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THE ESTABLISHMENT OF CALVARY PROTESTANT EPISCOPAL CHURCH FOR NEGROES IN CHARLESTON

ROBERT F. DURDEN *

One might think that the desire of leading Episcopalians of Charleston, South Carolina, to establish a special church for their slaves would meet only the warmest support of the community. But, in fact, these Episcopal leaders encountered considerable difficulty in formulating their plans and having them approved by the appropriate authorities. Once that was done and while the new church was being built, an angry mob threatened to destroy it. Only the most careful and elaborate maneuvers by civic and religious leaders saved the building and eventually made possible the opening of the church. The purpose of this paper in exploring the incident is to show that the difficulties surrounding the beginning of Calvary Church furnish in microcosm an insight into the deep fears and ambiguities involved in the attempt of white Christians to reconcile their religion with the presence of thousands of Negro slaves.

Prodded by their own consciences as well as stung by the rebukes of Northern critics, many Southerners awoke to the need for evangelizing among the slaves in the decades after 1820. Methodists and Baptists achieved the more spectacular successes among the Negroes, but Presbyterians and Episcopalians also participated in what was a peculiarly Southern manifestation of the nationwide movement toward humanitarian reforms. The mission to the slaves was "the South's conscientious alternative to antislavery activity—the Church's peculiar work in the 'peculiar institution.'" ¹ "Freedom's ferment" in Jacksonian America, in other words, produced both the movement in the South

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¹ Donald G. Mathews, "The Methodist Mission to the Slaves, 1829-1844," an unpublished essay furnished by the author and based in part on his doctoral dissertation at Duke University, 1961.

to make Christians of the slaves and the contemporaneous movement in the North to make them free.

The motives of the Southern church leaders and slaveholders were, in truth, mixed. Nathaniel Russell Middleton, wealthy planter of the Charleston area, put the matter succinctly when he declared: "Negroes are not what some would make them out to be: they are capable of good feelings, and [of] being influenced by good principles, and . . . where every good motive may be wanting, a regard to self-interest should lead every planter to give his people religious instruction."² The "good motive" of desiring to share the Christian gospel in obedience to Biblical commands probably inspired Middleton, for his missionary labors were more than perfunctory. He read the Episcopal service and taught the catechism to many of the 116 slaves on his plantation every Sabbath afternoon; after family prayers on Wednesday night he taught those who came voluntarily to be instructed, while his wife taught the catechism and hymns to the Negro children "constantly during the week."³

Other planters, with an emphasis different from Middleton's, stressed the self-interest involved. One declared that, "plantations under religious instruction are more easily governed than those that are not," for religious slaves had "a greater disposition to do what is right."⁴ Another planter, marking the cultural impact of Christianity upon semi-civilized Africans, argued that the "negroes who have from childhood enjoyed the stated ministry of the gospel seem to assimilate themselves more to the whites, not only in their manner of speaking, but of thinking and acting."⁵

Many slaveowners were indifferent, of course, and regarded the Negroes' religion as "little better than a compound of psalm-singing and animal excitement." But by the 1840's there were few in the South who had the temerity openly to denounce and oppose in principle the efforts of Christian missionaries among the slaves. Indeed, a meeting of influential church and lay leaders in Charleston in 1845 concluded its report with the assertion that the religious instruction of the Negroes was "THE GREAT DUTY, and in the truest and best sense, THE FIXED, THE SETTLED POLICY OF THE SOUTH."⁶

² *Proceedings of the Meeting in Charleston, S. C., May 13-15, 1845, on the Religious Instruction of the Negroes*, Charleston, 1845, p. 42.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72. The chairman of the committee that called the meeting was Daniel E. Huger, and among the members were R. B. Rhett, R. W. Barnwell, Henry

Perhaps it was this very meeting in 1845 and its carefully compiled report that inspired certain church leaders in Charleston to ponder the particular problems surrounding religious efforts among the Negroes in the city. Theoretically, slaves there worshipped in the churches of and often attended services with their masters, portions of the galleries frequently being reserved for Negroes. In fact, the census of 1840 revealed that there were about 20,000 slaves in Charleston and its suburbs. The Reverend Paul Trapier, one-time rector of St. Michael's Church, found that not more than 1,000 of Charleston's slaves were in any way connected with the six Episcopal Churches, and the best estimates were that at all the other churches of all denominations in the city not more than 5,000 slaves could be accommodated. This left an "appalling residue" of approximately 14,000 slaves, Trapier figured, who could not have been accommodated in the existing churches even if they had wished to be; and he did not mention the approximately 3,000 free Negroes in Charleston.⁷

As if the problem of numbers were not staggering enough, the religious instruction of the Negroes in a bustling seaport city such as Charleston was a vastly different matter from missionary work on remote plantations or in the small towns of the interior. In the first place, other Americans may have quickly forgotten the Denmark Vesey conspiracy of 1822, a vast slave insurrection that did not occur, but Charlestonians of the 1840's most certainly had not. Vesey had been a free Negro, and details of the plot had allegedly been worked out at an independent Negro church with a Negro minister.⁸ Even before the Vesey affair a South Carolina pamphleteer had asserted in 1820: "We regard our negroes as the 'Jacobins' of the country, against whom we should always be upon our guard, and who, though we fear no permanent effects from any insurrectionary movement on their part, should be watched with an eye of steady and unremitted attention."⁹

In the frightened aftermath of the trials and execution of Vesey and thirty-four other conspirators, Charlestonians petitioned the legis-

Bailey, Daniel Ravenel, F. R. Shackelford, B. Gildersleeve, W. Curtis, W. Capers, and W. H. Barnwell. Susan M. Fickling, *Slave-Conversion in South Carolina, 1830-1860*, Columbia, 1924, gives background and a useful summary.

⁷ "The Religious Instruction of the Black Population," *The Southern Presbyterian Review*, I (1847), 90. For Trapier, see *Incidents in My Life: The Autobiography of The Rev. Paul Trapier, S.T.D.*, ed. George W. Williams, Charleston, 1954.

