John B. Meachum and John M. Peck:

How Two Missouri Baptists Established a Heritage of Racial Unity in Antebellum Missouri

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In the 1820s, America was divided regarding the plight of black people. Slavery had existed in the country since before the colonies had united in revolution. As the colonies fought for their own freedom, they neglected the freedom of the African slaves. The country had put off the slavery issue far too long. The Civil War loomed on the horizon, threatening to tear apart families, peoples, and the country as cries for freedom grew so loud they could no longer be ignored. Unfortunately, few could agree on how or even if slavery should be abolished.

Many whites, both pro-slavery and abolitionist, resorted to violence for their cause. White Missouri abolitionist John Brown attempted a slave revolution and was executed by hanging when the attempt failed (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "John Brown"). In St. Louis, a radical mob attacked and killed Elijah Lovejoy, a white, peaceful abolitionist writer (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Elijah P. Lovejoy"). Even black people, desperate for freedom, disagreed on the best way to obtain it. Some black leaders such as Frederick Douglass advocated for freedom by encouraging slave rebellions as a part of emancipation (Levine). Others such as Booker T. Washington hoped that the hard work of black people would prove their worth to society and earn them their freedom (Smithsonian). In such a divisive climate, unity among blacks and whites seemed unlikely.

Even in this environment, unity prevailed in the lives of two unlikely friends: a black man named John Berry Meachum and a white man named John Mason Peck. Despite their different races and backgrounds, these Missouri Baptist pastors began a racially united gospel movement in St. Louis. Together, they advocated emancipation of slaves and promoted education for black people despite hardship and opposition. Throughout their lives, Meachum and Peck pioneered racial unity and ministry partnership for Missouri Baptists.

Before the Civil War, there was a general racial divide in many churches, even among Baptists (Shipley and Shipley, 25). This divide was accentuated by the vastly different cultures and lives of black and white people. Similarly, John Meachum and John Peck had dramatically different life experiences, yet their common Baptist faith united them as partners in ministry.

John Meachum did not have an easy life. Born a slave in Virginia, he was moved several times and eventually taken from his father, who was a Baptist preacher to other slaves. Through hard work in a saltpeter mine and the generosity of his master, Meachum was able to buy his freedom around the age of twenty-one. Meachum reunited with his father, and the Baptist preacher quickly made sure that his son knew of his own need for Jesus. Meachum surrendered his life to Christ and began learning to preach himself. After buying his father's freedom, Meachum and his dad walked seven hundred miles to South Carolina, where Meachum was able to purchase the freedom of his mother and siblings. "Oh there was joy!" Meachum writes, and no doubt his joy was enhanced by the gladness of his salvation (Meachum 3-5). Meachum later traveled to Indiana to help relocate a group of freed slaves, but when he returned to his home in Kentucky, he found that his wife and children had been sold to a master in St. Louis (Durst). Devastated, he journeyed to Missouri, having only three dollars by the time he arrived (Hawkins). After much hard work, he was able to purchase his family's freedom. Despite these successes, society tended to treat free black people like Meachum as inferior– freedmen were feared and seen as a threat to the slave trade (Durst).

Having been treated as property, separated from his family several times, and looked down upon for no reason other than his appearance, Meachum would have every right to harbor hate in his heart for white people. Instead of allowing himself to become angry or embittered, Meachum took a stance of forgiveness emphasizing unity. Among many Bible passages in his

"Address to All the Colored Citizens of the United States," Meachum cites Psalm 133:1, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (7) Though most of his writing was focused on unity among black people, Meachum did not limit his views to people of his race. In the same address, Meachum speaks of "our white friends" who had helped establish Sunday Schools for the black people (Meachum 53). Instead of responding in anger toward whites, Meachum allowed forgiveness to drive a spirit of oneness with all people.

John Peck had a very different life. Peck had come to Missouri by choice, having been sent out by the Baptist Triennial Missionary Convention in 1817 to spread the gospel and establish schools (Brenc, "First Baptist Church"). Unaccustomed to rough pioneer conditions of the Missourians, he nevertheless threw himself into circuit preaching with gusto (Babcock 205). In his travels across the state he encountered many white people of different stations, denominations, and opinions. He worked to learn from the pioneers what he could, graciously sharing in meals, customs, and the gospel as he went (Babcock 101-104, 207-208). When there was infighting in some of the Baptist associations, Peck was quick to forgive others and pray that God would extend them grace (Babcock 183-184). Though politically active, Peck often avoided bringing up his strong opinions to make sure no disagreement could inhibit the gospel (Babcock 195). He embodied Paul's statement that he would "become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some." (English Standard Version, 1 Corinthians 9.22)

Peck's love for unity motivated his ministry to black people. His friend and biographer, Rufus Babcock, writes about him: "... [I]n [his] efforts for the poor blacks he then, and through life, felt the greatest interest," (211). Peck did not look down on black people, nor did he merely use religion as a tool to try to keep them submissive as did many white Christians of the day

(Shipley and Shipley, 16-18). Peck was truly moved to compassion and love for black people, who needed salvation as he once did.

