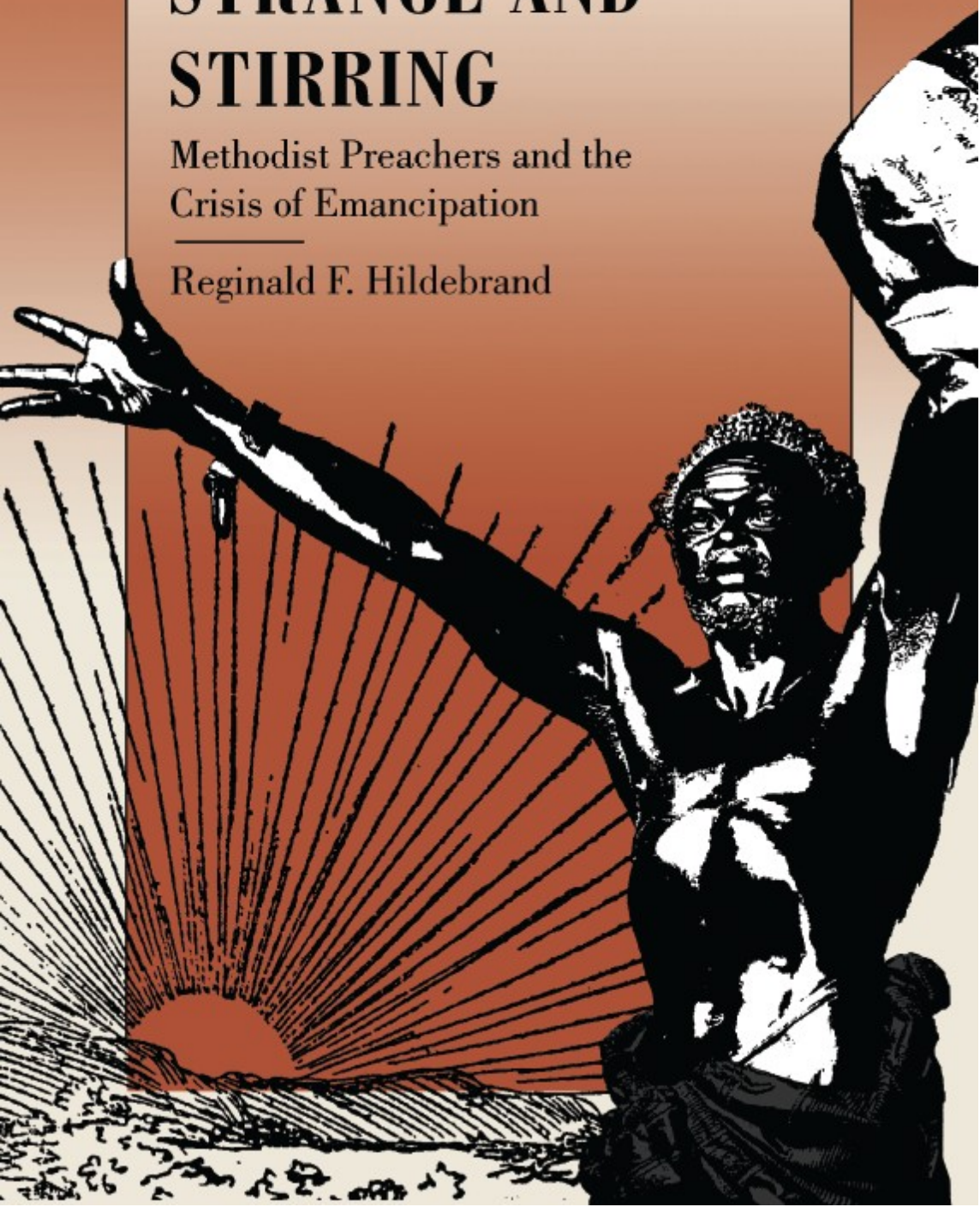


THE TIMES WERE STRANGE AND STIRRING

Methodist Preachers and the
Crisis of Emancipation

Reginald F. Hildebrand



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appear on the last printed page of this book.