⁸ H. M. Henry, *The Police Control of the Slave in South Carolina*, Emory, Va., 1914, p. 142.

⁹ Quoted in U. B. Phillips, "The Slave Labor Problem in the Charleston District," *Political Science Quarterly*, XXII (1907), 433.

lature for a sterner policy of control so "that we may extinguish at once every gleam of hope which the slaves may indulge of ever becoming free—and that we may proceed to govern them on the only principle that can maintain slavery, the 'principle of fear.'" ¹⁰

Such a rigorous and stern attitude, alien to the Southern climate as well as temperament, did not last long after the immediate fright of 1822 had passed. Carelessness and laxness concerning the slave code gradually returned. But the memory of the horror that might have been sank deeply into many minds; and the memory was temporarily freshened in 1831 when the Virginia slave, Nat Turner, a self-styled preacher, led the famed insurrection that resulted in the murder of some fifty white persons. Clearly, the matter of religious instruction for Negroes, and particularly special churches for them, cut to the heart of the problem of controlling the slaves, a problem doubly aggravated in Charleston by its urban character and the fact that in the Charleston district and surrounding low country Negroes vastly outnumbered the whites.¹¹

These were the circumstances that inspired Episcopal leaders in Charleston to move with the utmost circumspection as they tried to cope with the problem of providing religious opportunities for their slaves. At the diocesan convention in Charleston in 1847, Henry D. Lesesne, prominent attorney and chairman of the vestry of St. Phillip's, introduced resolutions pointing to the religious instruction of Charleston's slave population as a duty demanding "zealous exertions" and the special attention of the convention. Trapier, who had initially approached Lesesne on the subject, also spoke in behalf of the project. After some debate, the convention adopted Lesesne's resolution and named him chairman of a committee of six laymen to "make all necessary arrangements for establishing, and keeping up a Congregation of black and colored persons within the City of Charleston, and the suburbs, and for meeting the expenses incident thereto."¹²

Shortly after being named, this committee elected Trapier as the minister of the proposed congregation, to be known as Calvary Church.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 431.

¹¹ The census of 1840 showed that the Charleston district (county) had 20,921 whites, 58,539 slaves, and 3,201 free colored persons. Neighboring Colleton, Beaufort, and Georgetown districts had even larger proportions of slaves. *Ibid.*, p. 426.

¹² *Journal of the Proceedings of the Fifty-Eighth Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in South Carolina . . . February, 1847*, Charleston, 1847, pp. 23, 31-32. Other members of the committee were Nathaniel R. Middleton, William Jervey, Edward Lowndes, Thomas M. Hanckel, and George M. Coffin.

Then the committee prepared a circular describing and justifying the project and began to solicit subscriptions. Trapier preached on the matter to most of the Episcopal congregations in the city during July 1847. The committee purchased a "suitable lot advantageously located" at the corner of Beaufain and Wilson streets for \$1,200, but after a year's endeavor found itself with a balance of only about \$1,350 in cash and pledges. The estimated cost of the projected brick building to accommodate 600 persons came, however, to several thousand dollars more than that. Lesesne, reporting to the convention in 1848, declared that, with only a few exceptions, "those who have been called on for assistance have expressed their sense of the importance of extending the blessings of the Gospel to our colored population, and of their duty as Christians to engage zealously in it" But he admitted that many persons had objected to the proposed plan for realizing the object. "The separation of the master and slave in public worship," Lesesne explained, "and the evils of a distinct ecclesiastical organization, are the objections that have been urged."¹³ Another advocate of the idea behind Calvary Church and a similar Presbyterian project put the matter more bluntly when he insisted that the true secret of opposition to the plan was to be found in the fear that the Negro congregations would become "nurseries of self-government, in which the seeds of disloyalty and independence will be gradually sown to the ruin of the slave and the jeopardy of the master."¹⁴

In his sermons Trapier, in addition to developing the Biblical and theological bases for the project, emphasized the fact that there was no intention of "drawing off a single one from our existing congregations." Rather Calvary Church was designed to provide for those who were being denied the opportunity of public worship. To preserve the patriarchal relationship of master and slaves, special seats in Calvary Church were to be set apart for whites, and the committee counted on the "habitual attendance of a goodly number of them, who, from their position and precedence, will, we hope, be regarded by the colored people as their friend alike and their guides." Since laws prohibited teaching a slave to read, all instruction in the church and Sunday school was to be oral and, in contrast to the Methodists and Baptists who

¹³ *Journal of the Proceedings of the Fifty-Ninth Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in South Carolina . . . February, 1848*, Charleston, 1848, pp. 30-31.

¹⁴ J. H. Thornwell, *A Review of Rev. J. B. Adger's Sermon on the Religious Instruction of the Coloured Population*, Charleston, 1847, p. 13. This pamphlet was extracted from *The Southern Presbyterian Review*, I (1847), 137-150.

utilized Negro "exhorters" and "class leaders," only "trustworthy" white teachers were to be used at Calvary. Written consent from the owner would be required of any slave who sought to join the congregation, to be admitted to confirmation, or to partake of the sacraments.

In a printed circular of April 1847, Lesesne and the committee made the same points and added other arguments. They conceded that if it were possible to receive the slaves into the existing congregations that would be the "best conceivable" arrangement. But there simply was not space in the churches. Calvary Church would not be separating masters and servants for the first time, "our servants being already excluded almost entirely from our churches," but bringing them into a congregation composed of Negroes and whites "in reversed proportions" from the existing arrangement. Pastors of the existing churches could not, without neglecting their white parishioners, "spare for [the slaves] the large share of attention, and of detailed instruction, indispensably requisite to the preparation of them for joining intelligently in our public service, and for understanding adequately the Sermons addressed to us". To the charge that the Episcopal form of worship was simply not suited to the slaves, the committee responded that on certain plantations Negroes were becoming "more and more heartily attached to our mode of worship" because they were taught in special classes and "preached to in a style, and on topics, levelled to their mental and social condition." The plan for Calvary Church, in short, stood "not as abstractly the best, but as alone feasible." In future years even strangers would perceive that the proposed church, "while attaching our servants to us in closer faithfulness by the enduring tie of gratitude for a spiritual boon, will have been of essential benefit to our whole community."¹⁵

In view of the careful plans presented by Trapier, Lesesne, and their co-workers and despite the skepticism and opposition of some Charlestonians, the diocesan convention of 1848 renewed its endorsement and recommended support for the project to all members of the church.

