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Vindicating the Race

The history of African American Christianity is bound up with the history of American slavery. African Americans encountered Christianity in the context of enslavement, and it was as captives that they began the long process of making the gospel their own. The process varied across time and space and defies generalization or easy description. Sometimes conversion came quickly, in explosive moments of "awakening"; more often, it unfolded over generations, as Christian beliefs and practices insinuated themselves into slaves' daily rounds. In some settings, the new creed seems almost completely to have displaced older religions, which survived only in a handful of disembodied beliefs and rituals. In other places, Christian usages were grafted onto still vital African religious traditions, producing dynamic, richly syncretic creeds. Yet whatever the pace or pathway, slaves across the Americas were drawn into the dialectic of conversion, transforming the religion of their captors even as it transformed them.[1]

In Latin America, slave conversion was at least nominally encouraged by church and state. Ships arriving in New Spain were often met by Catholic priests, who baptized their human cargoes and occasionally undertook their religious instruction. Conversion was equally common in Brazil; indeed, by the end of the seventeenth century Portuguese shippers were required to certify slaves as Christian before embarking for the New World, a requirement usually met by perfunctory mass baptisms. In North America, on the other hand, slaves' initial encounter with Christianity took place almost entirely outside whites' purview. Dispersed population, shortages of ministers, and uncertainty about the legal basis of slavery all militated against any systematic efforts to baptize or instruct slaves. Bills passed by the Virginia legislature in 1667 and in Maryland a few years later alleviated the legal uncertainty, establishing captivity as a condition of birth unaltered by religious conversion. Even then, most slaveholders remained indifferent or actively hostile to the idea of instructing their bondsmen, largely out of "fears that slaves would not grasp the distinction between spiritual and temporal equality." Missionaries of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, which undertook work among North American slaves in the early eighteenth century, complained constantly of masters who denied them access to their bondsmen, on the grounds that religion made them "proud and saucy" and "not so good servants."[2]

African Americans responded to Christianity in a variety of ways. Some rejected it. An S.P.G. missionary in Virginia, for example, complained that his first baptismal candidates' progress was hampered by the fact that "all other slaves do laugh at them." Others hearkened to Christianity's call, though the paucity of documentation makes it difficult to say precisely who or why. Most black Christians in seventeenth-century records were free people of color, though this probably says more about the character of the evidence than about any relative proportions. Among the enslaved, the largest number of converts appear to have been baptized in the West Indies prior to transhipment to the mainland. At least some of these early converts saw conversion as a means to freedom; the Virginia law of 1667, in fact, may have been prompted by petitions brought by Christian slaves. For others, Christianity's appeal was less instrumental than existential. In the Old Testament story of the Exodus in particular, African Americans found a parallel for their own travails, as well as the promise of a future when captives would go free and the righteous would be rewarded. Whatever their individual motives, black Christians were soon sprinkled all through the mainland colonies, from Puritan Massachusetts to the South Carolina frontier. Some apparently commenced holding services independently, prompting legislatures in at least two colonies to ban the practice.[3]

The pace of conversion accelerated in the eighteenth century, especially after the Great Awakening, a surge of evangelical revivals that cascaded across the North American colonies in the middle third of the eighteenth century. Itinerant evangelists, led by the redoubtable George Whitefield, plied the backroads of the colonies, preaching an unadorned, enthusiastic Christianity that appealed to the lowly and ill educated. In light of the exaggerated claims of some historians, it is worth noting that few awakeners were what we would call racial equalitarians. While many condemned masters for cruelty and for neglecting their slaves' spiritual needs, few questioned the institution of slavery per se; a few owned slaves themselves. Even so, their message posed a profound challenge to slavery, and indeed to all worldly hierarchy. Thousands of awakened slaveowners manumitted their bondsmen or undertook to provide them with religious instruction. African Americans, in turn, rallied to the evangelical message. Dozens of contemporary accounts attest to the prevalence of people of color, slave and free, at revivals, and even to the existence of occasional black evangelists. Indeed, one of the primary charges laid against the

Awakening by disgruntled "Old Lights" was that it elevated the lowly to positions of religious authority. "They are chiefly indeed young Persons," complained Boston's Charles Chauncey, "sometimes Lads, or rather Boys; Nay, Women and Girls; yea Negroes, have taken upon them to do the Business of Preachers."[4]

Aftershocks of the Awakening continued to rumble through the last half of the eighteenth century, propelling ever more African Americans into the burgeoning evangelical churches. In several southern cities, black Methodists and Baptists established independent congregations under the leadership of black evangelists. More surprising, in retrospect, whites and blacks often came together in worship, participating jointly in Methodist classes and love feasts and in the ubiquitous revivals. Evangelical churches enjoyed a particularly rich harvest in the Chesapeake—in Maryland, Delaware, and parts of northern Virginia, where the political uncertainties of revolution were exacerbated by plummeting tobacco prices and chronic debt. Included in the evangelical harvest was a young Delaware slave named Richard, future founder of the AME Church.[5]

