

Contested Autonomy: Black Denominational Debates in the Early Jim Crow Era

Matthew Harper

At the 1894 New York Annual Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AME Zion) Church, Bishop James Walker Hood ordained a holiness preacher, Julia Foote, to the office of deacon. The ordination of the church's first woman deacon sparked debate within the denomination but no organized opposition. The next year, the denomination celebrated its second ordained female deacon, Mary J. Small. When Bishop Calvin Pettey ordained Small as an elder (the Methodist equivalent of pastor or priest) at the Philadelphia and Baltimore Conference in 1898, the move made headlines. Small's ordination prompted a heated exchange in the pages of the denominational newspaper.¹

Not all celebrated the denomination's pioneering move in women's ordination, but those who did saw it as evidence that Black Christians could reach fuller expressions of the Christian gospel in racially separate churches than they could in integrated ones. Bishop Cicero R. Harris told readers of the denominational newspaper that Small's ordination "alone evinces the value of a Negro Church in removing men from circumstances in which Negroes are overawed and overshadowed by a so-called 'superior race.'" Freed from the confining environment of a majority-white church, the AME Zion could pursue gender equality. Small's ordination, Harris assured his readers, would not have taken place in a church run by white men.² He had a point. The Methodist Episcopal (ME) Church, the northern Methodist denomination run by white men but with Black congregations and clergy, would not even permit women to attend annual conferences as lay delegates until the 1920s.³

Like Harris, Carter G. Woodson, the first academic Black church historian, celebrated the racial independence of "the Negro Church," arguing in 1930 that it was "the only institution which the

Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation, Vol. 33, Issue 2, pp. 248–281, ISSN: 1052-1151, electronic ISSN: 1533-8568. © The Author(s) 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on The Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the Cambridge University Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.cambridge.org/about-us/rights-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/rac.2023.15>.

race controls." His term "the Negro Church" made many different Black churches, including sometimes those within majority-white denominations, seem like a single autonomous institution. Woodson's use of the term came from his and others' "aspirations for the cultural and racial unity of a people," as Laurie Maffly-Kipp has argued. Woodson, W. E. B. Du Bois, and others spoke of "the Negro Church" to emphasize its racial independence and to downplay differences between Black religious traditions. White observers and historians assumed that a shared racial identity outweighed and diminished denominational differences among Black Protestants. In recent decades, historians have shied away from the notion of "the Black Church," highlighting instead the diversity of Black religious traditions.⁴ Scholars have continued, however, to presuppose the racial independence of Black churches and separate them from discussions of white denominations. They treat racial autonomy as the starting point for a discussion of Black denominations, not the heart of the debate between them. The effect has been to assume, and therefore fail to investigate, the racial autonomy of Black churches.⁵

We miss much about Black religious history if we assume that Black churches' resistance to racial subjugation started with a settled and uncontested racial autonomy. On the contrary, Black churches throughout the nineteenth century kept open a lively forum about the virtues and vices of such autonomy. This essay focuses on that forum among Black Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians in the late nineteenth century. When we investigate their denominational identity and competition, we see how carefully Black Christians weighed the perils and promise of working alongside white Christians. The very nature of denominationalism separated Black churches from one another and brought them closer to white churches. That is, denominations divided Black Christians and prevented them from operating as a single force or institution; denominations also allied Black Christians with white Christians of the same tradition. The resulting interracial cooperation, though prized by many Black Christians, usually threatened Black autonomy.

Was a church's racial independence something worth celebrating, as Harris did, or the regrettable result of white supremacy? Did racially separate churches advance the interests of the gospel or of Black Americans? Answers varied, within and across Black denominations. Debates took place in church conventions, in the pages of denominational newspapers, and in the publications of denominational printing houses. In all these arenas, clergy spoke more than did lay members and men far outnumbered women—Mary J. Small's ordination notwithstanding. So, while women and

laity voiced their opinions, their voices were often marginalized when denominational debates became heated, even when those debates hinged on the importance Black churches gave to women and lay people. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has described the Black church as a “interstitial space” or public forum in which Black Americans could critique the racism of Jim Crow and Black women could challenge the subordination of women. Even as the racial autonomy of Black churches allowed for such a forum, that autonomy was itself often the topic of debate. Nicole Turner has argued that many of the characteristics of Black church life which scholars have tended to treat as fixed or static were, in fact, contested and developing in the period following emancipation. Among these features were the political activity or the leadership of male clergy.⁶ We could add Black autonomy to that list.

Debates over racial independence were foundational to Black churches, a part of the conversation when Black Methodists and Baptists began forming independent churches in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Their argument for Black autonomy well preceded the Jim Crow period. In both North and South, before and after emancipation, it was Black worshippers who took the initiative to leave majority-white churches, well before law or custom required them to do so.

These debates looked different with the arrival of the Jim Crow era in the late nineteenth century. For a time, historians seemed comfortable in the conclusion that religious life split racially on its own before Jim Crow legislation mandated segregation elsewhere. James Bennett challenged that consensus by noting that interracial worship continued in New Orleans beyond the end of Reconstruction. The process to segregate the city’s Methodists and Catholics happened slowly across the late nineteenth century and with considerable debate and resistance. Cultural historians have shown that there “is no tidy or clear answer to the question of when the white South imposed Jim Crow.” Some Jim Crow laws and customs were established in the antebellum North; some were in place at emancipation; others did not take shape until the 1930s.⁷ Similarly, Bennett argues that we cannot conclude that church segregation was an uncontested fact in the decades after emancipation. The chronology in New Orleans suggests that religious segregation and legal Jim Crow followed a similar if messy timeline.⁸

As Bennett found in New Orleans, Black church debates about racial independence and segregation were not limited to those churches’ founding periods. This essay follows those debates throughout the nineteenth century, focusing on the slow arrival of

the Jim Crow era, from the 1870s to 1910. Southern emancipation, the rise and fall of Reconstruction, international ecumenical movements, and Jim Crow segregation all changed the way Black church leaders approached their denomination's stance on racial autonomy and interracial cooperation.

"The Black Church"

Tracing battles fought within and between church denominations, as this essay does, fell out of favor among historians shortly after World War II. Russell Richey and Robert Bruce Mullin explain that historians began to view denominational history as "quaint, parochial, and evocative of the long-standing but now passé Protestant hegemony." Religious historians of the late twentieth century pointed to phenomena that transcended denominations as the real crux of American religion. They argued that broad movements like the Social Gospel, evangelicalism, or civil rights revealed more of the character of religious groups than did petty institutional differences. Coincidentally, African American history experienced its boon in religious studies at the same time that denominational history was on its way out. This confluence of these historiographical trends guaranteed that there would be no heyday of Black denominational studies. The significant differences among Black churches on issues like racial autonomy and interracialism remained hidden behind descriptions of "the Black Church" that deemphasized denominations.⁹

Despite excellent studies of individual Black denominations, it is still possible to hear discussions on Black church history without reference to denominational distinctives.¹⁰ Curiously, even volumes dedicated to a revival of studies on denominationalism tend to lump Black denominations together and emphasize their racial separateness from whites in the same tradition. Books like Nathan Hatch's *The Democratization of Christianity* and Keith Harper's edited volume *American Denominational History* feature chapters on Baptists, Methodists, Mormons, Congregationalists, and Black Protestants. Which of these, we might ask, is not a denomination?¹¹

Perhaps, we might argue, it makes sense for historians to treat Black denominations as a group and separately from whites.¹² Much of what gave Black religion "significance," as Eddie Glaude recently explained, was the context of white supremacy; that is, Black people practiced their religion in resistance to racial subjugation, making that religion distinctive from white groups within the same tradition.¹³ But the degree to which Black people practiced their

religion separately could in fact be what Black churches understood as their denominational distinctiveness, as Harris's editorial illustrates. Bishop Harris and his colleagues in the AME Zion emphasized their church's racial independence not to downplay differences among Black denominations but to do the opposite, to highlight those differences. Some Black churches were completely independent from white influence and able to pursue developments like women's ordination, they argued, and others were not.

C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya identified Black churches' varying degrees of racial autonomy as the dialectic between ethnic particularism and Christian universalism. "While all of the historic Black churches have maintained a universal openness to all races," they wrote, the churches differ in the degree to which they understood themselves as racial institutions. Nevertheless, Lincoln and Mamiya excluded Black congregations in majority-white denominations from their study of "the Black Church," eliminating from view the debate Black churches had over their racial autonomy.¹⁴

Nowhere was that debate more heated than between Independent African Methodists, like those in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and AME Zion connections, and Black Methodists who remained within or sponsored by white-controlled churches, like Black congregations in the ME Church and members of the Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church, a Black southern denomination sponsored by the white Methodist Episcopal Church, South (ME South). Independent Black Methodists accused Black members of the ME and CME of succumbing to white paternalism and control; those in interracial denominations, like Black worshippers in the ME Church, called the AME and AME Zion "race churches" guilty of drawing the color line.¹⁵

The debate raged in other traditions as well. David Komline argues that Catholic missionaries lobbied for separate Black parishes in the late nineteenth century not to capitulate to white worshippers' prejudice but to appeal to would-be Black worshippers. Without separate Black churches, Catholic evangelists could not compete with Protestants.¹⁶ Presbyterians raised the same issue when they debated whether to put Black congregations in their own non-geographic synods or to fold them into the local synods, alongside white congregations. In Baptist churches, too, the debate sparked controversy, as we will see in the story of a "Plan of Cooperation" that, despite its name, caused a church split.

