

CHAPTER 1

Interracial Methodism in New Orleans

REFLECTING ON THE STRUGGLE for racial equality in 1877, Methodist Episcopal bishop Gilbert Haven claimed that “nowhere in the land does the battle rage more hotly” than in New Orleans. The city’s oppressive summer heat no doubt influenced Haven’s choice of metaphor. A leading advocate of racial integration, Haven had spent the previous four years living and traveling throughout the South as the episcopal supervisor of his denomination’s southern work. The bishop recognized that New Orleans’s complex racial and religious history created a furnace in which “the battle of caste” and the fires of racial prejudice were “already raging . . . hot, hotter, hottest.” The political changes marking the end of Reconstruction threatened to fan the flames to new heights. Yet Haven remained optimistic that racial tensions in the Crescent City would not boil over. Surveying the accomplishments of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Haven predicted that in New Orleans “is the battle set” to overcome racial prejudice. M. E. church members in the Crescent City shared Haven’s optimism. They believed their racially inclusive denomination would extend its influence to cool the “fires burning in the furnace political” and thereby “mold the State” toward a broad acceptance of racial equality.¹ The M. E. Church in New Orleans would be the soothing salve to heal the nation’s racial blisters.

Haven’s hope for New Orleans appears striking in hindsight. The M. E. bishop had thrown down the gauntlet for racial reconciliation in a seemingly peculiar place. Would the nation’s racial anxieties be resolved in the South’s largest, but often marginalized, city? Could the best hope for racial equality come from the city whose Jim Crow laws would lead to the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling that sanctioned segregation for the next half century? Equally perplexing is the centrality Haven assigned to the Methodist Episcopal Church. Could a northern-based, biracial Protestant denomination transform a southern, Catholic, and increasingly segregated city? Haven’s optimism seems misplaced, given the course of events that would make New Orleans among the most rigidly segregated cities in the early twentieth century.

But hindsight does not provide twenty-twenty vision, clichés aside. Historical perspective can inspire overconfidence, blurring rather than clarifying our comprehension of the past. What now appears inevitable was only one of several possibilities to those who lived the story. Retrospective em-

phasis on a steady and inexorable decline into segregation is more prescriptive than descriptive, since it ignores the prevailing hope that sustained much of New Orleans's black population in the face of a worsening racial climate. Like African Americans throughout the postbellum South, black New Orleanians used their churches to assert an alternate vision that challenged white supremacy. For no group was this more true than for the city's M. E. church members. The future was far from certain for these black Christians. M. E. church members believed their city's race relations remained undetermined, even as recent political developments created cause for concern. They also recognized that uncertainty meant the door of possibility remained ajar. The stories of church members in New Orleans open a window into these church-based racial struggles throughout the South, illuminating the extent to which the 1880s were discontinuous with both the antebellum racial order and the imposition of segregation in subsequent decades. During the decade after Reconstruction, black residents found greater affirmation and faced fewer constraints than they would later encounter. Attention to these intervening decades does not change the end result. Nonetheless, recognizing these competing visions reveals the extent to which Jim Crow was contested. Whites had to deliberately impose segregation. It did not emerge smoothly or inevitably as a pattern of religious or racial organization. The experiences of Methodists in New Orleans, like those of their more numerous Catholic counterparts, demonstrate that the question of segregation was neither quickly nor easily resolved in the nation's racially mixed Christian denominations. Our own disappointment with the outcome must not overshadow the very real hope that inspired the city's black church members, despite the nearly overwhelming obstacles they faced.

M. E. church members in New Orleans believed they were best positioned to realize the possibility of a new racial order in the 1880s. They argued that New Orleans offered the most promising locale to advance racial equality, pointing to gains during Reconstruction that included a liberal state constitution and integrated public schools, ongoing black political influence, and only recent "redemption" by white Democrats. The M. E. Church played an important role in fostering this favorable context. The northern-based denomination, with its rhetoric of racial equality, had arrived shortly after New Orleans came under Union control in 1862. While other denominations quickly succumbed to racial separation, the M. E. Church had sustained its biracial membership. Nowhere in the South was its racial commitment more clear than in Louisiana. As M. E. church members recalled these political and religious gains, many believed they had already glimpsed the transformation Bishop Haven had so boldly predicted for New Orleans. M. E. church members in New Orleans continued to fight for a racial equality that was rooted in their churches during the

two generations after the end of Reconstruction. Their commitment to racially mixed religious institutions undermines both the contemporary and historical tendencies to associate churches with segregation rather than integration.

These church members privileged the role of the church in social as well as religious transformation. M. E. faithful in New Orleans argued throughout the 1880s that their churches embodied the best hope for building upon the promising foundation the city's religious and racial history provided. They were confident of the church's influence on the political order, believing that efforts to win social, economic, and political equality were inseparable from African-American religious struggles. The fight was the same, whether it concerned racially exclusive denominations or disfranchisement in the political sphere. Church members thus embraced Bishop Haven's contention that "the Church must mold the State." The M. E. Church would continue the project of Reconstruction that the federal government had abandoned. Racial interaction and an acceptance of African Americans as equals would increase as the denomination's biracial example inevitably spilled into the secular arena. Modeling this racial interaction was "alike necessary to the salvation of our Church and nation," and formed "the glorious privilege and duty" of those who lived and worshiped in New Orleans. To M. E. members, the future of the American nation, no less than the church, was at stake.²

Black and white M. E. church members offered their own model of a shared religious affiliation that transcended racial differences as the best hope for the uncertainty of the 1880s. Racial inclusion stood at the very center of their M. E. religious identity. In the face of constant criticism and even abuse, theirs was not an easy task. Loyalty to their biracial denomination testified to their confidence in the promise it offered for transforming an increasingly hostile racial order in New Orleans and throughout the South. Black and white members alike defended their church's racial inclusiveness against the exclusionary practices of religious rivals. They believed that by following the M. E. example, black and white Americans could likewise emphasize a new shared identity grounded in religious and national commonalities. This vision of the future motivated those whose stories appear in the following pages to resist both a segregated church and a segregated society. This was the faith that M. E. church members in New Orleans lived and acted during the 1880s.³

IN PRIVILEGING THE ROLE of their church, M. E. church members identified denominational affiliation as a critical component of the struggle for racial equality. Following Emancipation, choosing a new church connection marked one of the first assertions of freedom from white control. The choices were numerous. Within Methodism alone, the spectrum ranged

from the conservative and mostly white Southern Methodist Church of their masters to the all-black “African” denominations such as the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.), African Methodist Episcopal Zion (A.M.E. Zion), and Colored Methodist Episcopal (C.M.E.) churches.⁴ Debates among these Methodist factions concerned far more than contests for members and churches. Each tradition offered competing understandings of freedom and of strategies for advancing racial interests.

This range of denominational choices for black Methodists created a unique pattern in the American religious landscape. Baptists, who claimed the largest number of African-American members, had the widest range of congregations to choose from. But black Baptists were choosing among individual congregations rather than denominations advancing different strategies for racial equality. These independently organized Baptist congregations would not coalesce into formal denominations until the turn of the century. Absent altogether was a racially integrated Baptist association in the South. Within other Protestant denominations, the small number of black church members left them with few choices. Among Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians, only the latter had the occasional option of a racially separate denomination. Unlike Baptists and Methodists, the divisions in most of these and other Protestant traditions were geographic and theological, not racial. None claimed substantial numbers of black churches or clergy. Black Methodists thus faced the unique challenge of contending with rival Methodist organizations as well as with competing Baptist and, especially in New Orleans and Atlanta, Congregationalist churches. Still, no tradition approached the success of the M. E. Church in retaining black and white members in the same denomination. Well into the twentieth century, the M. E. Church was the only substantially biracial Protestant denomination.

