

Diocese of Alabama. The Church and African-Americans : Quotations from sources

Greenough White, *A Saint of the Southern Church: Memoir of the Right Reverend Nicholas Hamner Cobbs, First Bishop of Alabama*. New York, 1900.

p. 98: The Episcopal Church was the slaveholder's church – that it was in fact the church of a class.

p. 101: Cobbs took up residence in Tuscaloosa [in 1844]. The diocese then had 15 parishes and 450 communicants.

p. 101-2: One of the earliest entries in Cobbs' journal {January, 1845}: "It is my intention to pay special attention to the slave population in the diocese and thus to remove, if possible, one of the grounds of objection to the Episcopal Church."

p. 106: "Cobbs organized a colored congregation in Montgomery and preached one of his best sermons there . . . on the consideration due by masters to their slaves. It is entitled 'Naaman and the Hebrew Maid.'"

Joseph Blount Cheshire, *The Church in the Confederate States*. New York, 1914.

Ch. 10: The Church and the Negro

p. 114: "The first resolution adopted by the House of Deputies of the General Council [of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Confederate States of America] of 1862, upon the subject of the Church's work within her own borders, is as follows: 'that this Church desires especially to recognize its obligation to provide for the spiritual wants of that class of our brethren, who in the providence of God, have been committed to our sympathy and care by the national institution of slavery.'"

p. 115: "After stating in strong terms the duty of the Church to the slaves, and the impossibility of separating the interests and the fortunes of the two races, [the Pastoral Letter of the House of Bishops] speaks of them as 'this sacred trust committed to us, as a people to be prepared for the work which God may have for them to do in the future.' The Pastoral Letter then proceeds to urge 'upon the masters of the country their obligation, as Christian men, so to arrange this institution as not to necessitate the violation of those sacred relations which God has created, and which man cannot, consistently with Christian duty, annul.'"

p. 127: "In Alabama, the Committee on the State of the Church in 1863 mention the increased interest of the clergy in work among the negroes, and the report of the Committee urges the clergy to be faithful in pressing upon all masters their religious duty to the slaves. In the Bishop's address in 1864 he mentions confirming on one plantation, Faunsdale, Marengo County, twenty negroes at one service. Bishop Green [of Mississippi] visited this same plantation in 1862, and mentions the chapel built for the negroes by the owner (Mrs. Harrison, afterwards Mrs. Stickney) as 'a finished specimen of Ecclesiastical architecture.' Special interest and importance attaches to this work in the Dioceses of Mississippi and Alabama, because of the comparative weakness of the Church, and the great preponderance of the black people in those States."

Walter C. Whitaker, *History of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Alabama, 1763-1891*. Birmingham, 1898.

Ch. 8: The Church's Slave Children

p. 81-83: "From the very beginning parochial reports tell of Negro children baptized and Negro adults confirmed. What other religious bodies did for the slaves it is impossible for the writer to ascertain, but when it is considered that the work of which brief mention is herein made was done by the representatives of a body which numbered only three thousand souls, out of a total white population of a quarter of a million, and that religious zeal was not monopolized by Churchmen, some conception is possible of the Christian force brought to bear on the ante-bellum Negro.

In Mobile as early as 1840 the Rev. S. S. Lewis was preaching regularly to a congregation of these people, which, consisting at first of six or eight persons, soon numbered more than one hundred. At St. John's-in-the-Prairies, twelve were communicants. Smaller numbers were attached to most of the other congregations.

When Bishop Cobbs came to Alabama, increased attention was given to this work. In 1846 nearly one-half the baptisms in the entire diocese were of Negroes, and for many years thereafter this proportion was approximated. In a single year, sixty-eight Negro children were baptized in St. David's Church, Dallas County. In the ensuing year Mobile, Demopolis, Uniontown, and Faunsdale reported one hundred and fourteen baptisms of Negroes. In Livingston, twenty were baptized in a twelve-month. In Eutaw, the following year, thirty-six were baptized. In Huntsville, in 1854, fifty-one were baptized; and in Faunsdale, the year after, forty-two. In single years Cahaba reported the baptism of twenty-two Negro infants, Uniontown thirty-two, and Lowndesboro fifty-seven. In 1860 two hundred and thirteen Negroes were baptized in the diocese. Very incomplete records show that the total of Negro baptisms of Bishop Cobbs' episcopate was sixteen hundred, of which about three hundred were of adults.

