

Harry V. Richardson<sup>1</sup>

## EARLY BLACK METHODIST PREACHERS<sup>2</sup>

The first Methodist preachers proclaimed the Gospel to all people, white and black, bond and free. Many slaves welcomed the message and came as they could to hear it. The Methodist Gospel and pattern of religious experience was simple, personal and readily comprehended by Blacks as well as whites. Richard Allen, himself a Methodist convert and preacher said that the Methodist form of faith was the best for his people.<sup>3</sup> A further reason for the popularity of Methodism among the slaves was the fact that the early preachers actively sought the slaves, made them feel welcome at the preaching services and took them into the “societies.”<sup>4</sup>

In the beginning, Methodist preachers were few; and those few were traveling evangelists. They aspired to convert a continent. They covered vast “circuits” that extended often into several counties and sometimes into more than one state. Travel was slow and hazardous and there might be several weeks between a preacher’s appearances at a given point.<sup>5</sup>

In the interim, between the preachers’ visits, the converts were kept “in the way” by local leaders. Among whites, these leaders were heads of “classes,” which were the basic units of Methodist organization. Among Blacks, the leaders were often volunteer Christian workers, persons who had heard the Methodist

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Harry V. Richardson was president of The Interdenominational Theological Center, 1958-1968.

<sup>2</sup> This is a section of a book on Black Methodism published in the C. Eric Lincoln Series by Doubleday, Spring of 1976.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Allen, *Life Experience and Gospel Labors* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1970), p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> The sad thing is that many churches today are so cold that church seekers are forced to visit church after church before they find one that they feel welcome.

<sup>5</sup> It is obvious that the slave preacher was like the apostles in the Early Church, especially the Apostle Paul who was an itinerant preacher on missionary journeys to visit and also found churches across countries.

message, who had felt its saving power in their own lives and were anxious to impart it to their fellows.

Who were these Black preachers? Unfortunately, we do not even know the names of most of these early black leaders, to say nothing of the story of their lives. We do know that they were largely responsible for the preservation of the faith and its transmission among slaves in the early days. A few examples will show their significance.

On one of his trips through South Carolina in 1788, Bishop Asbury saw a slave fishing on the bank of a stream. “Do you ever pray?” asked the bishop. “No sir,” the slave replied. “Bishop Asbury alighted from his horse, sat down by the slave’s side, instructed and exhorted him. The poor man wept; the bishop sang a hymn, knelt with the astonished slave in prayer, and left him.”

Forty-eight years after this interview, a Methodist itinerant preacher visited a plantation where it was reported that there were many black but unrecognized Methodists. He found between two and three hundred members in a society. The itinerant preacher asked to see the leader. He was taken to a hoary headed old black man with palsied limbs but a smiling face, leaning on a staff. “He looked at me a moment in silence, then raising his eyes to heaven, he said, ‘Lord, now leitest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation.’ He asked me to have a seat. ‘I have,’ he said, ‘many children in this place. I have felt for some time that my end was near. I have looked around to see who might take my place when I am gone. I could find none. I felt unwilling to die and leave them alone, and have been praying to God to send someone to take care of them. The Lord has sent you, my child, and I am ready to go.’”<sup>6</sup> “It was Punch. The Bishop’s passing word had raised up an apostle who had, through all these years, been ministering to his neglected people.”

Slaves at first would gather at Punch’s door for conversation and prayer. Eventually crowds came. The overseer

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<sup>6</sup> He was repeating Simeon’s words in Luke 2:29-33.  
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opposed these meetings, and Punch had to work with small groups in homes. But despite opposition from overseers and masters, Punch continued to give religious leadership for near half a century to his fellow slaves. The only name that we have for this saint is “Old Punch.”<sup>7</sup>

In the mission to the slaves conducted in the first half of the nineteenth century, the volunteer black workers played a large and important part. White preachers or missionaries did the preaching and catechizing, but it was the local black leader, male or female, who kept groups together and made the teachings a part of everyday life. In his work in a mission in Beaufort, South Carolina, a missionary reported that the two or three hundred Negro children whom he catechized “were kept together under the care of an elderly female.” He did not give the name of the “female” who performed this important and doubtless wearying work.<sup>8</sup>