Racial inclusiveness was the primary reason African Americans joined or rejoined the M. E. Church after Emancipation. In evaluating religious options, black Christians understood that choosing a religious identity encompassed far more than simply freedom of worship. Religious and racial identities were inextricably intertwined. Choosing a denominational affiliation involved articulating a particular understanding of freedom and racial identity. Debating these differing meanings of freedom and racial priorities stood at the center of denominational rivalries that endured past the turn of the century. Those who joined the M. E. Church emphasized racial equality above all else, pointing to the “anti-caste” appeal that was the centerpiece of M. E. mission work in the South. Black members saw a denomination that strove, albeit imperfectly, to model the racial inclusiveness they envisioned for all of society. White workers no less than black converts recognized that “the equality of relations enjoyed by black and white was the rallying cry which gathered the people to us.” Although the

recently arrived Congregationalists proclaimed a similarly inclusive message, the large network of existing black Methodist preachers and churches gave the M. E. Church a distinct advantage in building a biracial denomination in the postbellum South.⁵

M. E. church members demonstrated their commitment to a biracial religious identity in their willingness to suffer for their denominational affiliation. Both black and white members endured widespread hostility for their church membership. Remaining in the M. E. Church was not easy in the face of this antagonism. But denominational loyalty testified to church members' confidence that their example offered the best hope for improving the nation's race relations. The suffering of black M. E. church members was by no means unique; it resulted from racial as much as religious identity. Nor was oppression limited to Louisiana. Throughout the South, African Americans of all religious persuasions endured threats and actual harm, as did many with no religious affiliation. Nonetheless, belonging to a biracial denomination only increased vulnerability. M. E. church members experienced their oppression through this dual lens of religious and racial identity, in which one was inseparable from the other. As an M. E. leader in neighboring Mississippi explained, membership in the M. E. Church entailed "repeated efforts all over the land to alienate us from it by force and proscription on the one hand and persuasion on the other."⁶

Efforts to alienate black M. E. church members "by force and proscription" referred primarily to the activities of white antagonists. The religious as well as the racial identity of black members threatened white southerners. Much of the opposition came from Southern Methodists, who had separated from the M. E. Church over the issue of slavery in 1844. Because Southerners considered the division between northern and southern Methodism as much about geography as ideology, they resented the postbellum incursions of the M. E. Church into their territory. Southern Methodists did not oppose a Methodist identity for former slaves. Rather, they argued that Methodism should be racially separated. The southern ideal was two American Methodist denominations, one white and one black. Race would replace geography as the criterion for denominational affiliation. Southern Methodists had already enacted this separation within their own ranks in 1870, creating the Colored Methodist Episcopal (C.M.E.) Church for the few African Americans who had remained in the Southern Methodist Church. The desire for separate denominations was typical of southern white evangelicals; Southern Methodist racial anxieties were hardly distinctive. Presbyterians, both the Southern and Cumberland branches, created separate denominations for their black members, while Baptists segregated almost immediately after Emancipation, if they had not already done so.⁷ Nor was opposition to the M. E. Church limited to those concerned about Methodist geography or politics. To southern whites, participation

in racially mixed religious institutions formed yet another example of black citizens exceeding acceptable limits. These challenges to white supremacy resulted in assaults to remind black Southerners of their proper place: away from whites.⁸

White hostility took many forms, some disastrous, others deadly. Arson abounded, as report after report filtered into New Orleans that “another of our churches has been burned in the South by some wicked incendiary.” More troubling was the risk of death under which black M. E. leaders labored. Two years after the end of Reconstruction, the front page of the M. E. newspaper in New Orleans listed acts of violence carried out against its ministers in the South, noting the murdered clergymen “were all killed because they were laborers in the Methodist Episcopal Church.” In Ouchita Parish, Louisiana, two masked men shot Primus Johnson, an M. E. minister, and Eaton Lockwood, a “colored Republican,” in October 1876. African Americans in New Orleans knew the murders did not constitute random acts of violence but rather reflected the racial threat that the men’s religious and political affiliation represented: “These men were shot because they were leaders among the colored people and because they were Republicans.”⁹ In this triad of identities—black, Republican, and of a biracial denomination—one characteristic often implied the others. Just one of these traits was enough to provoke whites to hostility.

Other efforts to discourage M. E. loyalty were less deadly but even more widespread. Southern Methodists’ tactics reflected not only disgust with M. E. racial policies but also the recognition that black M. E. church members were central to the M. E. establishing a new strength and presence in the postbellum South. This combination of racial and polity concerns led Southern Methodists to agitate for their vision of racially homogenous denominations. Their goal was “the organization of a great Episcopal Methodist Colored Church in the South” along the lines of the C.M.E. they had created in 1870. In the interim, Southern Methodists worked to steer black church members away from the M. E. Church and into any of the racially separate African or Colored Methodist denominations. Church members in New Orleans were well aware of the “constant talk in Southern Methodist papers about the colored people going to themselves, as being the best thing for them and all.” The opposition took its toll. In response to a call to build more churches, one black M. E. minister complained of the difficulty, with “Southern Methodists all the time talking to the members and telling them they are in the wrong church.”¹⁰

Southern Methodists tried to discourage M. E. church members by favoring African Americans who belonged to racially separate denominations. In New Orleans, as throughout the South, Southern Methodists refused Methodist fraternity with black M. E. church members, even as they interacted with both African Methodists and white members of the M. E.

Church. African Methodist preachers filled Southern Methodist pulpits during A.M.E. conferences in New Orleans. Black M. E. clergy never received such invitations, in New Orleans or anywhere else. The Southern Methodist General Conference welcomed only white delegates from the M. E. Church, while simultaneously embracing delegates from African Methodist denominations with “an exchange of expressions which indicated a well-defined policy of special interest and cooperation.” M. E. congregations also encountered financial intimidation to push them toward separate black denominations. Throughout the South, Southern Methodists used property disputes as leverage against M. E. church members. In New Orleans, Southern Methodists contested the ownership of buildings used by three black M. E. congregations. The southern church promised to release any claim if the congregations would reject their M. E. affiliation and unite with an African Methodist Church instead. Church members rejected the repeated overtures, realizing they risked expulsion should the courts decide against them. For M. E. loyalists, no less than their white antagonists, commitment to their denomination’s biracial identity stood at the heart of such disputes. Supporters noted that the black congregants “understood perfectly well the dispute concerning their property titles” and were “ready at any time should it be taken from them, to go out and rebuild the church to which they belonged.” In New Orleans, the M. E. church members prevailed and retained possession of their church buildings.¹¹

Ironically, belonging to a mixed denomination generated opposition from black Methodists as well as white. Criticizing black M. E. church members was an equal-opportunity activity. When M. E. leaders complained about efforts to alienate their church members, they complained as loudly about the hand of “persuasion” of African Methodist rivals as they did about the hand of “force and proscription” that white opponents used. The rhetoric from African Methodist critics proved louder and more pointed than that of Southern Methodists. The African Methodist antagonists varied by region. In Louisiana and Georgia, the A.M.E. was the prime instigator, while the A.M.E. Zion predominated in North Carolina. By the 1880s, all branches of black Methodism could be found in most parts of the South, and critiques of the M. E. Church tended to be the same regardless of tradition or locale. M. E. church members reported a constant barrage of encounters with African Methodist clergy “whose stock-in-trade is to build up their charges by abusing and misrepresenting the Methodist Episcopal Church.”¹² African Methodist arguments and ultimate goals were categorically different than the racist and segregationist aims of Southern Methodists. But the ironic synchronization of the two efforts was not lost on M. E. church members: both black and white opponents agitated to shift M. E. church members into racially separate denominations.

The A.M.E. Church constituted the M. E. Church's primary black antagonist and its biggest competitor for members. The contest remained fierce throughout the 1880s. M. E. publications regularly noted changing affiliations in the final decades of the nineteenth century, challenging long-standing assumptions that African Americans settled questions of denominational identity within a few years of Emancipation.¹³ Typical was a report from Louisiana that "about a hundred members of the Union Bethel African M. E. Church, Washington City . . . have organized into a new society of our Church, to be called the Central M.E. Church." The rivalry concerned far more than simply competition for members, ministers, and church buildings. The relationship of religious and racial identity formed a primary concern as African Americans considered and reconsidered their denominational affiliations. Debates centered on the advantages of each to racial advancement and the integration of blacks as equal citizens in American society. Differing perspectives aroused such passion that one M. E. minister charged that "in organizing new works Baptist members very often show us more encouragement than do many Methodists of the colored persuasion."¹⁴

African Methodists accused M. E. loyalists of betraying the race. M. E. church members reported being confronted with charges that equated membership in their denomination with slavery to white masters. Some opponents suggested a financial slavery, wherein the M. E. Church recruited black members to support white congregations in the North. Church leaders in New Orleans pointed to the impoverishment of most black congregations to refute such charges. "Stop and think," an M. E. minister in New Orleans retorted: "Our people are poor and have little or nothing to give." M. E. churches in Louisiana and the South received far more funding from the North than they raised themselves, a nearly universal situation for black congregations belonging to predominantly northern and white denominations. A more potent charge of subservience came when African Methodists highlighted the limited opportunities for advancement in the M. E. Church. Unfulfilled white promises of leadership opportunities haunted black church members for generations. Church leaders feared the impact of African Methodists who asserted that "young people of color, however pious and well educated, have no rational ground upon which to predicate the hope of being promoted" in the M. E. Church. Culminating these assaults was what members of the M. E. Church considered the most offensive and arrogant step of all: "To assume the right to command our people, particularly the young and promising, to come out of the Old Church, assuring them that their manhood and womanhood would never be acknowledged while they remained in the fellowship of this Church."¹⁵ The cry to abandon imperfect churches has been a repeated

theme in American religious history, and the struggles among African-American Christians were no exception.

