

# COLOR-CASTE

THOMAS H. PEARNE

**This is an annotated text of *Color-Caste*, published by Thomas Pearne in Dayton, Ohio, in 1876. Original spelling, punctuation and page citations have been retained; minor typographic errors have been corrected.**

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## Introduction

Rev. Thomas Pearne (1820-1901) was a leading figure of nineteenth-century American Methodism. Born in western New York to English immigrant parents, he studied at Cazenovia Seminary and joined the ministry in 1837. Until 1851 he served in central New York and northern Pennsylvania. From 1851-1865 he organized the Methodist Church in Oregon, then returned east to Tennessee to participate in Reconstruction activities. He was appointed US consul to Jamaica in 1870, where he spent four years. Pearne concluded his career in the Cincinnati Conference, where he functioned as a Methodist minister. For further, see Pearne, *Sixty-One Years of Itinerant Christian Life in Church and State* (Cincinnati: Curtis and Jennings, 1899).

The present text emerges from the post-emancipation debates within US Christian churches concerning treatment of blacks. In this tract, Pearne argues against segregation and denounces “color-caste” as a social and theological evil. Early in his career, Pearne had encountered the divisiveness of the slavery question at the 1844 General Conference where the Methodist Church split between slave-holders and opponents of slavery. He argues in this tract that the Methodist Church should not repeat its history of divisiveness by segregating itself along the color line. Pearne calls for a fully integrated church, both in the laity and ministry. Despite this anti-segregationist position, Pearne employs repeated racial stereotypes in his writing and was, at the time of the tract’s publication, the secretary of the American Colonization Society, dedicated to sending emancipated slaves to Africa. Pearne’s theology called for formal integration and spiritual equality between black and white church members, but his cultural and political orientation favored separation and removal of black ex-slaves from the United States.

[unnumbered page 1]

## **COLOR-CASTE.**

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**BY THOMAS H. PEARNE, D.D.**

PASTOR OF GRACE M. E. CHURCH, DAYTON, OHIO.

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COLOR-CASTE is that prejudice against black persons and mulattoes, which leads one to treat them with disrespect, and which discriminates against them in favor of the whites.

This prejudice is born of slavery, and, like the tail end of the snake, which, it is said, will not die until sunset, no matter what time of the day the body was killed, this color-caste will not die; its sunset has not yet come. Just now, this tail end of slavery is twisting itself into all manner of contortions, and is raising quite a stir in the Methodist Episcopal Church, by insisting on the separation of whites and blacks in those Southern conferences, where some of the members are colored. Correspondents in the Church papers are earnest in enforcing their views on this important question. The General Conference is invoked to come to the rescue.

The question, it is declared, has long since been practically settled by custom; but, like Banquo's ghost, it will not remain down. Unless the General Conference shall do something, harm will come to the Church, our position as a Church will be misapprehended in the South, and the peace of that whole section will be disturbed.

Writers in the *Western Christian Advocate* urge separate conferences for the white and black preachers.

The *Christian Advocate* (New York) of April 19, 1876, has the report of three districts in Tennessee, in convention, who ask the General Conference to establish, or to authorize the establishing of, separate conferences on the color line.

*The Methodist Advocate* (Atlanta) has presented the argu-

[page 2]

ments, *pro* and *con*, on this question, but we fear it has given the weight of its influence to the separationists.

What is the grievance? A trivial one to endure, but a momentous one to change. The payment of stamps a hundred years ago was a comparatively small affair; our Revolutionary fathers could have paid them without much inconvenience. They refused. That refusal gave birth to a free nation.

The grievance is simply this. A few colored ministers meet, in conference only, with the white ministers. They do not belong to the same classes; they do not sit in the same congregations nor Churches; they do not go to the same day-schools nor Sunday schools. O no! "Society," it is affirmed, has adjusted that. How? By kukluxing the white teachers of freedmen schools, and by killing their colored teachers, as has been repeatedly done, until, from fear of the deadly bullet and the assassin's knife, the freedmen have learned to keep themselves aloof from white Churches and schools.