This book is dedicated with respect, gratitude, and love, to those of my forebears who were, and are, ministers of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. They all were born in South Carolina. The most senior was a slave there. All of them were products of, and contributors to, the tradition that began with the events described in the following pages.

The Reverend Couthman F. Brogdon, great-grandfather
The Reverend Richard E. Brogdon, granduncle
The Reverend Arnette C. Brogdon, granduncle
The Reverend Benjamin F. Hildebrand, grandfather
The Reverend Christopher C. Burgess, uncle
Bishop Richard Allen Hildebrand, uncle
The Reverend Walter L. Hildebrand, uncle
and most especially this book is dedicated to my father
The Reverend Henry A. Hildebrand

Foolish talk, all of this, you say, of course; and that is because no American now believes in his religion. Its facts are mere symbolism; its revelation vague generalities; its ethics a matter of carefully balanced gain. But to most of the four million black folk emancipated by civil war, God was real. They knew Him. They had met Him personally in many a wild orgy of religious frenzy, or in the black stillness of the night. His plan for them was clear; they were to suffer and be degraded, and then afterwards by Divine edict, raised to manhood and power; and so on January 1, 1863, He made them free.

The magnificent trumpet tones of Hebrew Scripture, transmuted and oddly changed, became a strange new gospel. All that was Beauty, all that was Love, all that was Truth, stood on top of these mad mornings and sang with the stars. A great human sob shrieked in the wind, and tossed its tears upon the sea,—free, free, free.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*

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As is the case with many first works, this book began as a dissertation. I decided to enter the graduate program at Princeton, primarily to work with James M. McPherson, who actually did become my thesis advisor. At the time, I did not fully realize how good and how important that decision was, but subsequently, I have often congratulated myself for my keen insight. I trust that, in time, some measure of Professor McPherson's thoughtful scholarship, good writing, and integrity will be reflected in my own work and career. I made the transition from thesis student to author under the knowledgeable, supportive supervision of Lawrence J. Malley, editor par excellence and former director of Duke University Press. While at Duke, Larry strove to create an

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INTRODUCTION

This is a book about emancipation and about the ways in which some Methodist preachers tried to shape the world that began when slavery ended. For most antebellum blacks, freedom had existed only in hopes and prayers and in a dimly remembered past in another land. But, in due course, the earth moved, Pharaoh yielded, and there came the supreme moment. They did not all hear about it at the same time, and they did not all experience it in the same way, but for each slave there was the moment of emancipation, the discrete point in life's journey when slavery ended and freedom began. There is very little likelihood that we could ever grasp how it felt when "the big freedom" came.

W. E. B. Du Bois tried to enter that moment in *The Souls of Black Folk* when he wrote:

Few men ever worshipped freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries. To him, so far as he thought and dreamed, slavery was indeed the sum of all villainies, the cause of all sorrow, the root of all prejudice; Emancipation was the key to a promised land of sweeter beauty than ever stretched before the eyes of wearied Israelites. In song and exhortation swelled one refrain—Liberty; in his tears and curses the God he implored had Freedom in his right hand. At last it came, . . . suddenly, fearfully, like a dream. With one wild carnival of blood and passion came the message in his own plaintive cadences:
Shout, O Children!
Shout, you're free
For God has bought your liberty.¹

In the 1930s, an ex-slave from Mississippi named Hamp Santee looked back over his life and recalled the day of Jubilee. The interviewer who heard Mr. Santee's remembrances chose to record the old man's words in the following manner:

At surrender I kin remember de niggers wuz all so happy. Dey jes rung bells, blowed horns and shouted like deys crazy. Den dey all bought a brand new rope, and cut hit up into little pieces and dey gives every nigger a piece of hit to keep and say, dat when ever dey look at de rope dey remembers dat dey is free from bondage.²

The transcriber's pirouette between anthropological accuracy and ethnocentric condescension cannot obscure the poignant brilliance of Santee's story, or the clarity with which it reveals the power of one community's first encounter with freedom.