As Black denominational leaders discussed segregation and racial independence, their writing made clear one thing. Few supported racial separateness for its own sake but only in so much as it undermined racial subordination. If and when they thought

separateness promoted subordination, they readily condemned it. These debates over church segregation underline for religious historians what Black activists at the time said repeatedly: Jim Crow segregation was about subordination, not separation. Those ministers who supported racially separate churches while opposing Jim Crow segregation were opposed to Black subordination within a white hierarchy. Moreover, they thought Black subordination within white churches would hinder them from doing important gospel work, like evangelizing Africa or ordaining women. They wanted to make advances that white-led churches were not prepared to make. In contrast, many Black Christians, including those in the ME Church and some Black Presbyterians, found it hard to understand how more segregation in churches would help mitigate the subordinating effects of segregation elsewhere. Instead, they fought against caste within their own denominational hierarchies.

The Value of Racial Independence

Women's ordination was not the first occasion for Black Methodists to reflect on the value of racial independence. The desire for racial independence, as a response to racial hierarchy, gave birth to nearly all Black denominations in the United States. Leaders of AME and AME Zion churches sacralized their departure from white-controlled churches in the antebellum North. Bishop Hood called the formation of independent denominations in the early nineteenth century "a most remarkable movement, and, we repeat, unparalleled in the history of the Christian Church."¹⁷ God used their negative experience in white churches to "form them into a people for himself—that he might make them an elect race—that he might, through them, make himself known to the nations of the earth," Hood preached.¹⁸ Underneath the "rough and unchristian" treatment that Black worshippers received from their white brothers and sisters "was a divine purpose": to create independent institutions where Black Americans could become a people, separate, distinct, and self-reliant.¹⁹ Bishop George Clinton, also of the AME Zion, gave the most credit for race advancement to the church's "separate and distinctly racial" organization.²⁰

Bishop Benjamin Tanner of the AME Church claimed that among his church's most important successes was its ability to remove Black Americans from "servility" and give them instead "consecrated manhood."²¹ His fellow bishop, Daniel Payne, wrote in his 1891 denominational history that, before separation, "the colored man was a mere hearer . . . a mere subject"; but racial independence

"[threw] us upon our own resources and made us tax our own mental powers both for government and support." The success of the AME Church, Payne argued, silenced the slander that Black Americans lacked the character or resources to do for themselves. The separation, Payne continued, gave "the man of color. . . an independence of character which he could neither hope for nor attain unto, if he had remained as the ecclesiastical vassal of his white brethren."²² It was exactly that independence of character which Bishop Harris claimed had allowed the AME Zion Church to ordain women.

Racial independence held similar importance in the South. In the antebellum period, a few independent urban Black congregations attracted hundreds of worshippers, but most Black southern worshippers did not find independence until emancipation. Switching churches was among Black southerners' first political acts in freedom. As Joe Richardson and Reginald Hildebrand have argued, when former slaves affiliated with a particular denomination or chose one preacher over another, they had begun the process of defining themselves as a free people. At emancipation, Black worshippers began leaving white-led congregations. By 1866, two-thirds of southern Black Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians had left southern white denominations. The separation was, to many whites, completely unanticipated. White southerners experienced shock and confusion as they watched Black church members leave in droves.²³ To Black southerners, however, the move came as no surprise. Their desire to separate from white churches extended back into the antebellum period; many had worshipped independently in secret.²⁴ Hood likened the emancipation-era separation as an escape from slavery itself. In those churches, Black members' "chains" were fastened "tightly;" they were "oppressed and fettered." "We cannot wonder," Hood mused, that when slavery ended so did Black membership in white churches.²⁵ For those independent African Methodists who shared Hood's assessment, it looked like Black southerners who joined the ME Church or the CME Church had experienced an incomplete emancipation.

Joseph C. Price, an AME Zion minister, made this point explicitly by defining what counted as a independent Black church: "those religious bodies that are not owned, controlled, or connected with white organizations."²⁶ His definition excluded the ME Church, the CME, and others. "The independent church work of the Negro represents one of the best examples of the self-directing and self-reliant organizations of the Race," he boasted. Black believers who remained in white-controlled denominations, these authors worried, would be forced to accept racial subordination. Payne wrote that "none but *men robbed of true manhood* could endure" the

contempt and prejudice of the ME Church. Everyone who actually believed the scriptural admonition to show no partiality, Payne argued, “withdrew from the Methodist Episcopal Church.”²⁷ Staying in majority-white churches, those in the AME and AME Zion said often, meant condoning a racial caste system.

Racial autonomy also allowed Black churches to do what white churches could not. Women’s ordination made a compelling case for that argument. Bishop Harris, in celebrating the AME Zion ordination of the Reverend Mrs. Small, downplayed the controversy. Small had already been ordained as a deacon in 1895, and had been licensed to preach in 1892. Those who objected to women’s leadership in the church should have voiced their objection much earlier, Harris insisted. Moreover, he continued, gender discrimination in the AME Zion Church had been put to rest in 1876 when the General Conference voted to strike the word *male* from the qualifications for holding office, a move the AME Church made in 1872. The striking of the word *male* mirrored the kind of gender-neutral language that women’s suffragists had wanted in a gender-inclusive Fifteenth Amendment, Martha Jones has argued. Not all Black political organizers during Reconstruction favored women’s suffrage, but some did.²⁸ Independent Black Methodists were no doubt influenced by the historical moment and from women suffrage advocates in their own organizations. By 1898, Harris argued, women’s ordination was “a logical outcome.” It was also a biblical outcome. “In Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female,” he quoted from Paul’s letter to the Galatians: “If it means anything, it is that males and females stand on equal footing in Christ’s Church.” So, in one way, Harris did not think Small’s ordination warranted the “considerable attention” it had attracted. From his perspective, it was logical and biblical, and people should have known it was coming.²⁹

But, of course, it was a big deal. A long line of Black Methodist women preachers had fought for a place within the denominational hierarchy. Jarena Lee and Amanda Berry Smith, among others, faced censure and ostracism from the AME Zion and AME as they sought greater freedom for women to preach.³⁰ Smith recalled the ridicule from men in her local AME Church when she expressed a desire to but attend the General Conference in Nashville in 1872. The men assumed she wanted to attend to argue for women’s ordination. Smith, for her part, said “the thought of ordination had not once entered my mind, for I had received my ordination from Him, Who said, ‘Ye have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that might go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit might remain.’” Smith published her autobiography twenty years after the 1872 Conference and was pleased to report that many of the

opponents to women's ordination had changed their minds, though she remained "satisfied with the ordination that the Lord has given me."³¹ In the 1880s, the AME agreed to license women as preachers but prevented them from ordination as elders, despite having struck the word *male* from the qualifications for elder at the 1872 conference that Smith attended. In fact, the AME General Convention did not recognize the ordination of women as elders until 1948.

The AME Zion Church, only a few years prior to Small's ordination, prevented women from serving on conference committees.³² Eliza Ann Gardner, who had spearheaded fundraising for southern and overseas missions and then served as vice-president for the Woman's Home and Foreign Missionary Society, lambasted male ministers' resistance to women's leadership within the denomination. In an 1884 meeting, after touting her credentials as a Massachusetts abolitionist and temperance reformer, Gardner told the ministers: "I am so earnest for [Zion's] progress and success, that I could not let my hands hang down if I wanted to. . . . but if you commence to talk about the superiority of men, if you persist in telling us that after the fall of man we were put under your feet and that we are intended to be subject to your will, we cannot help you in New England one bit."³³ Gardner and other officers of the Woman's Home and Foreign Missionary Society complained that male ministers regarded even unordained women as threats to their authority. So perhaps it was disingenuous for Harris, in 1898, to register surprise at the controversy.

