The Episcopal Church and Race in 19th-century North Carolina

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Delivered at the Annual Council of the Diocese of Mississippi
Trinity Episcopal Church
Natchez, Mississippi
January 25, 2008

Preface

The relevance of this paper to these proceedings may require some explanation. Is there value in adding the perspective of North Carolina to the work being done here in Mississippi?

Yes, because the Episcopal churches in North Carolina and in Mississippi during the antebellum period were closely interwoven. For example, the first bishop of Mississippi, William Mercer Green, was the founding rector of my parish in North Carolina. His active interest in slave evangelization is as much part of our parish and diocesan history in North Carolina as it is part of the history of the church in Mississippi. This paper is perhaps best regarded, therefore, as a preamble and parallel to those presented by Professors Bond and Wilson. I offer it in hope that it will strengthen our shared sense of the importance of addressing the legacy of slavery throughout the Episcopal Church.

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"The truth's the light and the truth never hurt nobody. I'm proud of my kinfolks. Besides, I'm telling this child pure history." So Cornelia Fitzgerald, the grandmother of prominent civil-rights attorney and pioneering black Episcopal priest Pauli Murray, used to respond when questioned about the value of recounting her family pedigree—a pedigree rooted in the fact that she was the daughter of a slave mother and a white master

whose family were prominent members of the Episcopal Church and benefactors of the University of North Carolina. This made Cornelia both the niece and the slave of her mistress, Mary Ruffin Smith, as well as a communicant of the same church.[1]

I, too, am here to tell "pure history," and I share with Cornelia Fitzgerald a surpassing confidence in the value of truth-telling. Although the truth I am about to tell is neither easy nor painless to recount, addressing the topic of slavery and race in the antebellum Episcopal Church requires a willingness to probe beneath glib, sentimental versions of the past. It also means exploring the depths of a complicity that leaders of our church forged with a violent and cruel institution, a complicity they masked from themselves with various self-serving strategies. But if we do not tell the truth about our past, including the parts we might heartily wish to avoid, we cannot properly meet the distinctive challenges and opportunities for healing and reconciliation that lie before us today.

The Episcopal Church in North Carolina before the Civil War was populated both with slaveholders and with slaves. That was as true in my parish, St. Matthew's, Hillsborough, as anywhere else. The two leading rectors of St. Matthew's in the antebellum period, founding rector William Mercer Green (1825-1838) and Moses Ashley Curtis (1841-47; 1856-1872), were themselves slaveholders. Moreover, the single largest slaveholder in the state on the eve of the Civil War was Paul Cameron, owner of several plantations including Burnside, the estate from which St. Matthew's own property was carved.[2] Though largely forgotten today, many enslaved African Americans were

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[1] Pauli Murray, *Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) 33.
[2] Jeffrey J. Crow, Paul D. Escott, and Flora J. Hatley, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina* (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1992) 52,53.

part of the baptized membership of St. Matthew's along with the white families—the Camerons, Greens, Curtises, and Ruffins—who owned them. In fact, of the 550 or so baptisms recorded in St. Matthew's parish register between 1828 and 1864, 142—over 25%—were persons of color.

That number reflects the high value placed on the evangelization of slaves in the antebellum Episcopal Church in North Carolina. All three antebellum bishops of our diocese—John Stark Ravenscroft, Levi Silliman Ives, and Thomas Atkinson—were vigorous promoters of slave evangelization, and they did not hesitate publicly to commend those members of the church, lay and clergy, who embraced this work.[3] Thus we find Bishop Ravenscroft, on his first visitation to our county in 1823, noting in his journal with evident satisfaction the efforts at slave education.[4] And a decade later we find Bishop Ives at St. Matthew's, baptizing nine slave children belonging to the rector, with Green and the children's parents serving as baptismal sponsors.[5] To demonstrate even further this public commitment to evangelizing slaves Green oversaw the addition of a slave gallery to St. Matthew's in 1835. He later incorporated this architectural feature into the Chapel of the Cross in Chapel Hill—the church he founded after resigning his Hillsborough cure to take a faculty position at the nearby University of North Carolina.[6]

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[3] John Hope Frankin, "Negro Episcopalians in Ante-bellum North Carolina" *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* XIII.3 (September 1944) 216-234.

