

COMMUNITY AND THE RHETORIC OF "FREEDOM:" EARLY AMERICAN METHODIST WORSHIP

by Fred Hood

Revivalism has been widely recognized as a significant form of social expression in America. Since many features of nineteenth century American revivalism were first present in Methodist worship, an examination of those practices may give some insight into the social meaning of revivalism. While Methodists quickly discarded their liturgical heritage, they developed informal patterns which were uniform throughout Methodism. These worship practices developed in the context of a rhetoric which denoted "liberty" or "freedom" as the highest goal of worship. Ultimately, however, the worshiping community determined the proper expression of "freedom." Thus the community rather than the liturgy became the standard for acceptable worship.

Reflecting its English heritage,¹ the Methodist Episcopal Church was constituted as a liturgical church, but was such in name only and that for just eight years. When John Wesley sent Thomas Coke to America as Superintendent of the Methodist societies, he also sent an abridged and slightly altered version of the *Book of Common Prayer*. This liturgical manual, entitled *The Sunday Service for the Methodists in North America*, was adopted by the famous Christmas Conference of December, 1784, which marked the beginning of Methodism in America as an independent denomination. The *Sunday Service* was used but little from the first and soon fell into total disuse. Although this work is a valuable source for the study of Wesley's attitude toward liturgical worship, a careful analysis of it would be totally irrelevant in seeking to understand early American Methodist worship.²

Jesse Lee, first generation Methodist preacher and historian, penned the now famous epitaph of the *Sunday Service* in 1810. He wrote:

At this time the prayer book, as revised by Mr. Wesley, was introduced among us; and in the large towns, and in some country places, our preachers read prayers on the Lord's day; and in some cases the preachers read part of the morning service on Wednesdays and Fridays. But some of the preachers who had been long accustomed to pray extempore, were unwilling to adopt this new plan. Being fully satisfied that they could pray better, and with more devotion while their eyes were shut, than they could with their eyes open.

¹ Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England from Watts and Wesley to Marville, 1690-1850* (Princeton, 1961), pp. 184-189.

² The same would not be true of twentieth century American Methodism. See Nolan B. Harmon, *The Rites and Ritual of Episcopal Methodism* (Nashville, 1926) for the most thorough analysis and comparison with the *Book of Common Prayer*. The current interest in the *Sunday Service* is reflected in Edward C. Hobbs (ed.), *The Wesley Orders of Common Prayer* (Nashville, 1957).

After a few years the prayer book was laid aside, and has never been used since in public worship³

Judging from the absence of any comment on the *Sunday Service* in the majority of the journals of the early ministers, the liturgical service received even less recognition than Lee noted. Francis Asbury very rarely mentioned that he "read prayers." It seems that the great leader and organizer of American Methodism only used the Sunday Service on very special occasions and when he was too ill to preach with his usual vigor.⁴ Asbury's most lengthy comment on the use of the liturgy was provoked when he was denied the use of a Lutheran church building because he had failed to read the liturgy. On July 10, 1789 Asbury wrote, "in the morning I was permitted to preach in the church; but in the evening this privilege was denied me: it was said, the reason was, because I did not read prayers, which I had forborne to do because of my eyes; I apprehend the true cause might be found in the pointed manner in which I spoke. . . ."⁵ Asbury, while not openly objecting to the liturgy, encouraged its disuse by his example.

That the *Sunday Service* was lightly regarded from the first is further demonstrated in several changes which occur in the 1787 edition of the *Form of Discipline*. The original edition specifically directed the elders to read the liturgy and stated that certain duly appointed local preachers "may regularly read the Morning and Evening Service on the Lord's Day."⁶ The 1787 edition, edited by Asbury without any official approval, contained several significant changes. The reference to the liturgy disappeared in the list of the duties of the elders and the section referring to the local preachers was changed to read, "All that have received a written direction . . . may read the Liturgy, as often as they think it expedient."⁷ In this document, just as Asbury changed his title from "superintendent" to "bishop" with one stroke of the pen, he made the use of the liturgy optional. Later some of the preachers opposed the use of the new ecclesiastical title.⁸ Concerning the liturgy, however, there was no complaint. Asbury seems to have changed the *Discipline* to accord with what was already the accepted practice.

