THE ROMANCE OF AMERICAN METHODISM

by John O. Gross

The revival fires started by John Wesley in England during the second quarter of the eighteenth century spread later to America. From the first Methodism in this country was an indigenous movement. The men who brought Methodism to these shores did not come primarily to preach the gospel; they came with a concern for the continuation of the influences which had brought them into the Christian life. Methodism was planted here by local preachers, Philip Embury and Robert Strawbridge being the most prominent. Church extension in this instance was not something imposed from without; it rose from within.

Prior to 1768, Wesley had not included the evangelizing of America in his plans. It was in response to urgent requests from Methodists in New York, who were sure that an effectual door had opened to Methodism in the New World, that Wesley asked for volunteers among his preachers to go as missionaries to America. In 1769 Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmoor accepted Wesley's challenge and came over. Francis Asbury arrived in 1771. Before the Revolutionary War began a total of eight preachers had been sent to America by Wesley, not to mention four who came on their own. By the time the war was well under way, all of the preachers sent by Wesley, save Asbury, had returned to England or had ceased preaching.

The men who accepted the requirements placed upon them for the evangelization of America readily identified themselves with it. The man to whom the church and the nation are more indebted than any other for this approach is Francis Asbury. He formulated the strategy and set the direction of Methodism in America. Asbury saw upon his arrival that Methodist preachers must travel with the people. He noted that the English Methodist preachers who had preceded him to America seemed “unwilling to leave the cities.” He wrote in his journal, “I think I will show them the way,”¹ and he did! Asbury’s “power was military which he used with military energy, but he imposed on the ministry no task that he did not himself exemplify.”²

It is said that American Christianity’s first order of business after winning independence from England was to wrest the new nation from the control of the devil. In America, as in England, many persons holding places of public trust openly disclaimed belief in the Word of God. A breakdown in morals inevitably followed the lapse in religious belief. W. W. Sweet said that in the period of the

² Ezra Squier Tipple, Francis Asbury the Prophet of the Long Road (Methodist Book Concern), 326.
American Revolution and the years immediately following, the religious and moral conditions of the country as a whole reached the lowest ebb in the entire history of the American people. Mass migrations diminished concern for the Christian faith. On the frontier the baser passions were given full rein. Good people were shocked by the vice encountered everywhere in the new country.

The Methodist Episcopal Church, organized in 1784, was destined to play an important role in the development of the new republic. It was the first indigenous episcopal church in America. The launching of the church in 1784 meant a clean break between American Methodists and the British. The interests of the Methodists here were promptly transferred to the new republic. In 1789 the conference meeting in New York delegated its bishops, Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke, to visit President George Washington and to declare formally the allegiance of the Methodist Episcopal Church to the republic.

Methodist preachers knew the basic purposes of the new nation and readily assumed responsibility for interpreting them. This was a most important service in the remote parts of the country beyond the established centers of civilization. Once in a camp meeting near Natchez, Mississippi, where Lorenzo Dow was the preacher, some rowdies created a disturbance. Dow rebuked them and in turn gave the whole assembly a discourse on the civil gains made in America through the Revolution. In his discourse he repeated from memory the entire constitution and then showed how it served as the center of gravity in keeping every state in its place. Without question, the preachers were a most important influence in establishing an understanding of the meaning of citizenship in the new nation.

Asbury accepted the challenges which eighteenth century America presented. His principal task was to recruit and train preachers to meet the conditions of the times. Very few of Asbury’s first circuit riders could be called experienced. They were young, often still in their teens. Henry Bason was seventeen when he received his first appointment; Joshua Soule was eighteen; and Martin Ruter was fifteen. Bishop Charles B. Galloway said that thousands of Methodist preachers were riding circuits before they were old enough to vote or needed to use a razor.

On one occasion Asbury was asked by an educated divine from the east, “How is it that you take men from the plow, the blacksmith’s shop, the carpenter’s bench, and without sending them to any college or divinity school set them to preach at once, and in a few years they become able ministers equal, if not superior, to our college trained men?” Asbury replied, “We tell one another all

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8 W. W. Sweet, Revivalism in America (New York, Charles Scribner & Sons), 117.
we know, and then use it at once. A penny used is better than an idle dollar. You study books, we study men, the Bible, the hymn book and Mr. Wesley's sermons, and we are instant in season and out of season. I once picked up a fiddler, and he became a saint and a great preacher.” Asbury had learned his way of training preachers while he served circuits under John Wesley in England.