Harris made it sound as if all in the denomination saw the parallelism between race and gender equality. "Is it any wonder," he asked his readers, "that we recognize the fact that the same arguments which, as to equality of rights abolish the color line, would also abolish the sex line?" The move toward gender equality conformed to the church's historical attention to "human rights and Christian liberty." Eliza Gardner had made the same point, arguing that if women's rights constituted a heresy, then earlier radical movements like temperance and antislavery counted as heresy as well.³⁴ Mary Church Terrell of the National Association of Colored Women made the same point when Black men opposed women's suffrage: "Even if I believed that women should be denied the right of suffrage, wild horses could not drag such an admission from my pen or my lips, for this reason: precisely the same arguments used to prove that the ballot be withheld from women are advanced to prove that colored men should not be allowed to vote."³⁵ Even if Harris exaggerated his church's support for women pastors, the denomination's long history of opposing slavery and racism had opened some church leaders to arguments for women's leadership.

In the same editorial, Harris also condemned southern states' move to segregate railways. It may seem hard to square Harris's celebration of the racial separateness of his church with his staunch opposition to the onset of Jim Crow segregation. How could Black ministers advance arguments for racial separation in one institution and against it in another? The answer lies in understanding the nature of Jim Crow segregation and Black American opposition to it. Jim Crow laws were about subordination, not separation. Wherever a clear hierarchy existed, laws and customs allowed for spaces to be physically integrated. For example, when a Black domestic servant worked in a white employer's home, intimate contact was routine. In the absence of such a hierarchy, when whites and Blacks shared the same role such as consumers or students, segregation prevented white and Black Americans from interacting as equals.³⁶ Harris and others objected to railway segregation not because they desired to sit next to white people but because they discerned Jim Crow segregation's true goal: to remind Black southerners of their place in the racial hierarchy.

As segregation hardened into law in the late nineteenth century, opponents identified the problem as *caste*, a system of vertical organization where races had defined roles and no upward mobility. It was not merely a problem of horizontal organization, with races kept distinct. Justice John Marshall Harlan, in his lone dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), recognized railway segregation as an attempt to use law to create a caste system in the United States, something he said the Constitution could not allow.³⁷ Two decades later, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), said it clearly: "The Association seeks to overthrow racial prejudice but its objective may be described as a fight against *caste*. Those who seek to separate the Negro from the rest of Americans are intent upon establishing a caste system in America and making of all Black men an *inferior caste*."³⁸ Earlier, when the Niagara Movement drafted what would become the NAACP's initial platform, the authors condemned not the existence of racially separate churches but moves within white or interracial churches to "segregate Black men to some outer sanctuary."³⁹ Caste could easily be a feature of multiracial organizations. In Bishop Harris's experience, racial subordination could come from both segregated railcars and integrated churches. He condemned both in the same editorial.

Bishop Hood, too, noted that Black Methodists in a majority-white church were powerless to make advances toward gender equality, or worse yet, they were taught to oppose it. He wrote, "The Methodist Episcopal Church is now agitated over the

question of admitting women as delegates to the General Conference. That question did not require an hour's debate with us." The AME Zion regularly admitted lay women delegates to annual conferences, "since there are generally more females than males in our churches." Hood boasted that women faced no official barriers to ministry or leadership within the AME Zion Church. On the local level, they served the church in numerous capacities, and the church's rules prevented no woman from ordination at any level—deacon, elder, or bishop. As he explained it, "Our idea is that we should not be hindered from using such instrumentalities as God is pleased to raise up, on account of sex." Hood underestimated the sexism women faced within his denomination. Yet for him the fact that women faced stiffer barriers within the ME Church only demonstrated the need for African Americans to form their own church organizations. They had to escape the discriminatory practices of white men.

The issue of women's ordination reinforced Hood's belief in the need for racially independent Black churches. Note that for Hood the ordination of Black women primarily pointed to the autonomy of Black men:

In Zion the Black minister has shown the height to which he can rise respecting the rights of women when he is where there is nothing to hinder him from following his best convictions. In his own institution he makes his own sentiment, thinks for himself, and takes his own responsibility, keeping pace with the best thought of the age in which he lives.⁴⁰

The same could not be said for Black men in the ME Church. There, Hood mourned, Black ministers had opposed the rights of women within church government. To Hood, the empowerment Black men experienced in the AME and AME Zion made them willing to empower Black women. Conversely, Black men willing to accept their own subordination in majority-white churches were more likely to subordinate Black women.

Hood gave other examples to demonstrate that white-run churches relegated Black Christians to positions of submission and dependence, truncating their spiritual growth.⁴¹ Reflecting on the failed attempts to elevate a Black man to bishop in the ME Church, Hood wrote in 1895, "The Methodist Episcopal Church is a poor soil in which to raise Black episcopal timber." To prove his point, he provided the example of an unnamed African American minister in the ME Church who reportedly belittled his race's intellectual achievements: "Only one reared in hopeless bondage to the idea of

the white man's superiority could exhibit such shameful ignorance of the excellencies of his own race." The unnamed man had talent, intellect, and culture, but, Hood regretted, "he belonged to the white Church, and the shadow of the white man was upon him so that he could not discern even his own brightness."⁴² His point was clear: only completely independent denominations removed African Americans from racial dependence and inferiority.

The Value of Interracial Cooperation

Other Black Methodists were not so quick to write off working with whites. From the earliest evangelical revivals, some evangelicals had hoped that the gospel would eradicate racial prejudice and create an intimate interracial community. As Mechal Sobel noted, "Virtually all eighteenth-century Baptist and Methodist churches were mixed churches, in which blacks sometimes preached to whites and in which whites and blacks witnessed together, shouted together, and shared ecstatic experiences." Early Methodism shared John Wesley's condemnation of slavery and of the aristocratic lifestyle of planters. Some hoped that the growth of revivals would deal a blow to divisions of both race and class. The first half of the nineteenth century was not kind to Methodists with those hopes. Southern white Methodists broke off in 1844 in defense of slavery. Northern white Methodists refused to admit Black ministers into their annual conferences. Even Black ministers like John Mars, who did not leave for the AME or AME Zion Church, acknowledged that white Methodists' refusal to accept Blacks as equals seriously hindered the work of the church among Black communities. Yet in the decades following emancipation, many Black Methodists were able once again to imagine a future where the end of racial hierarchy would erase the need for Black autonomy. Black Methodists in the AME, AME Zion, and CME repeatedly considered merging with white Methodist denominations. And Black worshippers in the ME Church defended their continued presence in the denomination even as they failed to secure equal rights and representation within the church. As historian Paul William Harris argued, "Black members of the M.E.C. held on to the belief that love can triumph over hate," despite how formidable an opponent racial caste proved to be.⁴³

During Reconstruction, the commitment of the ME Church to the full citizenship rights of the freedpeople led some independent African Methodists to consider a merger with their parent denomination. Because of the ME Church's substantial investments in southern Black schools and missions, it enjoyed considerable

support from southern Black worshippers, especially in cities such as New Orleans and Atlanta. Gilbert Haven, a white abolitionist who became an ME bishop in Atlanta in 1872, led the most progressive wing of the church. That wing, though not the whole church, advocated a radical racial equality; they moved to strike all racial distinctions from their bylaws and officer qualifications. Some ministers even openly advocated interracial marriage in the pages of the denominational newspaper.⁴⁴ Across the South, the ME Church organized biracial conferences, with white and Black congregations and white and Black clergy integrated at every level. The sincerity of Haven and others led some independent African Methodists to believe that an integrated Methodist church, without racial hierarchy, might be possible. Lucius Holsey, a founding bishop of the CME Church, was so surprised at the equal treatment he received at an ME camp meeting in 1875—"they forgot to look in our faces to see whether we were white or colored"—that he entertained the idea of unifying all Methodists regardless of race or denomination.⁴⁵

In 1868, Bishop-elect Singleton T. Jones of the AME Zion Church began negotiating with Haven about a possible merger of their two denominations. Jones was concerned about maintaining racial autonomy at the congregational level and racial parity among clergy. Bishop Haven promised that if such a consolidation took place, AME Zion bishops would receive proportional representation on the church's episcopal board and African Americans would have equal voice in all levels of church government, proportional to their numbers. Jones, delighted at the prospect, began arrangements to host the 1872 AME Zion Annual Convention in the same week and in the same city as the 1872 ME Annual Convention, in hopes that the two denominations could hammer out the details of the merger.⁴⁶

Jones's fellow bishops, however, remained suspicious of any union with the ME Church. These differing assessments caused a rift within the AME Zion Church, with Bishop Jones hosting an annual conference in New York adjacent to the ME conference and a majority of AME Zion bishops attending a different annual conference in Charlotte. It seems that a union between the two denominations was far less likely than Bishops Jones and Haven had hoped. Hood recalled twenty years after the proposed merger that he and the other bishops "fully realized that Bishop Haven could not secure for us what he desired."⁴⁷ As it turned out, Haven had been overly optimistic about his church's tolerance for racial equality.