The broad contours of Richard Allen's life are familiar to historians, thanks largely to a spiritual autobiography that Allen dictated to his son shortly before his death. Born a slave, Allen was awakened in his youth by an itinerant Methodist evangelist, an event that set him on a course to freedom and the Christian ministry. By the time of his death in 1831, he had risen to become one of the most revered leaders in black America, as well as bishop of America's first independent black church. Yet as familiar as we are with Allen's history, it is worth rehearsing again, if only because of the significance he himself attached to it. Like Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, and the other classic slave narrators, Allen viewed his life paradigmatically, as a parable of racial elevation for black and white alike. For those still enslaved, Allen's passage from ignorance and slavery to enlightened freedom blazed a trail to be followed; for skeptical whites, it provided proof of blacks' innate moral and intellectual capacity; for all, it offered a vivid illustration of the workings of Providence in human affairs. All these themes would be woven into the very fabric of the church that Allen founded. In this sense, Allen's "Life Experiences and Gospel Labors" functions as African Methodism's creation story.[6]

Like most spiritual narrators, Allen began his account not with his birth but with conversion, sometime before his eighteenth birthday. Fortunately, we know something of his early years, thanks to recent archival discoveries by Gary Nash. He was born in 1760 in Philadelphia, the slave of a prominent lawyer and planter. At the age of eight, he was sold, along with his mother and siblings, to Stokely Sturgis, a threadbare Delaware planter. In his memoir Allen remembered Sturgis as a "tender, humane man," more "like a father to his slaves than anything else." Like so many "good masters," however, Sturgis regarded his creditors more highly than his slaves. In the early 1770s he settled his debts by selling off Richard's mother and several of his siblings. While Allen expressed no bitterness in his account, the experience must have been devastating and probably helped prepare the young slave for the evangelicals' message.[7]

Some time later, Richard and his brother were awakened by an itinerant Methodist preacher. The conversion itself appears to have followed the standard morphology, with the preaching of the Word provoking an agonizing self-appraisal. "I was awakened and brought to see myself, poor, wretched and undone," Allen recalled. The ensuing weeks brought moments of elation followed by days of crushing doubt, culminating in a convulsive salvific moment—a moment rendered in the language of liberation:

> One night I thought hell would be my portion. I cried unto Him who delighteth to hear the prayers of a poor sinner, and all of a sudden my dungeon shook, my chains flew off, and, glory to God, I cried. My soul was filled.

Such imagery, it should be noted, was not uncommon. The reference to dungeons and chains, for example, came directly from a popular Charles Wesley hymn. Such words, however, doubtless had special significance for a slave. Forever after, Allen would continue to link salvation and freedom, investing that familiar Pauline equation with specific and literal meaning.[8]

The ensuing weeks brought a dramatic change in the two brothers' outward aspect. Secure in their newfound spiritual freedom and determined to refute the common charge that "religion made us worse servants," they attacked their work around the plantation with a will, even skipping their cherished weekly class meetings "if we were likely to be backward with our crops." Such conduct made a powerful impression on their master. Though an "unconverted man" himself, Sturgis became "convinced that religion made slaves better and not worse, and often boasted of his slaves for their honesty and industry." At Richard's behest, he opened his home to itinerant preachers, including the peripatetic Francis Asbury, founding father of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States. Shortly after Asbury's visit, he welcomed Freeborn Garrettson, a charismatic Methodist preacher who was himself a former slaveholder. Garrettson's sermon, based on the text "*Thou art weighed in the balance, and art found wanting*,"pierced Sturgis's heart. From that moment forward, he "could not be satisfied to hold slaves, believing it to be wrong. And after that he proposed to me and my brother buying our times . . ."[9]

Richard at least grasped the opportunity. (The fate of Allen's brother remains unclear.) Over the next few years, he labored in a variety of ventures, exhibiting the industry and entrepreneurial imagination that were to become two of his most celebrated qualities. He chopped wood, mended shoes, manufactured bricks, and hauled salt, eventually accumulating the price stipulated by Sturgis. In 1783 the twenty-three-year-old slave purchased his freedom, sealing his independence by adopting a surname: Allen.[10]