This separation, it is urged, has been by mutual consent, and for the benefit of both parties. The consent has been just about as mutual as that between the highwayman and his victim. "Society" has presented the revolver and the bludgeon, and has said to the freedman, "Stand and deliver!" He has submitted, by surrendering some of the dearest rights of manhood and some of the sweetest amenities born of Christian civilization. He has consented to be a pariah rather than to be extirpated from the land which gave him birth, and which he has enriched by centuries of unrequited toil.

The freedmen have never voluntarily consented to forego respect and fair treatment, and to be subjected to proscription and degradation; they are not a consenting party to the separation. But if they were, it does not follow that the separation, as now existing, is wise or necessary. The wishes of the whites, resulting from whim, caprice, or prejudice against color, do not establish nor settle great moral principles. Nor can the consent of the proscribed class settle them. The position of the colored people on this question of color separation, as it has been and as it is sought to be, is much what it was as to slavery during the earlier years of the war.

[page 3]

"We 's de bone, massa," said a black man to Chaplain Hunter the first year of the war. "What do you mean by that?" said the Chaplain. "Why, massa, you see two dogs fighting over a bone, de bone don't fight. We's de bone." On this question they may yet fight as they did on that; but if they do, it will not be on the side of their proscribers.

And the separation, now sought, is not by any means, by mutual consent. Nor would it be for the benefit of the parties, nor of either of them. To allege that it would, is to assume the very point in dispute. It must be more than asserted—it must be proved. It can not be proved by any reasoning based on God's Word, or on sound policy, that to treat the freedmen as an inferior, abject, outcast race, will benefit them. Nor can it benefit the whites to be guilty of thus treating the blacks. It is ennobling to exercise benevolence; but to mistreat the colored people, because they are colored, or because they were slaves, is to display and to cultivate the meanest and the most intense selfishness. Brutish impulses are degrading; but to mistreat our fellow-man, because his skin is dark, is brutish, and therefore this conduct is injurious to those practicing it. Before any this is conceded to this clamor for separate conferences, let it be shown by the clearest proofs, that the separation would be for the benefit of those of both colors.

Who demand separation? So far, as appears, the whites, and not the freedmen. The letters in the *Western Christian Advocate*, asking for separate conferences, are all written by white persons. The convention referred to was made up of white delegates. Some letters in the *Western* and in the *Methodist Advocate*, against separation, are written by colored preachers. No colored members, ministers, quarterly conferences, annual conferences, as such, ask this separation. The Holston Conference, it is said, almost unanimously adopted a memorial, asking separation. I venture the assertion that John C. Tate and Charles Mays did not vote for it. If either of them did, or if others have, there or elsewhere, it has been through persuasion, intimidation, or rebuff.

It is claimed that, in the convention held at Ellijay and Alabama on this subject, the colored people were present, and agreed in asking for separate conferences. But the blacks

[page 4]

have never so far as I know, originated such action. It has always originated with the whites. When the colored people have acquiesced, or seemed to, they have been persuaded or intimidated into such action. In line with this view, I quote Rev. D.S. Huskins, of Georgia:

Quoting from the tenth resolution of the Ellijay Convention these words: "There being no such desire on our part, nor do we understand it to mean that our colored people are to be abandoned, forsaken, or hated," Brother Huskins adds: "Now brethren, it affords me great pleasure to say that we are not your colored people, as by the terms of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States we are declared free. Again, I will ask the brethren of that convention, many of whom were ministers and members of the annual conference, if no man should be elected bishop, because he is colored, why should many men have a conference organization, because they are colored? If color should not enter into the qualification for one, why should it in the other?"