African Methodist calls to leave the M. E. Church reached their peak over the question of black bishops. The “bishop question” plagued the M. E. Church well into the twentieth century. African Methodists boasted of their own black bishops while pointing to the M. E. Church’s failure to elect even one. The dilemma was common to biracial denominations, especially those with an episcopal polity. Like the M. E. Church, the Episcopal Church struggled with unanswered calls for a black bishop until nearly 1920. M. E. church members complained that “our church is confronted everywhere in the South with the fact among the colored people that other churches have Bishops of African descent.” With the failure of each General Conference to elect a bishop of African descent, M. E. loyalists were greeted with more taunting. Nor were the charges innocuous. Church members and clergy, black members and white, acknowledged the boost that a black bishop would provide for M. E. work in the South. The biracial New Orleans Preacher’s Meeting passed resolutions in favor of a black bishop, while many black clergymen conceded their belief that with the passing of such a milestone, “thousands, yea, tens of thousands, who are this day waiting for our full recognition, will come flocking to our fold.” In the meantime, M. E. church members suffered the torment of their foes. Ministers reported “it almost impossible, in some places, to hold our colored members.” Those leaving the M. E. Church gave as their reason “Dey hes white bishops.”¹⁶

But most members of the M. E. Church in New Orleans remained loyal, testifying to their confidence in a mixed denomination as the best hope for achieving racial equality. When opponents tried to weaken African-American confidence in the M. E. Church, leaders responded with affirmations of their “implicit and unwavering faith in the Methodist Episcopal Church.” African Americans maintained this commitment even as they recognized that their church often marginalized its black members. Church members were optimistic “that the time is not far distant when the last vestige of prejudice on account of color shall be wiped out from among us.” Their denominational identity was deliberate, not accidental. “The Negroes are in the Methodist Episcopal Church of choice, not of necessity,” explained one of New Orleans’s leading black M. E. clergymen. They would remain and work for change from within. “We are in the M. E. Church to stay,” affirmed another prominent black clergyman from Kentucky. “We shall wait until the occasion comes, and then as members within the church, under its rules, and by its laws, demand and secure what ever rights we are entitled to by law as members.”¹⁷

Though members endured two decades of antagonism for their religious identity, as the black M. E. leader cited above observed, “There are

multiplied thousands of blacks that are as true to the old church as the needle to the pole, notwithstanding the repeated efforts all over the land to alienate us from it by force and proscription on the one hand and persuasion on the other.” Membership in a racially mixed denomination was unavoidably risky for African Americans living in the postbellum South. But their willingness to endure both physical and rhetorical opposition demonstrated their commitment to a biracial denomination and their faith that it could create a religious identity that transcended race. They believed the M. E. Church of the 1880s still offered promise in the midst of a worsening racial climate. The tide of Jim Crow was not yet so high that their church could not turn it back. Racially separate denominations made little sense to M. E. members, while the opposition they encountered only confirmed for them that the M. E. Church stood for the racially inclusive principles on which they based their loyalty. Some church members were so confident that they reversed the “come-outism” of their critics, arguing that “any sane person whose heart is clear of prejudice can readily see that the M. E. Church is the church for the colored people,” and thus “each and every colored person ought to unite with this grand old mother church of Methodism.”¹⁸

Black church members were not alone in suffering for their loyalty to the biracial M. E. Church. White M. E. church members throughout the South encountered opposition in parallel, though less dangerous, ways. Like their black counterparts, much of the antagonism came from Southern Methodists. Most white Methodists in New Orleans and across the South belonged to the all-white Southern Methodist Church. The few whites belonging to the M. E. Church faced constant criticism and often ostracism. White M. E. church members encountered “a strong spirit of opposition” to their work, discovering that “in many cases these unpleasant incidents would be found to have their inspiration from sources high in authority and influence in sister Churches.”¹⁹ Enduring parallel experiences of criticism bound the city’s black and white M. E. church members together in a religious identity that transcended race. White faithfulness in the face of hostility also reassured black church members of their denomination’s commitment to biracialism. Recognizing the sacrifice of their black counterparts, white church members endured their lesser hardships out of a shared belief in their denomination’s promise for improving the nation’s race relations.

The experiences of the Reverend Joseph Crane Hartzell (1842–1929) exemplified the challenges facing white M. E. church members in New Orleans and throughout the South. Reared and educated in Illinois, Hartzell arrived in New Orleans in 1870, serving first as pastor of the mostly white Ames M. E. Church and later as a presiding elder in the predominantly black Louisiana Annual Conference.²⁰ Using his own money, Hart-

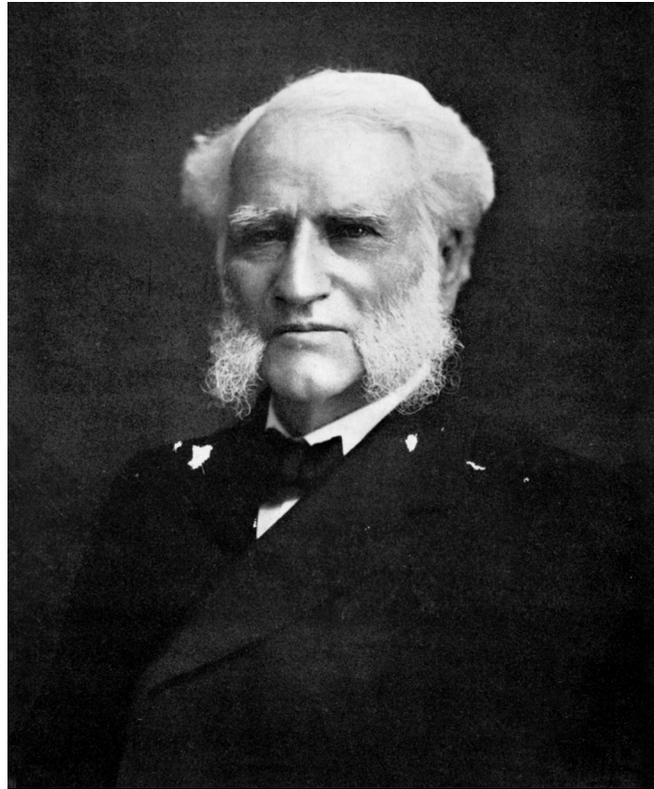


Figure 1.1. Joseph C. Hartzell (1842–1929). Courtesy General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church.

zell founded and served as the first editor of the *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, a weekly newspaper that was a tireless advocate of racial equality and would become New Orleans's largest circulating religious newspaper with a black readership.²¹ Hartzell's commitment to African Americans in the M. E. Church never wavered, despite the opposition he encountered during his early years in New Orleans and the occasional spirit of condescension and compromise that characterized even the most sympathetic white workers in the South. During Reconstruction, Hartzell served on the public school board that experimented with integrated schools. Following his work in New Orleans, Hartzell rose through the ranks of the denomination's Freedmen's Aid Society. In 1896 he was elected a missionary bishop to Africa, where he served until retirement in 1916. Upon his return to the United States, Hartzell was an increasingly lonely white

voice, even in the North, as he protested his denomination's racism and advocated for the equality of black church members.²² Like many Northerners who came south to work among African Americans, Hartzell's racial sympathies stemmed from an explicitly religious context and background. Attention to these church workers and the institutions they founded reveals many of the most forceful white advocates for black Southerners in the postbellum South.