Indeed, Asbury's attitude toward liturgical worship partly explains the development of American practices. As William Warren Sweet noted, "Indeed, what Wesley was to England, Asbury was to

³ Jesse Lee, *Short History of the Methodists in the United States* (Baltimore, 1810), p. 107.

⁴ *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, ed. Elmer T. Clark, et. al. (3 vols.; Nashville, 1958), I, 492, 494, 531, 667.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 603.

⁶ *Minutes of Several Conversations between Rev. Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury and Others, Composing a Form of Discipline* (Philadelphia, 1785), pp. 12, 14.

⁷ *A Form of Discipline for the Ministers, Preachers, and Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America* (New York: Printed by W. Ross, 1787), 12.

⁸ Lee, *Short History of the Methodists* . . . , p. 128.

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America,"⁹ and Asbury, unlike Wesley, had little appreciation for liturgical worship. Asbury constantly indicated his dislike for "formality." He had been nurtured on the informal services of the English Methodists and expressed his preference for these over the Anglican services. In 1792, when he was reflecting on his first contact with Methodist preaching, he wrote in his journal, "The people were so devout—men and women kneeling down—saying *Amen*. Now, behold! they were singing hymns—sweet sound! Why, strange to tell! the preacher had no prayer book, yet he prayed wonderfully! What was more extraordinary, the man took his text, and had no sermon-book: thought I, this is wonderful indeed! It is certainly a strange way, but the best way."¹⁰ By this time the first impression had become a firm conviction.

While the influence of Asbury was increasing, that of Wesley was declining in America. This was illustrated most pointedly at the conference of 1787. Wesley had recommended that Richard Whatcoat be appointed as a superintendent along with Asbury and Coke. This the conference refused to do. In addition, this conference voted to leave Wesley's name out of the minutes as a superintendent.¹¹ Early American Methodism was the child of Asbury rather than Wesley and this was reflected in its choice of a form of worship.

While these factors must be considered as part of the explanation for the disuse of the *Sunday Service*,¹² the most significant factor was the American Methodists' conception of "freedom" and "liberty" as the ideal for worship. This concept had a dual meaning. It not only indicated preaching and praying which came most freely in an extemporaneous delivery, but also that which found greatest acceptance from the congregation. Often a minister felt the greatest "freedom" in preaching when he had neglected preparation or had changed his text at the last minute or even after the service had started.¹³ Under these circumstances the minister would naturally draw from the store of ideas and opinions most accepted by the community. Thus the greatest "freedom" was the greatest subjection to the worshiping community.¹⁴

⁹ William Warren Sweet, *The American Churches: An Interpretation* (London, 1947), p. 18.

¹⁰ *Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, I, 721.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, III, 75.

¹² The most elaborate explanation for the disuse of the *Sunday Service* has been offered by Paul Sanders, "An Appraisal of John Wesley's Sacramentalism in the Evolution of Early American Methodism" (unpublished Th.D. thesis, Union Theological Seminary, 1954), pp. 249-250. While listing a number of factors, Sanders found the primary reason in the free and independent spirit of the early Methodists and the wilderness situation in which they found themselves.

¹³ Robert Paine, *Life and Times of William M'Kendree* (2 vols.; Nashville, 1870), I, 40; Charles Elliott, *The Life of the Rev. Robert R. Roberts* (Cincinnati, 1844), p. 107; *Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, II, 50, 57, 66, 92, 97, 303.

¹⁴ Paine, *Life and Times of William M'Kendree*, I, 120; Elliott, *Life of Robert Roberts*, pp. 95-116; *Autobiography of James B. Finley*, ed. W. P. Strickland (Cincinnati, 1853), p. 186.

While the concept of "liberty" in worship would not allow the use of a liturgy, it promoted uniformity. "Freedom" could be encouraged by the use of certain forms, which were recognized at an early date. The 1792 revision of the *Discipline*, which was the first to ignore the *Sunday Service* completely, testified to the continued desire for both form and uniformity in the question which introduced the subject. "What directions shall be given for the establishment of uniformity in public worship amongst us on the Lord's Day?"¹⁵

The question was answered with the following provisions for public worship.

