

THE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH.  
BY BISHOP BENJ. TUCKER TANNER, D. D.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church is simply a Methodist Episcopal Church, organized largely of "Africans" by "Africans" and for "Africans." We say largely, for the reason that men of other continents or races were in it at the organization, notably Jupiter Gibson, and to a greater or lesser extent have continued in it until to-day. Possibly one-half of one per cent of its present membership are of pure European extraction to say nothing of the host who by reason of mixture cannot be so written.

As to the term African it might as well be said it was the term applied in the early days of the nation, to all Negroes or those who came from Africa; as was the term English applied to all whites, or those rather who came from England.

The cause of the organization of these into a separate and independent ecclesiastical body was that race pride which universally dominates the unsanctified heart—the heart that refuses to believe and therefore essays not to practice the command:

"But now put ye also away all these; anger, wrath, malice, railing, shameful speaking out of your mouth; lie not one to another: seeing that ye have put off the old man with his doings, and have put on the new man, which is being renewed unto knowledge after the image of him that created him; where there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bond man, freeman; but Christ is all and in all." (Col. iii, 8-11.)

The occasion of the organization was—well, let the leaders of the movement tell, as they did in an historical statement they made at the time:

"In November, 1787," they say, "the Colored people belonging to the Methodist Society in Philadelphia, convened together, in order to take into consideration the evils under which they labored, arising from the unkind treatment of their white brethren who considered them a nuisance in the house of worship, and even pulled them off their knees while in the act of prayer, and ordered them to the back seats. From these and other acts of unchristian conduct, we considered it our duty to devise a plan in order to build a house of our own, to worship God under our own vine and fig-tree; in this undertaking we met with great opposition from an elder of the Methodist Church (J. M'C.), who threatened that if we did not give up the building, erase our names from the subscription paper, and make acknowledgment for having attempted such a thing, that in three months we should all be publicly expelled from the Methodist Society.

"Many of the colored people, in other places, were in a situation nearly like those of Philadelphia and Baltimore, which induced us, last April, to call a general meeting, by way of conference. Delegates from Baltimore and other places met those of Philadelphia, and taking into consideration their grievances, and in order to secure their privileges, promote union and harmony among themselves, it was resolved: 'That the people of Philadelphia, Baltimore, etc., etc., should become one body under the name of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.'"

"Signed } RICHARD ALLEN,  
          } DANIEL COKER,  
          } JAMES CHAMPION."

Of the abuses to which they were subjected the quaint Lorenzo Dow says:

"The colored people were considered as being in the way; they were resolved to have them placed around the walls, corners, etc., which to execute, . . . at prayer time, did attempt to pull Absalom Jones from his knees, which procedure gave rise to the building of an African meeting-house. This raised a dust—the colored people were commanded to desist, and make an acknowledgment within a limited period, or some one would know the reason why! Upon this they sent in their resignation, and so went on with their building." (Dow on "Church Government," page 561.)

As we have said, the three men mentioned above were the leaders. Besides these, however, the convention which met on the ninth day of April, 1816, and continued in session less than a week, was composed of the following: Jacob Tapsico, Clayton Durham, Thomas Webster, of Philadelphia, Penn.; Richard Williams, Henry Harden, Stephen Hill, Edward Williamson, Nicholas Gaillard, of Baltimore, Md.; Peter Spencer, of Wilmington, Del.; Jacob Marsh, Edward Jackson, and William Andrew, of Attleboro, Penn.; and Peter Cuff, of Salem, N. J.

It is clearly apparent, both by the words and the actions of these men, that they were strong, vigorous, liberty-loving, liberty-daring. More than a quarter of a century ago, having occasion to write upon this very phase of the subject ("Apology for African Methodism"), in answer to the query: Who taught them the lessons of religious freedom "and nerved them to accept its responsibilities?" we made reply, and we see no occasion either largely to amend or retract: "(a) They learned it from God's Word—from Paul's message to the magistrates of Philippi; from the Hellenists in the master of their widows; (b) they learned it from the example set by the very people who now strove to fasten upon them a hated authority. "Lastly, we said then and we say now (c)" The very genius of Columbia, the genius that speaks only of freedom, told them to stand up for their rights." When the Convention adjourned, the nation had one more independent ecclesiastical organization, with Richard Allen for its head or Bishop.

The old record of their doings, says:

"On the 11th of April, 1816, Richard Allen was solemnly set apart for the Episcopal office, by prayers and the imposition of the hands of five regularly ordained ministers. At which time, the General Convention, held in Philadelphia, did unanimously receive the said Richard Allen as their Bishop, being fully satisfied of the validity of his Episcopal Ordination."

In his "Semi-Centenary," Bishop Payne, referring to the ordination of Allen, says:

"He was consecrated Bishop on the 11th, by Rev. Absalom Jones, a Priest of the Protestant Episcopal Church and four other regularly ordained Ministers."

Would we estimate the character of this old hero, esteemed thus by the men of a whole people, regardless of their various religious proclivities—would we estimate him, we say, he himself has unwittingly given us the gauge:

"I was confident," he says, "that there was no religious sect or denomination that would suit the capacity of the colored people as well as the Methodist; for the plain and simple Gospel suits best for any people, for the unlearned can understand, and the learned are sure to understand."