The circuit riders grew as they worked. The discipline of enforced study and the rigid regimen they followed transformed many of them into powerful preachers. They were sometimes called “down-to-earth preachers” because their sermons contained both substance and nourishment.

Circuit riders often exemplified what may be called “muscular” Christianity. On the frontier where there was little protection by law, the pioneers had to enforce discipline against rowdies and drunken men. It is no idle saying that the fists of the circuit riders knocked the devil out of many sinners. Asbury understood the problems confronting his preachers. There is no record of his approving the use of force, but on one occasion he said to a group creating a disturbance: “You must remember that all of our brothers in the church are not sanctified. I advise you to let them alone; for if you get them angry and the devil should get in their way they are the strongest and hardest men to fight in the world.”

Asbury’s men formed a mobile force which was subject to his direction. As their field marshal he sent them to march with the pioneers and to minister in the hovels of the poor who stood in need of the saving Word. They endured hardships and many spent a part of their lives hungry, wet, cold, verminous and saddlesore. Of the 737 preachers who died before 1847, 203 were under thirty-five years of age.

Our nation is deeply indebted to the Methodist circuit riders. As bearers of civilization they played a great part in helping to temper life in the new west; they helped to keep the whole western country from sinking into barbarism.

Asbury’s design was for a national church, not a sectional one. When the Methodist Episcopal Church was organized in 1784 the center of its work was in Baltimore. But Asbury drew resources not just from the center but from the center to the circumference. Lines went in all directions but principally to the west and to the south. The Western Conference reached Ohio by 1798, Indiana by 1802, Illinois by 1803 and Missouri by 1806. No part of the nation was left untouched and today even in states settled largely by emigrants from northern Europe who brought their own church with them, Methodist influence is significant.

At the time of the organization of the Methodist Episcopal

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*Ibid., 60.

Church, there was no work in New England. In 1789 Jesse Lee was given a circuit which included all of that region where the established churches were served by college-trained preachers. When Lee crossed into Connecticut and applied for lodging he told his hostess he was a preacher and that he expected to preach in the village. She promptly asked, "Have you a liberal education?" Lee answered, "Tolerable, madam, enough I think to carry me through the country." 7 Commenting on his labors there, Lee wrote, "I love to break up new ground and hunt lost souls in New England though it is hard work; but when Christ is with me hard things are made easy and rough ways made smooth." 8

The first Methodist classes in New England were small, often only two or three members. But Methodism grew in spite of the adversities it faced. The opposition put the Methodist tenets on the defensive and compelled the preachers to resort to careful study in order to hold their own. This may explain why at the outset many of Methodism's ablest leaders came from New England. Matthew Simpson listed six men who he said brought strength to the Methodist movement in the nineteenth century—Joshua Soule, Nathan Bangs, Wilbur Fisk, Elijah Hedding, Martin Ruter, and John Emory. All except Emory came from New England, and Soule was one of Lee's converts.

One contribution which Methodism made to New England, and indirectly to the whole nation, was its humanizing influence on the Calvinistic theology of that region. As New England was turning away from the Calvinism of the Puritans to Unitarianism, many persons who could not accept either extreme welcomed the reasonable theological position of Methodism.

The civilizing program to which the circuit rider was committed did not end with revival meetings. The revivals opened the way for the upward rise of the people. The practice of achieving personal growth through self-education which prevailed in the Methodist societies in England, set the example for Methodist societies in America. In England reading was a fundamental discipline of the society. In writing to a lay preacher Wesley said, "It cannot be that the people should grow in grace unless they give themselves to reading. A reading people will always be a knowing people. A people who talk much will know little." 9 The American circuit rider encouraged the self-education of his people, and the long list of books sold by the circuit riders furnished the only instruction received by many of the pioneers. The preacher on a charge was an authorized agent for the Book Concern and in his saddlebags he carried books to sell to his members. The distribution of good

7 Holland N. McTyerie, History of Methodism (Nashville, 1885), 421. 9 The Letters of John Wesley (Epworth Press), VIII, 247.
8 Ibid., 424.
literature was regarded as part of the preacher's pastoral responsibility.