A similar instance of volunteer leadership is recorded about the mission on a Louisiana plantation. “Agreeable surprises sometimes awaited a missionary [He would find] a society, rudely organized there before him, with its stated times of worship, its rules, and its members. By purchase or partition of estates, or by immigration, a religious Negro or family of Negroes was thrown like leaven into an ignorant mass of his fellow beings, and became a source of instruction and a center of life which took form and grew, even under unpropitious surroundings. One missionary to such a sugar plantation in Louisiana found over thirty ‘members’ he had to begin with.”<sup>9</sup>

We do not know the number of these humble workers. There must have been many hundreds. They were found in all denominations. We do know that they were largely responsible for making the Christian faith a living fact in the lives of slaves and

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<sup>7</sup> J. B. Wakeley, *Heroes of Methodism*, pp. 29 ff. Also in Abel Stevens, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Vol. III*, New York, Carlton & Porter, 1867, pp. 360 f.

<sup>8</sup> W. P. Harrison, *The Gospel Among the Slaves*, pp. 247-8.

<sup>9</sup> H. N. McTyiere, *A History of Methodism*, Nashville, Tenn., Publishing House, M. E. Church, South, 1889, p. 589.

free black people in America in their day, and thus were responsible for its transmission to later generations.

Very early in the evangelical movements, beginning in the latter half of the eighteenth century, men began to appear who were not satisfied to be just unordained lay workers. They aspired to the full Christian ministry. They wanted to preach the Gospel to all who would hear, and to be leaders of regularly organized congregations. They arose in all of the evangelical bodies. Among Baptists there were such men as David George, (c. 1775), preacher of the first Baptist Church at Silver Bluff, South Carolina; George Liele of Burke County, Georgia, an eloquent preacher to Blacks and Whites; and Andrew Bryan (1737-1812), founder of the First African Baptist Church of Savannah. There was John Chavis (c. 1801), who was made a missionary to slaves by the Presbyterians and, most unusual, Lemuel Haynes, a man of learning and eloquence who through all of his life, pastored only white Congregational churches in New England.<sup>10</sup> The account here, however, is concerned mainly with Methodism, which had its full share of the early black preachers.

Among the earliest black preachers in the Methodist Episcopal Church were Harry Hosier, Absalom Jones, Richard Allen, Daniel Coker, Abraham Thompson, James Varick, Christopher Rush and Henry Evans. All of these men began their preaching careers in the Methodist Episcopal Church. With the exception of Harry Hosier and Henry Evans, however, they all later withdrew from the Methodist Episcopal Church and joined or started other denominations. It is in connection with the other bodies that their names became best known. Absalom Jones, for example, left the Methodist Church to become the rector of the African Episcopal Church of Saint Thomas in Philadelphia, the first black Episcopal priest in America. Richard Allen was a preacher in the Methodist Episcopal Church for 36 years until the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination in which he became the first bishop. But they all began in the Methodist Episcopal Church.

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<sup>10</sup> H. V. Richardson, *Dark Glory*, Friendship Press, New York, 1945, pp. 7-8.  
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The main reason these men left the Methodist Church was the reluctance of that body to accept them fully into its ministry. The Church did recognize their preaching and organizing abilities, especially in the work with Blacks, and used them as exhorters and local preachers, the lowest orders in the Methodist hierarchy. But despite repeated appeals over a long time, the Church would not ordain them as deacons, the middle rank, and certainly not as elders, the highest rank. It was not until 1800 that the General Conference agreed to ordain even black deacons.