The opposition Hartzell and his white colleagues encountered stemmed from three inter-related issues. Sectionalism was one dimension of the antagonism between Hartzell and Southern whites. Most of the members of Ames Chapel, where Hartzell first served as pastor, either hailed from the North or had remained loyal to the Union during the Civil War. Lingering resentments made it difficult for them to penetrate New Orleans's society, where they were derided as carpetbaggers and scalawags. Shortly after his arrival in New Orleans, Hartzell complained of city residents whose sectionalism was so bitter "that they knowingly will not associate with a Northern Family." Compounding the difficulties was the M. E. Church's identity as a northern denomination. In a letter inviting Hartzell to preach in her church, a Southern Methodist woman conceded that "the people here as in other places in the South are considerably prejudiced toward the Northern Methodists." Hartzell's wife fared no better in her work among the city's women, encountering a "most intense opposition . . . among hostile whites" throughout New Orleans. In his work as an editor of the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* and as a traveling M. E. statesman in the South, Hartzell endured much criticism from Southern Methodists who considered the M. E. Church nothing more than another Yankee army invading the South. Hartzell heard often from Southern Methodists who "consider us *intruders* here and throughout the South." As far away as Texas, Southerners alleged that "without doubt Dr. Hartzell and the clan he represents, would gladly rule as conquerors over the South, and compel its people to accept their opinions by all the terrors of the secular arm." Hartzell did little to ease the hostility, suggesting that easing sectional tensions required nothing less than "that the convictions of vast multitudes of white people in the South be remolded."²³

Political hostility provided a second basis for Southern whites to ostracize white M. E. church members. Like Hartzell, most members of the M. E. Church were Republican as well as Unionist. Hartzell reported that the membership of Ames Chapel was "composed of those who have been loyal enough to their country and God, to 'come up through' the 'great tribulations' of the rebellion and reconstruction." Hartzell bragged of the Republican flavor of his congregation at Ames Chapel during Reconstruction: "the governor and most of the leading state and city officials support us financially—several attend and some are members." None of this en-

deared him to the antebellum and Confederate Democrats who had been shut out during Reconstruction but returned to prominence with the end of Reconstruction in 1877. Wherever M. E. missionaries entered the southern field, from Tennessee to Atlanta to New Orleans, their Republican politics became a major source of tension with Southern Methodists. Throughout the South, fellow M. E. missionaries joined Hartzell in publishing pro-Republican articles in religious and secular papers alike and in very public support for Republican and northern policies in the South. In Atlanta, Erasmus Q. Fuller used his *Methodist Advocate* to campaign for Republican candidates, while other M. E. clergy advanced their Republican political agenda in secular papers from Knoxville south to Jackson, Mississippi, and from Memphis east to Orangeburg, South Carolina.²⁴

But it was a commitment to racial equality that proved the third and greatest source of tension with whites in New Orleans. Hartzell reported that the M. E. Church was “reviled and persecuted by all the aristocratic white Churches of the South because of her work among colored people” and its gospel of racial equality. Ames Chapel, the predominantly white congregation that Hartzell served, struggled to maintain a policy of non-discrimination.²⁵ When a church member protested Hartzell’s invitation to a black colleague to preach at Ames, Hartzell replied, “If I am forbidden to invite a brother minister to preach in my pulpit simply because his color is a shade darker than mine, my pastorate ends in that place.” During his tenure at Ames, Hartzell reported that he and his wife also frequently “invited the colored brethren to take tea with us.” Later, as a presiding elder visiting area churches, he slept exclusively in the homes of black church members and leaders. As a Southern Methodist woman explained to Hartzell, this sort of behavior was the central cause of animosity that residents of New Orleans felt toward northern Methodists: “They have no objection to your preaching to the colored people but they must not wish them to meet together.” Hartzell responded to such complaints by explaining that the M. E. Church was engaged in “the mission of peace and good will to all men, without distinction of race or condition.” Ironically, opening a church’s doors to all races restricted a congregation such as Ames, which found itself “shut in by barriers of prejudice.” Hartzell’s commitment to racial equality drew scathing attacks well beyond Southern Methodists, as did many of his northern missionary compatriots. The secular *New Orleans Picayune*, for example, leveled the accusation that Hartzell “has long and actively engaged in misinforming the Northern public in regard to Southern matters, and particularly as to the condition of the colored people of this section. We are not aware that he has any other claim to distinction; but in the department of bloody-shirt and outrage literature he has secured a position of undisputed prominence.”²⁶ While Hartzell and the M. E.

Church hoped to soothe the nation's wounds, many white New Orleanians believed he applied more salt than salve.

Although Hartzell was far from alone in agitating for greater racial equality, he was one of the loudest among M. E. missionaries working in the South. Only Bishop Gilbert Haven, who served in Atlanta between 1872 and 1876, was more vocal, and more reviled. Still, both men were part of a much larger contingent working for the religious and racial transformation of the former Confederacy. Like Haven, many of denomination's most prominent racial activists hailed from New England and could trace their Methodist and ideological roots to the region's abolitionist heritage. The New England Annual Conference was where some of the earliest attempts to integrate M. E. churches and conferences took place, and Boston was home to *Zion's Herald*, the denomination's most vocal advocate of racial equality. The religious and racial commitments of several New England clergymen led them to engage in work for and among African Americans in the South. In New Orleans, Hartzell worked with numerous white M. E. supporters of African-American equality, including ardent integrationist Lucius Matlack, whose "rally cry" was "the equality of relations enjoyed by black and white"; L. P. Cushman, who was, among other responsibilities, Hartzell's successor as editor of the anti-caste *Southwestern Christian Advocate*; and W. D. Godman, one of several M. E. missionaries who served as president of New Orleans University.

Alongside New Orleans, Atlanta formed another center for M. E. work among African Americans. Besides Bishop Haven, Atlanta clergy such as Isaac Lansing, who worked tirelessly in his city and in the Methodist press against segregation in church and society alike, labored. Wilbur Thirkield, Haven's son-in-law and later a bishop himself, was dean of the M. E. Gammon Seminary in Atlanta, where he succeeded in opening "the first Library Building in the South open to all races." Others had carried the call for equality to the large African-American Protestant population in South Carolina. By the end of Reconstruction, the M. E. Church had hundreds of white missionaries, clergy and lay, male and female, who continued working throughout the South. Throughout the 1880s, black church members continued to look to northern strongholds of biracial sympathy. After Haven's death in 1880, several black leaders coordinated their efforts to ensure the episcopal vacancy was filled by another sympathetic New England native, Willard Mallalieu.²⁷

Like Hartzell and his colleagues in New Orleans, these white missionaries suffered for their trinity of interrelated identities as Northerners, Republicans, and advocates of racial inclusiveness. The further south they ventured, the greater opposition the missionaries encountered. No less than Hartzell in New Orleans, M. E. missionary families from Memphis to Atlanta, and even as far north as Maryland, faced social and economic

ostracism. Social ostracism was the most common response, but some whites also experienced the threats to property and life that routinely terrorized black church members. A black church member in rural Louisiana recalled a white teacher “who was taken out of his schoolhouse, right before his scholars, in broad daytime, and caned half to death by a mob of nearly a hundred.” After a ten-day chase with a five-hundred-dollar bounty on his head, the teacher “reached New Orleans in safety, where he could continue in the same line of work with a little more security.” A Congressional investigation into violence in the southern states suggested M. E. church members appeared especially vulnerable, although their suffering was far from unique. Northern Presbyterians lost schoolhouses and churches in Tennessee to arson, while their teachers in Mississippi were victims of mob violence.²⁸

Opposition to white M. E. missionaries and members left the white portion of the denomination’s biracial equation in a precarious position. The struggles of Ames Chapel in New Orleans typified just how unstable the balance remained. Ames, where most white M. E. church members in the Crescent City worshiped, began in 1865 with a sizable loan from the denomination. The church continued to struggle for several decades thereafter. The congregation’s sectional, political, and racial views made it difficult to attract enough members to support the church. Adding insult to injury, the church was named after the M. E. bishop who had used Union troops to take possession of Southern Methodist church buildings in New Orleans and Nashville.²⁹ M. E. loyalists had hoped their church could transform the political order, but they were learning that the opposite could also hold true. Political changes that returned Redeemer Democrats to power in 1877 stifled the effectiveness of M. E. work among whites in New Orleans. Hartzell reported that the end of Reconstruction proved quite a blow for the congregation, for “they have been greatly crippled, owing to the changes which have taken place recently in the political world and the consequent removal from the city of many of its former supporters.” But Ames remained important as testimony to the denomination’s biracial identity in the Crescent City. Without the predominantly white congregation, the M. E. Church in New Orleans would have had the appearance of another black Methodist denomination. Ames continued to struggle throughout the 1880s. In 1882, the presiding elder in New Orleans responded to the rumors of Ames’s closure, saying, “We are not quite prepared to abandon the Ames church as yet.”³⁰ They did not abandon Ames.