The number of confirmations as far less, for the very good reason that many proved themselves after baptism to be unfit for admission to the higher privileges of the Church; whilst the caution and thorough instruction necessitated by the weak moral character of the candidates discouraged many more from persevering to the end. Yet that much good and effective work was done among them is evident from the number of Negro communicants towards the close of the period. They had grown from fewer than fifty in 1845 to more than one hundred and fifty. They formed exclusively the congregations of the Good Shepherd, in Mobile, and St. John's-in-the-Wilderness, in Russell County. They formed a considerable part of the congregations at Tuskaloosa, where they worshipped in a chapel built for their use, and at Spring Hill, in Mobile County. At Selma alone of the larger congregations, nothing was done for the Negro; this parish having had, in all its history, only one Negro communicant."

Ch. 6: Decay of the Negro Work

p. 197-8: "Under the old regime it had been possible to give the slaves frequent religious ministrations, and many a slave-holder had gladly made provision for their spiritual and moral instruction. But now the ex-slaves would take neither their politics nor their religion from their former owners. Northern politicians and renegade Alabamians initiated them into the mysteries of political economy. Preachers of their own color made broad for them the strait and narrow way. Every attempt made by the clergy that had formerly visited them, preached to them, and administered to them the Sacraments, was now met with that disingenuousness which has ever characterized the response of the freedman to the approaches of the whites.

The few faithful Negroes that clung to the teaching and the communion of the Church in preference to hearing the ranting ululation of sensual enthusiasts were ostracized by their race, and

suffered all the social trials that went with medieval excommunication. They were regarded as heathen and traitors. In health they had no communication with their own people. In sickness they received no succor from their own kinsfolk. In death hirelings of their own race performed the offices that affection refused. Some endured to the end a martyrdom as real as that of the early Christians. But most wearied after a time, and went with their people.

The Church in Alabama yielded only to necessity in abandoning for a time her efforts to evangelize the Negro. There were lips to speak so long as there were ears to hear, and long after there were hearts to feel. It must be confessed that the laity did not evince any wild enthusiasm. To any reasonable distance they would follow the rector's lead, but they themselves would not lead. When in 1866, it was proposed that the convention should, in its corporate capacity, adopt some authoritative plan for the furtherance of Christian work among the Negroes, the laity flatly, though in parliamentary language, refused to have part or parcel in the matter as a diocesan movement."

p. 199-200: "The General Convention attempted to assist the Southern Bishops, before they asked for assistance, by establishing the 'Freedmen's Commission,' but the Commission rendered assistance impossible by suggesting at the outset, that the Church's work among the Negroes pass from the Bishops' jurisdiction and be entrusted to other agencies. This schism-breeding proposition was promptly and forcibly rejected by Bishop Wilmer

As early as 1867 the many congregations of Negroes had dwindled to two – the Church of the Good Shepherd, Mobile, and Faunsdale Chapel, on the plantation of the Rev. William A. Stickney, in Marengo County. Occasionally a solitary Negro communicant was found in white congregations, but the only aggressive work attempted, except in the two congregations mentioned above, was among the children. Even this did not long survive. In St. John's parish, Montgomery, Dr. H. M. Smead conducted a Sunday school of six white teachers and one hundred and twenty Negro pupils; but in face of the parental and social influences that were moulding the pupils' character all through the week, the difficulties and discouragements were too many, and the fruits of an hour's influence and teaching once a week were too few and insignificant, to warrant a continuance of the attempt. When, in addition to these discouragements, intermeddling Negro politicians went about proclaiming that the school was simply a hot bed of horrible Democratic sedition, the project was doomed. After two years of faithful labor the entire corps of workers retired from the field.

p. 200-1: In the 'Canebrake' of Hale, Perry, Dallas, and Marengo counties, the Rev. William A. Stickney fought a losing fight, single-handed, for nearly twenty years. Mr. Stickney was a large land-owner; it was his property that gave the name to the present town of Faunsdale. On his plantation he had built, at a cost of twenty-five hundred dollars, a neat chapel for the use of those who, at first his slaves, were now his tenants. . . . upon his own plantation, when the congregations began to decrease Mr. Stickney refused to renew the lease of his tenants except with the stipulation that they should regularly attend public services in the chapel. With the negroes it was one thing to make this contract, and another to keep it. With those who kept the contract it was one thing to come and another to worship. Very soon the ministerial proprietor of the chapel ceased the attempt to make the Negroes worship the Almighty by contract.