As may be inferred here, the Methodist Book Concern was founded to aid the church in spreading Christian literature. This agency, now called the Methodist Publishing House, has grown until its very size can obscure its basic purpose. But the Book Concern, assisted by the preachers, provided for those who had obtained an experience of religion, the books which enabled them to develop an appreciation for learning.

Now, in a day when the United States is the leading power in the world, it is difficult for some to recall that at the Centennial of American Methodism in 1866, one hundred years ago, this nation was still immature and undeveloped. One of the original trustees of Simpson College at Indianola, Iowa, and the secretary of its board for many years, was the first white child to be born in what is now Warren County, Iowa. The fact that Iowa Wesleyan College antedates the admission of Iowa into the union shows that from the time of the first Methodist settlement, Christian leaders recognized that stability and growth called for the education of American youth. And the kind of education they envisioned was designed to produce not “hewers of wood and drawers of water,” but leaders who would be able to mold public opinion. Matthew Simpson, for whom Simpson College is named, expected the Christian college to channel into our national life the noblest heritages of the Western world. In order to prepare men for leadership, he said, education must transmit the best of the ancient civilizations to the New World. Thus, the Hebrew concepts of ethics and morality, the Greek appreciation of beauty and culture and the Roman genius for order and government were deposited in the stream of American life. The civilizing value of these cultural legacies upon our national life can hardly be estimated.

If Bishop Asbury could have returned for the Centennial of American Methodism in 1866, he would have found a committed church. No doubt he would have deplored the schism of 1844 and the inability of his church to deal forthrightly with the issue of slavery. He would have noted that the cleavage of his beloved church had widened during the Civil War with no hope of an early reconciliation.

The activity of the Methodist Episcopal Church in taking over Methodist churches in the South behind Union army lines was resented. An order from President Andrew Johnson for the restoration of church property in Louisiana was necessary before the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South could be held in New Orleans in 1866. How much was said there about the Centennial, we do not know. The southern bishops had urged the Annual Conferences to send their ablest men as dele-
gates. Of 153 delegates chosen, 149 were present. And in spite of the confusion and poverty all through the South, the 1866 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South proved to be one of the most progressive ever to convene. It resolved to rebuild the waste places, provide for the education of the people, and to restore the church to a meaningful place in the South. Progressive legislation such as the admission of laymen to membership in the General Conference was adopted. The southern segment of Methodism was to arise "Phoenix like" from ashes and become a powerful instrument in the South and many parts of the world. How well it succeeded is reflected in the statistical tables of the two southern jurisdictions today.

Northern Methodists made the Centennial of American Methodism a time for a great push forward. Recognized as the leading Protestant church in the nation, its leadership at the time was of critical importance to the country. I lifted up for special consideration the two matters which Bishop Simpson said were most vital to the advance of Methodism—church extension and education. Church extension was strategically important in the opening of the west.

The period following the Civil War was one of feverish expansion. New railroad trunk lines were laid across the western plains, opening them up for settlement. There was a great migration to take up the land made available by the Homestead Act of 1862. But the prairie states did not have the timber available for church buildings. A sod church at best was only temporary; for permanent buildings lumber was required. The Church Extension Society helped the newly founded churches to build suitable houses of worship. Without question the church extension program enabled Methodism to become a national denomination with churches evenly distributed across the nation. From Ohio westward to the Pacific coast and from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico, one will find a Methodist church not only in every county seat town but in villages and out-of-the-way places. The leader of this movement was the singing chaplain, Charles C. McCabe, who for many years served as secretary of the Church Extension Society. When the freethinker, Robert G. Ingersoll, declared that the Christian church was dead, McCabe wired him that the Methodists were building a church a day and soon hoped to raise it to two. McCabe's telegram inspired the song which he sang from coast to coast:

"The infidels, a motley band,
In council met and said:
'The churches die all through the land,
The last will soon be dead.'

When suddenly a message came,
It filled them with dismay,
'All hail the power of Jesus' name!
We're building two a day.'"
Education was the second concern to receive a period of emphasis—an emphasis that has continued to mount since 1866. We may trace the beginnings of several educational institutions to the special Centennial observance, such as Drew University and some nine others. One great educational project which began with that celebration was the loan fund which has helped many young Methodists to attend college. For almost one hundred years, every Methodist college has been able to assist many of its promising youths with loans from this fund. Today, one hundred years after the establishment of the fund, the General Board of Education is loaning annually more than $1,000,000 to Methodists pursuing work in institutions of higher education.