¹⁵ Extracts from Trapier's sermon of July 1847 and the circular dated April 29, 1847, are included in the "Journal of the . . . Convention of . . . 1848," pp. 31-35. Trapier's sermon as well as material about a similar project of the Second Presbyterian Church in Charleston, under the leadership of a missionary returned from Armenia, the Rev. John B. Adger, may be found in *The Southern Presbyterian Review*, I (1847), 89-120. For a clerical attack on the idea of separate congregations, because they might lessen the moral responsibility of the master and "break down the patriarchal relation of master and bondsman," see *The Charleston Gospel Messenger and Protestant Episcopal Register*, XXIV (1847), 179-182.

In March 1848 Trapier began to hold services for the Calvary congregation in the basement of St. Philip's parsonage, and in mid-July of that year the committee of laymen hired a large room, known as Temperance Hall, over a carriage warehouse on Meeting street. By early 1849 there were usually about twenty-five white persons who attended the Sunday morning service and about fifty in the afternoon. From thirty to forty "black and colored persons" attended in the morning and about one hundred in the afternoon. In the Sunday school 276 persons had attended at one time or the other. Forty of the children were free; and of the slaves, belonging to 121 owners who had all given their consent, forty were adults.

Attendance at the Sunday school rose in the summer, shrank during the coldest months, and averaged about 120. Eighteen teachers, "white of course," assisted the minister in giving the oral instruction. Trapier received those who desired to be prepared for confirmation or Holy Communion at his home during the week and reported that six women and two men were under instruction but not yet qualified. Meetings were held with the full knowledge of the municipal authorities, and in compliance with the committee's request, one of the City Guard was always stationed nearby during services, as at other churches, "though happily interference has never been rendered necessary by the behaviour of the people."¹⁶

Encouraged by this impressive beginning and apparently in possession of the necessary funds, the committee early in 1849 entered into a contract for construction of the building for the new congregation. But just as the project approached completion, a series of fortuitous events in Charleston precipitated a crisis that dangerously jeopardized the very existence of Calvary Church.

The summer of 1849, as far as local and national political life was concerned, was only a slight lull before the full storm that was expected when Congress convened in December. Ever since the introduction of the antislavery Wilmot Proviso during the initial stages of the Mexican War in 1846, Southern fury and fear had been increasing. South Carolinians especially, but also many Southerners in other states, looked to the leadership of John C. Calhoun in the approaching crisis. Many agreed with "A Countryman" who wrote the *Courier* that the South could expect nothing from either the Whig or Democratic party "in any emer-

¹⁶ Committee's card "To the Public," *Courier*, July 16, 1849; this contains extracts from the report to the diocesan convention in February 1849. See also *Autobiography of . . . Trapier*, p. 27.

gency involving her *peculiar institutions*,” and these interests of the South’s soared “above all party consideration—above the Constitution itself—and rest their foundations on the very organic law of society.”¹⁷ The Charleston *Mercury*, ultra in its politics and more given to impassioned pronouncements than the staid and once-Whiggish *Courier*, rang the sectional tocsin throughout the summer. The *Mercury* declared that the new Whig president, Zachary Taylor, had filled sufficient federal posts with Whig abolitionists to make the South “ripe for all sorts of Abolition experiments.”¹⁸

As Charlestonians warmed up for the coming political crisis, they also debated nervously about the adequacy of the city’s quarantine laws. Cholera raged in several American seaports and inland cities, but the disease never struck in Charleston that summer. The event that did throw the city into genuine, albeit brief, panic was an insurrection of slaves imprisoned in the city’s workhouse. None of the newspaper or other accounts of the affair mentioned Denmark Vesey, but for a time during the days of July 13-14, 1849, many Charlestonians may have thought that the old nightmare had become a grim reality.

One Nicholas, “slave of Mr. Kelly,” began the trouble on July 13 when he defied the keeper’s order to go inside to a cell. After reports of this insubordination reached Mayor T. Leger Hutchinson, he proceeded to the workhouse and summoned the board of workhouse commissioners. With these authorities present, the master of the workhouse agreed to go out and subdue Nicholas. After the prisoner refused to obey an order to “Go up stairs,” the master threatened to knock him down. “If you do, I’ll be damned if I don’t knock you down,” Nicholas retorted. When the master moved as if to seize him, Nicholas raised a stick or hammer that he held in his hand. Wild confusion now ensued. The master retreated behind a locked door, which Nicholas and five or six other prisoners proceeded to attack with the hammers that they used to crack stone. With one Negro crying that he was “Santa Anna,” Nicholas yelled to the other prisoners, “We’ll show you what we are; we’ll set you at liberty.” The mayor later testified that, “[I] succeeded in getting out of the Eastern Gate, and went to the Guard House where I obtained assistance.”

Before any assistance could arrive, Nicholas and thirty-six other Negro prisoners escaped through the open gate of the workhouse. One citizen,

¹⁷ *Courier*, November 14, 1849.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, July 24, 1849. Also see the *Mercury*, July 16, 1849, which charges Southern Whigs with betrayal of the South and argues that the “South will only be safe when she has but one party in her limits” and sends men to Washington who will “fear nothing and dare everything in defence of her rights and interests.”

thinking at first that the commotion signified a fire, looked out of a window to see a "crowd of negroes looking down Wilson street." When he ran out and met others who were as mystified as he, one neighbor yelled: "You had better take care of yourself." The man rushed to get his sword, requested two of his neighbors with rifles to join him, and this small posse earned the distinction of overtaking and capturing Nicholas on one of the bridges that led from the city.