In 1880, the AME Zion Episcopal Board issued a statement looking back on the possible merger in 1872 with sorrow. The bishops blamed themselves for "not guard[ing] our people sufficiently against being misled" by leaders of the ME Church; and

they blamed ME bishops for taking “advantage of the situation to proselyte our people.”⁴⁸ The fear and expectation of paternalism or second-class citizenship within a combined ME-AME Zion church drove AME Zion leaders away. The affair reminded Bishop Hood of his belief that Blacks needed independent Black churches. “The Methodist Episcopal Church has done a grand, a glorious, yea, a praiseworthy work, in its schools in the South,” he began with admiration. But the ME Church would not give Black bishops proportional representation, and without it, Hood and his fellow clerics would not “accept less than a full recognition of our Christian manhood.”⁴⁹

When some in the AME, too, considered merging with the ME Church, or at least changing their name to sound less race-specific, Martin Delaney, the passionate Black nationalist and Africa emigrationist, feared that the real motive was not Christian interracialism. He worried that Black Christians were ashamed of their African descent:

Why should the word “African” be dropped from our Church Connection; or, indeed, as some would advocate, even to drop the connection itself, and degradingly bow in subordination to another church government, the Methodist Episcopal Church? Has our Church connection existed just long enough, and we just simply learned enough and no more, to become ashamed of ourselves? Is this the foundation stone that our fathers laid for us in 1816? Is this all of manhood, womanhood and self-respect that we have inherited to bequeath to our children?⁵⁰

In a culture of white supremacy, it was all too easy for Black Americans to harbor feelings of shame and inferiority and to value all things white as somehow more legitimate. Whites in America, Delaney explained, had worked to associate the word *African* with all sorts of hideous connotations. To him, only distinctly racial organizations could counter these negative assumptions about the intellect and culture of African Americans. Were Black Christians to labor in majority-white churches, their accomplishments would be hidden. But in the AME or AME Zion, their achievements would proudly be labeled as African.

When the International Ecumenical Methodist conference met in London in 1881, Black Americans once again considered an organic interracial union. At the conference, delegates from the many branches of Methodism gathered to discuss a loosely held union (without institutional reorganization), a common hymnbook, and a Methodist catechism. Members of the AME committee that selected their delegates had the highest hopes for the conference, that it “would

break down caste and wipe out color lines.”⁵¹ The British Anti-Slavery Society and the Good Templars welcomed the Black American delegates, holding meetings where, according to the *London Times*, British speakers expressed “sympathy with the colored people of America in relation to the varied phases of ostracism to which they are subjected.”⁵² After one such meeting, AME Bishop John M. Brown said that if he lived in England, he would not belong to “a colored church.” Brown and others at the conference may have idealized race relations in Britain, but the positive visit allowed them to imagine a world without racial hierarchy. In such a world, he argued, separate Black churches would fail to serve their purpose. The editors of the *Christian Recorder* agreed and even noted the irony that the AME’s newspaper would desire their church to become unnecessary one day. “We belong to colored churches now,” the editor explained, “for the reason that the shadow of the past is not entirely off us.” In the not-too-distant future, he hoped that American Christians would cease investing in racially separate institutions.⁵³ Even Bishop Payne, in celebrating the AME’s founding, pointed to the temporary value of a racially separate church.⁵⁴

But it was the anticaste feelings of the white American delegates that moved Black Methodists the most. American delegates from white and Black Methodist bodies found themselves sitting beside each other, and dining, lodging, and mingling “on terms of equality.” When Joseph Price returned from London, he told a local conference of the AME Zion Church that “Our white American brethren, from both North and South, associated as freely with us over there as if they had always been used to it.” As delegates met and ate together, Price reported, “they did not seem to think about our color.” Hood left thinking the conference “a much more important meeting than I had any idea of.” In fact, he was so taken aback by the racial equality at the proceedings that he even spoke with southern white Methodists about an organic union between the ME South and the AME Zion, even though he had dismissed such a union with the more racially progressive ME Church just a few years prior. No one in the ME South or AME Zion acted on those talks, but the mere idea highlighted what an alternate universe the conference seemed to be.⁵⁵ The egalitarian impulses of the ecumenical conference sparked discussions of church unions, but realities back home soon put an end to talk of interracialism.

Those who hoped for an integrated church experienced a disappointment that mirrored the rise and fall of civil rights in the nation. Radical Reconstruction policies had defined Black freedom in ever-expansive terms. The Civil Rights Act of 1875 went one step

further, granting freedpeople the rights to labor, property, and legal redress, to what Hood called a "full recognition" of "our manhood." The landmark legislation, for which Black Americans lobbied for years, entitled "all persons . . . full and equal enjoyment" of public spaces, inns, theaters, and transportation. This "last act of abolition" was the high-water mark for federal protection of Black freedom, quickly followed by retreat.⁵⁶ As the nation ceded more control back to white southerners, the Supreme Court overturned the Civil Rights Act in 1883, and Black Methodists found it more difficult to imagine a context for a fully integrated church. What had seemed possible in the 1870s, an organic interracial union among Methodists, by the 1880s seemed far-fetched.

Two key issues tested the ME Church's commitment to equality: whether to allow the racial segregation of annual conferences and whether to appoint Black bishops. To many observers, the ME Church retreated from racial egalitarianism at the same time occupying Reconstruction forces abandoned Black southerners. In 1876, the same year Congress agreed to end Reconstruction, the ME Church General Conference voted to permit the racial segregation of local annual conferences, much to the frustration of Haven and other progressives.⁵⁷ Almost all congregations on Sunday morning were segregated, white churches with white preachers and Black churches with Black preachers. The ministers, however, belonged to local conferences, called annual conferences. Should those conferences keep a geographic division, with the result that Black and white ministers shared local governance as equals? Or should each area have separate conferences for white and Black ministers?

As Haven saw it, the larger denomination lacked the moral courage to tell local whites to submit to an integrated church and, in particular, to Black clergy in leadership positions over whites.⁵⁸ Randolph Foster, a white ME bishop, argued in favor of the local option to segregate, saying in 1875, "A colored congregation has a right to say, we don't want white people in our Churches." The *Christian Recorder*, the organ of the AME Church, took issue with Foster's choice of example. It had been white congregations refusing fellowship with people of color, not the other way around, that drove the conversation in the ME Church. White Methodists in Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia were the ones who first asked for separate conferences in 1872, and by 1884, all but three local annual conferences had chosen to separate. White missionary John Braden said, "The divisionists have the popular feeling of the whole South against the colored man in their favor."⁵⁹ Hiram Revels, the first Black man to serve in the U.S. Senate and a delegate at the 1876 ME

General Conference, saw the separation as “based on the detested principle of caste.”⁶⁰ In the AME, too, Revels saw this form of segregation not as a form of Black autonomy but as a way to subordinate and exclude, or in the words of the Apostle James, to “despise the poor.”⁶¹ Even a denomination that had chosen Black autonomy over interracialism expressed outrage that an interracial church would segregate out Black ministers.

As radical egalitarians like Haven lost ground in the ME Church to so-called pragmatists like Foster, Black members asked whether interracialism necessarily meant the acceptance of subordination and inequality. Their question came to a head in the campaign for a Black bishop. From 1872 to 1904, the ME Church practiced a kind of double-speak. At each general conference, the largely white delegates passed a resolution calling for a bishop of African descent and affirming that race barred no one from the board of bishops. Yet those same general conference delegates each year elected only white bishops. At the same 1876 General Conference that permitted local segregation, Moses Adams argued that the church’s Black membership was so large that it demanded African American representation at the highest levels of the denominational leadership. In the debate that followed, lines became blurred. Many of those who had opposed the 1876 local segregation option felt compelled to stand by their commitment to a church without distinctions of color. Such a commitment meant that the church could not allot leadership positions by race. Yet without a movement to elect a Black man to the office of bishop, the church seemed unlikely to do so. Any Black bishop would have authority over a geographical region and not a specific racial group. Too few whites in the church could tolerate a Black man exercising authority over white churches and white clergy. As Adams made clear in his resolution, the unstated but effective cap on Black leadership at the level of presiding elder gave AME and AME Zion churches reason to claim that Black Christians in the ME Church were second-class citizens in their own church.⁶²

As the 1880 General Conference approached, Black ministers in the ME Church felt it was their best chance to integrate the church’s board of bishops. They filled the pages of the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* with letters to the editor on the “Colored Bishop Question.” J. Morris Shumpert, a Black pastor in Holly Springs, Mississippi, wrote in to denounce a *Methodist Advocate* (Atlanta) editorial by John W. Ramsey, a white layman from Tennessee. Ramsey had opposed the election of a Black bishop, calling “our colored people” impatient and loud for writing so many editorials. “Nothing short of an independent organization with plenty of their

own Bishops and other officials will satisfy them," Ramsey argued. Shumpert resented the characterization of Black ministers as loud and impatient—did not all Methodist leaders proclaim their positions in newspapers, as indeed Ramsey himself was doing? Most of all, Shumpert wanted to refute Ramsey's claim that Black ME ministers wanted racial independence. Ramsey's logic seemed to follow that of AME and AME Zion leaders. To him and to them, the choice was between Black independence on the one hand and subordination within a white hierarchy on the other. To argue against subordination was to argue for independence. Shumpert and his comrades struggled to find an audience for a third way: Black leadership in an integrated church. In fact, some of Shumpert's colleagues worried that the movement for a Black bishop would undermine interracialism and lead to the creation of racially separate (and marginalized) spaces within the church. J. W. Robinson, a Black minister in Calvert, Texas, said it would make the ME Church "not one whit ahead of the Africans [AME and AME Zion Churches], and C. M. E.'s of America who boldly say they have no use for the white men in their churches."⁶³