Another venture projected in the Centennial year was Negro education. Emancipation brought freedom to four million slaves who were illiterate and unprepared for citizenship. The close identification of the Methodist Episcopal Church with the Union placed it in a strategic position to lead in Negro education.

The Freedman's Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church was formed in Cincinnati in 1866 and became the dominant agency for missionary, educational and social work among Negroes. It was probably the most effective among many such organizations founded after the Civil War. Four-fifths of all Methodist expenditures in the South during Reconstruction went to evangelize and educate the Negroes. The Freedman’s Aid Society moved swiftly, and at the end of the first year it had opened 59 schools, enrolling 5,000 students in strategic centers of the southland. The first students ranged in age from seven to seventy years. Soon the schools were furnishing the teachers for the elementary schools, and in time they were giving to the nation one-half of the Negro physicians and dentists and most of the Negro ministers with seminary training. It goes without saying that these schools encountered many obstacles. A leading Southern Methodist, Atticus G. Haygood, later bishop and author of Our Brother in Black, saw this work as invaluable for the South. “Suppose,” he said, “these Northern teachers had not come, and nobody had taught the Negroes, set free, and citizens! The South would have been uninhabitable by this time [1881].”

In this day when the church often is criticized as a place of worship without relevant connections with contemporary society, it is refreshing to note evidences of its close identification with the moral and cultural development of the nineteenth century. Horace Bushnell said that the aim of the church in the nineteenth century was to present to the world “the spectacle of ... a religious nation, blooming in all the Christian virtues; the protector of the poor, the scourge of the oppressed; the dispenser of light; the symbol to

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mankind of the ennobling genial power of righteous laws, and a simple Christian faith.”

In 1866 our people dreamed of the ultimate triumph of Christianity and of a Christian world. Their zeal for evangelizing the non-Christian world prompted hundreds of young college graduates to go as missionaries to the undeveloped parts of the globe. This unselfish concern for people and their needs finds its parallel today in our nation calling youth to volunteer for the Peace Corps.

One cannot escape the conclusion that in the nineteenth century there was a close identification between militant Christianity and American culture. Religious leaders often interpreted investigation, discovery, and material and social progress, as preparation to receive the kingdom of Christ. America, they believed, was God’s beachhead from which the Christian faith would advance to all parts of the known world. Once students at Garrett Biblical Institute heard Bishop Simpson prophesy that—

Some of you will live to see the day when every land shall be Christian. Some of you will live until there shall be missionary centers in every land; some of you may live till the brightness of millennial glory shall sweep over this earth and make it but the threshold to the greater glory on high.

This was the mood of 1866 and the years immediately following. A strong belief persisted that the gospel had the power to reset the direction of the world, and to give it the ideals on which it might live and develop. Barbara Ward in a book dealing with the issues of politics and economics supports this view when she says, “What Christianity has brought is not so much the answers as energy to see that the answers are applied. It has been an extraordinary source of dynamic power and dynamic change.”

Nineteenth-century Methodism had a sense of destiny and a commitment to what it believed was God’s purpose in history. It looked at the future with hope, believing that with man’s cooperation God had the power to make his kingdom possible. This caused his followers to carry a heavy responsibility for the evangelization of the world. One theologian prominent in the present theological dialogue has proposed a new theology based upon the premise that God is affirmed where hope exists. This is not a new thesis for American Methodists. Their oft-derided activism has had its inspiration in the belief that what can be cured need not be endured.

We must say, however, that the mood which prevails in 1966, the year of Methodism’s Bicentennial is remote from the optimism reflected in the last part of the nineteenth century. Today, June 20, 1966, you can hardly pick up a newspaper or a magazine without

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11 Hudson, American Protestantism (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), 77.
12 Tracey K. Jones, Missionary Intruder (Nashville: Scarritt College), 11.
13 Northwestern Christian Advocate (November 6, 1861), 356.
reading about the uprootedness—sometimes called the alienation—of the younger generation from the society of their elders.

The new generation, so runs the diagnosis, has nothing to cling to except their own alienated selves. God is dead. The family is in decline. The country is no longer an inspiration. The ancient virtues of thrift, duty, work, and obligation no longer invoke a response.