Nor did Hartzell and his white colleagues abandon their commitment to bolstering black as well as white membership in the M. E. Church. This small band of whites in New Orleans sustained their commitment to an integrated religious and social world, even in the face of constant harassment and financial difficulties. Their troubles paled in comparison with

that of their African-American counterparts, who risked loss of property and life for their denominational loyalty. Nonetheless, white encounters with adversity formed a meaningful complement to the hardship that black members endured for their allegiance to the M. E. Church. Both black and white church members in New Orleans viewed the resistance they encountered through the lens of religious and racial identity. Neither racial nor religious identity alone but the assertion of both combined in an M. E. identity had fostered the opposition that black and white members alike endured. Their parallel experiences strengthened their sense of a shared religious identity that transcended racial differences.

M. E. CHURCH MEMBERS suffered for their religious identity because they believed the stakes were so high. Black members insisted African Methodist rivals offered a far worse alternative to the M. E. Church, even as they were aware of their own denomination's shortcomings. White M. E. church members considered Southern Methodist racial exclusivism equally dangerous. Racially separate denominations, whether the product of self-separation or enforced segregation, fell well short of the society demanded by both the Christian Bible and the recently amended United States Constitution. Accordingly, both black and white M. E. church members went on the offensive against their religious rivals. The shared religious identity of black and white church members was not merely a by-product of similar experiences of oppression. Privileging a common denominational identity over racial distinctions was an intentional activity, not an incidental consequence. Calling attention to their differences from other Methodist traditions enabled black and white M. E. church members to highlight their shared commitment to a biracial denomination, upon which they hoped to build a religious identity that transcended race.

Racial inclusiveness was the most crucial characteristic separating the M. E. church from its rivals. Emphasizing their denomination's biracial membership, M. E. loyalists engaged in parallel processes wherein black members differentiated themselves from African Methodists, while white members distanced themselves from Southern Methodists. Their rhetoric bound them together as they invoked the same critique against racial exclusivism. By accentuating their differences from their respective rivals, black and white church members emphasized a shared space constructed upon a common religious identity that made room for racial differences. The M. E. Church in New Orleans became a middle ground where both races found refuge from the segregation of African Methodism at one extreme and Southern Methodism at the other. This shared middle ground was evidence, especially to black church members, that the M. E. Church could be the catalyst for transforming race relations in church and state alike.

Black M. E. loyalists focused their criticism on the dangers of racially exclusive denominations. They hoped to eliminate caste, a term they used interchangeably with race, as a principle of organization and a measure of worth. Their objection referred as much to the black exclusivism of African Methodists as to the white exclusivism of Southern Methodists. There was no reason to have any more faith in a purely black church than in a purely white one. Black M. E. church members rejected the contention that the immediate leadership opportunities available in a separate denomination necessitated an exodus: “The sentiment that a man to prove his manhood must isolate himself from the bulk of mankind is a mistake.” M. E. loyalists believed that in their denomination, a person’s skin color would not determine his or her stature. To their rivals touting the advantages of racial homogeneity, M. E. loyalists responded that “color is nothing, character is everything.” Black members in other biracial denominations, such as Francis Grimke of the Presbyterian Church, were equally outraged by racial separation among either black or white church members. When invited to join an alliance of black Presbyterians, Grimke responded with a frustration analogous to that of his M. E. counterparts: “It is not true that I am a colored Presbyterian. I did not know that Presbyterianism was any particular color.” In a properly constituted Christian church, skin color remained irrelevant, and “as the world learns to more fully appreciate this fact, the use for a purely race church obliterates.”³¹ For Methodist Episcopalians, churches were central to the struggle to create a color-blind society.

M. E. church members warned that racially homogenous denominations created a greater concession to the color line than any failures within their own denomination. Responding to the “African” in A.M.E. and A.M.E. Zion or the “Colored” in C.M.E., church members lamented the way rival denominations privileged racial over religious identity. These denominations made race intrinsic rather than irrelevant to religion, fusing religious and racial identities into an inseparable whole. The M. E. Church, in contrast, offered a common religious identity regardless of race. M. E. church members believed African Methodist racial separatism represented the very prejudice these rivals decried within the M. E. Church: “‘Caste and race prejudice’ is the backbone of their success . . . and they know this.” M. E. church members encouraged African Methodists to remove the log from their own eye before attempting to remove the speck from the eye of the M. E. Church. “When the A.M.E. Church works less in the line of race prejudice,” challenged one minister, “they can more justly criticise this evil in the M. E. Church.” M. E. arguments failed to differentiate between the self-separation that African Methodism was founded upon and the white-imposed limits African Methodists were so critical of in the M. E. Church. For M. E. critics, the contemporary implications were more important than the historical foundations. The first black editor of the New Orleans–

based *Southwestern Christian Advocate* was typical in his analysis of African Methodist influence: “The talk with which their adherents boast of race pride, self-assertion, freedom, manhood, and patriotism is but another form of demanding, asserting and upholding color-caste and the COLOR LINE.”³²

The most stinging criticism against racially exclusive churches charged that separation in the religious sphere supported segregation in other areas of society.³³ M. E. church members believed even the self-separation of African Methodists contributed to the rising tide of Jim Crow. “Those who advocate the color line in churches,” one minister charged, “ought not to object to it on railroad cars, steamboats, in hotels, and all other places carried out to its fullest extent.” M. E. loyalists worried about the detrimental impact of separate churches on all African Americans, given their belief that churches exerted influence on the larger social order. Black M. E. church leaders warned that black denominations are “full of future mischief to the nation and to the church of Christ.” White leaders such as Hartzell concurred, asserting that “the putting of colored people into separate denominational organizations—no matter how much the act may be explained by questions of policy—is an acquiescence in distinctions on account of race and color, which commits those who do it to a defense of those distinctions as being right, and to be perpetuated.” When someone tried to downplay the role of the church and blame racial divisions solely on the government, these same Methodists responded, “No, *the pulpit is responsible*. It is the duty of the pulpit to make a public conscience adverse to this state of things. . . . The responsibility remains with the pulpit, and to that responsibility the pulpit must be held.” African Methodist preachers looked out upon racially exclusive denominations and thus encouraged rather than opposed the practice of racial segregation. The A.M.E. Church cannot be anything but a perpetuator of racial divisiveness, claimed one M. E. leader, except that it cease “to exist at all as a distinct church for American Africans.”³⁴

Separate black denominations encouraged the spread of Jim Crow by playing into the hands of conservative southern whites. Southern Methodists had long frustrated black M. E. church members with assertions that “all Methodists should be divided on the color line and one part be united in one great big ‘Colored’ Methodist Church” and the other in a single white denomination. Southern Methodists interpreted African Methodist growth as evidence that all African Americans shared white segregationist preferences, not only in religion but throughout society. In New Orleans, a leading black clergyman and editor warned that “for the race to isolate itself and wall itself inside of a race church . . . would tend more to continue indefinitely the prejudices of the white people against the colored.” M. E. church members stressed that the ramifications ex-

tended far beyond denominational organization. They feared that self-segregation in churches provided fodder for whites seeking to enforce separatism outside of the church. A presiding elder in Kentucky cautioned that segregated denominations were “strengthening the hands of our foes by placing arguments in their mouths against interracial mixture for moral and mental development.”³⁵ Whites would argue that in areas where African Americans had the freedom to choose—religion being the most visible—they preferred separation. The imposition of Jim Crow, whites could then claim, merely provided African Americans with the social order they desired.