When the 1880 General Conference failed to elect a Black bishop, many Black ME ministers wrote to the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* to express their deep disappointment. AME ministers reported that the Black Methodists left the ME in protest over the General Conference. An AME pastor in Georgia wrote, "After the Methodist Episcopal church beat the colored members of that church out of a colored bishop, it was the making of our church in Jonesboro. Some of the members of that church told me they don't intend to be a tool for the white man any longer."⁶⁴ One ME minister complained, "We have been told repeatedly since our last General Conference, that by the ten thousand our colored membership would go to the A. M. E. Church where they could have representation;—where a colored Bishop. . . could enter in to the sympathies and wants of the colored people."⁶⁵ In fact, AME and AME Zion churches used the ME Church's failure to elect a Black bishop as a recruiting tool.

The denominational newspapers hosted heated debates in the aftermath of the 1880 General Conference, and those flare-ups illustrated well the tension over racial caste. All sides seemed agreed that a true Christian spirit should do away with racial caste. Those loyal to the ME church claimed that the AME was "built on the color line, the very thing we are trying to obliterate."⁶⁶ The letters to the editor that poured into the *Christian Recorder* (AME) and the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* (ME) were equally concerned with eliminating racial hierarchies. To defenders of the ME Church,

separate churches for Black people—churches with smaller numbers, fewer resources, and less worldwide missionary activity—reinforced Black inferiority. To defenders of the AME Church, submitting to a second-class status within a racially mixed church was to endorse the racial caste system that they purported to oppose. At least one writer, an editor for the *Recorder*, found room for both independent and integrated churches. He likened the struggle to eradicate caste from the church to straightening a buckled metal sheet; it takes beating from both sides.⁶⁷

In the 1890s, when the AME, AME Zion, and CME denominations once again considered an organic union of all Black Methodists, some white leaders of the ME church encouraged it, hoping that Black members would leave the ME to join the new united Black Methodist church. With Black members gone, northern and southern white Methodists would find it easier to reunite. Bishop Foster's 1892 book *Union of Episcopal Methodism* openly proposed that Black members leave the ME Church for their own benefit. Foster unapologetically asserted that the ME Church would never accept a Black bishop exercising authority over white conferences; if Black Methodists wanted to be rid of subordination, they needed independence. It was the same argument African Methodists like Hood and Payne had made repeatedly. Foster had supporters, but both white and Black members of the ME Church took to the denominational newspapers to denounce his plan. Wilbur Thirkield, the white son-in-law of Bishop Haven, claimed that in this new era when the "spirit of caste" was growing, the ME Church "stands as the last hope in the order of Divine Providence to bind the races together, in any large way."⁶⁸ As Paul William Harris has argued, despite the ME Church's increasing concessions to the racism of the day, "no institution in American society was better positioned to overcome racial division."⁶⁹ If Black Christians committed to interracial cooperation gave up on the ME Church, where else was there to go?

Presbyterians and Baptists

Presbyterians, in both the northern and southern denominations, faced the same question that the ME Church did. Where did Black ministers fit within the structure and hierarchy of a largely white church? In fact, some white Presbyterians worried that independent African Methodists would win over African Americans from their own denomination because Presbyterians offered them neither equality nor autonomy. For example, Zion Presbyterian

Church, a Black congregation in Charleston, South Carolina, six hundred members strong by the time of the Civil War, remained under the control of white trustees. After emancipation, when the Black congregants welcomed a Black Methodist missionary and then attempted to call their own pastor, the white trustees sued for control of the building and won. When Black Presbyterian elders in Macon, Georgia, pursued ordination, their southern presbytery ordained them, but with a caveat. Their power to preach, baptize, and marry only extended to "their own people," even though white ministers could work freely among Black populations. As a result of their second-class status within the southern church, Black Presbyterians either flocked to the northern church or to other Protestant churches. Nannie Alexander, the white wife of a white Presbyterian minister in Charlotte, North Carolina, bemoaned that "when the war was ended in 1865, the Freedmen nearly all ceased to attend services in the churches in which they were brought up, but gathered in large crowds to open air meetings conducted by men of their own race [the AME Zion Church]." Black Presbyterians, she feared, were being lured away by "uneducated, sensational, and unsafe leaders"—by independent Black Methodists.⁷⁰

Alexander and her husband were among the few white southerners who recognized that churches would have to grant Black worshippers equality and a large measure of autonomy if they hoped to retain them. D. J. Sanders, who eventually became the first Black president of Biddle College (Presbyterian) in Charlotte, worked with the Alexanders to carve out a space for the independent work of Black congregations. But he drew a line between racial autonomy and racial discrimination.⁷¹ Writing to Sanders, white colleague and close friend Reverend H. Alleison protested movements to segregate the church by race. "If it were proposed," he wrote, "[that] you shall not belong to the same congregation, or presbytery, or synod with us . . . such a scheme would have no more resolute opponent than myself."⁷² Alleison assured Sanders that the northern Presbyterian Church would still make space for Black Presbyterians' racial autonomy while excluding efforts by white segregationists to limit the role of Black clerics within the denomination. Sanders and many other Black Presbyterians agreed with this arrangement, even as some opposed it. Although Presbyterians normally organized themselves into small, geographical presbyteries and synods, Black Presbyterians as early as 1868 met in a racially distinct synod within the northern Presbyterian Church that extended across the South. They kept their Presbyterian affiliation, benefited from shared resources with whites in their denomination, and maintained a degree of racial independence.⁷³

Sanders's more famous friend and colleague Francis Grimke, pastor of Fifteenth Street Presbyterian in Washington, DC, more explicitly defended his involvement in a majority-white denomination. Grimke thought that preaching a theology of racial independence did more harm than good. The AME Zion's Bishop Hood tied Black Americans' fate to the growth of "the Negro Church," but Grimke thought the accurate barometer of progress was reform within white churches. "In the growth of Christianity, true, real, genuine Christianity in this land, I see the promise of better things for us a race." He continued:

I am hopeful because I have faith in the power of the religion of the Lord Jesus Christ to conquer all prejudices, to break down all walls of separation, and to weld together men of all races in one great brotherhood. . . . I have myself, here and there, seen [Christianity's] mighty transforming power. I have seen white men and women under its regenerating influence lose entirely the caste feeling.⁷⁴

Grimke and Sanders wanted to eradicate caste by working with, not apart from, white Christians.

Black Baptists, too, struggled to balance their desires for racial independence and interracial cooperation, though they had a much longer history of independence. Scholars date the creation of independent Black Baptist churches to the mid-eighteenth century. Unlike Methodists and Presbyterians who had well-connected church hierarchies, Baptists' congregational polity decentralized their debates and decisions. Their conversations tended to be local, rather than national. But at times policies and plans between state and national conventions drew Black Baptists into larger debates over how racially independent their churches ought to be. In 1895, several Black Baptist conventions came together to form the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. (NBC), in large part to reassert their own racial independence when Black Baptist education seemed entirely in the hands of northern white missionary organizations like the American Baptist Home Mission Society (ABHMS). One denominational leader, Richard Boyd, called the creation of the NBC "a determination on the part of the Negroes to assume control of their race life." As some saw it, northern white investment in Black Baptist education, which had been substantial since emancipation, threatened to undo the racial autonomy that Black Baptists had secured over the last century. Boyd explained, "Hitherto, the Home Mission Society has led and the Negroes have followed; henceforth, the Negroes must lead and the Home Mission Society must follow. . . if it will." Black Baptists in the 1890s did not agree on what was to be gained or lost from working closely with whites.