[4] John Stark Ravenscroft, Manuscript Journal in the Ravenscroft Papers, microfilm on deposit at the North Carolina Collection, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina.

[5] Parish Register of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Hillsborough, North Carolina, May 19, 1833.

[6] William Mercer Green offered the following comment in his parochial report to the 1835 Diocesan Convention: "The addition of a Gallery to the Church will, it is hoped, be the means of ensuring hereafter, a larger attendance of coloured persons, who have hitherto been often excluded for want of room." *Journal of the Annual Convention, Diocese of North Carolina,* 13.

Such sustained commitment to slave evangelization was not insignificant in time or money, so it behooves us to ask: What did the clergy and bishops of the diocese hope to achieve through these efforts? Perhaps the single best statement of the matter can be found in the 1836 pamphlet, *The Rights and Duties of Slaveholders*, which was written by George W. Freeman, then rector of Christ Church, Raleigh, and published with the express encouragement of Bishop Ives.[7]

From Freeman's perspective the call to evangelize slaves was a solemn duty that Christian masters had towards human beings whom providence had placed in their care. Indeed, evangelization stood at the center of a slaveholding ethic that urged not only attention to the spiritual welfare of slaves but also moderation in the exercise of mastery with respect to physical demands and disciplines. Freeman placed particular emphasis upon the obligations of parents toward their children, arguing that, by extension, masters had similar obligations toward their slaves. However, while children at adulthood become their own masters, he observed, "for our slaves, their state of pupilage never ceases; they are always with us; they are always members of our families; they are always subject to our authority and control; and what is further and more to the point, though ever so far advanced in years, they are, from the very nature of their condition, always children; they are but children in intellect, children in wisdom, children in understanding and judgment!"[8] Thus, Freeman argued, the obligation to bring one's own children to the sacrament of baptism was equally applicable to one's slaves.

[7] George W. Freeman, *The Rights and Duties of Slaveholders* (Raleigh: J. Gales & Son, 1836) [3]. Freeman later became the bishop of Arkansas.
[8] *Ibid* 31, 32 (source of quotation).

The obligation did not end there, he contended, but embraced religious instruction as well. Since by 1830 it was illegal in North Carolina to educate a slave, Freeman instead advocated use of an oral catechism. Freeman also made clear that his advice applied to all slaveholders, large and small. Should the slaveholder own too many slaves to instruct personally, he should underwrite the expense of a chaplain or minister to fulfill the work. For Freeman, then, slave evangelization was simply a component of Christian slaveholding. One could not serve as master of another person without also serving as a guardian and guarantor of that person's religious wellbeing.[9]

Such religious benevolence notwithstanding, from the 1830s onward the leading proponents of slave evangelization were vitally interested in defending the practice of slavery itself. Freeman was no exception. He began his discourse with a rehearsal of the biblical justification for slavery, noting its presence (and tacit approval) in both the Old and the New Testaments. This led him to conclude that "no man nor set of men in our day, unless they can produce a new revelation from Heaven, are entitled to pronounce [slavery] WRONG; and that to brand them who, in the Providence of God, are now holders of slaves, with the epithet of ANTI-CHRISTIAN, is presumption in the extreme." Rather, contended Freeman, slaves of African descent in America were actually the recipients of God's merciful providence, having been delivered from much worse forms and conditions of slavery in their native land and having been brought into "a land where, though slaves, they serve, for the most part, humane and enlightened masters, are secured the enjoyment of the necessaries and most of the comforts of life, and may become partakers of the blessings of the Gospel of Salvation."[10]

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[9] *Ibid* 34-36.
[10] *Ibid* 12 (first quotation), 19 (second quotation).