Black M. E. church members straddled a precarious position in their criticisms of African Methodists. When church members linked African Methodism and segregation, they ironically committed the error of white segregationists whose reasoning failed to differentiate between self-separation and segregation. For this reason, newspapers from rival denominations, such as the A.M.E. *Zion Star of Zion* and the A.M.E. *Christian Recorder*, both of which spoke forcefully to racial concerns, generally refused to engage these particular terms of debate. The self-separation of African Methodists who voluntarily withdrew from biracial communions was qualitatively different from the segregation that white supremacists forced upon black citizens, even when the freely chosen black departure was a direct response to discrimination. Separate railroads and streetcars, separate waiting rooms and drinking fountains, and separate seating in theaters and stadiums were not a matter of choice for African Americans. Even if they might choose to sit apart, segregation denied the opportunity to make such a choice. African Methodists were separate by choice. M. E. critics did not always acknowledge the significance of these differences in their challenges to African Methodists.

Yet white segregationist reasoning also meant that M. E. critics were correct. White supremacists pointed to black organizations and alliances of all types, from labor and professional organizations to social clubs and benevolent organizations, as evidence that African Americans preferred a racially segregated society. Absent was the recognition that discrimination necessitated these separate organizations. Separate churches stood at the forefront of white supremacist arguments for racial segregation. The white Southern Baptist Convention, for example, assumed the explosion of independent black Baptist churches expressed an African-American desire “to have their own organizations” segregated on the basis of race. Yet M. E. church members charged that African Methodist denominations were among the most damaging to the quest for integration. The New Orleans-based *Southwestern Christian Advocate* published testimonies from black church members who, when insisting on equality and integration, were confronted by white separatists who “pointed [to] the African Church for example” of evidence that black Americans preferred separation.”³⁶

As racial separatism complicated relations with whites, M. E. loyalists also feared it would sow dissension within the black community. In New Orleans, they worried the spread of racially separate denominations would further deteriorate the already racially fragmented society. The diversity of skin color among people of African descent would provide a never-ending opportunity for discrimination. One church leader described the color line in the A.M.E. Church as “a color-caste reaching to the home, taking its grades upwards from deepest black to faintest octoroon; often interfering with the family relations.” The danger held especially true in New Orleans, where the range of colors extended from the generally lighter Creoles of color, to Haitian immigrants, to African Americans, most of whom were former slaves and darker-skinned. A hierarchy that placed Creoles and former free persons of color above those who had been slaves had long characterized the Crescent City. St. James A.M.E. Church in New Orleans, an antebellum independent church for free people of color, was already associated with the city’s elite, and almost inevitably light-skinned, Protestants. Following Emancipation, many of St. James’s members left to form Central Congregational Church, troubled in part by the growing presence of less refined and darker-skinned worshipers who had also been slaves. Commenting on the growing homogenization among different shades of people of color elsewhere in the country, a leading M. E. clergyman in New Orleans observed that as late as 1888, “a notable exception exists in Louisiana where the fusion is not so thorough.”³⁷ The divisions associated with African Methodism contrasted with the ideals of inclusivity and unity that M. E. loyalists in New Orleans believed their denomination upheld and their city needed. Criticisms of African Methodists were therefore more than quibbles within Methodism, or even a mere competition for members and resources. The very future of race relations was at stake.

M. E. church members were defining religion and its influence in the broadest possible terms in their castigations of religious and racial rivals. These Methodists recognized that religion involved a wide range of activity, not merely the realms of formal theology or personal spirituality. Such theoretical or inward religious thoughts had little meaning until they found outward expression. The activities and practices of religious institutions were a far better measure of a church’s theology than declarations about a sacred text. A church’s acceptance or rejection of racial inclusion not only worked to shape racial attitudes in the society in which it operated, it was itself an expression of religious belief. Proclamations of concern for all souls or statements of inclusion meant little if contradicted by institutional practices and attitudes. Black Christians looked to practical expressions far more than to theological treatises, publications, or even sermons to determine a denomination’s beliefs about race. This understanding of religion challenged southern white denominations that asserted churchly con-

cerns were limited solely to the spiritual realm. Neither theology nor practice alone but rather the tension between the two formed the center of religious experience for black Southerners.

Emphasizing this connection between theology and religious institutions, M. E. church members were critical of the theology implied by racially separate denominations. They charged African Methodists with betraying the inclusiveness of their tradition's founder, John Wesley, whose Methodist fellowship was interracial from its inception in America. M. E. church members insisted their denomination maintained Wesley's openness to all people. One minister who transferred from the A.M.E. to the M. E. Church gave as his reason that the only true Methodist church was "the old mother of Methodists—the Methodist Episcopal Church, that knows no North, South, East, nor West, but to preach Christ and him crucified to all the world." The M. E. Church in New Orleans contrasted its own faithfulness with the hypocrisy of opponents who were "tantalyzing the Methodist Episcopal Church because it is composed, [as] the Apostolic church was, of men and women 'of every nation under heaven.'" One church member suggested that rivals who criticized the M. E. Church about not having a colored bishop "are not Methodists in heart, but only Methodists in a colored bishop."³⁸ African Methodist had lost sight of their Methodist lineage in their preference for racial homogeneity.

M. E. church members viewed their concerns through a wider theological lens. They argued that racially separate denominations also fell short of essential tenets of the Christian faith. Such churches did not manifest genuine Christianity. To separate on the basis of race, an M. E. presiding elder challenged, was not only "in violation of the very principle for which we have all along contended," but to "loose the image of Christ and become schismatic beside." Pointing to race as the organizing principle, another minister claimed that "the plan of colored churches is unchristian, because 'color' is the badge of heathenish caste." Likewise, the C.M.E. Church was "an abomination in Christendom" since its constitution excluded whites from membership. "We cannot look upon a mere race church, as the church of the Lord Jesus Christ," another critic charged, because "of all human organizations that take the name of a church, a caste church is the most hateful and harmful." Some claimed the practices of African Methodists were unscriptural, arguing that there is "not a syllable of Bible in favor of such teaching" and that such practices were "not in keeping with the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount." Congregationalists in Atlanta were equally adamant that the early church described in the book of Acts and the apostle Paul's assertion that "there is neither Jew nor Greek" forbade racial separatism in the church. Others pointed directly to Jesus in supporting their claims: "Jesus came to mix with us. Came all the way from glory. He has no respect for persons; we are to be like Him."

They further reminded both African and Southern Methodists of eternal consequences for falling short of Christ's standards of inclusiveness: "Should we fail, we might miss the crown."³⁹ As church members emphasized the need to correlate theology and its institutional expression, they were demonstrating to white as well as to black rivals that Christianity in general, and Methodism in particular, were more accurately associated with integration than segregation.

In the end, theological and pragmatic opposition to African Methodist churches merged. African Americans in the M. E. Church asserted that only a mixed denomination could simultaneously remain a faithful church and advance the struggle against race prejudice. They rejected African Methodist arguments that black Christians could only attain the fullest expression in separate churches. While rivals repeatedly issued calls "to come out" and join the African Methodist congregations, M. E. loyalists argued that just the opposite was necessary. M. E. church leaders advised African Methodists that on issues of prejudice, the M. E. Church "was doing away with it more rapidly than any other branch of Methodism." Inverting the language of "come outism," the M. E. Church urged A.M.E. ministers to "come over to our house and take all your folks along," since "no ecclesiastical organization in the land . . . 'is giving caste such deadly blows,' as the Methodist Episcopal."⁴⁰ African Americans in the M. E. Church turned the racial criticisms directed at them back on their opponents, remaining convinced that their own denomination was accomplishing more on their behalf than any other organization, religious or secular.