But this failure did not quench his ardor. With the help of the women of his family he began a day-school for the children that were too young to work in the fields. Only a two-hour session was held, and the instruction was entirely oral and sugar-coated."

p. 204-5: "The congregation of the chapel of the Good Shepherd [Mobile] gradually melted away and sought the companionship of their own people. From fifty communicants the number dwindled to nine.

The separate organization was dissolved, the building was sold for a few hundred dollars, and the handful of communicants became members of Trinity parish.

So among the children of Montgomery, the farmhands of the Canebrake, and the literate of Mobile, the Church's attempts failed utterly and completely, and in 1882 not one of the old organized negro congregations was to be found in the Diocese of Alabama."

Ch. 7: Ethiopia's Uplifted Hands

p. 207: "Years passed. Social equality came not to the Black. Neither did he long retain his political superiority. The rightful owners of the State drove out of power the dishonest carpet-baggers and his unscrupulous black tools, and put a stop to the fearful knavery that was bankrupting the commonwealth. After a while the negro learned that legislation could no longer give him his daily bread, and that henceforth he must earn in the sweat of his face what bread he did not steal. Then he turned to his old master. The former confidence between them was gone, but there was between them a bond that gave hope of better things in days to come. If the ex-slave would not follow from love, he would follow because of the loaves and fishes. He had learned where his best interests lay. From necessity he had learned humility. It was now possible to edify his without puffing him up. "

p. 208: "Finally, at what was deemed an opportune time, a new beginning was made in Mobile. It was in 1882 – the year that saw the death of the last Black Belt congregation. The remnant of the old congregation of the Good Shepherd formed the nucleus. The clergy and the Bishop bore the entire burden of the attempt. They did not receive the co-operation of the laity; they neither asked nor expected it; for the laymen of Mobile, some of them that were interested in ecclesiastical and benevolent work, were already doing what they could for the numerous hospitals and widows' and orphans' homes in the city.

The father of the revived mission work among the Negroes of Alabama was the Rev. J. S. Johnston, who had become rector of Trinity Church, Mobile, in 1880. . . . On the afternoon of November 19, 1882, he brought the Bishop to a hired room where he met the few members of the old organization. Steps towards reorganization were taken then and there. On the following Friday the Rev. Chester Newell, hearing of the proposed undertaking, gave the Bishop a lot at Kushla, a small neighboring village, the proceeds of sale, (ultimately about \$300) to be applied to the erection of a new church of the Good Shepherd. With about twelve hundred dollars available (given by friends in New York) the building was begun. So soon as work actually commenced, help came from outside sources. With a year six thousand dollars had been expended in the purchase of the ground, the erection of church, rectory, and school-house, and the purchase of suitable furniture. The most liberal contributors to the support of the school, then and thereafter, were Mr. William Butler Duncan, of New York, and the Rev. Dr. Saul, of Philadelphia. The day-school was named in honor of the latter. A Negro man became lay-reader and held services. Mr. Johnston preached regularly and frequently. At the end of the year there were fourteen communicants and six candidates for confirmation, a day-school of thirty-nine pupils, and a Sunday school of one hundred."

p. 210-12: "Mr. Pierce [the Rev. A Wallace Pierce, son of the Bishop of Arkansas] took charge in May, 1885. . . . he gave himself entirely and unreservedly to the work, living in the rectory and going in and out among the Negroes with as much freedom as if he were a missionary in Darkest Africa – perchance with more. On account of thus placing himself on the social plane of his congregation he soon met with several rebuffs from former friends. In order to prevent possible repetitions of such disagreeable incidents he cut himself off entirely from the society of his own race, abjured diocesan meetings, and was approached by individual clergymen with great difficulty. His doctrine was as high as his ritual was elaborate, and his self-sacrifice was carried far beyond necessity and the highest wisdom. But whatever

it was possible to do for the welfare of his people he did, and for seven years he gave every energy of body, mind, and soul to the material and spiritual advancement of his congregation. . . . In 1892 Mr. Pierce moved to another sphere of labor.

