



Daniel Alexander Payne

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## Faith, Education and the Gospel

by Victoria McAfee

Daniel Alexander Payne was a theologian, historian, church bishop, the first African-American college president, and a constant voice for the education of African-Americans, especially their church leaders.

He was born February 24, 1811, in Charleston, South Carolina, the son of free black parents Martha and London Payne. Sadly, his father died when

Daniel was only four years old, and his mother died five years later. Although he only spent a short time with his father, he credits him for his spiritual and educational commitments, saying, "I was the child of many prayers."

Like Hannah in the Book of 1 Samuel, Payne's father asked the Lord for a son and promised to consecrate him to God's service. When that son came, London Payne named him Daniel. Payne's father also modeled what it means to be a Christian. He taught Bible classes at the Methodist church, conducted family worship, and started his day singing hymns. Payne also remembered getting a spanking from his father for not completing a lesson. When Payne's father died, his mother continued taking him to Bible classes. After she died, a great aunt took him in and continued to raise him to know God.

As a child, Payne said he felt "the Spirit of God moving my childish heart." One sermon so impressed him, he went home "crying and praying." As a teen, he went to the Methodist Episcopal church for examination. They assigned him Samuel Weston as his teacher, and Weston became a major spiritual guide for Payne. At 18, Payne gave his whole heart to the Lord.

Several weeks after his conversion, while in prayer, Payne believed God spoke to him and said, "I have set thee apart to educate thyself in order that thou mayest be an educator to thy people." This incident caused Payne to resolve to intently study as many books as he could. He spent all his extra funds to purchase reading materials, spent all his spare time reading, and drew pictures with a crayon to help him better understand the concepts in the books. Payne received his formal education in Charleston schools that were established by free blacks, and he had a private tutor. He mastered mathematics, Greek, Latin, and French.

As a teen, Payne also worked as a shoe merchant, carpenter, and tailor before he opened his own school for African-American children and a few adult slaves at the young age of 19. Sadly, in 1835, after the Nat Turner slave rebellion, a law was passed prohibiting the education of slaves or free blacks. Forced to close his school, Payne moved to Pennsylvania and attended the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg while teaching at Gettysburg College. After two years, he was ordained as the first African-American minister in the Lutheran Church. His ordination speech was on the topic "Slavery Brutalizes Man," in support of a Lutheran resolution to abolish slavery in America. However, in 1841, he left the Lutheran Church and joined the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, where he became the sixth bishop of the church in 1854. He remained its bishop the rest of his life.

Payne married in 1847, but his wife died during the first year of marriage from complications of childbirth. In 1854, he married again, to Eliza Clark of Cincinnati. Eliza had children before they married, and then she had three more with Payne.

Before the Civil War, Payne also worked with abolitionists and others against slavery as part of a committee that helped provide slaves with food, clothing, and shelter as they escaped to Canada. He had no fear of speaking out against racial injustice.

Seriously committed to the education of African Americans, especially leaders, in 1856 he helped establish Wilberforce University in Ohio, and in 1863, he became the first black college president when the AME Church bought the university. In fact, he convinced the university board to open a seminary (now called the Payne Theological Seminary) in 1871, and Payne was its first dean.

Payne continued to be an overseer of the AME Church, emphasizing formal education and preparation for ministers. At an early AME conference, he had called for a "regular course of study for prospective ordinees" that included courses in English grammar, geography, arithmetic, ancient and modern history, and theology. He believed that "...an undereducated and ill-prepared minister was a scandal and affliction upon black churches." He taught that a clergyman ought to first preach the Gospel, showing a person their need for a Savior, then encourage maturity, training, and understanding of the doctrines and government of the church. According to Payne, a person called to ministry needed to live a life of faith and prayer. They should want to fill their "...head [with] all knowledge and [their] heart with all holiness." Payne was the first bishop in the AME Church to have theological seminary training. The AME Church points to Payne as the reason for its continuing emphasis on educated ministers in their congregations.

Under Payne's leadership, the AME Church expanded foreign missions, reorganized its publications, established new churches, and introduced trained choirs and instrumental music into the worship experience. After the Civil War, the denomination gained 250,000 new members, partly because Payne organized missionaries, committees, and teachers to reach out to newly freed black slaves. The denomination spread across the South, from Florida to Texas, with new congregations.

In 1881, Payne traveled to Britain to be the first African American to preside over the Methodist Ecumenical Council, and in 1891 he wrote the first history of the AME Church, a few years after he published his memoirs, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, in 1888. He died on November 2, 1893.

Several people have called Payne the Rosa Parks of his day. In fact, Rosa Parks attended an AME Church where she learned about Payne and his actions against discrimination. Payne refused to give up his seat on a train. When Payne was in his 70s, a conductor asked him to move to the Jim Crow car. He refused, stating, "Before I'll dishonor my manhood by going into that car, stop your train and put me off." The conductor did just that—he made Payne get off at the next stop.



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