Peck and Meachum did not simply write about unity; they lived in genuine friendship and worked in effective partnership with one another. Peck began ministry to the black and white people of St. Louis together in one church (Durst). Whereas many churches of the day had black people sit in the balcony or even outside, Peck's congregation made no distinction of rank between blacks and whites (Shipley and Shipley, 18, 22). As the mixed-race church grew, Meachum assisted Peck and trained for the pastorship. Eventually the church separated along racial lines simply because the church building could not hold them all at once. There seems to be no apparent animosity during the split (Babcock 209). When the congregation separated, Peck ordained Meachum in 1825 as the pastor of the newly formed First African Baptist Church (Shipley and Shipley 22; Babcock 210). The two of them continued to work together teaching a black Sunday School that they had previously established (Our History: The First Baptist Church Story). When the First African Baptist Church built a new building in 1843, Meachum and his congregation eagerly invited Peck to come preach the dedication (Babcock 317). Meachum likely had Peck in mind when he prayed blessings on "our white friends," and Peck's heart's desire to help black people was strengthened and encouraged by his friendship with Meachum.

Meachum and Peck were united ministry partners and united in ministry purpose. Both of them were life-long advocates of freedom for enslaved black people. In their ministries together and on their own, Meachum and Peck demonstrated peaceful but firm resistance to slavery.

Meachum's life indicates his anti-slavery position, yet the ways he expressed it can make him difficult to categorize. He is considered a puzzle by many historians: not radical enough to violently rebel, yet not passive enough to allow slavery to continue to push down his people

(Durst). In a spirit of wisdom, he utilized hard work, Biblical ministry, and civil disobedience to support the cause of freedom. Meachum bought the freedom of many slaves: himself, his parents and siblings, his wife and children, and about twenty others throughout his life (Meachum 4-5). His home also became a stop on the underground railroad, and after his death his wife Mary continued to help slaves escape north to freedom (Hawkins). He believed in working hard and utilizing whatever opportunities a person had. He called industriousness "King Cure-All" and used his life and the lives of others as examples of how hard work and self-respect could help black people gain their freedom (Meachum 5, 25-30, 47-50).

Peck was also an advocate for freedom all his life. In his journal, Peck describes how he felt upon witnessing a slave auction for the first time:

> To-day I attended for a few moments a sale in the marketplace. A negro boy was sold, who appeared about twelve years old. He stood by the auctioneer on the market-bench, with his hat off, crying and sobbing, his countenance a picture of woe. I know not the circumstances; but it was the first human being I ever saw set up for sale, and it filled me with indescribable emotions….
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> [S]lavery in its best state is a violation of man's nature and of the Christian law of love. (Babcock 300)

Peck's heart broke over the evil enacted on the people around him. While he knew some of the various pro-slavery arguments of the day, he could not reconcile any so-called Biblical justification of the slavery institution with Jesus' clear instruction to "Love your neighbor as yourself," (Babcock 300). He actively spoke and lobbied in Illinois to prevent it from becoming a slave state; it was largely due to his influence that it did not (Babcock 195). Peck retained a firm and active stance against slavery.

Some historians wonder why Peck and Meachum seemed to be more moderate than some abolitionists of the day (Durst; Harrison LXVI). It seems that the answer lies in the gospel: both understood that true freedom is not merely physical. Meachum stated it in this way: "Sin has degraded us, but righteousness will exalt us," (Meachum 7). A person cannot be truly free until he surrenders himself to the lordship and salvation of Jesus Christ. Both Peck and Meachum believed this so strongly that in the few writings they left behind, this theme prevails. Peck was primarily a preacher, and he preached the gospel to slave, free, and slaveholder equally (Babcock 195). Meachum also urged the black people to turn to Christ, as they could never be free without Him (Meachum 37-42). Together and throughout their lives, both Meachum and Peck worked for freedom, both physical and spiritual.

Peck and Meachum expressed their desires for freedom and unity through the practical avenue of education for black people. Together, they opened several schools despite educational hardships and outside opposition. Even in such difficulty, Meachum and Peck's partnership did not crumble under pressure.

Basic literacy was the main goal of Meachum and Peck's schools. Both black and white people sought education so they could read the Bible, but for a black person, literacy was also an avenue to freedom (Durst). Education allowed black people to gain better jobs and opportunities without relying on white people to interpret laws, contracts, or Scriptures (Durst). Literacy boosted morale among the black community– it was seen as a soft rebellion against the system intent on keeping the black people oppressed (Durst). Additionally, Meachum included labor apprenticeships in his philosophy of education (Meachum 19). Since Meachum sustained himself and his family through his skills in carpentry, barrel-making, and steamboat delivery service, he considered work in a trade necessary to gain and maintain freedom (Shipley and Shipley, 23).