The reasons usually given were, first, that the black men were uneducated, which was true. Most could hardly read or write, if at all. Also Blacks had difficulty traveling freely enough to meet the demands of the Methodist itinerancy. Yet against these reasons is the fact that these same men made phenomenal contributions to the new denominations that they joined and in some cases helped to start. The thought cannot be downed that these men could have done within the Methodist Church what they did outside it had the Church decided to utilize their abilities and had given them the necessary training. The Episcopal Church, for example, waived the requirement for knowing Greek and Hebrew in the case of Absalom Jones, thus making it possible for him to render his remarkable leadership to the Philadelphia congregation of blacks.<sup>11</sup> Also some of the black preachers were striking exceptions. Daniel Coker was not only well educated, but he taught school in Baltimore and published what is perhaps the first pamphlet produced by a black man in America.<sup>12</sup>

For the lives of the earliest preachers, records are few and fragmentary. Only in one or two cases do we have anything like adequate biographies or autobiographies. In most cases we only have passing references or comments by interested persons. But such records as we do have indicate that the early black preachers, though lacking in education, were men of intelligence and

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<sup>11</sup> Charles H. Wesley, *Richard, Allen Apostle of Freedom* (Washington, D.C., The Associated Press, 1935), 59 ff.

<sup>12</sup> *A Dialogue Between a Virginian and an African Minister*, a pamphlet by Daniel Coker, (Dorothy Porter, ed.) in *Negro Protest Pamphlets*, Arno Press, N. Y., 1965, p. 15 ff.

dedication, and were possessed of remarkable preaching and organizational powers. All were converted in true Methodist fashion; they believed and preached the true Methodist doctrine; and they were aflame with the passion to spread the good news of the love of God, the saving power of Jesus Christ, and the need to flee from the wrath to come by accepting Christ as personal savior.

Most famous among the early Negro Methodist preachers, of course, was Harry Hosier, or as he was popularly known, “Black Harry.” He was a truly remarkable man. Unfortunately, we do not have a full biography of him, but we do have allusions to him in contemporary writings and more comments on his great preaching than on any other early Negro preacher. He is mentioned nine times in *Asbury’s Journal*; as many times and at greater length in Garrettson’s writings; and several times in Coke’s *Journal*. He was the first Methodist preacher white or black, whose preaching was commented upon in a New York newspaper, *The New York Packet*.<sup>13</sup>

Hosier served as Bishop Asbury’s traveling servant. He also traveled with Bishop Coke, Freeborn Garrettson, and Richard Whatcoat. Physically, he was “small in stature, and perfectly black, but had eyes of remarkable brilliancy and keenness.”<sup>14</sup> He was uneducated. He could neither read nor write, but he had a quick mind, a most retentive memory, and such an eloquent flow of words, which he could soon put into almost faultless English.” His natural and marvelous oratorical gifts made him one of the wonders of his time. Dr. Benjamin Rush, the distinguished Quaker of Philadelphia said, making allowance for Harry’s illiteracy; he was “the greatest orator in America.”<sup>15</sup> Bishop Coke with whom Harry traveled in 1784 said that he was one of the best preachers in the world.

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<sup>13</sup>A newspaper, *The New York Packet*, September 11, 1786.

<sup>14</sup> Abel Stevens, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, II, pp. 1748

<sup>15</sup> Stevens, *Ibid.*, p. 174

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“I have now had the pleasure of hearing Harry preach several times,” he wrote in his journal. “I sometimes give notice immediately after preaching, that in a little time he will preach to the blacks; but the whites always stay to hear him. Sometimes I publish him to preach at candle-light, as the Negroes can better attend at that time. I really believe that he is one of the best preachers in the world — there is such an amazing power as attends his word, though he cannot read, and he is one of the humblest creatures I ever saw.”<sup>16</sup>

Harry “acted as servant or ‘driver’ for the eminent itinerants, but excelled them all in popularity as a preacher, sharing with them in their public services, not only in black, but in white congregations. When they were disabled by sickness or any other cause, they could trust the pulpit to Harry without fear of unfavorably disappointing the people. Asbury acknowledges that the best way to obtain a large congregation was to announce that Harry would preach; the multitude preferring him to the Bishop himself.”<sup>17</sup>

