to Blacks and Whites being separated into two distinct services that a white Methodist preacher led.²¹ However, this would not last forever and eventually in 1816, black leaders and laypersons organized into the African Methodist Episcopal Church. While some Methodists still desired the existence of biracial churches in the North the tide had shifted strongly in the direction of segregation, and Blacks fled to the denomination in which they could begin to take hold of their own faith by serving in church government and by an ordained minister from their own race teaching them.²²

It was not because of fonder attitudes towards Blacks that the schism along the color line took a half century longer to develop in the South, but the real reason was because in an area of the country where for the most part Blacks outnumbered the Whites, and the slaves were vital to the southern way of life, Whites could not afford for the slaves to take over any part of their lives. White legislatures set in place laws forbidding the meeting of groups of Blacks in the South to make sure that Blacks would not be able to gather together to form a slave rebellion.²³ These worries intensified when a former slave named Denmark Vesey led a rebellion in Charleston South Carolina in 1822 and a decade later when Nat Turner organized his rebellion in Virginia.²⁴ However, after the conclusion of the Civil War, the Union troops

²¹ Daniel A. Payne, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville: Publishing House of the A.M.E. Sunday-School Union, 1891), 3-7.

²² Payne, *History*, 9.

²³ Raboteau, *Canaan*, 22.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 57-58.

moved into the South to make sure that white southerners would obey the new Reconstruction laws. This allowed the freedmen to develop many of the feelings and desires that their Northern brethren had experienced before in the formation of the AME church, and a movement toward independent black churches in the South developed.

Over two million southern Blacks were church members by the end of the Reconstruction Era and there were different persuasions from which Blacks had to decide to choose.²⁵ In the South a couple hundred thousand of these two million joined the AME Zion Church and the AME church respectively, but the grand majority of the Blacks deserted there religious persuasion and became Baptists.²⁶ Foner discusses the decision that the majority of Blacks make when he asserts, "By the end of Reconstruction, black Baptists outnumbered all the other denominations combined; taken together, the Baptist churches formed the largest black organization ever created in this country."²⁷ The reason why the Baptists acquired more than a million new blacks into their denominations was because they were more democratic in nature and black preachers did not have to become subservient to a bishop who would try to wrest away the control they had over their parishioners.²⁸

One white Georgia Methodist clergyman, named Atticus G. Haygood explained why he and other white southerners believed African Americans sought to achieve racial separation. When explaining the sentiments of Haygood, H. Shelton Smith a man who was a scholar of Christianity and a professor at Duke wrote, "He held that black churchmen had been prompted

²⁵ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 209.

²⁶ Raboteau, *Canaan*, 68.

²⁷ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 92

²⁸ *Ibid.*

by a fundamental race instinct to leave the white churches, and that any repression of what divinely implanted instinct could well 'mar their evolution.'"²⁹ Other preachers held similar attitudes to Haygood. One of these men was the Methodist preacher William M. Leftwich who advocated for "equality," but in his mind the only way that "equality" could be practiced was through complete segregation of the races. He gleefully noted the failure of Northern missionaries to establish biracial churches in the South, when churches had already been moved to segregation in the North.³⁰ When explaining the beliefs of Leftwich, Smith wrote, "Leftwich did not believe that blacks and whites could ever dwell together in peace with equality of civil and political rights, and he advocated colonizing the 'inferior' race in Africa. He noted with great joy that Bishop Henry M. Turner of the African Methodist Episcopal Church also favored this solution of the racial problem."³¹ Leftwich believed in this project wholeheartedly and started to organize funds to send the Blacks back to their "home land" on steam ships, back to a continent on which none of the African Americans who were currently in America had ever set foot on nor had ever known. These efforts never resulted in widespread success because most Blacks viewed America as their home and could not imagine moving somewhere so far away to start over their lives.³²

This was a convenient way to explain the emigration of Blacks out of white churches, but it does not explain the underlying factors that really led Blacks to want to leave their churches. Some Whites held a paternalistic attitude towards Blacks because of the perceived

²⁹ Smith, *Image*, 280.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 280.

³¹ *Ibid*, 269.

³² *Ibid*, 269.

Blacks' inferiority to the Whites. Blacks' inferiority in some Whites' minds meant they had childlike tendencies. This led some pastors who possessed a paternalistic disposition to assist in the organization of these new independent Black churches and even preach at these churches until a black preacher could be ordained to lead the church.³³ A variety of reasons explain the segregation of the races among the Northern and Southern churches, but no matter what those reasons were, the result was the disappearance of biracial churches in the United States.

