

**THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SOUTH:  
SOUTHERN ACTIVITY ABOVE THE  
MASON-DIXON LINE**

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While the Methodist Episcopal Church suffered several splits during its long history, from 1784 to 1939, the most devastating one was the 1844 split which formed the MES [Methodist Episcopal Church, South]. The precipitating issue was slavery. Bishop Andrew of Georgia owned slaves through inheritance, and his wife was also a slaveholder. Under the laws of Georgia, neither he nor his wife could free their slaves. When the General Conference of 1844, meeting in New York City, requested him to desist from the exercise of his office so long as he remained a slaveholder, the southern delegates were incensed and formulated a provisional plan of separation. In question was the constitutional power of the General Conference, which, in the eyes of the southerners, had virtually deposed a bishop against whom no charges had been brought, who had violated no law of the church, and who had been given no trial. There were no questions of doctrine or polity.

Perhaps because of the controversy that led to its founding, the denomination made definite efforts to present a fair and open image. The preface to the 1894 Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, for example, begins with this rather folksy preface.

*To the members of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South:*

*We esteem it our duty and privilege most earnestly to recommend to you, as members of our Church, our Form of Discipline, which has been founded on the experience of a long series of years.*

*We wish to see this little publication in the house of every Methodist; and the more so, as it contains the Articles of Religion maintained more or less, in part or in whole, by every reformed Church in the world.*

*Far from wishing you to be ignorant of any of our doctrines, or any part of our discipline, we desire you to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the whole. You ought, next to the word of God, to procure the articles and canons of the Church to which you belong.*

We remain your very affectionate brethren and pastors, who labor day and night, both in public and in private, for your good.

Besides the usual articles of religion, rituals and general rules, the 1894 volume also contains an interesting section titled "Decisions Rendered by the College of Bishops." It is here that one discovers what practical concerns and standards were in effect in the nineteenth century MES. The decisions are given in chronological order, and the first one involves dancing.

*A presiding elder decided in the case of a local preacher complained of for having the art and science of modern dancing taught, and the case came under the rule of the Discipline forbidding "improper tempers, words, or actions." This decision, on appeal, was sustained by the bishop, on the ground "that it is contrary to the spirit of the Discipline and of the New Testament to teach the art and science of modern dancing anywhere, or to practice promiscuous dancing anywhere," and all the bishops concurred. (1858)*

An item of concern immediately following the Civil War was the testimony of former slaves and other people of color.

*Ought the testimony of colored persons to be received in our Church trials? The answer made and approved is that, in view of the altered civil condition of the colored people within the recently slaveholding States, and in view of the action of the late General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in respect to their ecclesiastical status, the testimony of said colored people ought not to be excluded from Church trials, in cases where it is obviously applicable, said testimony being weighed according to its merits. (1867)*

The status of such testimony, and the ecclesiastical status of such persons in general, prior to the Civil War is not given.

Most of the decisions tended to involve matters of ecclesiastical procedure. One of the more interesting such cases involved the bringing of a complaint against a pastor.

*In a Quarterly Conference, under the question, "Are there any complaints?" the pastor was complained of for neglect of certain duties, and a record was made of it. The case coming before the Annual Conference,*

the President decided: "That, while it is the duty of a presiding elder to learn all he can concerning the usefulness and acceptability of a pastor, and from no source is he more likely to get such reliable information as from official members, nevertheless the Quarterly Conference is not charged with the duty of inquiring into the life and official administration of a member of an Annual Conference. Complaints may not be entered against him by that body, nor entered on its journal. He is responsible to another ecclesiastical body which has original jurisdiction, and may censure, suspend or expel him."

Approved. (1875)

While it is not the purpose of this article to review the decisions rendered by the College of Bishops, a final example further illustrates the perspectives and procedures of the MES denomination. This case involves the expulsion by a local church of one of its members for the sale of alcoholic beverages.

In a case of arraignment and trial, the accused admitted that he was engaged in the sale of intoxicating liquors by the quantity and by the drink, and with reasonable knowledge that it was bought to be used as a beverage, but his defense was that there was no law violated. He appealed from the decision of the Church committee, by which he was expelled, to the Quarterly Conference. The action and decision of the court below were sustained in the Quarterly Conference.