An episode in North Carolina illustrated this conflict well. An ambitious plan in the 1890s by the ABHMS called for local white and Black Baptists to work together across the region. In North Carolina, West Virginia, Missouri, Kentucky, and parts of the Deep South, the so-called New Era Plan or the Plan of Cooperation called for shared funding and oversight among northern white Baptists, southern white Baptists, and local Black Baptists for rural schools for Black clergy.⁷⁵ So divisive was shared oversight in the ABHMS's Plan of Cooperation that, despite its name, it led to a church split in North Carolina.⁷⁶ The plan called for an alliance with southern white Baptists, and this made some Black Baptists hesitate. For their part, southern white Baptists seemed just as hesitant. Racism in southern white Baptist churches had prompted Black Baptists to form independent churches, a move those white churches resisted. In 1867, the (white) North Carolina Baptist State Convention issued a report that argued Black Baptists were not "prepared for separate and independent churches."⁷⁷ Twenty-five years later, Black Baptists still worried if southern white Baptists would recognize and respect their independence. When North Carolina's Black state Baptist convention, the North Carolina Baptist Educational and Missionary Convention (NCBEMC), convened in 1895, Dr. J. O. Crosby warily read over the plan, warning delegates, "Greeks are not to be trusted even when bearing gifts." Others, too, worried that the plan might be a "Trojan horse." These statements revealed the underlying hostility between white and Black Baptists in the state.⁷⁸

Even Crosby conceded that "he saw nothing misleading or detrimental to our people" in the details of the plan. The convention voted to adopt the Plan of Cooperation for the next three years.⁷⁹ The plan began at an unusual moment in the state's history, just as Black Republicans and white Populists united to form a Fusion ticket and wrest political power from the state's Democratic elites. On both religious and political realms, it marked an unprecedented alliance of North Carolina's white and Black rural populations.

Many hailed the Plan of Cooperation as a brilliant success, but skepticism remained. In 1898, when the plan again came before the NCBEMC, Black missionary John A. Whitted acknowledged that the plan "has met some objection, we admit," but he blamed resistance on envious leaders who, unlike himself, had not secured the plan's highly sought-after posts as missionaries. Perhaps more of the opposition came as result of the paternalism of the plan's white partners. In its publications, the ABHMS boasted of its role in helping "colored Baptists [emerge]. . . from their former chaotic condition." Despite such descriptions, Whitted insisted that Black Baptists retained their autonomy under the Plan of Cooperation.

White Baptists, he wrote, "in no way. . . wish to dictate in the prosecution of this work, but to come and assist us only as the colored brethren find it a necessity." The convention voted to extend the plan for another three years.⁸⁰

A number of Black Baptists, however, continued to chafe under the Plan of Cooperation, and in 1903, they broke off to form a rival state convention. Their grievances, though difficult to ascertain from the limited extant records, included allegations that the NCBEMC, the original convention, formed stronger ties with local whites than with the newly formed NBC. The NCBEMC had experienced strained relations with the NBC since the latter's formation, in part because the NBC worried that North Carolina Black Baptists were too heavily influenced by white organizations such as the ABHMS and the American Baptist Publication Society, which regularly employed Black ministers as salesmen for their Bibles, Sunday School literature, and other church-related merchandise. Now the rival North Carolina convention pointed to the Plan of Cooperation as further proof of the NCBEMC's dependence upon whites. Calvin S. Brown, the president of the NCBEMC, countered the "open rebellion" by reasserting the convention's autonomy: "The missionary and educational work done by the officers, agents and missionaries of this Convention from year to year has been done by direction and command of this Convention. No plan was undertaken without the consent and approval of this body duly assembled." Brown, attempting to avert a "calamity of disastrous consequences," tried to convince the leaders of the rival convention that the Plan of Cooperation had in no way impaired the NCBEMC's racial independence.⁸¹

Like Grimke, Brown defended interracial cooperation as a virtue. "We believe in co-operation pure and simple," he stated at the top of his spirited defense, and he reaffirmed his belief that the Plan of Cooperation was about equity and mutuality, not dependence upon whites. Brown accused his opponents of drawing the color line: "We deny that color has anything to do with Christianity as a principle; and we believe the clamor on account of color the direct result of sin, and should be reduced to a minimum in the advancement of grace." Brown's theology of race contrasted sharply with independent African Methodists. Brown, arguably the state's most outspoken Black Baptist minister, advanced an ideal of the Christian church in which racial distinctions were minimized at precisely the time when Hood, unquestionably the state's most outspoken Black Methodist minister, argued for wholly separate religious institutions. Brown surely meant this statement about "clamor on account of color" as a criticism against racism in white

North Carolina Baptist churches; but his remarks also meant to criticize the strain of thinking within Black Protestantism that prioritized racial autonomy over other advancements in church work. For the sake of the gospel and the denomination, Brown contended, interracialism was a good thing.⁸²

Others in his denomination agreed; the NBC and the NCBEMC later reconciled and the movement to maintain a dissenting Black state convention fizzled out. Nevertheless, Black Baptists in North Carolina continued to send mixed messages about their relationship with white Baptists. Before his African American colleagues, the Reverend Samuel N. Vass, a representative of the American Baptist Publication Society, tried to reconcile his criticism of white Baptists with his support of the convention's alliance with them: "We know our white people, that they are not perfect. We know how to forgive and love them." At the 1903 NCBEMC meeting in Durham, the Reverend W. T. Coleman of First Baptist Church (Black) of Raleigh declared in his sermon, with white Baptists in attendance, that "The Negro Baptists are the only people who can truly preach the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man."⁸³ Coleman's point was not dissimilar from AME Zion Bishop Harris's. Black Baptists' racial independence allowed them to more fully live out the Christian gospel.

The Plan of Cooperation ended in 1907–1908 not because some Black Baptists left in protest over the threat of racial subordination but because whites no longer wished to finance the short-term institutes or the salaries of the missionaries.⁸⁴ The denomination's contentious attempt to ally with local white Baptists demonstrates just how untidy the chronology of church and racial separation could be. Most Black Baptists left white churches in North Carolina during and after the Civil War, only to ally with them again in the 1890s, prompting another exodus to form a (more) independent Black church. As James Melvin Washington has argued, Black Baptists like Coleman saw clearly that the racial hierarchy of American society so permeated the American church that only a fierce independence could keep them from complicity with it. Washington calls those in favor of such independence Black Baptist nationalists and argues that they had the momentum in the late nineteenth century, but in the NCBEMC it was interracialists like Brown who won the day.⁸⁵

Conclusion

Even though almost all of life in the Jim Crow Era was racially segregated, Carter Woodson argued, white Americans still attempted to control Black spaces and institutions, with the singular exception

of the church. But even within the church, Black autonomy was contested. Throughout the Jim Crow Era, Black Christians did not agree whether racial independence helped or hurt the forces of white supremacy. In Reconstruction, interracial cooperation seemed most promising to Black Methodists; that promise faded in the Jim Crow era, when independent African Methodists more staunchly defended their independence from whites even as they condemned segregation elsewhere. Some Baptists, however, were willing to try interracialism again at the turn of the century. For Methodists, the debate renewed in the 1930s when the ME Church and ME South reunited. At the 1939 meeting that merged the denominations, Black ministers set in a segregated section of the building and watched in dismay as the white delegates decided to create an all-Black conference, completely separate from the local conferences of white churches. Far from the 1880 hopes of a Black bishop with authority of white and Black ministers, the new segregated arrangement effectively prevented any Black Methodist from exercising any authority over or alongside a white Methodist.⁸⁶

In the 1950s and 1960s, racial separation in church looked much like a segregated train station or movie theater or any other feature of Jim Crow; whites kept Blacks away in order to maintain a racial hierarchy. Even in churches that supported the desegregation of other spaces, eleven o'clock on Sunday morning remained the nation's "most segregated hour," as Martin Luther King and others before him lamented. The students who first tried to integrate worship services in Atlanta in the summer of 1960 wanted to expose segregationist churches for their role in "foster[ing] segregation of the races to the point of making Sunday the most segregated day of the week." The kneel-in movement they started drew a parallel between church pews and lunch counters, but they did so with a more powerful appeal to conscience. As the movement spread, Americans watched white ushers blocking church entrances from interracial groups of worshippers who knelt in prayer on the stone steps outside.⁸⁷ Given this image, it would be easy to understand church segregation as part and parcel of the larger system of Jim Crow segregation, which drew a stark color line in nearly every part of life, from maternity wards to cemeteries. That was how A. E. P. Albert, a Black minister in the ME Church and editor of the *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, understood it, when Jim Crow segregation first began. In 1891, he wrote, "We oppose such race segregation in church, for the same reason we oppose separate cars and all discriminating laws adopted by the South."⁸⁸

But for nineteenth-century writers proud of their independent Black denominations, things looked quite different. Those in the

kneel-in movement saw separate worship as a symptom of white racism; those who founded Black churches throughout the nineteenth century saw separate worship as a refuge from white racism. Even as they protested the increasing segregation of transportation and public facilities, some ministers like Bishop Harris celebrated their church's racial autonomy. When the kneel-in movement of the 1960s and King criticized the nation's "most segregated hour," neither planned to surrender control over independent Black churches. They intended to highlight how pervasive white supremacy was in the church. Of course, questions about the intractability of white supremacy in American society and American churches remain, as do questions about the role and value of white allies.