This view of slavery as a benign institution not only bolstered the defense of slave evangelization to white readers in the South but also shaped the content of the religious instruction of the enslaved population. During the time Freeman served in Raleigh Lunsford Lane, an enslaved man who lived there, used his remarkable entrepreneurial skills to create a business for himself as a tobacconist, and he was ultimately able to purchase his own freedom and that of his family. After leaving North Carolina in 1842, Lane wrote an account of his early life in which he described the content of slave evangelization. His first words echoed Freeman's sentiments: "I, with others, was often told by the minister how good God was in bringing us over to this country from dark and benighted Africa, and permitting us to listen to the sound of the gospel." But Lane then added a countervailing appraisal of divine providence: "To me, God also granted temporal freedom, which man without God's consent, had stolen away."[11]

Lane pointedly objected to the selective use of scripture in sermons preached expressly by whites to persons of African descent:

> I became quite familiar with the texts, "Servants be obedient to your masters,"… "He that knoweth his master's will and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes," and others of this class: for they formed the basis of most of these public instructions to us. The first commandment impressed upon our minds was to obey our masters, and the second was like unto it, namely, to do as much work when they or the overseers were not watching us as when they were.[12]

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[11] "Narrative of Lunsford Lane" in William L. Andrews, ed., *North Carolina Slave Narratives: The Lives of Moses Roper, Lunsford Lane, Moses Grandy, & Thomas H. Jones* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003) 108. I am indebted to my colleague Donald Lowery for this reference.
[12] *Ibid* 109.

Although Lane conceded that excellent content was sometimes intermingled with such admonitions to submission and obedience, the fixed barrier between the condition of slavery and that of freedom remained a constant theme in those sermons. Indeed, Lane reported that he was at one time drawn to the ministrations of "one very kind hearted Episcopal minister" until that clergyman "argued from the Bible that it was the will of heaven from all eternity we should be slaves, and our masters be our owners." Lane and other slaves (who evidently enjoyed some liberty in the choice of religion) then left the Episcopal Church, "for like some of the faint hearted disciples in early times we said,—'This is a hard saying, who can bear it?'"[13]

Slave evangelization was not simply about the spiritual welfare of slaves. It was also a powerful element in the creation of a worldview that projected a picture of household harmony and shared piety between master and slave. Within this slaveholding worldview unrest and dissatisfaction were laid at the feet of masters who failed to promote the piety and order of Christian worship and instruction among their slaves, while critics of slavery were told that they did not fully understand how much peace and concord filled the houses of exemplary Christian masters.[14]

This way of conceptualizing slavery reached its apotheosis in Bishop Ives's remarkable account to the 1846 diocesan convention. In it he spoke of spending Holy Week and Easter at Somerset Place, the plantation of Josiah Collins III in eastern North Carolina, where he held daily services, delivered lectures, and gave oral catechetical instructions to the slaves. Ives reported the following to his diocese:

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[13] *Ibid* 109. Lane does not name the Episcopal minister; it could well be George Freeman himself.
[14] Franklin, "Negro Episcopalians" 221-224; see also Michael T. Malone, "Levi Silliman Ives: Priest, Bishop, Tractarian, and Roman Catholic Convert" (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1970) 115-128.

> "The services here were of the most gratifying character, fully justifying all that has been said and anticipated of the system of religious training heretofore pursued on these plantations. When I saw master and servants standing side by side in the holy services of Passion week—when I saw all secular labor on these plantations suspended on Good Friday and the cleanly clad multitude thronging the house of prayer to pay their homage to a crucified Saviour—and when I saw, on the blessed Easter morn, the master with his goodly number of servants kneeling with reverent hearts and devout thanksgivings to take the bread of life at the same altar—I could not but indulge the hope that ere long my spirit may be refreshed by such scenes in every part of my diocese; while I could not help believing that, had some of our brethren of other lands been present, they would have been induced to change the note of their wailing over imaginary suffering into the heartfelt exclamation, 'Happy are the people that are in such a case; yea, blessed are the people who have the Lord for their God.'"[15]