Rev. D.H. Hays, of the Tennessee Conference, says:

"The plea for separation implies a great deal more than those who urge it care to bring to the surface. It means ostracism and forced degradation of all to whom God has given a dark complexion. It means the weakening and *the ultimate overthrow* [italics mine] of the power and influence of Northern white men in the South. It means, practically, a Methodist Episcopal Church in the South, for and under the control of white men of the South. More than that. It means the fixing of the claim for superiority in the color of the skin. Is the great loyal heart of the Methodist Episcopal Church ready to favor it? A million and a half of voices respond, No!"

And now comes good John C. Tate, or "Bishop Tate," as he is sometimes called, of Holston Conference. Hear him:

"We joined the Methodist Episcopal Church from principle, and not from mere policy. Our colored brethren of the Zion Church tell us that we are 'slaves of the white people, and that we are able to run our own machine, that the white people will impose on us, and that we can never be a people until we learn to do our own business.' All very true, said I, *but we want to associate with those who have what we have not* [italics mine], and what we so much need, and who are willing to contribute to our necessities until we can stand alone. The Methodist Episcopal Church was the first to stretch out her hand to take us on board. Our white brethren in the South, whom we call Southern Methodists, withdrew from us, or rather kicked us out of the back door, plainly declaring that they would have nothing to do with negroes, that they might go to heaven or anywhere else."

If all the whites and negroes in the South should ask separate conferences, that fact would not make the separation

[page 5]

right, if it were not otherwise right. Opinions and prejudices are not the rule of right. They are scarcely safe guides as to what is expedient. It is not always true that "the voice of the people is the voice of God." Majority opinion is not necessarily right; but, if it were, we do not get it by submitting the question to the wishes of the Southern white members of our Church, say fifty thousand, as against the one hundred and seventy-six thousand of our colored members. Both these together would be less than one seventh of our entire membership, as a Church. If this question of color caste were submitted to the suffrages of all races, the white race would go under, for they are an inconsiderable minority. There are more dark races of men than light ones. The dark races are much the more numerous.

In every refined, intelligent negro, there is a shrinking from asking the recognition from the whites, to which his manhood is entitled. But there certainly is not—there can not be—a voluntary asking to have equality denied, and inferiority conceded. I lived five years in the South, and I speak from close and careful observation. A few years ago a white brother proposed a separate enumeration of the whites and colored in the Holston Conference Minutes. Some of the whites favored it, but none of the blacks did. The colored people are sensitive about such allusions to their color as imply inferiority. During the last battle of Hatcher's Run, when Grant extended his left line, Mr. D. L. Moody and myself were visiting the negroes on a plantation, which that advance had included in our lines. Mr. Moody asked one of the negroes this question: "Auntie, do you think the Lord Jesus loves colored people as much as he does the white?" After a significant pause, she replied: "Brother, the Lord Jesus loves all his redeemed children." A colored person would never have asked a white person, such a question as to the whites. The disparaging comparisons, the suggestions of inferiority, the proposal of painful and doubtful separations, always come from the whites.

The reasons assigned for this proposed change, are, first, the welfare of the colored people, who, it is claimed, would develop more rapidly and healthily if thrown upon their own resources; and secondly, the more convenient working of our

[page 6]

white work in the South, as it would free them from the reproach to which these mixed conferences subject them.

As to the former of these reasons, it is not borne out by the facts. The purely colored Methodist organizations are not equal in development with the colored numbers of the Methodist Episcopal Church. John C. Tate inquires in vain for a single colored school in the South supported by the Zion (colored) Church. In Jamaica (West Indies), the color line was long since abjured, especially in Church matters; and there harmony, thrift, civilization, and religion have advanced. In Hayti, white association has been unknown. The blacks have exclusively administered their own affairs. The result there has been division, revolution, irreligion, cannibalism.

It is reasonable, not because of color, but in the nature of the case, that the less informed, less cultured, would profit more by association with those more advanced than they would if separated from them. No one in the North would favor the separation of the less advanced white members of our annual conferences from their more experienced white brethren, that the former might be more self-dependent and developed. Why, then, propose it as to the colored people in the South?