Several aspects of the account are worth remarking. The first is Allen's almost sublime faith in the leveling power of Christianity. Just as darkness depends on a shuttering of light, so, Allen believed, did slavery depend on the exclusion of Christian enlightenment. Once that gloom had been pierced, once slaves had felt "the favour and love of God dwelling in their hearts," the whole edifice would crumble. Degraded slaves would exhibit a new dignity, a devotion to Christian service, to melt the hearts of all but the most unfeeling masters. Manumissions would multiply. The sheer force of Christian example, exhibited by bondsmen redeemed from the slavery of sin, would help redeem America from the sin of slavery. This simple faith, born of personal experience, shaped Allen's antislavery convictions in distinctive ways. While pamphleteers such as David Walker, Allen's self-proclaimed disciple, urged slaves to cast off their chains by force, Allen advocated "patient waiting" and warned of the tyranny of a "wrathful disposition." "That God who knows the hearts of all men, and the propensity of a slave to hate his oppressor, hath strictly forbidden it to his chosen people," he wrote: "*thou shalt not abhor an Egyptian, because thou wast a stranger in his land*. Deut. xxiii. 7." Instead, he argued that slaves could advance their own freedom by attending faithfully to their duties and cultivating ties of Christian fellowship with their masters, as he and his brother had done. Those few slaves whose masters were immune to Christian influence would at least have the consolation of "that freedom which the sons of God enjoyed."[11]

Even more remarkable is the sense of representativeness that pervades the narrative, the sense of participating in an ongoing racial trial. Even as a slave, Allen was aware of whites' skepticism about black Christians; he and his brother heard neighbors whisper that "Stokely's negroes would soon ruin him." In the face of such scrutiny, every act became magnified; the slightest evidence of indolence or insolence confirmed white skepticism and cast another obstacle before the numberless bondsmen groping for redemption. This sense of representativeness, and the almost palpable feelings of obligation that flowed from it, would become abiding features in elite black politics in America, exhibited nowhere more dramatically than in the AME Church.[12]

Even as he strove to raise his purchase price, Allen labored for Methodism, stopping at farms and crossroads to preach the gospel. Once free, he redoubled his efforts, establishing himself as one of the movement's most effective evangelists. A testimonial written in the 1780s by three prominent white Methodists hailed Allen's extraordinary energy and commitment.

> After the War he Believed it to be his Duty to Travel abroad as a Preacher of Righteousness, and for the first six Months Traveled at his own Cost, and the Remainder of his Religious Journeys his expences was for the most Part defrayed

> by the Religious Society of which he was a Member; he Traveled into various parts of New York, New Jersey, Pensilva., Delaware, Virginia, Maryland, North and South Carolina; and also spent about two Months in visiting the Indian Natives.

Word of this powerful new preacher soon reached Bishop Asbury, who invited Allen to accompany him on a planned tour of the South. While doubtless flattering, the offer came with conditions that gave the perceptive young freedman pause. "He told me that in the slave countries, Carolina and other places, I must not intermix with the slaves, and I would frequently have to sleep in his carriage, and he would allow me my victuals and clothes," Allen remembered. "I told him I would not travel with him on these conditions . . . that I thought people ought to lay up something while they were able to support themselves in times of sickness or old age." When Asbury noted that he himself made no such provisions, Allen's reply was fearlessly direct. "I told him he would be taken care of, let his afflictions be as they were . . . but I doubted whether it would be the case with myself." In the end, he continued to preach independently, working when necessary "so that no man could say I was chargeable to the connection." "My hands," he concluded in an oft-quoted passage, "administered to my necessities.[13]

Early in 1786 Allen's itineracy took him back to Philadelphia for what he thought would be "a week or two" of preaching. Long the center of American philanthropy, the City of Brotherly Love was fast becoming the hub of black life in the new republic. Thousands of freedmen and women poured into the city in the decades after the Revolution, beneficiaries of the ongoing transition from tobacco to cereals in the city's hinterlands. In 1780, when Pennsylvania passed the nation's first gradual abolition act, Philadelphia boasted scarcely a thousand people of color, slave and free, constituting about 3 percent of the city's population. Ten years later, African Americans accounted for almost 10 percent of Philadelphians, a proportion that remained more or less constant for the next half century. By 1830, close to 15,000 blacks lived in the city, all but a handful of them free. In contrast to the white population, only a fraction of the growth in the city's black population stemmed from natural increase. The bulk came from new arrivals, many just days removed from slavery.[14]

For the most part, black migrants to Philadelphia encountered not the promised brotherly love but poverty and indifference fast slipping into hostility. Under the terms of Pennsylvania's gradual abolition law, slaves and their children were often bound out for long and dreary indentures, a device to compensate masters and to instill the habits of industry that blacks allegedly lacked. Newly arrived freedmen were consigned to similar fates, often through the good offices of philanthropic groups like the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. The more fortunate found jobs at the port, working as mariners, dock-workers, caulkers, and the like, positions that afforded a measure of autonomy but that left them vulnerable to the era's frequent commercial slumps. In the end, most freedmen and women settled into the same niches they had occupied as slaves, especially domestic labor. (According to the 1790 census, more than half of black Philadelphians resided in white homes.) Educational facilities were virtually nonexistent; well into the 1780s the only school for children of color was a small academy run by Quaker abolitionist Anthony Benezet. The local Anglican Church, blessed with a series of liberal rectors, welcomed black congregants, but other white denominations, including the Methodists, made little or no effort to convert or minister to people of color. Even the vaunted Quakers declined to accept African Americans at regular meetings, preferring to entertain the inner light in segregated services.[15]