Ira Berlin's magisterial, multivolume documentary history of emancipation, as well as recent works by William Cohen, Seymour Drescher and Frank McGlynn, Russell Duncan, Robert F. Engs, Barbara Jeanne Fields, Eric Foner, Leon Litwack, Edward Magdol, Jay R. Mandle, Clarence L. Mohr, and others, have signaled the fact that scholars have begun to focus on emancipation as a period and a process in and of itself, and no longer regard it merely as the event that preceded Reconstruction.³ To underscore that shift in historiographical emphasis, it is useful to make a distinction between emancipationists and Reconstructionists: *emancipationists* were primarily concerned with securing and expanding the fruits of freedom; *Reconstructionists* were primarily concerned with reuniting the nation on an enduring basis. Sometimes the efforts and the objectives of emancipationists and Reconstructionists coincided; sometimes they ran on separate tracks. At other times, they were in direct conflict with each other. Emancipationists were black and white, northern and southern. This work is primarily a study of the actions and aspirations of emancipationists.

The emancipation of black southerners was both conventional and radical. It was conventional in the sense that, in their quest for freedom, the freedpeople did not try to alter the commonly held understandings of what that term meant. They did not challenge the fundamental political, social, or economic ideals of the American republic. Southern blacks wanted to direct their own lives: they wanted to have secure families, to be educated, to own property, to be protected by the law, and to participate in the political process. In short, their aspirations were very traditional. On the other hand, emancipation was radical in the sense that it challenged the omnipresent, multifaceted ideology of white

supremacy which posited that blacks should be subordinate to whites in all areas of life. Some emancipationists tried to finesse that ideology by allowing freedom to be mediated through white paternalism. Others insisted on confronting the ideology head-on through a kind of black nationalism. Still others believed that the ideology of white supremacy could be transcended, and they tried to construct a new social order in which color would play no significant part.

Emancipationists were an eclectic set of true believers. Among the strategies and goals that they pursued were the following: accommodationism, moral reform, black nationalism, civil rights legislation, integration, migration, emigration, Pan-Africanism, economic self-help, federal intervention, electoral politics, and uplift through education. Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. all could have found their precursors among the emancipationists. In fact, all of those leaders spent all of their careers trying to achieve the goals that had seemed so close at hand when freedom was still new. The apparent similarities with ideas and leaders from subsequent time periods are interesting, but the aim of this study is to understand the extraordinarily complex phenomenon of emancipation in its own context and on its own terms. As I will attempt to show, the period of emancipation was unique.

This essay uses religious denominations as vehicles for exploring some of the dimensions of emancipation and as the means for developing a new typology of some of the ways in which emancipation was approached. To some degree, I am seeking some new information from institutions that have already received a great deal of scholarly attention, of a sort. Traditionally, monographs on emancipation and Reconstruction have both acknowledged and neglected the significance of the black church. Such studies almost always include a chapter on the church, explaining that blacks left white religious organizations to form churches of their own, which then became centers of social organization and served as staging grounds for political activities in which clergymen played prominent leadership roles. Generally, those monographs also point out that black worship was emotional. After making those almost obligatory and predictable general observations about the significance of the church, most studies quickly move on to explore other topics in much greater depth, and, I believe, with far greater seriousness.⁴

Two of the most thoughtful, comprehensive, and important recent books on this period help substantiate the foregoing assessment of the literature on emancipation. In his impressive and thoughtful study called *Reconstruction*, Eric Foner focuses on "the centrality of the black experience" during that period.