Reaction to Segregation

No matter what the reason for segregation within the churches was, this new trend would persist, but the reactions to this new development varied depending on race, geography, and personal conviction.

Interestingly much of the reaction centered on efforts to erect church buildings as places for Blacks to worship. It was with this difficulty that Union soldiers carried out the Northern reaction to the segregation of the church in the South. For example, The Union Army aided Blacks during the War when they helped the freed people, who made up nearly two-thirds of the church, acquire the Front Street Methodist Church in Wilmington, North Carolina. They then replaced the pastor with an African American minister.³⁴ After the war the help of acquiring new church buildings fell to of the Freedmen's Bureau and Northern missionaries such as the American Missionary Association, which brought 532 missionaries to the South.³⁵ Since segregation had emerged as the way to deal with the race issue Freedmen's Bureau

³³ Harvey, *Redeeming*, 50.

³⁴ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 90.

³⁵ Raboteau, *Canaan*, 63.

agents along with Northern missionaries confiscated and also bought buildings from the Confederate rebels, to serve as both schools and churches for the freed slaves. It was then the job of the Northern missionaries to educate and ordain black ministers to lead these newly founded congregations through their fledgling years as churches.³⁶

However, there were not enough missionaries and agents from the Freedmen's bureau to acquire all the churches for Blacks to worship in across the South, which left much of the work on the shoulders of Southern Blacks. Knowing that the creation of these new black, independent churches would mean the first step in taking over their lives gave the motivation many of the African Americans needed to save their money and purchase land on which to build a church. Shortly after the destruction of Charleston at the hands of the Union General William Tecumseh Sherman and his men, a black church on Calhoun Street became one of the first sites of construction. In the next year white northerners helped build ten more independent black churches. In rural areas churches took a little longer to be built, but Blacks solved this issue by having multiple congregations use the same building at different times throughout the week.³⁷

Some minor dissent to the growth of independent black churches emerged. For example, one popular South Carolina newspaper expressed its regret that blacks were forming religious institutions where they could worship God because they believed that without white

³⁶ Harvey, *Redeeming*, 49.

³⁷ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 90.

oversight and supervision, the result would be Blacks abandoning Christianity in order to return to the primitive African religions of their ancestors.³⁸

The remarkable growth of African American congregations proved to be a disturbing reminder of the destruction of the antebellum society that Southerners had come to know and love.³⁹ One violent reaction to the racial segregation of churches and this new time of Reconstruction was that of bigotry, and one group, the Ku Klux Klan, led the way in trying to destroy the places where Blacks were gathering to worship. Even more dangerous in the eyes of the KKK was that Blacks were using these churches as places to meet and to talk about their need for civil rights. Foner explains the plight of some churches in a part of Alabama when he states, "Institutions like the churches and schools, embodiments of the black autonomy, frequently became targets. 'Nearly every colored church and school-house' in the Tuskegee area was burned in the Fall of 1870."⁴⁰ However this reaction and abuse was not just relegated to Tuskegee or even Alabama, but instead this reaction and destruction spread all over the North and the South in order to try to scare Blacks into submission. Even more disconcerting is the realization that membership in the KKK was not just reserved for the laypersons of the congregations, but clergy members were also members of the KKK, committing atrocities against both Blacks and Republicans.⁴¹ However, this strategy did not prove to be effective. African Americans realized the importance of the churches and rebuilt them as places to speak out for the rights of African Americans to life, liberty, and happiness. In a series of essays on

³⁸ Kimberly R. Kellison, "Parameters of Promiscuity: Sexuality, Violence, and Religion in Upcountry South Carolina," In *Vale of Tears: New Essays on Religion and Reconstruction*, edited by Edward J. Blum and W. Scott Poole, (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2005), 22.

³⁹ Harvey, *Redeeming*, 46.

⁴⁰ Foner, 428.

⁴¹ Kellison, "Parameters," 25.

Reconstruction and Religion, Dr. Kimberly Kellison, a professor of Reconstruction Era history, notes, "African American Methodists complained about the 'band of lawless, disguised men, who, under the shroud of darkness, at midnight's lonely hour, violently assaulted men and women in the sanctuary of their peaceful yet perhaps humble homes, and inflicted upon them stripes, wounds, and in a number of instances death.'"⁴² This despicable effort to curb the expansion of the rights of African Americans did not lead to a widespread clash between the races. Some Blacks sought good relations with white southerners despite a history of abuses that they had suffered at the hands of their masters.⁴³

Shortly after the emergence of the Reconstruction Era, the Methodist Episcopal Church began a plan to found some black denominations for over whom they would have influence. This plan would require white Southern Methodists to turn over their leadership to black preachers who shared their same beliefs and traditions.⁴⁴ The bishops gave control of some church property that once belonged to white parishioners to the Blacks and also allowed them to ordain their own clergy. In exchange they received congenial relations from the newly formed Colored Methodist Episcopal Church.⁴⁵

Although most black Methodists left Methodism, joined the AME church, or the AME Zion Church, one interesting reaction of a significant minority of black Southern Methodists was Church to plant their own churches in the South. In Jackson, Tennessee on December 15, 1870 The Southern Methodist Episcopal Church organized a new denomination for black Southern

⁴² Ibid, 21.