The expelled person desired that the case might come before the bishop presiding at the Annual Conference; and to give his wish effect, the Quarterly Conference, although deeming the verdict and judgment just, under construction of the law rendered, appealed from the decision of the presiding elder to the bishop presiding at the ensuing Annual Conference, upon the question of law: "Does the sale of intoxicating liquors, by the large or small quantity, to be used as a beverage, constitute an actionable offense under Methodist law, as found in the Article of the General Rules requiring the avoidance of evil of every kind, and the doing of no harm -- these General Rules themselves being based upon the written word of God?" The

plea of the absence of specific law was relied on by the defendant in the case referred to. The ruling of the preacher in charge was that the case was actionable under the General Rule; and this ruling was sustained by the presiding elder on the appeal.

Decided, That both were correct in the ruling. (1874)

No comments on the 1894 Discipline would be complete without reference to the final section, *On Worldly Amusements*. It appears that a Committee of Fifteen was appointed to prepare an address on the spiritual state of the church. When the address was delivered at the 1890 General Conference, that body ordered it to appear in the Appendix to the Discipline along with the following:

*Resolved, That inasmuch as the deliverances of our Bishops, as contained in their quadrennial addresses to the General Conference from time to time, and as quoted at length by the Special Committee of Fifteen, have declared dancing, theater-going, card-playing, and the like worldly indulgences to be contrary to the spirit of Christianity, and violative of the General Rules and moral discipline of our Church, and also of the vows of our Church-members; we, therefore, heartily endorse the aforesaid deliverances as containing the just and correct interpretation of the law in the premises, and as such this General Conference accepts the same as having equal force and authority as if contained in the body of the Discipline.*

Readers interested in the address itself, which goes beyond the purposes of this brief article, are referred to appropriate copies of the MES Discipline. Suffice it to say here that the General Conference of 1894 continued in the same spirit by adopting the following resolution.

*Resolved, That the Address on Worldliness contained in the Appendix of the Discipline of 1890 be continued in the Appendix of the Discipline of 1894.*

In one sense, the MES denomination continues to this day in the form of the Southern Methodist Church. Formed in 1939 by MES congregations not wishing to unite with the northern Methodist Episcopal Church on the grounds of "alarming infidelity and apostasy found therein," the denomination was "brought into existence to perpetuate the faith of John Wesley." Although they

follow the usual Methodist pattern of annual and general conferences, they have no bishops; a president, usually a clergyman, is elected every four years. Included in their teaching is the belief that "holy writ teaches the separation of peoples at least to the extent of three basic races, namely Caucasian, Mongoloid, and Negroid." The information and quotations above are from Frank S. Mead's Handbook of Denominations (fifth edition, 1970).

Finally, know that MES activity was not limited to the South. Although the split bisected the Methodist Episcopal Church, there was no clear geographic line of division and each denomination, for example, maintained a Baltimore Conference. Many small border-state towns (e.g., Shepherdstown, WV) supported both ME and MES churches right up to the 1939 re-merger and still maintain two such United Methodist churches today. Within the boundaries of the present Central Pennsylvania Conference, there were three known MES congregations, all in southern Bedford County: Bean's Cove, Oakdale and Rainsburg.

The congregations at Bean's Cove and Oakdale were a part of the old MES circuit housed at Flintstone, MD. In 1939 the Flintstone circuit became part of the Baltimore Conference of the Methodist Church, and the 1962 conference realignments along state lines placed Bean's Cove and Oakdale in the Central Pennsylvania Conference. That was probably a mistake, as both churches were housed in a valley that "came up" from Maryland and were almost inaccessible from Pennsylvania. The Bean's Cove church was discontinued before the 1968 merger; the building stands empty, but in good repair, in the center of the village by the cemetery. The Oakdale church was discontinued in 1970; in 1975, the building was sold to the Oakdale Community Church.

The history of Rainsburg's MES congregation is not quite so clear. The existing Rainsburg United Methodist Church traces its origins to 1852, built its present structure in 1878, and apparently was always ME (i.e., not MES). References to an MES congregation, however, begin sometime prior to the Civil War. It is known that the stone building next to the Rainsburg UM Church was owned by the MES 1875-1883. It appears that the members of two groups worked together and may have even worshiped as one congregation in the stone building for a few years beginning in 1875. Then there was a re-splitting; the ME congregation (called the "split group" in one old reference) built its present brick building in 1878, and the MES congregation built a frame building at the other end of town in 1877. For some reason the ME group predominated, and by 1888 the MES congregation ceased to exist and its building became the Rainsburg Patriot's Hall.