All of the other escapees were eventually recaptured or came in to surrender themselves. But it was more than a week before news reached Charleston that the last three of the fugitives, fleeing toward North Carolina, had been captured and imprisoned in Kingstree, South Carolina. (One of them, evidently light skinned, had attempted to pose as the white owner of the other two.) The Charleston city council, meeting in emergency session several hours after the outbreak, voted to try Nicholas on the next day (Saturday, July 14, 1849) before a court of magistrates and freeholders. The council also requested the mayor to publish the known facts in the morning newspapers "in order that the public excitement on this subject may be allayed."¹⁹

Nicholas, who had earlier assaulted a police officer with a deadly weapon and escaped a death sentence on a technicality, was sentenced, after an apparently careful trial in which court-appointed counsel represented the defendant, to be hanged on the following Friday. Two other slaves were tried in separate trials for "grievously wounding, maiming and bruising several white men" during the affair, and they also were condemned to be hanged on Friday. Other prisoners involved were tried in more leisurely fashion at a later date and received sentences such as five years' imprisonment, with fifteen lashes on the first Friday of every month for six months and with the owner to have the privilege of selling them out of the state at the end of a year.²⁰

As early as Friday evening, July 13, Charlestonians may have realized that the workhouse affair was a spontaneous, even if deplorable, incident rather than a carefully planned signal for a general insurrection of the

¹⁹ *Mercury*, July 14, 16, 17, 20, 25, 1849. This newspaper has more details than the other morning newspaper, the *Courier*, or the *Evening News*.

²⁰ *Mercury*, July 31, August 1, 7, 1849. Thomas Barksdale published a letter to the editor on August 7 saying that he never sent "the boy Cyrus" to the workhouse, did not know he was there until after the outbreak, and that "I am not in the habit of sending my servants there." The fact that Barksdale, probably like many other masters in Charleston, did not know where his slave was suggests one aspect of the problem of slave control in the cities, where many slaves were hired out or worked as artisans.

slaves. But the events had frayed citizens' nerves. Tension ran high. On Saturday night, July 14, after the trial of Nicholas and the other two ringleaders, a mob gathered to destroy the nearly completed building for Calvary Church, located a short city block away from the workhouse. The "nigger church," as some foes called it, had for over two years been the subject of debate and controversy; now the emotional by-product of the incident at the jail threatened to end the project altogether with one violent outburst.

The Charleston newspapers were conspicuously reticent in their coverage of the mob that threatened Calvary Church. Charleston, like other antebellum Southern cities, prided itself on the preservation of good order and general decorum, and the newspapers apparently regarded the publicizing of mob action by white citizens as close to civic treason. Nevertheless, certain details are known. A local diarist recorded that about ten o'clock in the evening a mob, which intended to pull down the building "for the blacks attached to the Episcopal Church," was dispersed only with difficulty.²¹ Trapier, writing many years later, recalled that the "rabble of the city, set on by some demagogues, and inciting the jealousy of the white mechanics against the Negroes," were responsible for the threatened destruction of the church.²²

The Charleston newspapers might never have referred to the matter if a local citizen had not written a private letter containing the following account which first appeared in a Wilmington, North Carolina, newspaper: "We all here have been, and still are, under much excitement. . . . Saturday night about 1200 of the citizens repaired to a Church, lately erected for the worship of Blacks, with the intention of pulling it down. The Mayor, and others, however, succeeded in getting them . . . to postpone the pulling down, and a meeting is to be held to-day at twelve o'clock, to discuss the expediency of doing so. The military were out in force, but if they had been ordered to protect the Church, they would have refused."²³

The editor of the *Mercury* described this account as a "tissue of exaggerations and misrepresentations" and assured the North Carolinians that Charleston "may be relieved from the odium which justly attaches to

²¹ Jacob Schirmer Diary, July 14, 1849, South Carolina Historical Society. On the previous day Schirmer recorded that there was "great excitement in consequence of a revolt in the Work house" and that on the whole "the affair was badly managed and more excitement made than was necessary. The leading Characters exhibited great want of Judgement and discretion."

²² *Autobiography of . . . Trapier*, p. 27.

²³ *Mercury*, July 21, 1849, quoting the *Wilmington Commercial* of July 19.

mob rule." The *Mercury* insisted that there were many fewer than 1,200 persons assembled outside Calvary Church and that most of those there "were opposed to all measures of violence" that would have compromised the peace and good character of the city.

This much is clear and indisputable: a mob of unknown size and composition threatened to destroy Calvary Church on Saturday night, July 14, 1849. Mayor Hutchinson and other dignitaries, including James Louis Petigru, whom one contemporary described as being "then, in many respects, the topmost citizen of Charleston," succeeded in calming and dispersing the crowd by promising to hold a public meeting on the subject of Calvary Church.²⁴

Controversy concerning the church was once again limited to verbal exchanges, and these now filled the columns of the newspapers. Letters attacking the plan of the church were signed with pen names, but one of the opponents, who was later charged with having sought to "arouse the fears of a community which had not forgotten the events of 1822," was apparently Andrew Gordon Magrath, a prominent lawyer who served as a federal judge and then governor of South Carolina towards the end of the Civil War.²⁵

Lesesne and his committee lost no time after the near disaster in getting their arguments before the public. A statement "To the Public" appeared on Monday, July 16, assuring interested citizens that the building for Calvary Church would not be completed for another month. This left plenty of time for the "free consultation and conference" which the committee invited regarding modifications of the plans for the church.²⁶

²⁴ The description of Petigru is in John B. Adger, *My Life and Times, 1810-1899*, Richmond, 1899, p. 173. James Petigru Carson in *The Life, Letters and Speeches of James Louis Petigru: The Union Man of South Carolina*, Washington, 1920, p. 280, quotes Petigru as addressing the mob as follows: "How can you be such damned fools, as to attempt to destroy this Church, even if you have to set fire to the town. Have you not seen enough of fire here to be afraid of it? It is the only thing that decent men are afraid of! Men, let us call a meeting; if you are right, I will go with you; if you are wrong, you will carry out your purpose over my dead body." Since Carson's account of the Calvary Church episode has several errors of detail, this quotation, for which no source is given, may or may not be authentic.