These ongoing debates among Methodist denominations illuminate the fluidity of African-American religious affiliation in the late nineteenth century. Shortly after Emancipation, most black Christians had voluntarily left the ranks of the southern churches that their masters had compelled them to attend. In Georgia and Tennessee, no less than Louisiana and throughout the South, Southern Baptists, Southern Methodists, and Southern Presbyterians witnessed a near total loss of their black members.⁴¹ But that was only the beginning of the journey, not the end. Two decades later, many were still searching for the denominational home that best articulated their understanding of their faith and place in the world. Attention to the resulting denominational competition provides an important window into the unsettled character of segregation and race relations, as debates among black Methodists reveal. African-American understandings of their place in Christianity and in the American nation remained at the center of denominational rivalries, keeping competition alive throughout the decade after Reconstruction. As other avenues of expression were closed to black voices, church debates preserved a space for ongoing discussions about racial organization, segregation, and the nature of black and white relations in the final decades of the nineteenth century. African Americans disagreed

about which religious organizations best reflected God's will for their race, just as they differed regarding which political parties and economic strategies best enabled them to claim their constitutional rights. Black citizens, no less than any group in the United States, were far from unified on how best to advance their position in American society. Churches and denominational affiliations would remain at the center of these debates, even as particular loyalties and alliances shifted over time. Most African Americans drifted toward the various Baptist and Methodist bodies—but not all of them did. In New Orleans, in particular, the Congregational Church was another tradition steadfastly committed to biracialism in ways very similar to those of the M. E. Church. The city's black Catholics offered their own challenge to segregation. It thus remains a misnomer to speak of anything approaching a unified "black church" in the decades after Reconstruction.⁴²

In carving out their niche in the religious marketplace, black M. E. church members challenged the idea of the church as a place of retreat from racial oppression. Rather, they understood churches as a means to engage and ultimately challenge the prevailing white supremacy in southern society. Like black members of other denominations, they recognized the increasing importance of churches as a locus for debating responses to racial oppression, especially as other avenues for racial protest, from electoral politics to the judicial system, became increasingly closed to African Americans. But the strong link between belief and action meant that the debates could not remain merely in the realm of rhetoric or displaced to the life to come. Black church members understood M. E. churches as places to use otherworldly models to push for this-worldly transformation. As a member from Arkansas explained, "We will have to mix in heaven. Better get acquainted here."⁴³ The strong legacy of social reform in Methodism, most notably abolition, no doubt influenced M. E. church members' conception of the church and its role in the world. Remaining in a racially mixed denomination formed an important expression of this understanding of the church. As a result, the biracial interactions at the national denominational level was as important a part of the M. E. identity as was the particularity of one's own congregation.

As black M. E. church members differentiated themselves from African Methodists, they also demonstrated their unity with white members of the M. E. Church in New Orleans. Black church members privileged religious unity over racial unity. They were willing to endure intraracial divisions to achieve their goals of racial integration in church and society. In critiquing African Methodists, black M. E. church members assumed an active role in relation to their rivals, refusing to allow their opponents to define them. This critique of African Methodists also enabled black M. E. church members to define their place in their own denomination. They were no more willing to have their position defined by white members of their own de-

nomination than by black members of rival churches. Their membership in the M. E. Church was predicated on equality before God and humanity, and it was on those terms, and those terms alone, that they defended their M. E. membership. Black M. E. church members in New Orleans emphasized racial inclusion as the boundary that separated them from African Methodists and bound them to their own denomination.

Black Methodists found strength in their white counterparts, who were engaged in similar debates with their rivals in the all-white Southern Methodist Church. Race stood at the center of these debates. While Southerners primarily invoked territorial protectiveness, M. E. church members countered that differences between the two denominations centered on morality more than geography. Nor was the divide unique to Methodism. The nation's other major evangelical traditions, Baptists and Presbyterians, also divided over slavery, and none would see their rifts healed in the nineteenth century. In each instance, Southerners resented the postbellum northern incursions into southern territory, the resulting mass exodus of black members, and the efforts to educate freed slaves. Southerners characterized these efforts as propagandizing northern and Republican values, which included notions of racial equality. Episcopalians and Catholics proved an exception to the evangelical tendency. Although northern and southern church members and leaders defended the Union and Confederacy respectively, neither Catholics nor Episcopalians made an official ecclesiastical split. Following the war they therefore continued as unified traditions, aided by the lack of zealous northerners coming south. Episcopalians, for example, sent funds rather than missionaries, leaving the expenditures to the dictates of southern clergymen.⁴⁴

The tensions among divided denominations remained high. White M. E. advocates castigated Southern Methodists for their racial record. Just like northern Presbyterians, M. E. missionaries claimed that these failures, ranging from a pro-slavery stance and Confederate sympathies to a failure to provide for emancipated slaves and the eventual shunting of black members into the C.M.E. Church, justified the northern religious incursion into the southern states. Scanning the ranks of Southern Methodists, Hartzell and his colleagues saw no evidence "which could be interpreted as indicating any change of sentiment in the Church, South, as to the relative positions to be maintained between the white and the colored people." The failure to recognize African Americans as fellow human beings, let alone as brothers and sisters in faith, marked the clearest difference between the M. E. Church and Southern Methodists. While M. E. leaders portrayed Southern Methodist racial views as particularly horrendous, they were in fact representative of the attitudes of most southern denominations. Virginia Baptists, for example, no more equated Emancipation with a changed social status than did Louisiana Methodists.⁴⁵

White M. E. church members challenged the racial exclusivism of Southern Methodism in arguments that paralleled black members' criticism of African Methodism. Southern Methodists were even less welcoming of black members than African Methodists were of white members. M. E. leaders chastised Southern Methodists because "they don't want our colored members. If they should seek a home in the M. E. Church South, the door would be closed against them, and they would be informed that the Church South was for white people." By 1883, the entire Louisiana Conference of the Southern Methodist Church included only 29 black members, constituting two-tenths of one percent of the total membership. Across the whole denomination, African Americans comprised just over one-tenth of one percent of the denomination's members. Hartzell found the Southern Methodist commitment to racial homogeneity so extreme as to be humorous. In 1881, a newspaper mistakenly identified the Southern Methodist Church as the denomination in which a famous black politician had been appointed a newspaper editor and presiding elder. The appointment actually occurred in the M. E. Church. So remote was the likelihood of a black leader in Southern Methodism that when the mistake appeared, Hartzell chided that "neighbors of the Church South, misled by the erroneous paragraph, must have thought the millennium had come!"⁴⁶

Like their black counterparts, white M. E. church members also criticized their Southern Methodist rivals from a theological perspective. Leading white advocates called upon Methodists north and south to "have the illogical, fastidious, unchristian discrimination of the Negro from all other races . . . abandoned as unworthy of our religion." The M. E. Church invoked Southern Methodism's failure to uphold the entirety of the Christian faith as justification for sending missionaries and funds within its rival's bounds. "Our work in behalf of the colored people is providentially appointed," proclaimed M. E. missionaries in defense of their decision to enter Southern Methodist territory. M. E. loyalists questioned Southern Methodists' ability to recognize genuine Christian service. One clergyman defended the M. E. Church by claiming that "no true follower of Christ will hinder us."⁴⁷ Whites eliminated Southern Methodism as a true expression of Christianity because of its racial exclusivity, while black church members did the same to African Methodism. Each left the M. E. Church as the only denomination for both black and white Methodists who accepted biblical standards.

Southern Methodists, however, refused to acknowledge the theological charges. As a result, they also denied the important connections between social relations and the practices of religious institutions, connections that were so central to black church members' criticism of racially separate denominations. When challenged on the morality or social implications of segregation, southern churches invoked the doctrine of the spirituality of

the churches, claiming to eschew political involvement and thereby refusing to act on social problems. According to ministers in the Louisiana Annual Conference of the Southern Methodist Church, “the civil and religious right of the colored people” was “simply a political question without any moral questions being involved.” To advocate such issues from the pulpit was to engage in the supposedly forbidden practice of “preaching politics.”⁴⁸ Southern Methodists apparently missed the contradiction of calling their own opposition to black interests “spiritual” while characterizing African-American responses as “political.” Northern advocates responded that “though our religion is wisely not dogmatic on such subjects, unquestionably it repels at its very heart most of these prejudices.” White M. E. church members attacked segregationists’ failure to defend separatism from a theological perspective: “We have yet to meet with the first person who advocates separate schools or churches exclusively for colored or white people on Christian principle.”⁴⁹ Their appeals fell on deaf ears. Over time, increasing numbers of white Christians, including many in the M. E. Church, would similarly refuse to discuss segregation, claiming race relations was a social or political, not a theological, issue. Ironically, theology offered little hope for transforming the church.

Watching the debates among white Methodists, black church members took solace in their denomination’s commitment to racial inclusion as central to its identity. Especially reassuring were M. E. pronouncements regarding reunion with Southern Methodists. Given the ongoing tensions, the rival denominations did not yet consider “organic union,” which would have reunited them into a single denomination. They did speak of “fraternity” as a first tentative step that would help move them closer to eventual reunion. The role of black Methodists was and would remain the central issue in adjusting relations between northern and southern Methodism. The M. E. Church insisted that neither fraternity nor union with Southern Methodism could come at the cost of abandoning its biracial identity. Hartzell explained that “the Fraternity for which we should work . . . is that brotherly love which regards the colored man, as well as the white.” True fraternity remained problematic as long as Southern Methodism maintained its discriminatory attitudes toward black church members. Segregation was a nonnegotiable roadblock. Weighing the demands of fraternity and racial equality, Hartzell concluded that “to let go of the prostrate colored people whom we had taken hold of and are lifting up, so as to have our hands free for embraces with the brethren of the M. E. Church South, is not the best way to do our work.” A fellow white laborer in the South insisted that before any negotiations began, Southern Methodists must recognize that “the Methodist Episcopal Church cannot set off her colored members, nor abandon the schools established for them.” The Methodist pattern was typical within American Protestantism.