Mr. Pierce was succeeded by the Rev. Joseph L. Berne, who conducted the services along the lines pursued by his predecessor, but adopted other methods of pastoral care. The change did not prove of advantage to the work. Congregations dwindled week by week, the Sunday-school fell off two-thirds, and few of the pupils in day-school and Sunday-school came to confirmation. In 1896 it was determined that the prosperity, almost the continuance, or the work demanded the ministrations of a clergyman who could enter into his people's mode of thought. In that year a Negro priest, the Rev. James J. N. Thompson, took charge. Subsequent growth has been encouraging, the communicants having been increased in a single year by twenty-five and the parishioners by one hundred per cent.

It had never been the bishop's desire to attempt the organization of Negro congregations in the rural districts. He contended that the only reasonably hopeful fields were the cities and larger towns, where, as with whites so with blacks, the mind is more open to conviction and to the formation of new habits. Yet for many years no other place followed Mobile's lead; no other place, because no other clergyman. Not until 1891 was the second Negro congregation in Alabama founded – that of St. Mark's, Birmingham. The Rev. J. A. Van Hoose fathered the work, and its success has been due to his own personal interest. This work is still in the experimental stage, but in the past is the criterion of the future the wisdom of its methods and the energy manifested in their application make sure a success equal at least to that achieved in Mobile. Valuable gifts have been made, and a large brick building for an industrial school is completed. The entire property owned by St. Mark's mission, Birmingham, is valued at sixteen thousand dollars. That of the mission of the good Shepherd, Mobile, is valued at twelve thousand dollars."

S. Albert Kennington, *From the Day of Small Things: the Story of Trinity Church Mobile, 1845-1995*. Mobile, 1996.

p. 94-95: "In his continuing concern for the Church's ministry to Negroes, Bishop Wilmer found the Rev. Mr. Johnston to be his champion. In 1882, Trinity's Rector addressed the convention on the subject:

That the vindication of its claim to be a Church, and not a sect, largely rests upon the action we take in this matter. If we are, in fact, as we are generally supposed to be, the rich folks' sect, then we freely grant that the question has no standing in this assembly. But if we are, indeed, a branch of the Catholic Church of Christ, then we shirk this duty at the peril of losing the presence of the Spirit of God among us. If these are Christ's lost sheep, and we are the representatives of Christ, to do His work, how can we expect blessings from Him whilst neglecting His poor, lying at our doors, like another Lazarus, covered with wounds and bruises and putrefying sores? No Church ever had such an opportunity of demonstrating the truth of its Catholicity, as this church now has; and if it fails, it will justly entitle itself to the scorn of those whom it has practically unchurched by its claims to be a Catholic Church – for two Catholic Churches cannot exist at the same time in the same place.

He then outlined a plan by which the diocese might renew this work. Bishop Wilmer also spoke on this matter to the convention. He recalled the rejection of the Church by many former slaves. He acknowledged his unwillingness to use the Northern based Protestant Episcopal Freedman's commission

because it would not accept oversight by Southern bishops in its early Reconstruction era work. He also spoke of his own difficulties in adjusting to the new reality of emancipated blacks. But for him, the time of adjusting was over, and the church was called to take up its ministry to all people.

On November 19, 1882, Bishop Wilmer noted in his diary that he met in the evening with the scattered flock of the Church of the Good Shepherd in a hired room and with the aid of the Rev. Mr. Johnston, he took measures for the reorganization of a congregation of the colored people of Mobile. In later years, the Rev. Mr. Johnston would be remembered as the person most responsible for the effective resumption of the Episcopal Church's ministry among blacks.

Walter C. Whitaker, *Richard Hooker Wilmer, Second Bishop of Alabama, a Biography*. Philadelphia, 1907.