⁴³ Savage, *Life*, 50.

⁴⁴ Reginald F. Hildebrand, *The Times Were Strange and Stirring: Methodist Preachers and the Crisis of Emancipation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 13.

⁴⁵ Shattuck., "One Fold," 60.

Methodism, the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church.⁴⁶ Colored Methodism was intended to be a conservative, alternative to radical northern Methodism and the African Methodist Episcopal Church.⁴⁷ Black Southern Methodists disagreed with the African Methodist Episcopal Church because of the changes that African Methodist Episcopal Church missionaries were trying to force on the Southern form of Methodism. Representatives from the African Methodist Episcopal Church insisted that the black preachers who were now leading the congregations were not seminary educated and thus should not be leading their respective churches. They also thought the services were too rowdy and should be more somber in form like those of the worship services in the North.⁴⁸

The Colored Methodists were a group of around 72,000 black traditionalists who had come to peace with white Southerners despite the feelings that a majority of their race understandably held.⁴⁹ They were happy to be free of the bonds of slavery, but they still felt largely comfortable with the majority of other southern beliefs including that of black inferiority and thus associated more closely with Southern Methodism than they did with the alternatives that the North offered.⁵⁰ Even though southern states ratified the Reconstruction Era Amendments before the formation of the new denomination of Colored Methodists, leaders within Colored Methodism believed that the efforts toward racial advancement resulting in equality by Whites and Blacks alike were misguided.⁵¹ This also meant that the Colored Methodists had feelings of ill will toward both black and white northerners. Unfortunately,

⁴⁶ Horace C. Savage, *Life and Times of Bishop Isaac Lane* (Nashville: National Publication Company, 1958), 52.

⁴⁷ Hildebrand, *The Times*, 11.

⁴⁸ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 92.

⁴⁹ Savage, *Life*, 50.

⁵⁰ Hildebrand, *The Times*, 15, 16, 21.

⁵¹ Hildebrand, *The Times*, 15.

Colored Methodist believed that other Blacks misunderstood them, which led to these traditionalists being outcasts in the eyes of a majority of Blacks whether from the North or the South.⁵²

Current State of Affairs

Unity between Blacks and Whites is possible within the church today, unfortunately few Blacks and Whites come together to make this possible. The disciples in the early church tried to achieve a similar type of unity in the first few decades of the Church though they faced much opposition. Similarly, the churches in South Africa have seen some success at integrating the two races, but Martin Luther King's sentiment nearly five decades ago is still true in America. Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week. While this disunity still exists today and has existed since the Reconstruction Era, disunity within the church is something that Christians should address and heal by focusing on the unity of Christ.

In the last few decades both clergy and lay people have wanted to make changes to the rampant denominationalism which plagued the United States in the twentieth century. Because of this, men and women have taken steps toward ecumenism. However, while these efforts have created some unity, there are few examples of unity along the color line. When black churches and white churches seek church union it usually just reveals how far the church still needs to come rather than effectively joining two groups together in the unity of Christ.⁵³

⁵² Ibid, 15.

⁵³ Niebuhr, *Social*, 259.

The segregation of churches along the color line seems to be just another example of the disunity that has occurred in the two millennia of the Church. However, although this racial disunity is disconcerting, it was the necessary course of action for Blacks to take at this time in order to achieve the equality within Protestant Christianity that they enjoy today. It was because of the efforts of black men and women to form independent black churches that the black community achieved unity.⁵⁴ Through the separated churches, Blacks sought ordainment as ministers and took up positions within church government. The Reconstruction Era brought on an exciting new religious wave for African Americans that has changed the landscape of American Christianity in a positive way.

While, it was necessary to take this step of separation a century and a half ago, attitudes have changed and we have come to a time in America when churches no longer need to be separated along the color line. Now Whites and Blacks can attend the same church without being confined to different seating sections, now Whites and Blacks can join one another around the communion table because in Christ there is no Jew nor Greek Black nor White, but Christ is all and in all people.

⁵⁴ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 405.

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