1. Let the morning service consist of singing, prayer, the reading of a chapter out of the Old Testament, and another out of the New, and preaching.
2. Let the afternoon service consist of singing, prayer, the reading of one chapter out of the Bible, and preaching.
3. Let the evening service consist of singing, prayer, and preaching.
4. But on the days of administering the Lord's Supper, the two chapters in the morning-service may be omitted.
5. Let the society be met, whenever practicable, on the Sabbath-day.¹⁶

Within the confines of this rather meager outline, Methodist worship everywhere was amazingly similar. Of the elements of worship listed in the *Discipline*, preference was given to those most suited to "freedom." Thus preaching was central and prayer was the second most important part of the service. Singing, which provided for another mode of attaining "freedom," was prominent but the reading of Scripture occupied a place of less importance. Some ministers even refused to submit to the dictum requiring the reading of Scripture in the service.¹⁷

As most conducive to "freedom," preaching stood at the heart of Methodist worship services, which were more properly called preaching services. As indicated in the *Discipline*, the Methodist preachers were expected to preach three times each Sunday and they usually preached nearly every day in the week. As a very young man, Ezekiel Cooper reported that he had preached 319 times during the year, and 500 times did not seem to be unusual.¹⁸ In addition to the frequency of preaching, the ministers often spoke for several hours and often more than one preacher would speak during a single service. On one occasion Asbury noted that he "spoke, first and last, nearly three hours."¹⁹ Of another time he wrote, "We were speaking about four hours, besides nearly two spent in prayer."²⁰

The content of Methodist preaching was amazingly uniform. The primary purpose of preaching was evangelism. Perhaps it is not insignificant that the early Methodists often referred to the conversion

¹⁵ *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, Revised and Approved at the General Conference of 1792* (Philadelphia, 1792), p. 40.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁷ George A. Phoebus, *Beams of Light on Early Methodism in America* (New York, 1887), p. 169.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45; *Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, II, 210.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 607.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 622.

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experience as being set "at liberty."²¹ In a discourse on the duties of ministers, Coke declared, "Preaching of the gospel is indispensably necessary to raise mankind out of the ruins of their fallen state . . . and to bring them to the eternal enjoyment of Him and the Sovereign Good." He further reminded the preachers of the admonition in the *Discipline* that they had "nothing to do but to save souls."²² That the preachers followed this advice is everywhere evident. William M'Kendree's description of the preaching of John Easter, under whom he was converted, seems to be typical.

He never indulg'd in metaphysical discussions, and rarely in doctrinal expositions. His themes were repentance, salvation by faith in Jesus Christ, and the Witness of the Spirit . . . He was full of his subject, and intent only upon the rescue of sinners from impending wrath. At once he went to work, invoking the presence and power of God, admonishing Christians to pray, and . . . appealing to sinners.²³

The uniform evangelistic message was augmented by the constant extemporaneous delivery demanded by the goal of "freedom." The ministers sought to stir the emotions of their hearers and bring about an experience of salvation. One unsympathetic listener testified to this aspect of Methodist preaching.

The uniform method, manner, and style of their Pulpit Oratory! the whole drift of which appears to aim at, and move on the passions of their auditory, by first frightening them into a belief of a hell, or place of future torment, painting the horrors of the damned, in the most doleful, and dismal colors; and gaining in the mind of their hearers, a belief of this, the Penitent, will readily suscribe to any system, or articles of faith, however monstrous and absurd, that the enthusiastic Brawler wishes for.²⁴

This account, while distorting the motives of the preachers, does reflect something of their sermon content and delivery. Asbury indicated an ideal delivery when he reflected, "after I got to preaching, I was long and loud, warm, and very pointed."²⁵

The preacher, however, was not the only one who found "freedom" in preaching. Often a successful sermon brought forth a "shout" from the congregation. The Methodists were highly criticized for having noisy meetings, but the preachers declared these uncontrolled outbursts to be the "operations of the Spirit of God" rather than "the mere excitement of human passions."²⁶ Freeborn Garrettson wrote, "I am never offended in hearing convinced sinners cry aloud for mercy; neither do I doubt but that the children of God are so happy at times, that they are constrained to shout the praises of God."²⁷ The "praise" often became so loud that the preacher would have to stop

²¹ Leland Scott, "The Message of Early American Methodism," *The History of American Methodism*, ed. Emory Stevens Bucke (3 vols.; New York, 1964), I, 298.