Stigmatized as idle and vicious, bereft of spiritual leadership, blacks in Philadelphia were ripe for Allen's evangelical message. "My labor was much blessed," he recalled in his memoir. "I soon saw a large field open seeking and instructing my African brethren, who had been a long forgotten people, and few of them had attended public worship." The elder at St. George's Methodist Church gave Allen access to the pulpit at 5:00 A.M. each day, and he began to gather a small following. He also preached on the city commons, sometimes a half dozen times in a day. While the fruits of this early labor went to St. George's, Allen appears already to have concluded that black Methodists needed a church of their own to address their distinctive problems and needs. His proposals in that direction, however, found little support among established leaders of the black community, most of whom inclined toward Anglicanism or Quakerism.[16]

His first initiative blocked, Allen set out to promote the methodical virtues by other means. In 1787 he and another community leader, Absalom Jones, established the Free African Society, black America's first mutual aid society. Organized on a nondenominational basis, the society welcomed all black men and women who led "orderly and sober" lives. As that proviso suggests, the basic insurance functions of the organization were laced with a strong dose of moral reformism. Indeed, a special "Committee of Monitors" was appointed to visit society members in their homes to ensure that they lived frugal, upright lives. Such institutions, Allen and Jones wrote in the society's preamble, would help lift African Americans out of "their irreligious and uncivilised state" and into the full light of Christian independence.[17]

The Free African Society proved a great success, spawning sister institutions in New York, Boston, and Newport, as well as a handful of benevolent and fraternal organizations in Philadelphia itself. From the outset, however, the society was riven by denominational tensions. Still convinced that blacks needed a church of their own, Allen strove to impose Methodist usages on the society, antagonizing most of his colleagues in the process. In November 1788 a special F.A.S. committee proposed commencing each meeting with fifteen minutes of silence, largely in deference to the Quaker owners of the building in which they met but also as an antidote to the "previous predilections of a large number of the members composing this Society in favor of an unconstrained outburst of feeling in religious worship." By early 1789 things had reached such a pass that Allen was formally read out of the organization on charges of convening irregular meetings, "attempting to sow division among us," and generally engaging in "refractory" behavior.[18]

Allen was soon back in harness. In late 1790 he joined other leaders of Philadelphia's black community in a campaign to raise money for an independent "African Church." The object, according to physician Benjamin Rush, one of the group's white patrons, was to establish a nondenominational "union," gathering together blacks from various churches, as well as the mass of black people "ignorant and unknown to any religious society." Such a scheme, while doubtless more ecumenical than Allen would have liked, represented a major step toward achieving his vision of a separate black church. In its solicitation for funds, the group defended itself against charges of schism, stressing the "necessity and propriety of separate and exclusive means" to raise a proscribed and ignorant people. The merits of the argument were underscored in 1792 by the famous episode in St. George's Methodist Church, when Allen, Absalom Jones, and the church's growing black contingent were ordered to seats at the back of a newly constructed gallery. When white trustees tried forcibly to remove Jones during prayers, the entire group "went out of the church in a body." The episode produced a wave of sympathy for the seceders, enabling them to raise the necessary funds and to commence building a church of their own. Allen, as "the first proposer of the African church," was selected to turn the first spade. "Here," he concluded, "was the beginning and rise of the first African Church in America."[19]

Initially, Allen's plans reached no further than erecting a separate church for Philadelphia's people of color; he certainly did not foresee severing ties with organized Methodism, the connection under which he "was born and awakened." When Anglican leaders approached him with an offer of ordination, Allen declined, declaring that he "could not be anything else but a Methodist." When Absalom Jones accepted the Anglicans' offer, taking the newly erected African Church and most of its membership with him, Allen remained steadfast. With a small group of Methodist loyalists, he commenced holding services in a blacksmith's shop, while slowly raising funds to build another church. When the new church opened in 1794, Allen invited Bishop Asbury to preach the dedicatory sermon, clear evidence of his desire to remain within the Methodist fold. Asbury complied, but it was one of his subordinates who gave the place its name, when he offered a prayer that the new church would become "a bethel to the gathering in of thousands of souls." Forever after, the church was Bethel, the House of God.[20]