Constructing such a glowing picture of the harmonious plantation household required Ives to overlook evidence that slavery's critics refused to ignore. Thus, within months of its publication in the diocesan journal his account was subject to a withering critique from northern abolitionist William Jay. Writing as "A Protestant Episcopalian," Jay charged that Ives was a willing victim of a carefully orchestrated event and had conveniently omitted two salient considerations: first, that the slaves had no choice in the matter of their attendance or instruction; and second, that despite their standing as co-

[15] *Journal of Annual Convention 1846.* In making reference to 'our brethren of other lands' Ives had in mind the criticism of the Episcopal Church for acquiescing in slavery issued by Samuel Wilberforce, the bishop of Oxford. See Malone, *Ives* 124.

religionists slaves had no power to renegotiate the conditions of slavery itself. Jay remonstrated Bishop Ives: "You well know, sir, that in the choice of their church and creed the slaves are passive; and that, had the … communicants been sent to auction on Easter Monday, they would each thenceforth have worshipped in the place and manner directed by 'the highest bidder.'"[16]

As Jay and other anti-slavery advocates clearly understood, slavery in the American South was fundamentally not about benevolence but about control. This point was made with terrible clarity by Thomas Ruffin, Chief Justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court and principal benefactor of St. Matthew's parish, in his oft-cited decision in *State v. Mann* (1829). In this ruling, which overturned the assault and battery conviction of a white man who shot a slave running from a beating, Ruffin opined that "the power of the master must be absolute, to render the submission of the slave perfect." Although he freely confessed his own "sense of the harshness of this proposition," he concluded that "the restraint of cruelty towards slaves … belonged to the realm of voluntary considerations not legally enforceable."[17]

Ruffin was certainly not the only member of St. Matthew's, Hillsborough, to struggle with the question of how to reconcile the brutal realities of slavery with Christian

[16] [William Jay], *A Letter to the Right Rev. L. Silliman Ives, Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina, Occasioned by his late Address to the Convention of his Diocese. By a Protestant Episcopalian* (Washington, D.C.: Buell and Blanchard, 1846) [7].

[17] Quoted in Gregg D. Crane, *Race Citizenship, and Law in American Literature* (Cambridge: University Press, 2002) 72,73. See also Mark V. Tushnet, *Slave Law in the American South:* State v. Mann *in History and Literature* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003). Harriet Beecher Stowe was so moved by Ruffin's brutal honesty about the foundations of slave law that she made this case the centerpiece of her novel *Dred*. Recent research into Ruffin's private papers has revealed, however, that he was more self-serving than Stowe realized. Ruffin evidently had no qualms about treating slaves harshly on occasion and even engaged for a number of years in speculative slave-trading—Eric Muller, "Judging Thomas Ruffin and the Hindsight Defense," unpublished paper delivered at "The Perils of Public Homage: *State v. Mann* and Thomas Ruffin in History and Memory" symposium, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 16 November 2007.

obligation. The private correspondence of William Mercer Green's successor, Moses Ashley Curtis, reveals several instances of crisis occasioned by the tenuous legal status of marriage between slaves. One instance occurred in the spring of 1845 when Kitty, Mrs. Curtis's maid, asked to marry a slave owned by the local Presbyterian minister, John Knox Witherspoon. Evidently Curtis was against sanctioning the marriage because he expected to leave Hillsborough in the near future and knew his departure would put the marriage at risk. He shared his concern with Armand J. DeRosset, his father-in-law. Although as a doctor DeRosset had no particular scruples about a common-law relationship, he offered to purchase Witherspoon's slave for his son-in-law so that the two could marry and go with Curtis anywhere he chose to move.[18]