He points out that “religious convictions profoundly affected the way blacks understood the momentous events around them.” Yet, Foner devotes only eight of the over six-hundred pages of his text to an examination of the role played by the black church.⁵ Few works have even come close to the thoroughness of Leon Litwack’s landmark study of the aftermath of slavery, *Been in the Storm So Long*. Yet, Litwack devotes only one half of one chapter of his book to the black church.⁶ The few works that do focus on the role of the freedpeople’s religious institutions have made important contributions to our understanding of emancipation, but they have their own shortcomings. For example, the best monographs on the history of Methodist denominations during emancipation and Reconstruction have tended to focus on intense denominational rivalries and cutthroat competition for new members.⁷ Those institutional rivalries were indeed important parts of the drama of the postwar years, but the history of the black church during that period cannot be properly understood outside the context of the impassioned search to find the meanings of freedom. The missionaries to the freedpeople were engaged in much more than competition for members. They were key players in a battle of ideas. They had deep convictions about how the future of the freedpeople should unfold, and more than a few of them paid for their convictions with their lives. To date, the best and most ambitious general study of the black church during the period of emancipation and Reconstruction is William E. Montgomery’s, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, which was published in 1993.⁸

FREEDOM. The word was surely sweet, but what did it mean? Emancipation had merely determined that blacks would no longer be slaves. It said nothing about what they would become. Before the war, the Supreme Court had ruled that free blacks were not entitled to the same legal rights as whites, and the Black Codes enacted right after the war seemed to confirm that view. Was there any reason to assume that freedom would mean more for blacks after emancipation than it had meant for the mostly marginalized antebellum free blacks? How, from the rubble of slavery, could blacks fashion an instructive image of what it could mean to be free and black?

At the moment of emancipation, the freedpeople began a long, frustrating, and sometimes painful process of finding answers to those questions. Many other players in the drama of emancipation tried to promulgate answers of their own. Officers of the Union army, the Freedmen’s Bureau, President Andrew Johnson, the moderate Republicans, the radical Republicans, the courts, southern state governments, white landowners, and the Ku Klux Klan were among the forces who had strong ideas about how freedom should be defined and about where the freedpeople should fit within the new national order.

At the outset, former slaves with neither the ballot nor the bullet, forty acres nor a mule, were put in the position of having to wrest freedom from the grip of all those powerful, conflicting forces. For the freedpeople, the passage from slavery to freedom was treacherous and unpredictable. In making that passage they had to develop their own points of reference; they had to develop a vision of who they were and of what they could become; they had to find ways to give institutionalized expression to their concepts of freedom. The church was one of the few areas in which blacks were relatively free to define an aspect of freedom in ways that made sense to them. This essay will examine some of the ways in which Methodism attempted to play a role in that process.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.) the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (A.M.E. Zion), the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (C.M.E.), the Methodist Episcopal Church (M.E.), and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (M.E. South) each offered southern blacks working models of what freedom could mean. Each denomination promoted a distinctive set of social values, and each pursued its own approach to racial issues. E. Franklin Frazier argued that Christianity made it possible for slaves to make sense of the world they entered after the trauma of the middle passage displaced them from the social and cultural moorings that had defined life in Africa. Albert J. Raboteau has shown the key role that religion played in helping slaves sustain themselves as they passed through the vicissitudes of existence in chattel slavery.⁹ Similarly, it is the thesis of this study that religious denominations played an important role in helping the freedpeople make sense of the world they entered after the happy trauma of emancipation.

I will attempt to define some of the ways in which freedom was perceived and pursued at a unique moment in American, African-American, and Methodist history. During this period, the nation's political, legal, and economic institutions were focused on two tasks: one was determining on what bases the states would once again be united; the other was defining what freedom would mean for nearly four million black southerners. It should not be surprising that religious institutions also concerned themselves with the latter task; it was the paramount social issue of the immediate postwar era. When former slaves made a religious affiliation, they were not just choosing a church and a preacher; they were also engaged in the process of redefining themselves as free people. Selecting a religious affiliation was just as significant as selecting a surname or deciding where to live and work.¹⁰ To a large degree, the freedpeople bequeathed their religious identities to their descendants, just as surely as they bequeathed their names.