²² Thomas Coke, *Four Discourses on the Duties of the Gospel Ministry* (Philadelphia, 1798), pp. 2, 18.

²³ Paine, *Life and Times of William M'Kendree*, I, 40.

²⁴ George Pickering, *Methodism Delineated* (Norwich, 1795), p. 10.

²⁵ *Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, II, 43.

²⁶ Nathan Bangs, *The Life of the Rev. Freeborn Garrettson* (New York, 1830), p. 188. See also Phoebus, *Beams of Light*, pp. 88-89.

²⁷ Bangs, *Life of Freeborn Garrettson*, p. 188.

or else continue and go unheard. Richard Whatcoat wrote of one occasion that, "the preacher's voice could scarcely be heard, for the space of three hours." The result of this service, in Whatcoat's words, was that "many were added to the number of true believers."²⁸

Prayer, the second most prominent feature of early Methodist services, is more difficult to delineate because no prayers have come down to us. Prayer was always extemporaneous and the ideal, as in preaching, was "freedom." The ministers often prayed for great periods of time, although the *Discipline* contained an admonition not to pray "above eight or ten minutes (at most) without intermission."²⁹ The most important prayers, however, seem to have been the private, or at least individual, petitions of the devout for the salvation of souls. These prayers, often silent but sometimes audible, would be concurrent with the preaching.³⁰ This, in effect, served to make preaching more of a communal exercise.

Singing, the third major element of Methodist worship, reflected, like preaching, a pattern of uniformity in the context of "freedom." In 1784 Wesley sent to America *A Collection of Psalms and Hymns for the Lord's Day*. Like the *Sunday Service*, this did not meet the needs of the new denomination and was soon replaced by an edition of Robert Spence's *Pocket Hymn Book*. With further revisions, this hymnal was used until an official hymnal was adopted in 1836, which also incorporated the greater part of the *Pocket Hymn Book*.³¹

The content of Methodist singing reflected the same evangelistic themes of their preaching. Benjamin Crawford has made a careful study of the official hymnals of the Methodists and his findings are significant. Since there was a considerable similarity between the *Pocket Hymn Book* and the first official hymnal, his conclusions about the latter would be applicable to the former. He found that the hymns in the 1836 edition "are limited mostly to works of rescue in evangelism" and show little interest in worship. Further, the earlier hymns emphasize motives based on fear, awe, and terror of impending judgment, all of which is consistent with early Methodist preaching.³²

While the relation is not as immediately apparent, as in the case of preaching and prayer, the concept of "freedom" likewise controlled the form of Methodist singing. The usual manner was for the minister or some talented layman to give out, line by line, a hymn which would be sung to a familiar tune. In this early period fugue singing became popular in some areas, but the Methodists opposed its use in the services. Cooper opposed this "new mode of singing" on Long Island as early as 1784.³³ The custom persisted in some quarters and in 1789

²⁸ William Phoebus, *Memoirs of the Rev. Richard Whatcoat* (New York, 1828), p. 24.

²⁹ Paine, *Life and Times of William M'Kendree*, I, 120.

³⁰ Bangs, *Life of Freeborn Garrettson*, p. 159.

³¹ Benjamin Crawford, *Changing Conceptions of Religion* (Carnegie, Pennsylvania, 1939), pp. 27-35.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 58, 122-124, 136.

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Asbury wrote to one of the preachers stationed in New York and asked him to "reform the singing a little."³⁴ Fugue singing was opposed because it decreased the possibility of total congregational participation, thus violating both the expressive and communal aspects of the ideal of "freedom." It is thus clear that the Methodists adopted uniform practices of worship on the basis of the concept of "freedom" or "liberty" in worship.

The Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper, traditionally the most structured part of Christian worship, did not occupy a prominent position in early American Methodism. Because of its traditional centrality, however, it could not be ignored. The Methodists incorporated the observation of the Lord's Supper into their pattern of worship by emphasizing its disciplinary aspects and by bringing it into close proximity to the love feast. The love feast provided a better occasion for the expressive aspect of the ideal of "freedom." In its disciplinary role, the Lord's Supper became the most visible point of community enforced conformity. Thus the observation of the Lord's Supper was consistent with the overall pattern of Methodist Worship.

The early Methodist theological interpretation of the Eucharist, if indeed there was one, totally eludes the historian. The Christmas Conference adopted the sections on the sacraments from the Anglican *Articles of Religion* and this doctrinal statement continued to appear in the Methodist *Discipline*.³⁵ There is no evidence, however, that the Methodists held or differed with this statement, but the general treatment given to the other items sent by Wesley in 1784 suggests that this doctrinal statement could not be taken as normative for early American Methodism. Concerning the American materials, Paul Sanders has made the following observation.

There was no careful speculative discussion of the theology of the Lord's Supper in early Methodism, or at least, no record of such has come down to us. The Americans were not likely to have been generally familiar with Wesley's own position, for it was some years before Wesley's works began to be printed and circulated widely here. It is not known that any edition of the Eucharistic hymns was ever published in America.³⁶

This being the case the only evidence for the practice concerning the Eucharist is that afforded by the *Discipline* and the various ministerial journals. It is immediately apparent that the administration of the Lord's Supper was limited to a properly ordained clergy. This point was made clear in the earlier sacramental controversy and was restated forcefully in the *Discipline*. Only elders could administer the Lord's Supper, while deacons were allowed to baptize.³⁷ This meant that in 1785 there were only thirteen men to administer the sacrament to the 15,000 members which were scattered throughout the

³⁴ *Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, III, 74.

³⁵ *Discipline* (1797), p. 11.

³⁶ Sanders, "An Appraisal . . .," pp. 494-495.

³⁷ *Minutes of Several Conversations*, pp. 12-14.

middle and southern states.³⁸ The reasoning behind this connection is far less obvious than the fact itself, but it seems to reflect a diminution of the role of the Lord's Supper in worship.

When the liturgy was replaced in 1792 the Wesleyan edition of the Eucharistic rite was retained and has continued a part of Methodism until the present. This fact, however, does not shed much light on the early Methodist usage, for the *Discipline* contained a final rubric which, in effect, made the use of the Eucharistic liturgy optional. It read, "If the elder be straitened for time, he may omit any part of the service except the prayer of Consecration."³⁹ This addition no doubt reflected prevailing practice in 1792, and after this time the form of celebration continued to be subject to the whim of the administering elder.⁴⁰

Again, Asbury's attitude toward the Lord's Supper is important, if not decisive, for an understanding of the place of that ordinance in American Methodist worship. When he wrote to Wesley in 1780 concerning the sacramental controversy, he seemed to be rather indifferent to the desire of the southern Methodists to provide the Eucharist. He wrote, "That violence for assistants introducing the ordinances is much cooled, but yet I must say our people are under great disadvantages, tho not such as will vindicate an alternation of old Methodism and weak laymen acting as ministers. I think the want of opportunity suspends the force of duty to receive the Lord's Supper."⁴¹ Asbury went on to point out that he felt he should remain a "preacher" which he seemed to distinguish from "minister," because God had called him to that station and he should "not move one step forward or backward."⁴²

When it became more apparent that American Methodism would eventually become a separate religious body, Asbury made it clear that he wished to refrain from placing any theological interpretation on the Lord's Supper. In a letter to Wesley on September 20, 1783, Asbury made some interesting comments that give considerable insight into his ideas on the Lord's Supper. At one point he asked, "Can a Quaker, as well as a member of any other church, be in society, and hold his outward peculiarities, without being forced to receive the ordinances?" The context indicates that Asbury's own answer would be in the affirmative. He continued,

I reverence the ordinances of God; and attend them when I have opportunity; but I clearly see they have been made the tools of division and separation for these three last centuries. We have joined with us at this time, those that have been Presbyterians, Dutch, and English, Lutherans, Mennonites, low Dutch, and Baptists. If we preach up ordinances to these people, we should add, "if they are to be had, and if not, there can be no guilt." If we do any other way, we shall

³⁸ Herbert Asbury, *A Methodist Saint: The Life of Bishop Asbury* (New York, 1927), pp. 121-135.