Even these manual skills required some reading and arithmetic, so academic education was critical (Thomas 23).

Though advancing education was an important goal, it was not easy. Missouri was still a territory when both Meachum and Peck arrived, and most Missourians still lived a pioneer lifestyle even after the territory gained its statehood. Many children, both white and black, were so involved working the land with their parents that there was no time for school (Thomas 21). Others simply did not have access to books or teachers (Thomas 83-87; Babcock 101). Despite the difficulties, Meachum and Peck worked to provide educational opportunities for as many black people as they could.

Peck, with Meachum's assistance, opened a Sunday school for black children and adults in the St. Louis church (Brenc, "First Baptist Church"). At the Sunday school, the students were taught not only basic reading, writing, and arithmetic but also how to learn and study Scripture. Most of the students were slaves. Peck requested that slaves bring written permission from their owners to attend the school, but this was mostly to minimize conflict, and students were not turned away even if their owners did not allow them to attend. Peck's biographer described the school as the work of the Holy Spirit, and soon there were nearly one hundred students (Babcock 93-94).

When the church split, the Sunday School grew even more. It came to be known as the Candle Tallow School since it met in the windowless church basement by the light of candles (Our History: The First Baptist Church Story). Meachum took on more of a leading role, with Peck supervising sporadically due to increasing travels. Both white and black teachers taught at the school, and many students not only responded to the gospel but also learned practical academics (Durst).

Opposition to the school had existed since its beginning, and it did not take long for this antagonism to strengthen. What had once been angry letters and disgruntled complaints turned to oppressive laws (Harrison LXVII). On February 16, 1847, Missouri passed several restrictions on both slave and free black people, and one of the primary laws banned anyone from teaching black people to read or write in the state. A second law outlawed religious gatherings of black people without a white officer present, while a third law prohibited black young people from becoming trade apprentices in the state. Violators of any of these laws could be fined $500 or sent to jail for six months (1846-1847 Missouri Session Laws).

Education for black people was now both difficult and illegal, but Meachum and Peck decided that they must obey God's command to "train up a child in the way he should go" rather than man's commands to the contrary (Meachum 14). Because of their resolve, the Candle Tallow School continued to shine the light of opportunity and education. Inevitably, Meachum and another white teacher were arrested in the middle of teaching class. It's unclear what punishment they were given, but eventually both were released and attempted to reopen the school. After several such valiant attempts, the school was closed due to violent threats against both Meachum and Peck (Durst).

Even though the school had closed, Meachum persevered in the ministry of education for black people. With a little creativity, Meachum found a way to work around the law. Education for black children was not allowed in the state, so Meachum took his delivery steamboat, conveniently located in the Mississippi River outside state lines, and established the school on the boat (Hawkins). The "Floating Freedom School," as it came to be called, soon had hundreds of students– more than the church's basement could have held (Brenc, "John Berry Meachum"). Moving to the boat was especially bold, since although it was technically legal, animosity among

the school's opposers could have easily grown into violence. Steamboats could also be dangerous, as evidenced by the commonness of steamboat explosions, fires, and wrecks (Durst). Nevertheless, to Meachum, to the black and white teachers, and to the students, the risks of the Floating Freedom School were not as dangerous as ending education. Peck's involvement with the Floating Freedom School is not recorded, but Peck was still committed to providing education opportunities to blacks and had endured opposition with Meachum. Both Meachum and Peck believed that education was the path to reading the Scripture, getting a job, and improving the lives of black people. Such education flourished through the unified efforts of Meachum and Peck.

God blessed the work of Meachum and Peck by giving them honor in their communities, strong families, and an impact that would last for generations. Meachum was regarded highly even among whites in St. Louis. Upon his death in 1854, a special news announcement proclaimed his passing and noted that he was "long known as a coloured preacher in this city" (Missouri Daily Republican). Peck, as a traveling pastor, was treated with honor wherever he went, and God led his family to faith in Christ even while Peck was away (Babcock 232). The Floating Freedom school had a lasting impact as well. Many future black American leaders were educated there including James Milton Turner, who would eventually establish the Lincoln Institute, the first center of African American higher education in Missouri (Brenc, "John Berry Meachum"). God worked through the lives of these faithful men as they served Him together.

As America's racial struggles marched violently toward war, Meachum and Peck shone as an example of friends who were able to rightly relate despite their differences. Their faithful gospel ministries led many people to eternal freedom; their passions for emancipation and education improved the lives of thousands of black people in Missouri and other states; and their

partnership established an early heritage of racial unity among Missouri Baptists. These unsung Baptist heroes are a powerful example of "how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (Meachum 7).

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