This study explores the ideas and the ideals of missionaries of the several

branches of the Methodist family. There was a time when Methodists were one, but they fell apart, largely because of different ideas about race. Both African Methodist denominations declared their independence from the Methodist Episcopal Church in the early 1800s because blacks had been denied equality and authority. The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, broke away from the national denomination in 1844 because southerners could no longer tolerate the antislavery positions of their northern coreligionists. From 1844 until the Civil War, the slave states and the slave quarters were the exclusive dominions of the M.E. Church, South.

Beginning in 1863, the missionaries of every branch of Methodism had free access to the souls of nearly four million black southerners. Methodists of every stripe pursued those souls with zeal and fervor. No important theological issues separated one branch of Methodism from another, nor did the race of the missionary personnel distinguish one denomination from another because all of the denominations recruited and made use of southern black preachers. The battle between Methodisms was waged largely over different interpretations of the meaning of freedom. This essay explains what those differences were and why the missionaries adhered to them with such fidelity. This work is not intended to be a chronicle of the spread of Methodism among southern blacks; rather, it is an exploration of how Methodist missionaries responded to the crisis of emancipation.

This work has a single theme. It should not be read as if it were three traditional denominational histories under one cover. As has been noted earlier, the major objective of this study is to interpret the emancipatory social gospels of Methodist preachers in order to develop a typology of three of the ways in which freedom was approached and understood. Consequently, the book is divided into three distinct sections, each of which could be read as a separate essay. Each was written and structured to reflect a different set of dynamics. Part 1 deals with the efforts of some black and white southerners to establish a new paternalism that could define the parameters of race relations after slavery no longer served that purpose. Part 2 deals with the actions and attitudes of northern black missionaries from African Methodist denominations who attempted to promote a kind of evangelical black nationalism. Those northern blacks advocated what I have referred to here as the Gospel of Freedom. Part 3 deals with the struggles of integrationist missionaries of the Methodist Episcopal Church who believed that dismantling the racial caste system was the logical and necessary successor to the fight against slavery. By no means, however, is the typology that will be developed in the following pages intended to

imply that there were only three ways of understanding the elusive and complex concept of freedom, even among Methodist missionaries.

Because of the somewhat unorthodox organization of this book, perhaps I should offer a few additional words of explanation, or apology, which I hope will serve as a kind of “readers’ guide.” Each of the three sections offers a different interpretation of the significance of the same time period and a different perspective on the meaning of similar events. Because all of the sections deal with the same chronological period, they do overlap, but I have made an effort to keep actual repetition to a minimum. One major figure, named James Lynch, appears in more than one part of this study because he moved from one denomination to another. I have tried to explain the motivations for his switch as fully as possible in order to highlight the significance of the distinction between the ways in which the different denominations approached the challenge of freedom. This study invites the reader to enter three distinct mind-sets and three conflicting denominational cultures. Although they could stand apart, the significance of each of the three sections is derived, in part, from contrasting it with the other two. It is hoped that the reader will find what could be whimsically referred to as a “triographic” approach (as opposed to monographic) to be an interesting and useful way of investigating one complex historical theme.

The period of emancipation began when the first black refugee fled to Union lines and was declared to be “contraband of war.” For all intents and purposes, affirmative federal involvement in the process of emancipation ended about a decade and a half later when the “Compromise of 1877” resulted in the withdrawal of military support from what remained of a remarkable, though seriously flawed, experiment in biracial democracy.¹¹ To paraphrase a literary cliché, emancipation/Reconstruction was the most promising of times and the most disappointing of times. During no other period in American history were idealism and depravity so exaggerated, so widespread, and so intermingled. The greatest beneficiaries of the period were the four million black southerners who had been chattel property; the greatest victims of the period were those same black southerners. For a wonderful and cruel moment, they were teased with the prospect of becoming citizens of the United States. Ultimately, their government found that maintaining their freedom was too difficult and too costly. Fortunately, the task of defining freedom was not left entirely in the hands of politicians. As might be expected, preachers had a great deal to say on the subject, and the freedpeople, who had little control over the vagaries

of government policies, could decide where they would go to church and who would be their preachers. As has already been indicated, those decisions were fraught with significance.