There was more to Allen's fidelity to Methodism than mere parochialism. "Notwithstanding we had been so violently persecuted," he later recalled, "we were in favor of being attached to the methodist connection; for I was confident that there was no religious sect or denomination would suit the capacity of colored people as well as the Methodist." Allen valued Methodism's openness to religious feeling, its simple doctrine, its reliance on "spiritual or extempore preaching," which suited an "unlearned" people better than dry scriptural exegesis. Methodism also emphasized discipline, vital to a people assailed by poverty and vice. To Allen, frugality, temperance, industry, and the other classic Methodist virtues represented more than a means to eventual salvation; they provided a formula by which blacks could lift themselves up from their impoverished, degraded state, a possibility his own life exemplified. This formula was reinforced by concrete structures—regular preaching, weekly classes, quarterly love feasts, cathartic revivals—that helped keep individuals on the narrow path, while providing a desperately needed sense of community and belonging.[21]

Allen may have been certain of Methodism, but Methodist authorities were deeply suspicious of him. Asbury was at best ambivalent about the Bethel enterprise. While he admired Allen's evangelical talents, he also put great stock in Methodism's institutional integrity and fretted about schism. His ambivalence was perhaps best expressed in 1799, when he ordained Allen a Methodist deacon, an unprecedented promotion for a man of color, but one that came without full sacerdotal powers. The local Methodist establishment was forthrightly hostile. Embarrassed by the episode in St. George's, Philadelphia Methodists tried first to compel the seceders' return, threatening to read them out of connection. When challenged to cite any specific violation of Methodist descipline, they relented and resorted instead to professions of friendship and concern. It was in this latter guise that a prominent white Methodist offered to draw up articles of incorporation for Bethel Church—articles that, Allen and his followers later discovered, bound them to the Methodist Conference, lock, stock, and barrel. One elder, citing the articles, ordered the church closed and locked, prompting the Bethelites to adopt an "African Supplement" reasserting control of the church they had built.[22]

The Bethelites retained formal links with the Methodist Episcopal Church for more than two decades, despite constant skirmishing over property, membership, and ministerial authority. Methodist authorities were endlessly ingenious in their efforts to recapture the seceders: one elder encouraged a dismissed trustee to pursue a suit against Bethel; another challenged the congregation's control over membership by providing a quarterly ticket to a woman whom the congregation had read out of meeting; still another opened a rival black church on Bethel's doorstep, in an effort to siphon off membership. Methodist leaders also tried various legal devices to regain title to Bethel Church, once nearly forcing it onto the auction block. Perhaps most cynical of all, Methodist authorities refused to bestow communion on the seceders or charged extortionate fees to do so. Such efforts caused endless rancor, but they did nothing to stem the growth of Bethel's membership, which had risen to almost thirteen hundred by 1813.[23]

By 1815 the relationship between the Bethelites and Methodist authorities had deteriorated to the point that a white elder seeking to take the pulpit for Sunday morning service was forcibly impeded by members of the congregation. The elder immediately filed for a writ of mandamus, pursuing his claim all the way to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. The dispute snapped the last fraying cord of loyalty binding the Bethelites to the Methodist Episcopal Church. Early in 1816 the court found for the congregation, effectively establishing Bethel Church as free and independent.[24]

Even before the court handed down its decision, Allen had begun corresponding with black Methodists in other cities, many of whom had endured similar outrages at the hands of Methodist authorities. The most significant response came from Baltimore, where rivalries between white and black local preachers and another row over seating had prompted black Methodists to establish their own Bethel Church. The leader of the Baltimore congregation was Daniel Coker, a man whose life reminds us just how peculiar America's "Peculiar Institution" really was. Coker was born on a Maryland plantation, apparently of a union between a black slave and a white servant woman; his given name was Isaac. To conceal the circumstances of the birth, the infant was registered as the son of a mulatto slave woman in the neighborhood, sparing community sensibilities at the cost of consigning a freeborn child to a lifetime of slavery. For a slave Isaac received a good early education, thanks to the "perverseness of his young master," who refused to go to school without his playmate. Sometime in the late 1790s he escaped to New York, where, in an effort to throw off pursuers, he adopted the name of his white half-brother, Daniel Coker. He completed his education and began preaching in the Methodist Church before accepting an offer to return to Maryland to open a school. With the help of several white patrons, he purchased his freedom and settled in Baltimore, where he quickly earned distinction as a preacher, teacher, and antislavery spokesman.[25]

Perhaps because of the strange turnings in his own experience, Coker remained preternaturally alert to the workings of Providence in human affairs. Surveying the struggles of black Christians along the eastern seaboard, he discerned clear evidence of an unfolding divine plan. His first antislavery pamphlet, published in 1810, included a list of more than a dozen "African Ministers . . . of the Author's Acquaintance," as well as lists of churches and local preachers, all to "show what God is doing for Ethiopia's sons in the United States of America." The Bethelites' legal triumph supplied yet another piece of the puzzle. On hearing of the Pennsylvania Court's decision, Coker convened a thanksgiving service in Baltimore, where he delivered a rousing sermon comparing African Americans to the Israelites and the Supreme Court victory to the end of the Babylonian captivity. Just three years later, Coker would take that parallel to its logical conclusion and embark for Africa as a missionary.[26]