Harry preached frequently in Maryland, but mostly in the North. He was very popular in Philadelphia. Bishop Asbury complained in his *Journal*, that if Harry would go with him to Virginia and the Carolinas to preach to the Blacks and they could spend six months there, “it would be attended with a blessing.” But Harry was unwilling to go.<sup>18</sup> In 1790 Harry traveled with Freeborn Garrettson. At Hudson, New York., Garrettson says:

“I found the people very curious to hear Harry. I therefore declined preaching, that their curiosity might be satisfied. The different denominations heard him with much admiration, and the Quakers thought that as he was unlearned he must preach by immediate inspiration.”<sup>19</sup> At another town in the same area,

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Coke, *Journal*, London, 1973, p. 18. Also *Stevens Dialogues*, p. 176.

<sup>17</sup> Abel Stevens, op. cit., pp. 174-5.

<sup>18</sup> Francis Asbury, *Journal*, entries for June 29, 1780, and October 27, 1780

<sup>19</sup> Freeborn Garrettson, *The Experience and Travel of Mr. Freeborn Garrettson*,

Philadelphia, Parry Hall, 1791, p. 225.

Garrettson writes: “I rode in the afternoon and preached in Salisbury, in a part of the town in which I had never before been, and I think I have never seen so tender a meeting in this town before, for a general weeping ran through the assembly, especially while Harry gave an exhortation. The Lord is carrying on a blessed work here.”<sup>20</sup>

Harry accompanied Garrettson on his pioneering excursion into New England, going as far as Boston. In all of the cities Harry preached regularly, his audiences numbering hundreds, and on one occasion in Providence, more than a thousand. He was not entirely free from the rebuffs that the early evangelists received, however. In Hartford, Connecticut, the people received him “very uncivilly.” Asbury relates that in Maryland “certain sectarians are greatly displeased with him, because he tells them they may fall from grace, and that they must be holy.”<sup>21</sup>

This latest statement by Asbury is the best indication that we have of *what* Harry preached. All the other statements are about *how* he preached and the powerful effects of his messages, but we have no clear examples of his sermons or his theology or his social opinions. Since his messages were received with such rapturous praise by nearly all who heard him, it can safely be concluded that he preached the typical Methodist form of the Christian Gospel and that he was non-controversial in his social preachments.

It is said that near the end of his life, Harry became addicted to drink. In the opinion of his peers, he “fell from grace.” Abel Stevens, the Methodist historian, says, “Though he withstood for years the temptations of extraordinary popularity, he fell, nevertheless, by the indulgent hospitalities which were lavished upon him. He became temporarily the victim of wine, but had moral strength enough to recover himself. Self-abased and contrite,

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<sup>20</sup> Abel Stevens, *History of the M. E. Church, Vol. II*, pp. 448-89. Also Freeborn Garrettson, *The Experience*, p. 224.

<sup>21</sup> Asbury's *Journal*, entry for May 21, 1781. Also Freeborn Garrettson, *Journal*, p. 220  
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he started one evening down the Neck, below Southwark, Philadelphia, determined to remain till his backslidings were healed. Under a tree he wrestled in prayer into the watches of the night. Before the morning God restored him to the joys of his salvation. Thenceforward he continued faithfully. He resumed his public labors, and about the year 1810 he died in Philadelphia, “making a good end, and was borne to the grave by a great procession of both white and black admirers, who buried him as a hero, once overcome, but finally victorious.”<sup>22</sup>

But despite any weakness or limitations in thought or training, for a black man and a slave, or near slave, to rise to the top of a respected profession, equaling or excelling the greatest in the field, proves that here we are in the presence of a truly rare human being who used his great gifts as best he could for the betterment of his fellow humans.