²⁵ Adger, *op. cit.*, p. 172, identifies the person who attacked the Presbyterian and Episcopal plans for separate churches for slaves under the pseudonym of "Many Citizens" as a prominent lawyer of Charleston who became a federal judge and governor of the state during the war. This could only be Magrath.

²⁶ *Courier*, July 16, 1849.

Four days later the committee published a fuller statement about the diocesan convention's original authorization of the project "after gentlemen, of high standing in the profession of the Law," had upheld the plan's legality. The difficulty of giving "instruction to the mind of the Negro where the congregation is composed mainly of enlightened white persons," the impossibility of one minister's devoting adequate pastoral attention to the Negroes as well as to the white members, and "more than all, the actual want of room in our Churches"—all these arguments in favor of the new church were restated. Touching on the economic and social standing of the plan's sponsors, the committee reminded Charlestonians that Calvary Church was not the project of a few unauthorized individuals but "of a numerous, enlightened and respectable body [the diocesan convention], representing a constituency, who, it is believed, are the owners of the larger part of the slaves in the lower country." The Episcopal leaders concluded with the assertion that the plan, far from being a "dangerous innovation," was actually "calculated to result in placing our servants under the more immediate supervision and instruction of their authorized teachers." Critics should "beware, lest by endeavoring to frustrate so discreet an effort they may seem to set slavery in opposition to Christianity, with which none of us doubt that it is entirely consistent."²⁷

Opponents of Calvary Church were just as articulate as its sponsors and were well represented in the newspaper columns. One of these critics, calling himself "Charleston" and blatantly appealing to racism, declared: "The Committee cannot longer constitute themselves directors of affairs in which the public interest is vitally concerned. I am surprised at the boldness with which they take their stand on a matter so exciting. That men, who stand foremost in the ranks of Christians, should obstinately persist in promoting schemes generally pronounced destructive to the interests, and even safety, of the community, is a matter to be wondered at, and deeply, bitterly deplored." According to "Charleston," within the past month five or six children of "highly respectable parents" were being christened at a local Episcopal church when "a negro child was brought in, baptised with the rest, all the sponsors and parents standing around, and in every respect [the child was] treated as one of the white children." "Now, if such things as these are permitted, will not our blacks soon be taught to consider themselves our equals in other respects?" he inquired. "Put them on equality on one subject, and there is no barrier which will be finally left. The negro church is the first

²⁷ *Ibid.*, July 20, 1849.

step, and I heartily hope the good sense of the community will put a stop to it.”²⁸

Another opponent began by expressing his hearty support for the “moral and religious cultivation of our negroes” and declared that “my own servants have the fullest liberty to avail themselves of the privileges of our religious institutions.” Nevertheless, he stood “thoroughly opposed, in theory and practice, to a different religious organization for the master and slave.” Neither the numbers nor the intelligence of the Episcopal supporters of Calvary Church could “sanctify what is wrong,” and they themselves should “beware lest by an *indiscreet* attempt to oppose public opinion, they create a revulsion that will tend effectually to retard, rather than advance, the object” that they aimed to accomplish. Getting down to one specific point, this critic charged that contrary to various published statements, the nearly completed building for Calvary Church, which was not to have a gallery, had no pews that were set apart in any way from the others, and if white persons did attend the services there it would establish “a degree of communism among the different classes of worshippers, entirely at variance with our institutions.”²⁹

A member of the committee quickly replied to this particular objection about the seating in Calvary Church. The church was not complete, and benches for white persons were yet to be installed. “All the benches so set apart will be painted of a different color from the others, and there will be, also, a wide space between them and the seats for the blacks.”³⁰

One writer, signing himself with the pseudonym “Dalcho” and possibly speaking as a non-slaveholder, pointed out that there were two free Episcopal churches in the eastern part of Charleston, St. Stephen’s and St. John’s. Why could not Calvary Church, which was located in the western part of the city, also be a free church for whites and a gallery added for the Negroes who might attend? They could then be “instructed

²⁸ “Charleston” to the editor, *Mercury*, July 23, 1849. The *Mercury* carried many more letters attacking Calvary Church than did the *Courier*, although neither paper took an editorial stand on the affair. Granville T. Prior, “A History of the Charleston *Mercury*, 1822-1852,” unpublished doctoral dissertation at Harvard University, 1946, p. 499, states that John E. Carew, then the editor and owner of the *Mercury*, always had a special interest in finding Biblical sanction for slavery and opposed separate churches for Negroes.

²⁹ “A Citizen” to the editor, *Mercury*, July 21, 1849.

³⁰ “One of the Committee,” *Mercury*, July 23, 1849. The benches were so disposed and painted at Pompion Hill Chapel; see S. G. Stoney, *Plantations of the Carolina Low Country*, Charleston, 1935, pp. 65, 178.

after the forenoon or afternoon services, as is done in other Churches of the city, by the *white* members.”³¹

As for the committee's point about the Episcopalians owning most of the slaves in the low country, one critic replied that they did not own most of the slaves in the state at large and they certainly did not in the slaveholding states taken altogether. In so vital a matter every slaveholder in the land was concerned. The committee maintained that they had done nothing in violation of the law. “Whether the spirit of the law has not been violated may be questioned,” this opponent declared; “if it has, then, in one sense, public and private rights have been infringed. That the safety and good order of the community have been endangered in *consequence* of the movement (I hardly need say *without the intention* of its originators) no one who was present at the building on the night of the 14th can deny.”³²

This controversy in the newspapers, which no doubt had also gone on at many of the places where Charlestonians of that era gathered, came to a climax on July 23, the day of the specially called public meeting at city hall where the fate of Calvary Church was to be decided.³³ At this “large and respectable meeting of the citizens” Mayor Hutchinson presided and, after stating the purpose of the gathering, urged that the discussion be conducted in a “spirit of conciliation.” The outstanding speaker of the occasion, and the man who appears to have done as much as any one to save Calvary Church, was James L. Petigru. Robert Barnwell Rhett, a fire-eating secessionist, later said of