In the wake of the court decision, a dozen black churchmen from Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, and New Jersey gathered together in Philadelphia's Bethel Church and formally incorporated themselves as the African Methodist Episcopal Church. (Protracted negotiations with Methodist separatists in New York City proved unavailing; six years later the New Yorkers launched their own independent denomination, the AME Zion Church.) In the best Protestant fashion, the delegates portrayed themselves not as schismatics but as keepers of the true faith, struggling to stem Methodism's declension. "It is to be awfully feared that the simplicity of the Gospel that was among them" had disappeared, Allen charged. "We would ask for the good old way, and desire to walk therein." To underscore their claim, the founders adopted Methodist doctrine virtually intact. What innovations were contained in the *Doctrines and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, first published in 1817, all aimed at purifying Methodism of un-Wesleyan innovations. AME ministers, for example, were not permitted to wear robes, restoring a prohibition that had lapsed in the Methodist Episcopal Church. The office of presiding elder, an intermediate position between bishop and elder, was abolished on the grounds that it smacked of Catholicism. (Robes and presiding elders both reappeared later in the century.) Most important, the delegates reasserted John Wesley's prohibition against membership by slaveholders, a ban that white Methodists had found it politic to ignore.[27]

The only apparent contention in the first AME conferences concerned the selection of a bishop. Delegates initially elected Daniel Coker, but several Philadelphians protested. Their objections no doubt reflected loyalty to Allen, but their main concern, according to a participant in the meetings, was Coker's color: "He being nearly white, the people said they could not have an *African Connection* with a man as light as Daniel Coker at its head." A proposal to elect two bishops was rejected by Allen, lest skeptical whites dismiss the whole enterprise as a product of personal ambition. After another ballot, Allen was elected and consecrated through the laying on of hands by the assembled ministers. The episode apparently wounded Coker, and relations between him and his fellows remained strained ever after. Ultimately, however, it was he, with his acute sense of Providence, who best captured what the moment meant to participants, in a passage from I Peter, which he appended to one of his early pamphlets:

> *But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, and an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praise of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy, . . .*[28]

The revolution of the Bethelites was encompassed within a second, larger revolution. As several recent historians have shown, the forty years after independence were a time of profound upheaval in American society, as the forces unleashed by political revolution reverberated through the structure of the new nation. Prevailing conceptions of citizenship and community, gender and family, authority and obligation were all subject to renegotiation in light of the new nation's professed republican creed. In the realm of religion alone, the two generations after the American Revolution produced a profusion of new sects and movements, posing a host of questions about ministerial authority, the scope of individual autonomy, and the value of inherited dogma.[29]

A mere recital of dates suggests the complex linkages binding African Methodism to these broader transformations. Richard Allen's passage from slavery to freedom coincided almost exactly with the colonies' passage to independence; his purchase price was denominated in revolutionary scrip. The Free African Society, cornerstone of northern black institutional life, was founded in Philadelphia in 1787, even as the framers of the American Constitution gathered in nearby Independence Hall. More ominous, the Bethelites' long struggle with Methodist authorities coincided with a mounting assault on the position and prerogatives of free people of color, who fit but uneasily into the new nation's social taxonomy. Indeed, the formal incorporation of the AME Church in 1816 preceded by less than a year the founding of the American Colonization Society, an organization devoted to removing this anomalous and "troublesome" population from U.S. shores.

There is more here than chronological coincidence. The creation of an American nation entailed complex processes of boundary drawing, which touched the emerging AME Church in myriad ways. What did terms like freedom and equality mean in practice? Did they apply to African Americans? Did black people possess the requisites of republican citizenship, or were they somehow, by nature or experience, disqualified? There is simply no way to understand African Methodism, or the culture and politics of antebellum black America in general, without taking cognizance of this context, without recognizing the perils and possibilities that Allen and his comrades themselves recognized in America's revolutionary transformation. In a less obvious sense, the reverse may also be true—that is, we cannot fully appreciate the meaning of the American Revolution without focusing on institutions like the AME Church and on the broader struggles of the nation's free people of color; for it was this embattled population, itself largely a by-product of revolution, that posed the first and most fundamental test of the revolutionaries' "self evident" creed.