And again he says:

"In 1793, a committee was appointed from the African Church (Protestant Episcopal) to solicit me to be their number. . . . I told them I could not accept their offer, as I was a Methodist."

As it relates to doctrine and discipline, the new organization did precisely what those of the Methodist Episcopal Church had done when they organized.

"As a separate organization," says Dr. David Sherman, "the new Church required a code of laws for its regulation. The Large Minutes, which had hitherto served the purpose of a Discipline, required considerable modifications to adapt them to the exigencies of the new world and nation. Hence the members of the Christmas Conference, in constructing a body of statutes for the infant Church, omitted a large part of the Large Minutes, and to the remaining part added such new rules as the condition of the work required."

It was precisely this that the "Africans" did. They appropriated, with slight changes, the Discipline of the Church they had been forced to leave. These sixteen "in their own eyes knew not enough to venture in strange ways; they preferred to walk the beaten path."

Let us take an inventory of this infant Church: The Convention numbered 16; these represented an acquired membership of 5,000, more or less, and a possible membership of less than 100,000, more or less; the entire population of colored people, according to the Census of 1810, being 78,181, supplemented by the free colored population of such border cities as Wilmington, Baltimore and Washington City in the East, and Louisville and St. Louis in the West—a round hundred thousand souls, say, and these as poor and as illiterate as ever the first preachers of the Gospel addressed, who, as described by Celsus, were "uncultivated, mean, superstitious people—mechanics, slaves, women and children."

With this force and this field of action what has been accomplished? Let statistics answer. In 1826 we had circuits 10, stations 2, members 7,937, pastors or itinerants 17.

In 1836 we had: Itinerants 27, stations 7, circuits 19, churches 86; sum total of salaries, \$1,126.29; sum total raised for all purposes \$1,485.88.

In 1846 we had: Six conferences, 98 churches, 16,190 members, 16 stations, 67 itinerants; salaries \$6,267.43; educational societies 3, missionary societies 3.

In 1866-'67 we had: Itinerants 343, members 71,084, churches 518, Sunday-schools 449; value of church property \$1,381,501; pastor's support \$117,019.04.

In 1876 we had: Bishops 6, itinerants 1,418, local preachers 3,168, exhorters 2,546, members 214,806, pro-

bationers 83,525, churches 1,833; valued at \$3,150,911; parsonages 218, valued at \$134,800; Sunday-schools 2,309, Sunday-school officers 8,085, pupils 100,453, collections in 1875 \$447,625.18.

In 1888-'89 we had: Number of bishops 11, general officers 7, presiding elders 203, elders 1,693, deacons 699, preachers 597, local deacons 358, local elders 189, superannuated preachers 129, agent publishing department 2, assistant editor 1, agent missionary society 2, professors of colleges 75, local preachers 6,209, exhorters 3,443, stewards 20,827, stewardesses 20,256, class-leaders 19,404, probationers 56,680, full members 370,796; grand total 1888-'89, 501,592; total collected for the year \$814,647.79.

Are we asked, what is our aim? Simply to help convert the world to Christ—the world, and not simply Africans, real or imagined. This we have done in the past; this we are doing now. Bordering on thirty years ago we wrote:

“African M. E. Church, what is the intended force of the title African? Is it doctrinal, or racial? Be not surprised when we assert it to be primarily doctrinal, and only racial secondarily. Allen in his day looked around upon the many organized Churches and to a unit they were defective not in expressed forms of doctrine, but in the systematic ostracism of a whole race—practical defection. They professed to believe the doctrine taught by Paul that God made of one blood all nations of men; but the fact was they gave it practical denial. To vindicate that doctrine was a thought uppermost in the brain of Allen—the humanity of the Negro was the goal to which he aspired. How could this truth best be taught? was the question with him. How best be taught? Why, in the very way others denied it. They denied it practically. He must assert it practically. He must organize a Church, having for its vitalizing power the truth that God made all men, especially him over whom the contention was held; him on whom the ban rested—a Church, wherein the claims to humanity of this despised class, would be practically recognized. The title, ‘African,’ then was and is but the finger-board, the index to this sublime truth; and means only that men of African descent are to be found there, and found as men, not as slaves; as equals, not inferiors. The doctrine of the Negro's humanity is its primary signification.

“It does not mean, neither does it say, that none others are admitted or to be found there; but it does say, and does mean, that whoever else you may find, you will be sure to find that notable individual. But why this prominence? Save for the simple reason, that other Churches would not receive him as a man, this one would, and God having given it a tongue to speak, it said so.”

To all this we now say: Amen. If any doubt the work we are doing on the broad lines of humanity, let him visit one of our churches, and he will see a sight well worth looking upon; and a hundred years hence, the goodliest to be anywhere seen in Christendom, to wit, a congregation that for variety of colors equals any garden in the world. Already we have them from alabaster to ebony, and all that is needed to have a picture of incomparable beauty, is that that high culture gives. In no sense are we a race Church. That is, a race Church whose people in color of skin, general contour of face and texture of hair indicate oneness; especially is that a race that refuses pastors from any other.

Not so ours, unless indeed men are to be ranked of one race, who differ as the poles in all these respects. If there be any Church in the land that can successfully disclaim the charge of being a race Church it is the African Methodist Episcopal. Our aim, then, is simply to help convert the world to Christ; following, of course, the Scripture method of operation—Jerusalem, Samaria, the world.

PHILADELPHIA, PENN.