As Eddie Glaude has argued, "the Black Church" and the more inclusive moniker "African American religion" have always been normative, not descriptive, terms. They tell us what writers like Bishop Harris wanted to be true of Black religious traditions.⁸⁹ When Harris argued that "the Negro Church" elevated women to a position of equality, he could not have meant that descriptively. His denomination alone ordained women, and to date, Mary Smalls was the only one. Instead, he spoke ideally of what "the Negro Church" could and should do. Too often scholars have been willing to take writers' normative definitions as the starting point of our analysis, such as when Lincoln and Mamiya limited their classic study of the Black churches to only those unaffiliated with majority-white bodies. If we instead turn our attention to the debate where such normative terms were used as weapons, we see the way they meant to include some Black religious traditions and exclude others. In this case, such an attention to denominations can challenge our narrative about both church segregation and Black opposition to the coming of Jim Crow segregation more broadly.

Matthew Harper is Associate Professor of History and Africana Studies at Mercer University.

Notes

¹William Jacob Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church: Reality of the Black Church* (Charlotte, NC: AME Zion Publishing House, 1974), 111–12.

²C. R. Harris, "Episcopal Dots: Women Elders—Railroad Discrimination—Coleman Factory," *Star of Zion*, August 4, 1898.

³Two small regional Wesleyan churches had ordained women elders before the AME Zion church. For a history of women's

ordination in Wesleyan and Methodist traditions, see Jean Miller Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient: A History of Women in American Methodism, 1760–1939* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999); Martha S. Jones, "'Make Us a Power': African American Methodists Debate the 'Woman Question,' 1870–1900," in *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora*, eds. R. Marie Griffith and Barbara Dianne Savage (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 128–54.

⁴Examples are too numerous to list here, but a perusal of the *Journal of Africana Religions* will demonstrate the diversity and complexity of recent scholarship on Black religious life.

⁵Laurie Maffly-Kipp, "Denominationalism and the Black Church," in *Reimagining Denominationalism: Interpretative Essays*, eds. Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 59–62, 70.

⁶Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 10; Nicole Myers Turner, *Soul Liberty: The Evolution of Black Religious Politics in Postemancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

⁷James B. Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow in New Orleans* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, "Introduction," in *The Folly of Jim Crow: Rethinking the Segregated South*, eds. Stephanie Cole and Natalie J. Ring (Texas A&M University Press, 2012), 7; Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

⁸Bennett, *Religion and the Rise*, 4–9.

⁹Mullin and Richey, "Introduction," *Reimagining Denominationalism*, 3–5. See Albert J. Raboteau, David W. Wills, Randall K. Burkett, Will B. Gravely, and James Melvin Washington, "Retelling Carter Woodson's Story: Archival Sources for Afro-American Church History," *Journal of American History* 77 (June 1990): 183–99. For a critique of the term "the Black Church," see Lawrence N. Jones, "The Black Churches: A New Agenda," in *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton Sernett (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985), 491; Curtis Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 141–76.

¹⁰For groundbreaking work on Black denominations, see Joseph Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*. A few, like Reginald Hildebrand's study of Black Methodists during Reconstruction, take seriously the division and competition between

Black denominations. Reginald Francis Hildebrand, *The Times Were Strange and Stirring: Methodist Preachers and the Crisis of Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995). For two good examples of recent Black denominational history, see Paul William Harris, *A Long Reconstruction: Racial Caste and Reconciliation in the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Oxford University Press, 2022); Dennis Dickerson, *The African Methodist Episcopal Church: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

¹¹Keith Harper, ed., *American Denominational History: Perspectives on the Past, Prospects for the Future* (Tuscaloosa: University Alabama Press, 2008); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, illustrated edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991).

¹²In these books, and even in Woodson's *The Negro Church*, historians have worked against homogenizing the Black religious experience; this essay is hardly the first to call for a recognition of the diversity of Black church traditions. But the organization of books like Hatch's and Harper's speaks to the enduring power of "The Black Church" as an idea.

¹³Eddie Glaude, *African American Religion: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7–15.

¹⁴C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 12–13. While Lincoln and Mamiya identify the central tension of racial character, because they limit their study to only those churches that are unaffiliated with majority-white bodies, they necessarily leave behind the debates over the merits and drawbacks of racially independent churches.

¹⁵See Reginald Hildebrand, *The Times Were Strange and Stirring*; Harris, *A Long Reconstruction*, 75–77.

¹⁶David Komline, "'If There Were One People': Francis Weninger and the Segregation of American Catholicism," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 27, no. 2 (July 1, 2017): 218, <https://doi.org/10.1525/rac.2017.27.2.218>.

¹⁷James Walker Hood, *One Hundred Years of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; or, The Centennial of African Methodism* (New York: AME Zion Book Concern, 1895), 5.

¹⁸Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 11–12.

¹⁹James Walker Hood, "Centennial Sermon," *AME Zion Quarterly Review* 8, no. 1 (January 1898): 5, 8. Much of this sermon overlapped with Hood's denominational history. Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 5–13. At times, the two share entire paragraphs word for word. I quote from both because the two do vary.

²⁰George W. Clinton, editorial, *Star of Zion*, October 11, 1884; George W. Clinton, "To What Extent Is the Negro Pulpit Uplifting the Race?," in *Twentieth Century Negro Literature, or, A Cyclopedic of Thought on the Vital Topics Relating to the American Negro, By One Hundred of America's Greatest Negroes*, comp. D. W. Culp (Naperville, IL: J. L. Nichols and Co., 1902), 116–17.

²¹Benjamin Tucker Tanner, "The African Methodists," *The Independent*, January 2, 1896.

²²Daniel Alexander Payne, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville: Publishing House of the AME Sunday School Union, 1891), 9–12, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/payne/payne.html>.

²³Hildebrand, *The Times Were Strange and Stirring*, xvii. For narratives and analyses of independent Black church movements, see J. Gordon Melton, *A Will to Choose: The Origins of African-American Methodism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007); Will Gravely, "African Methodisms and the Rise of Black Denominationalism," in *Reimagining Denominationalism: Interpretative Essays*, eds. Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 239–63; William Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South, 1865–1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993); Katherine Dvorak, *An African-American Exodus: The Segregation of the Southern Churches* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson, 1991); Harry V. Richardson, *Dark Salvation: The Story of Methodism as It Developed among Blacks in America* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1976).

²⁴The antebellum desire to separate from white southern churches, coupled with slaves' long history of secret, independent worship (the "invisible institution") prepared Black worshippers to assume and assert their independence during the Civil War and Reconstruction. See Dvorak, *An African-American Exodus*; Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

²⁵Hood, "Centennial Sermon," 7–8.

²⁶J. C. Price, "The Race Question in the South," *African Methodist Episcopal Zion Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (April 1892): 326. Black Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Catholics, and Congregationalists belonged to majority-white denominations. Price also meant to cast aspersions on the racial autonomy of other Methodists—those in the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, which held close ties with its parent denomination, the ME South, and also those in the ME Church. In Baptist polity, local congregations are independent and autonomous; so, at least theoretically, any Black Baptist church with a Black clergyman would have met Price's definition as

“independent.” But when Price spoke of “independent churches,” he had in mind an organized religious body—national churches like the AME and AME Zion—not the loosely affiliated associations of Baptists.

²⁷Daniel Alexander Payne, *The Semi-Centenary and the Retrospection of the African Meth. Episcopal Church in the United States of America* (Baltimore: Sherwood and Company, 1866), 20–21, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/emu.010002588604>.

²⁸Jones, ““Make Us a Power,”” 136.

²⁹Harris, “Episcopal Dots.”

³⁰See Jualynne E. Dodson, *Engendering Church: Women, Power, and the AME Church* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002); William L. Andrews, ed., *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); Bert James Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin, *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life: Their Words, Their Thoughts, Their Feelings* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), 125–80.

³¹Amanda Berry Smith, “The Travail of a Female Colored Evangelist,” in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 276.

³²Jones, ““Make Us a Power.””

³³Quoted in Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church*, 392.

³⁴Harris, “Episcopal Dots”; Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church*, 392.

³⁵Mary Church Terrell, “Woman Suffrage and the Fifteenth Amendment,” *The Crisis*, August 1915.

³⁶For a good explanation of the logic of Jim Crow customs, see Neil McMillan, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Fon Louise Gordon, *Caste and Class: The Black Experience in Arkansas, 1880–1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007).

³⁷“Plessy v. Ferguson,” Legal Information Institute, accessed January 24, 2018, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/163/537>.

³⁸National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *Annual Report of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (NAACP, 1919), 77–78. Italics original.

³⁹“Niagara Movement Declaration of Principles, 1905,” W. E. B. DuBois Collection, Series 1A. General Correspondence, University of Massachusetts Amherst, accessed January 24, 2018, <http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b004-i092>.