³¹ “Dalcho” to the editor, *Mercury*, July 23, 1849. That sharp differences of opinion existed between slaveholders and non-slaveholders in Charleston, despite Calhounian theory to the contrary, is also illustrated in the mayoralty campaign that began soon after the Calvary Church affair. A slave-owning planter, Ralph Izard Middleton, entered the race against the incumbent, T. Leger Hutchinson. “A Charleston Mechanic” wrote to the *Mercury*, August 27, 1849, that he and his friends were not willing to change the present mayor who “employs the white mechanic to do his own private work, for a wealthy man, who is the owner of negro mechanics, of whom he entertains a high opinion as regards their competency to vie with the white man. There is abundance of labor only fitting for them to perform . . . and which would not take bread out of the [white] working man's mouth, and causing his negroes to run many a white man from our City for want of work.” Hutchinson was re-elected, 1142 to 920, according to the *Mercury*, September 5, 1849.

³² Unsigned letter to the editor, *Mercury*, July 23, 1849.

³³ A group of citizens met on Monday, July 16, and named a committee to wait upon Mayor Hutchinson with a request that he formally “invite the citizens generally to assemble at the City Hall, on Monday, the 23d instant, at 1 o'clock, p. m., there to take into consideration the subject of the organization and erection of Calvary Church.” *Courier*, July 21, 1849.

Petigru, the famous Unionist and civic leader: "Certainly no man has lived in our day who possessed so much moral and so little official authority."³⁴ Petigru introduced a resolution calling for the appointment by the mayor of a committee of fifty citizens to gather accurate information concerning Calvary Church and its relationship to the "management of the slave population" in Charleston. This committee would, in due time, report to a future meeting of the citizens. Referring indirectly to his own Huguenot ancestry, Petigru made an eloquent appeal for the resolution: "The liberty of teaching what was true and good to all men, why sirs, that was what brought many of our fathers here."³⁵

One spokesman for those Charlestonians who objected to Calvary Church fought the appointment of the committee of fifty and insisted that "citizens in body assembled should decide their own matters." But this demand for direct and possibly ill-considered action gained few votes in the face of the distinguished supporters behind Petigru's resolution. Colonel F. H. Elmore, who would soon succeed to Calhoun's seat in the United States Senate, seconded Petigru's resolution, arguing that "it was the highest glory and boast of South Carolina that she adhered with unalterable fidelity to the protection of public and private rights, and to the sacred observance of the Laws and the Constitution." This view being supported by a large majority of the citizens present, the fate of Calvary Church was now to be decided in a most careful and orderly manner, a manner, needless to say, that gratified those leaders who jealously guarded the city's reputation for stability and decorum.³⁶

When several days passed and Mayor Hutchinson had still not announced the names of the committee of fifty, "Many Citizens," who presumably was Andrew G. Magrath, took to the columns of the *Mercury* to criticize the delay. "There never has been a subject discussed by the citizens of Charleston," he asserted, "more important in all its bearings, than that which will be referred to this committee. And there is a general

³⁴ *Memorial of the late James L. Petigru. Proceedings of the Bar of Charleston, S. C., March 25, 1863*, New York, 1866, p. 22. Pamphlet in the South Carolina Historical Society.

³⁵ *Courier*, July 24, 1849. The quotation is given in both Adger, *op. cit.*, pp. 173-174, and Carson, *op. cit.*, p. 281, but both sources give incorrect dates for the occasion.

³⁶ *Courier*, July 24, 1849. The *Charleston Evening News*, July 23, gives the views of the speaker who opposed the appointment of the committee and identifies him only as "General Brisbane." The *Directory of the City of Charleston and Neck for 1849*, which is available on microfilm in the Charleston Library Society, does not list any "Brisbane," but he may have been in the United States Army and stationed in or near Charleston.

anxiety, not only that the question should be properly disposed of, but also that it should be done as speedily as possible." The mayor promptly explained that the appointment of the committee required great care, since "the individuals selected should be the representatives of various secular interests and religious denominations—they should be men known to the community, and in whom the community have confidence, whose judgments unswayed by prejudice, should be controlled by no influence, save a sense of public good, and a deep conviction of the momentous question to be submitted to their consideration." To secure such men and also to "insure a just balance of opinion" could not be the work of a day.³⁷

Actually, for Charleston in mid-summer, the mayor acted with considerable speed. On August 2, as the committee assembled at city hall to begin its work, the public learned who the members were and how the investigation would be undertaken. Petigru, serving as chairman, called the meeting to order and named F. R. Shackelford as secretary. Three sub-committees were named to set about the task of studying and collecting information about Calvary Church and the general management of Charleston's slave population. William J. Grayson headed the sub-committee charged with reporting on Calvary Church; Dr. M. T. Mendenhall was to lead the group that would investigate the various methods used in Charleston and elsewhere for providing religious instruction to the slaves and free Negroes; and E. M'Crady served as chairman of the sub-committee charged with studying the "state of the law on the subject of religious meetings of slaves and persons of color; and whether any remedy in the form of the said laws, or any legislative provisions in regard to the management of the slave population of our city, is called for by the interests of the public good." The sub-committees were requested to prepare their reports with "all the despatch consistent with a deliberate examination of the subjects referred to them" so that Petigru could convene the full committee for final reports and action.³⁸

All of these sub-committees clearly took their assignments with great seriousness, for the final reports, which were subsequently published in a pamphlet, are carefully compiled and rich in information. After three months had passed, Mayor Hutchinson invited all interested citizens to another public meeting to hear the report of the committee of fifty and take final action concerning Calvary Church. When the

³⁷ *Mercury*, July 27, 28, 1849; *Courier*, July 28, 1849.