On several accounts separate conferences of whites and blacks are objectionable:

The demand for them springs from a hostile animus toward the freedmen. Those who advocate separate conferences on the color line seem incapable of recognizing merit in the colored people. They make disparaging comparisons between the white and colored people. They make disparaging comparisons between the white and colored preachers. The blacks can not sustain a respectable examination in the prescribed studies; they are "lacking in industry, sobriety, truthfulness, and chastity." And yet it is proposed to set them off by themselves, that they may improve! The money expended on their schools has proved vain. Hardly the desire for education is left, while the mass of the colored people have sunk into perfect indifference. I adduce these statements not to deny them. That is unnecessary; but simply to show the spirit of those who demand separation. Intelligent colored men denounce such statements as libelous.

[page 7]

D.H. Hays thus repels such assaults:

"It is true we are not yet out of the misty, miry log of sin, into which we were most inhumanly thrust, and kept confined during the woeful days of slavery. And it is equally true that we are not so radically deficient in those lovely traits which constitute the basis of moral excellence as the utterer supposes. My soul heaves with indignation when I see men who taught us to prevaricate, while trembling under the lash, who put the bottle to our lips, to make us do a greater amount of work, who spoiled the innocence of our mothers and sisters by tyrannical force, wasting their energies in the attempt to impede our progress, by fastening upon our dejected brow undeserved reproach."

Is it wise to grant separation on the request of those who discover this want of sympathy and appreciation toward the freedmen? A similar animus toward those who oppose separate conferences is displayed by the advocates of color separation.

Bishop Haven is roundly abused for holding the opinion that freedmen have rights which fellow-Christians should respect. A year or two since, he dined with a black brother in Atlanta, and forthwith he is denounced from Charleston to the Rio Grande, as having outraged the decencies of "society" in that country. These separationists draw it mildly when they speak of such men as Bishop Haven, Dr. Braden, brothers Lansing and Hartzell, as "zealous but weak-minded white brethren among us," whose "zeal is not born of wisdom," who seem to think "that the most rapid and ready way to elevate the black man is to rub him up against the whites." God has said, "He who walketh with wise men shall be wise." These separationists sneer at those who would act upon God's plan, as "zealous but weak-minded." Will the General Conference divide conferences on the color line, to gratify those who display this spirit toward the freedmen's truest friends?

One of the chief reasons urged in favor of separate conferences discloses recklessness concerning the colored people, if not direct hostility. That reason is, that our work in the South, especially as to the mixed conferences, is "*an attack upon the social customs of the country in relation to the two races.*" Those "customs" ostracize and oppress the colored people, drive them from the polls, treat them with rigor, deny to them the rights of manhood. The prevalence of those "customs" made necessary the Fifteenth Amendment. It is still

[page 8]

necessary for the same reason. If those "social customs" could work out their full and fell purpose unhindered by the freedmen's friends, they would repeal the Fifteenth Amendment, if possible, and if not, they would render it nugatory by State laws and by lawless raids upon a defenseless people, and thus, without the name or the forms of slavery, reduce the blacks to a serf or subject condition, and so reap the monetary and political results of practical slavery. Because the Methodist Episcopal Church in the South antagonizes, or is supposed to antagonize, these tendencies and purposes, therefore we must change our policy, and so leave these "social customs" to work out these unhappy results. This reason can not certainly have weight with our General Conference.

The mode in which the division is sought is objectionable. The separation is now asked only by the whites. They ask that, on the request of the whites *or* the blacks, separate conferences may be organized. Since only the whites ask it or will ask it, it is proposed that they shall have it, whether the colored people want it or not, whether it is best for them or not, whether it would be for the real welfare of the Church in that section, or in the Church at large, or not. This one-sided treatment of a question upon the wish of a *minority* would not be asked by any sane person in reference to any conference in the North. What would be thought of a proposition to provide that all in the Ohio Conference who had red hair and blue eyes might, upon the request of those having black eyes and hair, be organized into a separate annual conference? A proposal to let a majority of *all our members* in the South, or all our members in the Church at large, decide this question, would be more fair. But, if the division of conferences on the color line were allowed in the manner asked, that is, upon the request of either party, one party being a minority, a principle would be admitted fatal to all Church order and organization. We can not afford to do this.