Before proceeding, however, it is necessary to take issue with some of the analytical categories that prevail in the study of African American Christianity, and African American history generally. With several conspicuous exceptions, scholars remain mired in a set of overlapping dichotomies in which movements and ideologies are cast as militant or accommodationist, separatist or integrationist, "nationalist" or assimilationist, and so forth. While such categories have some basis in debates within the African American community, they have acquired a scholarly life of their own, producing all manner of simplification freedom," he wrote, "we cannot claim the privilege of representation in your councils, yet we trust we may address you as fellow-men." He proceeded to describe the history of each petitioner, to show that they were indeed fellow men, possessed of "natural affections, social and domestic attachments and sensibilities." As such, their enslavement was wrong not only in the particular case but as a matter of general principle; it represented "a Governmental defect, if not a direct violation of the declared fundamental principles of the Constitution." Jones concluded by broadening his plea to include the plight of all people of color, slaves and freemen alike, who were treated with "a degrading partiality" and deprived of "that public justice and protection which is the great object of government."[52]

Two years later Jones submitted a second petition, this one addressed to the President and Congress and signed (or, more frequently, marked) by seventy black Philadelphians, including Richard Allen. In it, Jones sharpened his attack on American hypocrisy, highlighting not only kidnappings but discrimination in law, the barbarous interstate slave trade, and restrictions on private manumissions that prevented even liberally inclined masters from obeying the dictates of conscience. As in his first petition, Jones strove to be both proper and conciliatory: he conceded that some masters had been burdened with slaves by inheritance and, like many black leaders of his generation, stopped short of demanding immediate, unconditional abolition. On the fundamental question, however, he was unstinting. America's treatment of black people, slave and free, contradicted national principles; it transgressed the golden rule; it shocked "the feelings of Man." The conclusion was inescapable: "[I]f the Bill of Rights, or the declaration of Congress are of any validity, we beseech that as we are *men*, we may be admitted to partake of the Liberties and unalienable Rights therein held forth. . . ."[53]

In the petitions and pamphlets of independent church leaders such as Jones, Richard Allen, and Daniel Coker, one can see the emergence of a distinctive and enduring African American political tradition that fused environmentalism, Christian universalism, and revolutionary liberalism into a compelling critique of all forms of racial discrimination. When Martin Luther King, Jr., vouchsafed to America his dream during the 1963 March on Washington, he was employing a rhetorical form that was almost as old as the United States itself. Ultimately, however, rhetoric was not enough. White people's assessments of African Americans, as Richard Allen well knew, were shaped not only by abstract beliefs but by a thousand daily interactions—interactions that, in Allen's opinion, all too often confirmed white prejudices. The battle thus had to be joined not only at the level of argument but on the field of daily conduct, with African Americans bearing the responsibility of proving their fitness for freedom.

Inevitably, the onus fell on free people of color, who had access to education and religious instruction and thus the wherewithal to elevate themselves. In effect, free blacks provided a test case in the ongoing debate between racists and environmentalists. By leading unimpeachable lives, by exhibiting industry, intellect, and character, they could vindicate the race's potential and advance the cause of abolition. On the other hand, idleness, criminality, even a slovenly appearance confirmed white biases and undermined the entire race's struggle for justice and equality. Allen and Jones incessantly reminded their fellow freedmen and women of this responsibility, most notably in their address "To the People of Color." "[M]uch depends on us for the help of our colour more than many are aware," they wrote:

> [I]f we are lazy and idle, the enemies of freedom plead it as a cause why we ought not to be free, and say we are better in a state of servitude, and that giving us our liberty would be an injury to us, and by such conduct we strengthen the bands of oppression, and keep many in bondage who are more worthy than ourselves. . . .

"We intreat you," they concluded, "to consider the obligations we lay under, to help forward the cause of freedom."[54]

The myriad institutions that flourished in the shadow of Bethel Church reflected this analysis. Allen himself participated in at least a dozen benevolent and moral reform societies, from Philadelphia's first black Masonic temple to a Magdalene Society for wayward girls. Education was the most obvious vehicle of racial "elevation," and Bethel Church became a kind of community schoolhouse, hosting weekly classes and Sunday school, an "African Evening Free School" for adults, and a common school for "Children of African Descent." The logic behind such initiatives was perhaps best articulated by the founders of the Pennsylvania Augustine Society, who gathered in Bethel Church in 1818 to launch a campaign to build a local high school for blacks. "[Let us] use the best energies of our minds and of our hearts to procure for our children a more extensive and useful education," they resolved, for "upon their intellectual, moral and religious improvements depend the future elevation of their standing in the social, civil and ecclesiastical community." Put baldly, blacks could never expect to be accorded full equality until they proved they merited it.[55]

At their best, such initiatives and institutions fostered feelings of personal responsibility and mutual obligation, which would themselves become crucial resources in African Americans' ongoing struggle for justice. Yet there were hazards here. Most obvious, the politics of racial vindication placed enormous pressure on free people of color. In effect, Allen asked free blacks to bear the burden not only of race but of racism, to scrutinize their own actions through the eyes of an omnipresent and unforgiving white audience. Every act became magnified; every lapse confirmed white prejudice and betrayed the hopes of millions. If there are historical origins to what W. E. B. Du Bois called the "second sight" of the American Negro, that "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity," they are here.[56]