This study focuses on Methodist ministers who preached to the freedpeople and on the factors that influenced the way those preachers saw the world. The preacher was the leader whose job it was to preside over life's rites of passage and to plumb their meaning. Baptisms, marriages, conversions, deaths, funerals—the preacher gave those moments context and explained their significance to the community. The preacher issued admonitions about values and about the responsibilities that members of the community had to God, to humanity in general, and especially to their downtrodden race. The preacher offered lyrical meditations on the powerful imponderables that could strike without warning or reason, reminding the prideful of their vulnerability and of the fragility of life—imponderables such as illness, violent storms, and white people. The words of the preacher provided consolation, inspiration, and meaning.¹² No truly momentous occurrence could pass without a few words from the community's spiritual leader, and emancipation was the most momentous occurrence that black folk had ever experienced.

Politics and political parties brought forth a wholly new category of leadership and a largely new cadre of leaders, but as important as politicians were, they could not displace preachers as the primary dispensers of meaning. The preachers served as precinct captains and ward heelers for the process of emancipation. They were authentic leaders whose survival and success depended on the effectiveness of their relationships with their parishioners. The state legislature, the county courthouse, and the local credit agency/general store were all locations that came to have tremendous impact on the lives of the freedpeople, but southern black churches—independent of white oversight—were also products of this era. The churches became bulwarks for communities in the midst of transition and reformation, and it was to the church that many people came for healing and hope and to seek the wisdom and strength they needed to live with life's powerful imponderables. On a day-to-day basis, even nonchurchgoers probably knew a lot more about the ideas and actions of local ministers than they did about the machinations of legislators at the state capital, although the emphases of many of the studies of this period might suggest just the opposite. It should be kept in mind that preachers and missionaries began to exert their influence even before the war was over, but the freedpeople weren't even permitted to register to vote until the process of emancipation was already two years old in most of the South, and in a few places even older than

that. Certainly, no less attention should be given to politics (much important work has yet to be done on that subject), but our understanding of emancipation would be enhanced by having more serious, creative, and resourceful scholarly attention focused on religion, preachers, and the church.

I end this introduction with a few caveats. First, this essay examines a moment in the history of five religious denominations in order to answer some secular questions about the ways in which the process of emancipation took place in the southern United States. This study does not discuss the spiritual dimension of religious organizations, even though I am well aware of the great significance of that dimension for the people who are the protagonists of this story. If I were a theologian, this would be a different kind of book. Second, this book focuses on the views of influential preachers for the reasons explained earlier, but that does not imply a disregard for the views of the laity. Obviously, a study based on the members' perspectives on the issues dealt with here would be of enormous value. Unfortunately, membership lists from this time period have not yet been found in sufficient numbers and of sufficient quality to make it possible to mount a sound comparative analysis. Third, in my two chapters on Colored Methodism I offer an interpretation of the founding of the Colored Methodist Church which departs from some of the traditional accounts of that event, and for that reason it may draw some criticism from colleagues for whom I have a great deal of respect.¹³ Nevertheless, I believe that my interpretation is firmly grounded in the primary sources.

Finally, a thoughtful colleague pointed out to me that writing about the black church while leaving out the Baptists is a little like writing about American politics and leaving out the Democrats—and, of course, he was right. Nevertheless, I believe that there are some sound methodological reasons for the one-denominational approach taken here. By limiting this study to Methodism, I have controlled for differences based on theology and/or polity. This allows me to keep the focus on the differences that developed primarily because of divergent understandings of the meaning of freedom. In addition, because of its centralized administrative structure, denomination-wide policies are more clearly discernable for Methodists than for the more decentralized Baptists. Furthermore, as Donald G. Mathews has observed, the policies of the Methodist church generally have been good reflectors of social and political developments in this country. Readers interested in how the Baptists dealt with the challenge of freedom should consult the relevant chapters of *Frustrated Fellowship: The Black Baptist Quest for Social Power* by James M. Washington.