³⁸ *Courier*, August 3, 1849.

meeting convened on November 13, 1849, Petigru announced that the entire committee had studied and discussed the reports of the three sub-committees and achieved "a most gratifying and even unexpected degree of unanimity in the result of their deliberations." The members of the committee, he explained, felt a certain satisfaction that arose "from the consciousness of having diligently and faithfully labored to arrive at the truth."³⁹

First, concerning Calvary Church the committee concluded that "nothing could be further from the intention of the founders, than to weaken the safeguards of public peace and order." The church was under the control of a regular minister who had been approved by the bishop and appointed by the six trustees representing the convention, which body constituted such an important part of "the proprietary interest of the low country." Moreover, the plan of the church provided accommodation for "fifty white members, by seats set apart and raised, and by a distinct entrance, keeping before the eyes of the congregation at all times, a sensible image of the subordination that is due to those to whom by the course of Providence, they are to look up to as their rulers." Clearly, the committee in effect concluded that even Charleston, with its large proportion of slaves and deep-rooted fears, could safely tolerate such a carefully circumscribed novelty as Calvary Church.

On the general question of the religious instruction of slaves, Dr. Mendenhall's sub-committee faced probably the most difficult subject because of its very broadness. Yet they sent out a printed questionnaire, gathered information from all over the southeast, and left the historian a compilation that is especially valuable for information about the religious life of the Negroes in antebellum Southern cities.

Trapier's work they knew about, but he informed them that since the "intended assault" upon the Calvary building on July 14 he and his congregation had not even been allowed to use Temperance Hall. The report from the Second Presbyterian Church in Charleston explained the background for their decision to build a church under much the same plan as that for Calvary. The pastor of the Cumberland Street Methodist Church in Charleston insisted that the class-meeting system, which Episcopalians and Presbyterians shunned for themselves, was

³⁹ *Courier*, November 14, 1849; also *Public Proceedings Relating to Calvary Church and Religious Instruction of Slaves: with an appendix containing the Reports of the Sub-Committees*, Charleston, 1850. This valuable pamphlet is available in the library of the College of Charleston.

an essential feature of Methodism because of the itinerant character of the Methodist ministry. The pastor of the Cumberland Street Church explained that in his two-year appointment to the Charleston church he could not possibly know well all of the approximately 1,500 Negroes who were members in addition to the large white congregation. Therefore, the Negroes were divided into classes, with the "most faithful and tried" appointed as the leader whose duty it was to see the members of his class once a week if possible, ascertain if they had led correct and orderly lives, and report regularly to the pastor. "It would be about as easy to manage successfully a plantation of fifteen hundred negroes without drivers," the hard-pressed Methodist argued, "as to keep up a moral discipline of that number without leaders."⁴⁰

From Richmond, Virginia, Dr. Mendenhall's sub-committee received an informative report from the white pastor of the First African Baptist Church. The First Baptist Church of that city, having a large membership of free Negroes and slaves in addition to the white membership, had built a new church and donated the old one to the exclusive use of the Negroes in 1841. Under Virginia law the pastor had to be a white man, but the business of the African Church was entrusted to thirty colored leaders together with the pastor. The only meetings that the Negroes held independently were reported to be funerals. Even that was against the law, but the city authorities were said to connive at the practice "as it seems hard for colored people to be buried like brutes without any religious respect; and white ministers cannot be obtained." The effects of the separate Negro church had been salutary, the pastor felt, because it helped the slave "obey his master from principle" and allowed the free Negro to "respect himself." "After eight years' experience and observation," the Richmond Baptist concluded, "I am *perfectly satisfied* that it is safe, beneficial and honorable, to allow the colored people separate houses of worship in all our *towns*—to convene in the *day time*; to have the pastoral attention of *white preachers* of judgment and high standing in society, and who not only feel identified with the South, but who enjoy the confidence of the whites, and feel a deep sympathy for the blacks."⁴¹

These and additional reports from Norfolk, Augusta, and other Southern towns furnished the basis for the full committee's conclusion that

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40. The Methodist pastor also described the Methodist "love feast" as a monthly meeting where the minister presided and after a Communion service the members were permitted to relate their religious experiences. He found the free Negroes in his church, "equally as subordinate" as the slave members.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

a majority of those answering the questionnaire indicated a preference for the method adopted in Calvary Church. But the main point on which all witnesses concurred was that the Christian religion did effect marked improvement "in the moral condition, docility and submission to authority, of those slaves to whom it has been communicated."⁴²

Finally, the sub-committee named to investigate the laws pertaining to religious meetings of slaves and free Negroes found that the plan for Calvary Church fully satisfied all statutory requirements. Those provided, among other things, that all religious assemblages of Negroes in Charleston be attended by at least one white man whom the church authorities had designated and the city council approved; that no such meetings be held at night or before sunrise unless a majority of the company be white; and that meetings of mixed congregations were not permitted at any time in secret or behind closed doors. The sub-committee believed that the plans for Calvary Church, far from falling short of these regulations, might be "deserving of attention, as a model for others engaged in the same laudable work." The only suggestion for additional safeguards that the sub-committee had to offer was that the state legislature might wish to pass a law specifying the regular presence of a given number of white persons whenever the Negro congregation assembled.⁴³

On the basis of these three reports from the committee of fifty, Christopher G. Memminger, who would later serve as Confederate secretary of the treasury, offered the following resolutions to the citizens' meeting:

First—That the Religious Instruction of slaves, combined with a prudent attention to the preservation of order, is a work highly acceptable, in a moral and religious view, and of great advantage to the commonwealth.

Second—That the establishment of religious worship, in Calvary Church, on the plans adopted by the authors of that undertaking, contravenes no law of the State, and furnishes no ground of alarm.