Ch. 12: The Bishop and the Negro

p. 236-7: "Early in the summer of 1883 the Board of Managers of General Missions invited Bishop Wilmer to address the General convention, sitting as the Board of Missions, at its coming session in Philadelphia in the following October. Meanwhile, upon call from Bishop Green of Mississippi, Chancellor of the University of the South, a conference on the relations of the Church to the Colored People of the South was held at Sewanee from July 25th to July 28th. . . . More than fifty speeches were made, some of them of remarkable eloquence . . . Utterance was given to the most widely varying views as to what action, if any, as expedient; but there was entire unanimity of opinion in regard to the forming of separate and independent organizations for the black people. 'There can be but one fold and one chief shepherd for all the people in any field of Ecclesiastical designation,' they said. 'It is entirely inexpedient, both on grounds of Ecclesiastical polity, and also of a due consideration of the interests of all concerned, to establish any separate, independent Ecclesiastical organization for the colored people dwelling within the territory of or constituted Jurisdictions.' But they recommended to the General Convention a Canon 'Of Missionary Organizations within Constituted Episcopal Jurisdictions,' in which provision was made for a separate convocational organization of the Negro Churchmen, under the presidency of an Archdeacon or other appointee of the Bishop, and for the complete separation of the clergy list of such organization from that of the diocesan organization, unless the Diocesan Convention should make special provision for their admission into union with the Diocesan Convention.

Bishop Wilmer opposed this recommendation of the Conference with all his might because it introduced (needlessly, as he thought) the objectionable feature of class legislation. He might have favored separation on the ground of incapacity and ignorance, he said, but not on that of color. . . . He did assert, what was a notorious act, that there were multitudes of white people in some of our states who, in intelligence, education, and manners, were even inferior to that class of colored people who were prepared to enter the communion of this Church. If a separate organization was desired it must be, he asserted, an organization for the ignorant and unintelligent of all colors.

On the merits of the question considered in the abstract there can be no doubt that the Bishop's contention was sound. But it is a fact that divisions on grounds other than of ideal right have existed in the Church from the time when St. Peter was set to preach to the Circumcision and St. Paul to the Uncircumcision. . . . It was a fact that Southern men would have nothing to do with a church which allowed an increasing proportion of negroes in her Councils. It was another fact that the negroes did not care for membership in an organization in which they were barely tolerated and plainly not wanted. And, in fact, it was not of the essence of the Gospel that negroes should sit in Council with white men. The Sewanee Conference accepted these facts as they were, and sought to preserve apostolic fellowship of the negro through the episcopate and not through the diocesan councils.

So the resolution was adopted by an all but unanimous vote of the bishops, presbyters, and laymen present. Bishop Wilmer stood absolutely alone.

p. 239: His own position, as expressed in a resolution which received no support, was 'that it would be contrary to the mind of Christ, inconsistent with true Catholicity, and detrimental to the best interests of all concerned, to provide any separate and independent organization or legislation for the peoples embraced within the communion of this Church.'

Though he stood alone in this Conference, Bishop Wilmer found that his position was that of the majority of the General Convention which met in the following October; for the Convention declined to enact any such canon as the Conference had recommended.

Had the Bishop, in his address before the General convention, confined himself to the one point at issue he would have met with general commendation, at least for the broadness of vision and tenderness of sympathy. But he was not slow to express other and quite as positive convictions about the negro's incapacity for a separate ecclesiastical organization, an incapacity of both body and headship. 'they cannot do without our pilotage in their present state, and the wisest among them know it; while the ambitious are willing to risk all for their self-advancement. Strange it is that men who would not risk themselves in business and the arts of life without the headship of the white man will create churches and ministries, and form schemes of doctrine and discipline, without the consciousness of inadequacy to such a task!'"

Richard H. Wilmer, *The Recent Past from a Southern Point of View; Reminiscences of a Grandfather*. New York, 1887.

p. 48-9: "I say noting in vindication of slavery in its origin. It was a foul wrong, shared alike by North and South, ad to be repented of by both sections with works meet for repentance. It was a foul wrong to sell Joseph into Egypt, and afterwards to enslave his descendants there. Yet out of this wrong the wonder-working providence of God wrought good unto Israel. So may it be in the case of Africa and America! I say nothing regretfully of the fact –not the manner – of the negro's emancipation. I am doing, as I have always done, all in my power to help him in every manner. I am alike a debtor to the bond and the free. But I do maintain, and that without fear of reasonable contradiction, that the negro's present civilized condition and capability is due to this cause, -- that he was brought closely into relations with the white men – and the best white men – in his state of servitude. The closer the relations, -- as in the family , -- the more marked the advancement! Here is a fact that should be deeply pondered by those who love and seek the truth; viz., that the slaveholding population of the Southern States were, for the most part, men of standing and culture, imbued oftentimes with a chivalry of spirit which forbade unkindness to the slave who lived under his roof, who ate of his bread, and hearkened unto his voice. A true Southern man will not be unjust to his dog."