There were other problems. Even as it placed enormous pressure on free people of color, the strategy of racial vindication invested the ultimate power of judgment in whites. The whole notion was predicated on the belief that prejudice would wilt before reason, that whites would modify their views when presented with compelling counterevidence. Yet people, as Allen learned, can be "wilfully blind and extremely partial" in their perceptions, especially on questions of race. The lesson was brutally underlined in the fall of 1793, when an outbreak of yellow fever attacked Philadelphia, reducing the city to a charnel house. With medical facilities hopelessly overburdened, physician Benjamin Rush approached Allen and other black leaders and suggested that they take over the tasks of nursing the sick and burying the mounting piles of corpses. (Reports of previous yellow fever outbreaks in the West Indies had convinced Rush—incorrectly, in the event—that blacks were immune to the disease.) Sensing an opportunity to win white gratitude and respect, Allen quickly organized medical and burial details, even securing the release of dozens of convicts to assist in the campaign. Through the months of the fever, black men and women dispensed water, succored the sick, and buried the dead, usually without remuneration. Allen himself expended over four hundred pounds to buy caskets and hire gravediggers, less than half of which he ever recovered. As the city's physicians died or fled, Rush showed blacks how to mix and dispense medicines; "knowing we could both bleed"—the Shakespearean echo was apt, though apparently inadvertent—he instructed Allen on drawing blood from the stricken, which remained the standard treatment against the fever.[57]

Alas, any hopes that such selfless service would win white gratitude or provoke a reassessment of racial assumptions were quickly dashed. The first history of the epidemic, rushed into publication by Matthew Carey, a leader of Philadelphia's Irish community, scarcely mentioned African Americans, except to condemn them for "profiteering" and "plundering the dead." The pamphlet quickly went through three editions. Stunned, Allen and Absalom Jones replied with a narrative of their own, accompanied by a series of addresses and testimonials. In the narrative, they recounted the coming of the fever and the hasty flight of white citizens (including the eminent Mr. Carey); they offered detailed financial statements; they contrasted the courage and devotion of black men and women with the "atrocious cruelty" of poor whites, some of whom turned out members of their own families in a desperate effort to save themselves. Finally, they saluted the three hundred African Americans who, in the ultimate assertion of their common humanity, died in the plague. "Thus were our services extorted from us, *at the peril of our lives,* yet you accuse us of extorting *a little money from you,*" they railed, in a passage which came as close to genuine rage as anything either man ever wrote. The accompanying addresses, while more temperate, likewise betrayed the authors' anger and frustration at the sheer intransigence of white prejudice. Having "reduced us to the unhappy condition our colour is in," they asked, "[will you now] plead our incapacity for freedom?" The very question, however, acknowledged whites' power to do precisely that.[58]

Finally, racial vindication, with its assumptions about respectability and collective destiny, could all too easily slip into paternalism, with elite, "elevated" blacks setting themselves up as guardians of the manners and morals of the lower classes. This possibility was already evident in 1787 in the establishment of the Free African Society's Committee of Monitors; it was even more blatant in the yellow fever pamphlet, in which Allen and Jones invited whites to bring "any complaint about our colour" to their attention so they could "warn, rebuke, and exhort" the offenders. The class implications of all this were exhibited in particularly dramatic fashion in 1808, in the aftermath of a celebrated murder of an elderly white woman by a drunken black man. In the wake of the episode, Allen hastened to jail to take the condemned murderer's confession, which he published along with an "Address to the Public and People of Color." "See the tendency of dishonesty and lust, of drunkenness and stealing," he thundered. "See the tendency of midnight dances and frolics. While the lustful dance is delighting thee, forget not, that 'for all these things God will bring thee into judgment'." A few months later, he chartered a Committee for the Suppression of Vice and Immorality, aimed explicitly at curbing the perceived excesses of Philadelphia's black lower classes. Of all the institutions and initiatives with which Allen was involved, none more starkly revealed the bourgeois presuppositions of racial vindication, or the thin line that separated a strategy of collective liberation from a formula for class-based social control. Allen's assault on dancing was particularly poignant, for these "midnight revels" represented not only a rare and precious space for autonomous recreation among Philadelphia blacks but one of the most dramatic examples of African cultural persistence in early-nineteenth-century North America.[59]

We shall have occasion, in the chapters that follow, to revisit all these themes. Before we do so, it is worth entertaining one final question. Did racial vindication work? Obviously, black petitions and pamphlets did not produce immediate abolition, but did they move their intended audience? Did the conspicuous virtue and respectability of men such as Absalom Jones and Richard Allen induce white Americans to revise their conclusions about black character and capacity? END

On the surface, the answer to all these questions is no. For people so patently reasonable, it must have been marvelous to see the sheer illogic of racial prejudice—to observe the various devices by which white Americans resisted the implications of their principles and the evidence of their eyes. Examples of