⁴⁰Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 161.

⁴¹Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 159–61.

⁴²Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 12; Bennett, *Religion and the Rise*, 42–70.

⁴³Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth Century Virginia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989) 180; Harris, *A Long Reconstruction*, 8–9, 32–45, 7.

⁴⁴"Race, Color or Previous Condition of Servitude," *Christian Advocate*, May 29, 1879.

⁴⁵"Colored Bishops at Round Lake," *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, August 26, 1875; Emperor Williams, "Fraternal Speeches," *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, January 16, 1879.

⁴⁶Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 98–101, 119–22; Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church*, 464–66.

⁴⁷Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 120.

⁴⁸*Minutes or Daily Journal of the Sixteen Quadrennial Session of the General Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Clinton Chapel, Montgomery Alabama, May 1880* (New York: William Knowles, Printer, 1880), 52, quoted in Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church*, 466.

⁴⁹Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 16, 119–22.

⁵⁰Martin R. Delany, "An Indisputable Moral Problem," *Christian Recorder*, April 29, 1880. Melissa Harris-Perry makes a similar point about Jim Crow as a system of stigmatizing shame. See *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 109–19.

⁵¹"Report of the Ecumenical Committee," *Christian Recorder*, May 20, 1880.

⁵²*London Times*, September 18, 1881, reprinted in *Christian Recorder*, October 13, 1881.

⁵³"A Questionable Project," *Christian Recorder*, November 17, 1881.

⁵⁴Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey, eds., *Reimagining Denominationalism: Interpretive Essays*, Religion in America Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 66.

⁵⁵J. A. Tyler, comp., *Minutes of the Second Session of the Central North Carolina Conference of the AME Zion Church, in America, Held in Charlotte, North Carolina, November 26th to 29th, 1881* (Concord, NC: Star of Zion Job Office, 1882), 31–33, 35.

⁵⁶Amy Dru Stanley, "Slave Emancipation and the Revolutionizing of Human Rights," in *The World the Civil War Made*, eds. Gregory P. Downs and Kate Masur, *The Steven and Janice Brose Lectures in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 269–303.

⁵⁷ Many radical abolitionists in the ME Church remained committed to racial equality long after the end of Reconstruction. See James T. McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy: From Reconstruction to the NAACP* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Harris, *A Long Reconstruction*, 3–7, 82–91.

⁵⁸ Bennett, *Religion and the Rise*, 47–48; Hood, *One Hundred Years*, 119–22.

⁵⁹ Reverend J. Braden, "By Lamplight," *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, November 23, 1876, quoted in Harris, *A Long Reconstruction*, 85; "Bishop Foster in New Orleans," *Christian Recorder*, February 11, 1875.

⁶⁰ Revels quoted in Harris, *A Long Reconstruction*, 83.

⁶¹ "Bishop Foster in New Orleans," *Christian Recorder*, February 11, 1875; Lucius Matlack, "The Color Line," *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, June 15, 1876. Matlack, an ardent white abolitionist and integrationist, made the same point at the 1876 ME General Conference, that segregation was about whites keeping out people of color, not the other direction. James 2:1–5 (KJV).

⁶² "General Conference Proceedings," *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, May 18, 1876, 2–3; Bennett, *Religion and the Rise*, 115–23.

⁶³ J. Morris Shumpert, "The Colored Bishop Question," *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, September 18, 1879; J. W. Robinson, "Do We Need a Colored Bishop?," *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, January 29, 1880.

⁶⁴ Richard Graham, "News from Georgia," *Christian Recorder*, August 5, 1880.

⁶⁵ I. G. Pollard, "The African Methodists," *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, September 23, 1880.

⁶⁶ Quoted from the *New England Methodist* in "Mistaken," *Christian Recorder*, September 2, 1880.

⁶⁷ "Mistaken," *Christian Recorder*, September 2, 1880.

⁶⁸ R. S. Foster, *Union of Episcopal Methodism* (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1892); Wilbur Thirkfield, "Methodist Union through Disunion and Its Results," *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, July 14, 1892, quoted in Harris, *A Long Reconstruction*, 142.

⁶⁹ Harris, *A Long Reconstruction*, 3.

⁷⁰ Andrew E. Murray, *Presbyterians and the Negro: A History* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1966), 141–42; Nannie R. Alexander, "Personal Reminiscences of the Founding of Seventh Street Presbyterian Church and Biddle University by Mrs. Nannie R. Alexander who assisted her husband, the late Rev. S. C. Alexander, D. D., Founder of both Church and School," handwritten memoir, Willerstown, PA, December 6, 1910, History of JCSU Collection, Box 1, Folder 1, Inez Moore Parker Archives and Research

Center, James B. Duke Memorial Library, Johnston C. Smith University (JCSU), 23–24.

⁷¹D. J. Sanders, "The Africo-American and the Religious Denominations," *Interior Supplement* (June 7, 1888), clipping, President's Gallery, Series 1, Box 1, Inez Moore Parker Archives and Research Center, James B. Duke Memorial Library, JCSU.

⁷²H. Alleison to Daniel J. Sanders, handwritten, February 28, 1888, Philadelphia, PA, President's Gallery, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 15, Inez Moore Parker Archives and Research Center, James B. Duke Memorial Library, JCSU.

⁷³*The Fayetteville Educator*, February 13, 1875; Murray, *Presbyterians and the Negro*, 177–81.

⁷⁴Francis Grimke, "Christianization of America," in Culp, comp., *Twentieth Century Negro Literature*, 431, 433.

⁷⁵American Baptist Home Mission Society, *Baptist Home Missions in North America: Including a Full Report of the Proceedings and Addresses of the Jubilee Meeting, and a Historical Sketch of the American Baptist Home Mission Society, Historical Tables, Etc., 1832–1882* (New York: Baptist Home Mission Rooms, 1883), 423–33; John Lee Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity: A History of the Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 32–39.

⁷⁶Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Edward R. Crowther and Keith Harper, *Between Fetters and Freedom: African American Baptists since Emancipation* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2015), 1–2; Boyd, quoted in McPherson, *Abolitionist Legacy*, 289; Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 65; James Melvin Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship: The Black Baptist Quest for Social Power* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 133–85.

⁷⁷Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities among Southern Baptists* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 34.

⁷⁸*Proceedings of the Joint Sessions of the Baptist Educational and Missionary Convention, The Ministerial Union, the Hayes-Fleming Foreign Missionary Society, and the State Sunday School Convention of North Carolina* (hereafter cited as NCBEMC Proceedings), October 1895, 11ff.

⁷⁹NCBEMC Proceedings, October 1895, 11ff.

⁸⁰*The Baptist Home Mission Monthly* (American Baptist Home Mission Society, 1898); NCBEMC Proceedings, October 1898, 11–13, 35–36.

⁸¹NCBEMC Proceedings, November 1903, 11–12; J. A. Whitted, *A History of the Negro Baptists of North Carolina* (Raleigh, NC: Edwards

and Broughton, 1908), 29–30, 49–50, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/whitted/menu.html>. Similar debates and schisms over cooperation with white Baptists erupted across the South. For examples from Texas, Virginia, and Georgia, see Harvey, *Redeeming the South*, 68–73.

⁸²NCBEMC *Proceedings*, November 1903, 13.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 25–26.

⁸⁴NCBEMC *Proceedings*, October 1908, 26.

⁸⁵Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship*, 133–85

⁸⁶Morris L. Davis, *The Methodist Unification: Christianity and the Politics of the Jim Crow Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 1, 5–9, 127–32, 207.

⁸⁷Stephen R. Haynes, *The Last Segregated Hour: The Memphis Kneel-Ins and the Campaign for Southern Church Desegregation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 12–14.

⁸⁸A. E. P. Albert, "The Organic Union of African Methodism," *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, December 24, 1891, quoted in Harris, *A Long Reconstruction*, 136.

⁸⁹Glaude, *African American Religion*, 7–10.

ABSTRACT *As Black church leaders decried the arrival of Jim Crow segregation, many also celebrated the racial independence of their churches. They touted advancements such as women's ordination as examples of what Black churches could do when freed from white control. Other Black ministers defended remaining in majority-white denominations as a way to abolish the color line. This article argues that scholars miss much about Black religious history if we assume that Black churches' resistance to racial subjugation started with a settled and uncontested racial autonomy. On the contrary, Black churches throughout the nineteenth century kept open a lively forum about the virtues and vices of such autonomy. Interracial cooperation often undermined Black autonomy, and Black Christians debated which better countered racial caste. To track the heated debates over racial independence and interracial cooperation within and between Black churches, this article analyzes Black newspapers, sermons, church minutes, and letters, mostly among Black Methodists but also among Black Baptists and Presbyterians throughout the late nineteenth century. It focuses on particular debates surrounding women's ordination, attempts to unite Methodists, and conflicts over Baptist education.*