Slavery in the United States was always about race and about the need of its advocates to develop a rationale for restricting it exclusively to persons of color.[19] To read the so-called 'biblical' and 'scientific' defenses of slavery is to encounter the profound depth of racism in American life and culture—a racism that settled into what the historian H. Shelton Smith called the "racial orthodoxy" of the South in the years following the Civil War.[20] This "racial orthodoxy" perpetuated the notion of intrinsic black inferiority and encouraged Episcopalians in the South to seek solutions to the fulfillment of the Great Commission only within the parameters set by racial segregation. Thus, when William Mercer Green and other southern bishops gathered at Sewanee in 1883 to discuss the best way to minister to former slaves, they could see no better

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[18] A. J. DeRosset to M.A. Curtis, 31 March 1845. Curtis Family Papers. Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill.
[19] George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002) 79.
[20] H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, But ... Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1972)

solution than to call for the creation of segregated missionary organizations within each diocese for the purpose of keeping black and white congregations absolutely separate and distinct.[21]

Who, then, can be surprised to learn that following the Civil War the former enslaved members of St. Matthew's, Hillsborough, did not voluntarily continue to seek the ministrations of the parish's white clergy? The one defiant exception was Cornelia Fitzgerald, Pauli Murray's grandmother. She continued to bring her children to St. Matthew's for baptism, so that of the twelve baptisms of persons of color during the seventeen-year period following the Civil War, three were her daughters and a fourth was a child she sponsored.[22]

"The truth's the light," Cornelia Fitzgerald would say. By the light of the truth disclosed in our legacy of slavery and its attendant racism, may we be led to acknowledge not only the religious concerns that motivated leaders like Green and Ives to evangelize enslaved Africans but also the blindness they exhibited to the fundamental incompatibility of slavery with human kindness and Christian practice. And may we acknowledge with gratitude the courage and persistence of those who struggled to reverse the racist attitudes and dismantle the structures that defined the relationship of black and white members of our Episcopal Church throughout its history.

<u>Postscript</u>

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[21] Gardiner H. Shattuck Jr. *Episcopalians and Race: Civil War to Civil Rights* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000) 12-15.
[22] Parish Register of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Hillsborough, North Carolina.

The work of dismantling is yet unfinished, as recent national and diocesan resolutions acknowledge. As historiographer of the Diocese of North Carolina I see the following challenges to be addressed in the years ahead.

1. To invite the members of our church to learn the story of the church, slavery, and race; to encourage reading of relevant materials that are already close at hand and to visit historic sites where first-rate interpretations of slavery are offered. One of the projects I will be working on this year is compiling a collection of primary and secondary materials for congregational study in all parishes in North Carolina. I want to close the gap between what scholars know and what everyone else knows, and to do it in a way that will be of interest to both historically white and historically black congregations.

2. To encourage deeper research and scholarship in parish and diocesan records. I was blessed to be able to interest one of my parishioners, Sally Greene, in undertaking research on Thomas Ruffin, and to date she has produced several scholarly articles and helped organize a day-long symposium on Ruffin's legacy at UNC-Chapel Hill.[23] My hope is to support more of this kind of work with my colleagues in other historic parishes in North Carolina.

3. To foster settings and events where prayer, reflection, conversation, and sacramental action can occur; where the reuniting of stories and lives that have been severed can be made whole; and where we can wrestle with the significance of what we are learning and think about the steps we will want to take in light of that knowledge. In North Carolina we are blessed with the support of our bishops and the resources of our diocesan school

[23] Sally Greene, a research attorney, is an adjunct professor at the Law School of the University of North Carolina where she teaches an interdisciplinary course in the law and rhetoric of the civil rights movement. Along with UNC law professor Eric Muller she convened a symposium, "The Perils of Public Homage: *State v. Mann* and Thomas Ruffin in History and Memory," in November 2007.

of ministry to sustain this work. It will not be completed in this triennium, but in the meantime we can “make a right beginning of repentance” in North Carolina as well as here in Mississippi.