Color prejudice originates chiefly in the former servile condition of the freedmen. It would soon die out if left to itself. But it is all time stimulated to its utmost malignity by the Church South and by sectional politicians. It is part of a deeply laid and tenaciously held policy to drive from the South all white sympathy and a cure for the freedmen, so

[page 9]

that ultimately the whites in the South can have as full control of the labor and of the political power of the black men as they had when they held them as their own. I state this purpose with the fullest conviction of its correctness.

The policy of the Methodist Episcopal Church South toward our Church in the South is the first to divide and then to destroy it, by arraying the colored and white members against each other, or at least by separating them so producing competition, and then mutual aversion. From a careful observation, under favorable conditions, I am satisfied that our white brethren in the South who demand separate conferences do it under the pressure of a public sentiment sedulously kept alive and sensitive by Southern ecclesiastical and political demagogues. They may not see that this is the real policy of the Church South; but it is, notwithstanding. From the first our going into the South was regarded as an intrusion and an offense. In an interview, in May, 1865, between Bishop Clark, Dr. Poe, and Rev. Dr. M'Ferrin, at which I was present, this was the view urged by Dr. M'Ferrin, who sought to dissuade Bishop Clark from his purpose to organize the Holston Conference.

If the Methodist Episcopal Church South were benevolently disposed toward the blacks, would they not hail the bestowal of labor and money on the freedmen by our Church? Would they not commend our zeal and liberality, rather than stigmatize them as fanatical? The Church South dismembered their colored people, and gave them the chapels they had built when slaves, provided they would remain a purely colored organization. Why? Simply that they would not recognize the Christian manhood of the late chattels of the ex-slaveholders. If de-organization and separation were so good for the blacks, why did not the Southern Church try their virtue upon the whites? They did not love the freedmen as men, as Christians, as Methodists. In no other way can we rationally account for the continued hostility of the Methodist Episcopal Church South to our Church and work in the South. The Tennessee Conference and the Church South do not fraternize. Dickson District and the Church South do fraternize. Why this difference? The former opposes, and the latter favors, separate conferences.

[page 10]

We can have fraternity with the Methodist Episcopal Church South, and our white brethren there can have peace, if only we will go back on the freedmen. If, to please our fifty thousand white members in the South, we will practice injustice and wrong upon one hundred and seventy-six thousand colored members there, we can have peace in all our Southern work. But, if we do this, we shall have God's displeasure, and we shall deserve the contempt of all true men, the freedmen included. Nor will it stop here. In the North the anti color-caste views and practice are growing. In the opera-house in Cincinnati, in the Bromfield-street Baptist Church in Boston, in political meetings, lectures, and concerts, the blacks and whites are seen sitting side by side. This will grow until the foolish pride of race and color shall have disappeared. Is our Church prepared to go back on God's poor, and to turn back the hands of progress on the world's dial? If we do, we shall not only be disrupted and disorganized in the South, but we shall also lose our following in the North, and we would deserve to lose it.

Grand opportunities come but seldom. One came in 1844. We seized it. God crowned us with honor and victory. This is another golden opportunity. If we are wise, it will be improved. In the old slavery times our General Conference refused to black members the right to testify in Church trials. In 1868, in the days of freedom—thirty years afterward—we were glad to purge our record from the black and damaging spot. If we separate conferences on the color line, the time is at hand when such a record will create universal shame and regret.