In their religious work, Richard Allen and Daniel Coker are known first as leaders of the separate black Methodist congregations in Philadelphia and Baltimore, respectively. They are much better known, however, for founding the American Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church in 1816. Coker, a brilliant but, erratic man, was elected first Bishop of the new denomination, but for unknown reasons declined to serve. He soon left America for Africa and died there after establishing several churches in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Upon Coker’s declining, Allen was immediately elected and ordained, thus becoming the first effective Bishop in the new denomination, and the first black bishop in Protestantism. He filled the office of bishop with efficiency and distinction, giving to the new church stability, respectability and growth. A brief sketch of his life and work is recounted in another book.

Many other able men were drawn into the ministry of the A.M.E. Church. Chief among them are Morris Brown, William Paul Quinn, and that most remarkable man, Daniel A. Payne. All

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<sup>22</sup> Abel Stevens *History*, p. 175.

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of these men became bishops in the Church. Descriptions of their work are found in the chapter on the A.M.E. Church.

The ministerial leaders in the founding of the A.M.E. Zion Church were Abraham Thompson, June Scott, William and Thomas Miller, William Carman, Leven Smith, James Varick and Christopher Rush. Except for Christopher Rush biographical information is meager indeed. We do know that all of these men were zealous for freedom of worship among their people; they were active in founding the Zion and Asbury churches in New York City and separate black congregations in New Haven, Long Island and Newark, N. J. The name of Varick occurs most frequently but comparatively late. He was active in forming the association of churches that led eventually to the creation of the new denomination. He was elected Superintendent of the associated congregations in 1822.

Abraham Thompson was the central figure in organizing the Zion congregation and in carrying on the negotiations with the parent church. The most powerful figure in the early Zion denomination, however, was Christopher Rush. He was the preacher, evangelist, organizer and leader who led the church in its early formation and into its early growth. He also gave to the Church its first history, which still is the basic source of essential information.

In addition to these men of whose lives we know a little, there were the great number of other men on the plantations of the South who played a most important part in keeping the faith alive among their fellow Blacks. In the Mission to the Slaves we hear much about the heroic, self-sacrificing service of the white missionaries or preachers. Indeed, the Mission was almost glorified in Southern writings as an example of Christian service at its best. We hear almost nothing of the black workers who were “assistants” to the missionaries in their work and who were largely responsible for the wide acceptance and intimate application of the faith in the daily lives of the Blacks. Once in a while their names are mentioned in the contemporary literature, often with appreciation for what they were doing. Emanuel Mack, Silas

Phillips, Nace Duval and Sancho Cooper are a few of the names mentioned.<sup>23</sup>

William Capers, the founder of the Mission among Methodists, has much to say about the black religious leaders. He had great appreciation for their work and for them as persons. He said he always had a group of them about him. Among those he mentions are Castile Selby, Amos Baxter, Thomas Smith, Peter Simpson, Smart Simpson, Harry Bull, Richard Halloway, Alex Hanston, “and others.” Some of these were devout laymen; some were unordained local preachers and exhorters. All were used as “assistants” in the work with the slaves. Yet despite the fact that history has passed them by, it was these little known persons, men and women, who took to their fellow blacks whatever healing and strength religion held for a soul under bondage.

Greatest of the Southern Methodist preachers by far was Henry Evans, the founder of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Evans was a contemporary of Harry Hosier; Hosier died in 1806, Evans in 1810. Evans was fully as great as Hosier, and possibly greater in some ways. While Hosier enjoyed almost unbroken popularity and eager reception, Evans at first encountered severe opposition and persecution and at least three times risked his life. Hosier was a traveling evangelist who thrilled varying crowds. Evans, with equal popularity and power as a preacher, stayed in one community and built a lasting church. Hosier’s work was limited to preaching. Evans was also a pastor who had a visible effect on the morals of his community. Hosier preached to Whites and Blacks in the North where it was permitted.<sup>24</sup> Evans preached to Whites and Blacks in the South where it was socially disapproved and later legally forbidden.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> W. P. Harrison, *The Gospel Among the Slaves*, pp. 341-360.

<sup>24</sup> Abel Stevens, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, IV, p. 225.

<sup>25</sup> The Story of Henry Evans and an evaluation of the early black Methodist preachers will appear in a subsequent article.