Third—That the conditions imposed, by law, upon assemblages of slaves for Religious Worship, are salutary and reasonable, and ought to be observed; and, that it is expedient, in addition to the existing regulations, that the Legislature should, by a law, declare what number of white persons shall be present in all Religious meetings.⁴⁴

⁴² *Courier*, November 14, 1849.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

When the assembled citizens overwhelmingly passed these resolutions, Petigru, Lesesne, Trapier, and the others had done more than save Calvary Church. The Reverend John B. Adger, whose Presbyterian church for Negroes would be dedicated some six months after Calvary Church, later recalled that this outcome of the whole affair went far toward dispelling fears that had lingered in Charleston since Denmark Vesey's time. "The nightmare, which had oppressed the mind and heart of the city for twenty-five years, vanished."⁴⁵

Trapier's congregation was now reassembled, and on Sunday, December 23, 1849, the completed building on Beaufain Street was consecrated in services conducted by Bishop Christopher E. Gadsden, Trapier, and two other ministers.⁴⁶ A visitor to the church about the time it neared its second birthday reported that Trapier, in reading the "Lessons," delivered a running explanation of the hard passages, and his sermon "was carefully written as to plainness of language and familiarity of illustration, to suit the humblest minds." A choir of Negroes sang the chants and hymns without accompaniment, and "notice was given that on a certain evening would be held the usual weekly meeting for the instruction of men, and on another for that of women, and on a third for that of singing." After he had concluded his sermon, Trapier removed his gown and, in the absence of the regular teachers because of a heavy rain, began the instruction of the "Sunday scholars." "For more than half an hour, the history of the day of Pentecost was explained in an evangelical manner, from the third chapter of Acts, interspersed with questions, which were answered as well as is usual in any school. The whole exercise showed an unusual tact and experience in the mode of conveying instruction in a pleasant and lively manner. At the close, each scholar received a ticket, to be shown at home as evidence of attendance."⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Adger, *op. cit.*, p. 178. Circumstances led Adger to become a slaveholding farmer later in the 1850's. A morally sensitive and conscientious man, he ultimately made this revealing observation: "The emancipation of my negroes [at the end of the war] was a pecuniary loss to me of some twenty-five thousand dollars. But it was, at the same time, my deliverance from a very serious and weighty responsibility, and I have never once regretted the emancipation. Nor, though I frequently made inquiries of men on this subject, did I ever find one who said he was sorry that it had taken place." *Ibid.*, p. 349.

⁴⁶ *The Charleston Gospel Messenger and Protestant Episcopal Register*, XXVI (1850), 330. Trapier preached a sermon—based on Joel 2:29, "And also upon the servants and upon the handmaids, in those days, will I pour out my spirit."—in several of the local Episcopal churches in November and December 1849; this may be found in *ibid.* pp. 337-343. Bishop Gadsden's sermon on the occasion of the consecration of Calvary Church was not carried for some reason until February 1851, *ibid.*, pp. 427-432.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, XXIX (1852), 215-216. Trapier prepared and published *The Church*

Before illness forced him permanently to leave Calvary Church early in 1857, Trapier reported that 2,485 Negroes of all ages had been admitted to the Sunday school and 78 to Communion; there were 51 Negro and 18 white communicants of the church. Despite such solid growth, Calvary Church, like other religious and educational institutions in the South, faltered during the Civil War. But by 1866 it again had a regular minister. Not until 1890 did a Negro receive appointment as the rector of the church.

The building that caused such a furore in 1849 came to an ironic end as a church late in 1940: a New Deal housing development for white persons had practically surrounded Calvary Church and largely "preempted that section" of Charleston from the constituency of Calvary. Consequently the property was sold to the housing authority, the consecration removed from the former church building, and services ended there on November 25, 1940. Ultimately the building was demolished. But the life of Calvary Church, which had been so strangely entangled in the changing racial arrangements of Charleston, went on in a new and larger building located in what had become a more appropriate district of the city.⁴⁸

In the aftermath of the Denmark Vesey affair, Governor Thomas Bennett of South Carolina, himself a native Charlestonian, spoke thus to the legislature: "Slavery abstractly considered would perhaps lead every mind to the same conclusion; but the period has long since passed when a correction might have been applied. The treasures of learning, the gifts of ingenuity and the stores of experience have been exhausted, in the fruitless search for a practical remedy. The institution is established—the evil is entailed and we can do no more than steadily to pursue that course indicated by stern necessity and a not less imperious policy."⁴⁹

A generation later Trapier, Lesesne, and their associates had ceased to characterize the institution as evil, and they searched not for any

Catechism Made Plain: For the Use of Those Who Cannot Read, New York, 1855, which consists of eighty-four small pages of simple questions and answers about the Apostles' Creed. In the preface Trapier warned against teaching by rote and urged teachers to put questions in varied forms and insist on replies in language that would prove understanding. A copy of this is in the library of Duke University.

⁴⁸ Albert Sidney Thomas, *A Historical Account of the Protestant Episcopal Church in South Carolina, 1820-1957*, Columbia, 1957, pp. 200-205. A photograph of the original church building is reproduced in *Autobiography of . . . Trapier*, facing p. 38.

⁴⁹ Quoted in David D. Wallace, *South Carolina: A Short History, 1520-1948*, Chapel Hill, 1951, p. 385.

“practical remedy,” as Governor Bennett had put it, but for humane amelioration within the framework of a slaveholding society. These Christian leaders in Charleston were men whom first the abolitionists and then ultimately a much larger group in the North denounced as depraved “man-stealers” and incorrigible sinners. And it was true that as all too frail mortals they, together with thousands of other leaders of the antebellum South, had failed to keep searching for a remedy for the “entailed evil.” The Christian religion that they sought to share with their slaves was strangely conditioned by slavery itself and even more by racial fears and ideas that hardly blended with the Christian concepts of the Fatherhood of God and brotherhood of men. That much is clear.

But it is equally clear that the abolitionists and their later allies took too simple a view in denouncing men like the Episcopal leaders of Charleston as sinners because slaveholders. Few if any in the North during the stormy years before the war had sought, much less found, a remedy for the problems posed by the presence of the several million Negroes. Without at least a search for that remedy, even the most moral of Northern antislavery reformers threw his verbal stones at Southern slaveholders with a dubious justification. Ambiguity, in short, characterized more than just the efforts of the Episcopalians of Charleston to provide a church for their slaves.