It is safer and better to stand by principle, even though, at the moment, inconvenient, than it is to follow the *ignis fatuus* of policy. God requires us to "honor all men." Is the freedman *a man* as really as the proudest white oppressor? Then we must honor him. Did Christ die for the freedman? Then we may "not destroy our brother" by unfriendly and wicked ostracism. Will the Methodist Episcopal Church dare to attempt this? When Bishop Kingsley presided at the Holston Conference, several colored men were elected to orders. On Saturday there was a stir as to whether Bishop Kingsley would ordain the black men at the same time and at the

[page 11]

same altars as the white candidates. The Bishop was waited on and asked to ordain the blacks at some other time and place, and so avoid arousing violent prejudices. He replied, that as God had made no difference in calling colored and white men to the ministry, he should make none as to their ordination. Noble words, worthy of the honored Bishop and of the Church, whose bishop he was.

When Bishop Clark preached at a conference in Atlanta, one of the ministers, greatly to the Bishop's annoyance, when he afterward learned of it, stood in the door and turned away colored preachers who came to hear their bishop preach.

Color-caste is unchristian. Its effects on national life are disastrous; on Church life, deadly. It dishonors Christ. It is degrading, divisive, disorganizing. It begets uncharitableness, unkindness, hatred, rancor, bitterness, murder.

If color-caste had control of all the agencies reaching the freedmen, they would have been left without protection, provision, education, evangelization.

The separation of conferences is instigated by color-caste, and it promotes it. On grounds of public policy it should be refused. Rupture, civil dissensions, strife, revolution, and war are opposed to Christ's kingdom. In their presence every interest of Zion suffers. We are, as Christians, interested in avoiding whatever tends to such results. But color-caste does. Therefore, we should not yield to its dictum.

Ex-slave-holders fluently predicted, at the close of the war, that the blacks would die out. This they refuse to do. In spite of abuses and murders they not only live, but they increase. In 1864 they numbered four millions. They number five millions now. They can not remove, *en masse*, to some other country, if they would. We would not have them if they could. Compelled to live with them in the same country, under the same laws, shall we live in peace, or in war? in fraternity, or in Ishmaelitish hate? religiously, in the spirit of Christ, or in the very spirit of the devil? If the former, then we must eschew this diabolical color-caste, which is both God-dishonoring and man-destroying.

The Roman Catholic Church, regardless of color, recognizes the Christian manhood of the negro, instructs him, evangelizes him, ministers to him in sickness, relieves him when in

[page 12]

want, stands by him when he is denounced and proscribed. This is so obvious that Downing, of Washington, and other sagacious and leading colored men, urge the freedmen to make that Church their home. Can we, then, afford to go back on the freedmen? Philip associated with the Ethiopian eunuch, got up into his chariot, and preached Jesus to him. God sent the vision to Peter to assure him that where God has made no difference, men may not. The Pentecostal baptism came upon the dwellers of all lands. Jesus died for all men. He gave commandment that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. He sent them into all the world to preach the Gospel to every creature. To separate the blacks and the whites in annual conferences where they are now associated, would be to act, in spirit, against these facts. A backward movement by the Methodist Episcopal Church on this subject means more, and effects more injury, than by any other Church, because we are, numerically at least, the strongest branch of the strongest Protestant organization in the United States. Will this great Church, in this, the nineteenth century—in this, the century-year of our national history, and in the thirteenth year of American emancipation—dare to lay a proscribing hand upon us. We can not prosper and be a party to the degradation of this people.

Will Christian ministers, Methodist ministers, in this Centennial year, lay a burden that God has not imposed upon our brethren? Shall our Heavenly Father, who has "made of one blood all nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth," see that we, the sons of Wesley, and the preachers of a full and free salvation, have consented to affix a brand and a stigma upon a race whose only crime is, that they have been in bondage, that they are poor, and that they bear the complexion God gave them?

Talk about policy! Talk of convenience! Better everyone of the fifty thousand of our white members in the South should leave us, if that were the alternative (thank God it is not), than that this General Conference should ordain separate conferences in the South, on the color line.