Questions of racial inclusion similarly hindered Presbyterian efforts toward reunion. Within the M. E. Church, black members found comfort in the fact that Hartzell's insistence on racial inclusiveness had episcopal backing. In their 1880 General Conference address, the bishops declared: "We question seriously the propriety of permanent union efforts where the distinctive methods of the Church are yielded to conciliate the prejudices of good men of other denominations. We lose more than the Master gains, while others gain all we lose."⁵⁰

Like that of their black counterparts, the white M. E. rhetoric of inclusion extended beyond ecclesiastical institutions. Radical whites, from Hartzell to Haven to many lesser-known names as well, called for the full inclusion of African Americans in the nation's economic and, especially, political structures. They pointed to the Constitution and its recent amendments guaranteeing the right of citizenship to African Americans and stressed that all people and all regions were charged with "the duty of maintaining it in its fullest integrity." From discrimination in the military to anti-miscegenation laws, white M. E. workers in the South called upon southern states to recognize the full citizenship as well as the full humanity of African Americans. "Color," they charged, "whether white or red, black or yellow, should be incognizable before the laws of the republic." What was true of constitutional and political rights was also true of natural rights, they continued: "The Negro, as a human being, is possessed of all the rights that naturally belong to human beings. . . . No natural right can be named as pertaining to any white man in the South that is not a part of the providential outfit of the black man."⁵¹ That Southerners disagreed with these contentions only signaled the distance between the two sections and the need, in the religious language of the missionaries, for the conversion of the South. As with the competition among black Methodists, the conflict among white Methodists was about more than gaining members. It was about right belief. Like their black colleagues, white members held that right belief was best measured by a church's inclusion of all races. These M. E. calls for inclusion and conversion helped win the confidence of African Americans, even as those calls continued to alienate most southern whites.

Black and white M. E. church members thus shared a confidence in the transformative power of their church in American society. White leaders contended that the church could shape race relations, just as black members had stressed to their African Methodist rivals. On the one hand, racial interaction in religious institutions was relatively innocuous. It lacked the intimacy so threatening to whites in other settings, such as the railroad and streetcars that would become the early targets for legalized segregation. Yet the symbolic importance of religious interracialism could not be overestimated. M. E. advocacy of religious integration placed the conflict within an institution that Southerners put at the center of their society and

that they declared to be the primary source of moral authority. Biracial denominations created a counternarrative to the growing emphasis on racial distance emerging in southern society.

The M. E. biracial model, church members argued, would benefit both black and white Southerners. They understood the work of the M. E. Church to extend well beyond spiritual salvation to a radical transformation of southern social and racial order. M. E. church members believed their denomination offered a model of racial equality and inclusion that, if emulated throughout Southern society, would boost the confidence of all African Americans. “The wisdom of our church in establishing mixed churches and conferences in the Southern states,” black church members affirmed, is that it made “the colored people to abandon the belief . . . they are so degraded.” M. E. missionaries who entered the South on the heels of Union troops were likewise confident that the M. E. Church was the key to reconstructing the South and healing the nation. Over two decades later, despite limited success, white church members argued that the church remained a force for racial transformation among whites. “The work of the Church,” wrote one white worker, continues to be important in the South “for its influence upon the white race in securing . . . the recognition of the manhood of the negro.”⁵²

For this reason, M. E. church members believed their church bore a special burden to advocate racial equality. For southern society to change its view of the emancipated slaves, ministers stressed that churches needed to lead the way. “If we are to have a change of sentiment,” blacks and whites in the M. E. Church agreed, “we must begin with the church.” And not just any church, they argued. Only the M. E. Church could best lead the nation into a new vision of racial equality. M. E. biracialism could counteract the dangerous example of racially exclusive denominations. They believed the inclusion of both black and white “is a standing proclamation to the world that all distinctions on account of race or color are wrong; and that they are to be warred against until, by Christian unity in the church of God, they are done away with.” In New Orleans, pronouncements from the racially mixed New Orleans Preachers’ Meeting emboldened African Americans by declaring the M. E. Church sought a “speedy and complete triumph over the prejudices in her own communion and in the nation against Christian brethren, because of their color.” Through its calls for racial equality in both church and society, members of the M. E. Church felt confident that “our church has placed herself in the van[guard] in handling and solving these questions, and believes that thus far God has led her.”⁵³

Despite occasional M. E. claims to monopolize hope, African Americans in the South found multiple avenues for advancing equality and resisting segregation in the 1880s. When the rhetoric was put aside, African Meth-

odist and other black denominations were equally committed to racial equality, and other northern denominations also proceeded in a similar fashion. African Americans also found ways to advance and model their ideal society beyond churches. Cooperation in the Republican Party, and in other political movements such as the Unification movement in Louisiana and the Readjusters in Virginia, took place in the political realm, although politics seemed a rapidly disappearing possibility by the 1880s. Dockworkers along the Mississippi River in New Orleans also occasionally pursued interracial cooperation to advance their labor interests against management. Recreationally, black and white baseball teams played against one another throughout the 1880s, while interracial crowds looked on. On a daily basis, African Americans across the South engaged in small acts of protest to signal their rejection of a white-defined inferiority. From challenging the racial order on streetcars to refusing to utilize segregated facilities, African Americans signaled their hope for an integrated society premised on racial equality.⁵⁴ But such resistance was always precarious, and as more and more avenues were closed down, churches increasingly appeared to be the best hope for sustaining racial interaction and a rhetoric of equality. Blacks still had access to the M. E. church in ways they did not in other formerly interracial platforms. As one leading black M. E. church member indicated, “We want to feel, that though the State has not arisen to that state of grace where it can give us equal justice & privileges, that the church of our choice accords freely such privileges.”⁵⁵

Together, black and white M. E. church members in the South remained hopeful throughout the 1880s that their church would be the best catalyst to transform the region’s race relations. Church members were aware of the increasing oppression limiting black citizens, even within the M. E. Church. They acknowledged that their rhetoric and vision were as much about what might be, as what actually was. They were aware that they faced serious challenges from an increasingly recalcitrant southern white culture. They also overestimated support from white members of their denomination, both north and south. And yet they continued to be optimistic that all was not lost in either church or society, that their vision of a religiously and racially transformed society might yet come into being. To twenty-first-century eyes, the glass appears half empty, at best. But to many M. E. church members, the small victories and resistance were evidence that the glass might be half full. Into the 1890s, the M. E. Church was remarkable for its inclusive racial views and policies, even though much of its rhetoric did not reach fruition. Church members were proud of the accomplishments of their churches in resisting institutional segregation, sustaining their faith in the God who had only recently delivered them from slavery. Already, the M. E. Church was more successful than any other racially mixed denomination in its ability to win converts, form churches, and pre-

serve an interracial denominational identity.⁵⁶ Black and white church members were forging a common religious identity that transcended race, evident in their willingness to suffer for their denominational affiliation and in their debates with racially exclusive rivals. In these parallel experiences they moved closer to each other and to the ideal of a unity that valued religious commonalities over racial differences.

Bishop Haven had opened the decade after Reconstruction with his optimism that New Orleans, especially through its M. E. Churches, would lead the racial transformation of church and state alike. Echoes in New Orleans and in the North made clear that Haven was not alone in his optimism. Church members' accomplishments through Reconstruction and into the 1880s signaled a new chapter in race relations rather than continuity with the past. Throughout the 1880s, Crescent City church members pressed ahead with their efforts to construct biracial alliances within and beyond the church in order to bring about the racial transformation they envisioned. From religious governing bodies to educational institutions to moral crusades, they explored the biracialism that formed the basis of their denominational loyalty. So confident was one M. E. minister that he proclaimed the church would be "God's great tidal wave . . . to sweep away caste from the South."⁵⁷ But to a city built below sea level, rising water rarely brought good news.