If, however, we are honest, our thoughts on these matters will take us back beyond the new generation. The decline in religion is part of a cycle. What is new is that the decline is not a matter of great concern to many who are expected to be the interpreters and defenders of religious faith. Some preachers and theologians have been known to assault the faith in the very places where the love of God is to be taught. Perhaps it should be said parenthetically that some of those who often speak disparagingly of our heritage do not intend to denigrate the whole. They think it is necessary to criticize and discount before renewal can come.

Our church in 1966 faces the challenges presented by this confused age. Its response to these challenges will determine the effectiveness of its work, indeed its own existence, in the next century. There is no church-wide program such as the Centennial of 1866 that provides a unilateral approach. Where once we had a degree of homogeneity, now there is wide diversity. Regardless of what the issue is on moral matters, the unanimity of opinion found in other years no longer exists.

Without question many believe that any emphasis that is denominational is out of step with the times. This is a day of cooperation, and in the end of union. No matter before Christendom today, it is conceded, is more important than the one dealing with the unification of all the Christian forces.

On the issue of church union, The Methodist Church is under pressure and is considered by some as the main obstacle to the early consummation of a plan of union. But church union is not the sole answer to today's needs. Nothing could be more disastrous than for the Protestant churches to merge into an amorphous mass and discard the values developed through their respective traditions. All churches which enter into plans of union should bring such aspects of truth as have been stressed by them individually. If, for instance, The Methodist Church does not carry over into the total life of Christendom the unique flavor produced by the Methodist movement, it will fall short of contributing its best. Methodists should not forget that they have a distinct ethos to which the Holy Spirit has committed many treasures. With the inevitable return of the Methodist Church of the United Kingdom to the Anglican Church, American Methodism may become the Obed-Edom of the Methodist Ark. This solemn fact makes it important for us to guard the heritage bequeathed to us. Once in the eighteenth century
Benjamin Rush observed that catholicism (or ecumenism as we would say now) in religion did not always spring from the spirit of the gospel. Fusion comes from freezing as well as heating. We are justified in our continued negotiations for union, not to improve efficiency, to eliminate overlapping, and other incidental reasons, but only as the negotiations give promise of making the church a more powerful instrument for mediating the Christian gospel.

Meetings of churchmen have always highlighted the problems of the time. Every age brings its own social, educational and economic changes. The impact of this century's materialistic environment upon society produces new challenges, and they must be met. Some are complicated, but many people will be reached in the places where we live and work by the faithful discharge of our day-by-day duties.

Once in a conversation with Gardner Cowles, Sr., then head of the powerful publishing interests in Iowa, Cowles observed that Methodists had not been able to make their transitions effectively. He noted that the church he knew in his youth was zealous in its evangelistic work. However, when new insights came in religious education, Methodism all but abandoned its previous emphasis. In retrospect it is evident that the church's failure to keep pace with the growth of the country's population is due to the lack of a working synthesis between education and evangelism. Our educational approach often neglects Christian nurture, and as a result the churches lose from the fellowship 50 percent of the children who once were in the Sunday schools. One of our Annual Conferences reported that 35 percent of its churches did not have a single addition in membership during 1964-65. At the same session a special conference was set for consideration of plans for evangelism. If we do not devise a working synthesis between education and evangelism, losses in membership will continue and churches will be sterile and ineffective.

Let us admit that there are many unresolved problems—problems brought by urbanization, social inequalities, and injustices. These are not to be ignored and Christian influence should be brought to bear to help resolve them. Today, practically every board and agency of the church can furnish guidance on meeting complex social and personal problems. Perhaps they presume that each pastor in his parish will succeed with the less complicated, normal, day-by-day problems. But it is with the day-by-day problems that help is most needed. Unless the gospel is effectively mediated at the local church level, there will be diminishing convictions on moral issues, weak motivation for the church's missionary work, and social action without an underlying theology.

It matters tremendously that Methodists should know something of the journey of their church through the past two centuries. They
should understand the point to which their long history has brought them and should know where they are going. In the past the church has not succumbed to the hosts of evil round it. The record shows that God did grant it wisdom and courage for the facing of its tasks. To keep faith with our heritage we may appropriately pray in the words of Harry Emerson Fosdick:

Save us from weak resignation
To the evils we deplore;
Let the search for Thy salvation
Be our glory evermore.
Grant us wisdom,
Grant us courage,
Serving Thee whom we adore.

(Dr. Gross read this paper before the South Iowa Annual Conference on June 20, 1966, as that conference celebrated the Bicentennial of American Methodism.)