³⁹ *Discipline* (1792), p. 40.

⁴⁰ Sanders, 'An Appraisal . . .,' pp. 494-495.

⁴¹ *Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, III, 24-25.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

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drive them back to their old churches that have disowned them; and who will do all they can to separate them from us.⁴³

At this point Asbury saw the ordinances as divisive and peripheral to the main concerns of Methodism. This attitude no doubt explains in part the absence of a "careful speculative discussion of the theology of the Lord's Supper in early Methodism."

In the face of this theological void, the Lord's Supper came to serve predominately as a disciplinary ordinance. Each society member was examined quarterly by the elder or deacon in charge, who, if satisfied with the behaviour and sincerity of the applicant, issued a ticket which entitled him to admission to the sacrament. Any non-member who wished to communicate with the Methodists had to follow the same procedure. On this point, the Discipline contained the following note: "No person shall be admitted to the Lord's Supper among us, who is guilty of any practice for which we would exclude a member of our society."⁴⁴

In its disciplinary role the Lord's Supper served primarily to enforce moral conformity rather than theological orthodoxy. The Methodist table was not fenced in the sense of excluding those persons not thought to be in a state of grace. The Methodists rather restricted the Lord's Supper to those whose moral life came up to the Methodist standards. It was tacitly assumed that some of the society members would not yet be converted.⁴⁵ The only requirement for admission to the society was a "desire to flee from the wrath to come,"⁴⁶ but in order to remain in the society it was necessary to show evidence of his desire by living a life of moral excellence. The Methodist had to avoid profanity, breaking the Sabbath, drunkenness, fighting, slaveholding,⁴⁷ storing up treasures on earth, wearing expensive clothing, and similar alleged evils. In addition, he had to engage in doing positive good and attend to religious duties such as public worship and private devotion.⁴⁸ Members who did not meet these requirements were expelled from the society and excluded from the Lord's Supper. So notable a Methodist as William M'Kendree, first native American bishop, was twice excluded from the society before freeing himself from "too much friendship for the world."⁴⁹

The contention that the Lord's Supper was primarily a disciplinary ordinance is supported by evidence from the early journals. Asbury's most frequent text for sermons on the Lord's Supper was I Corinthians 11:28-30, "Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴⁴ *Discipline* (1797), p. 40.

⁴⁵ *Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, I, 678.

⁴⁶ *The Nature, Design, and General Rules, of the United Societies of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America* (Printed with *Discipline*, 1788), p. 52.

⁴⁷ The rule on slavery caused some problems from a very early date. See Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845*. (Princeton, 1965), pp. 3-29.

⁴⁸ *Nature, Design, and General Rules*, pp. 52-53.

⁴⁹ Paine, *Life and Times of William M'Kendree*, I, 35.

bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself."⁵⁰ Another favorite text was I Corinthians 5:7-8.⁵¹ About one sermon preached on this text, Asbury recorded a synopsis of what he said. "It was shown who were proper communicants—true penitents and real believers. Not with the leaven of malice and wickedness—acid, bitter, and puffing up, but the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth—uprightness of heart, and sound experience."⁵² Evidently Asbury followed the policy of examination without wavering, as shown in the following notation in his *Journal*. "I visited Colonel P——, supposed to be at the point of death: after a close examination, I administered the sacrament to him."⁵³

Asbury was not the only one to hold this attitude concerning the Lord's Supper. Cooper condemned William Hammett for his laxness in administration of the sacrament. Hammett, who had come to America with Coke in 1791, believed that the Americans had strayed far from Wesleyan Methodism and proceeded to form the Primitive Methodist Church.⁵⁴ Cooper condemned him for allowing latitude of dress and admitting "swearers and common notorious drunkards" to communion.⁵⁵ Garrettson refused to communicate at a non-Methodist church because the communicants were "dressed in the height of the mode, and with all the frippery of fashion." He declared that there was "so much of the world in the manners and appearance that my mind was most easy to look on."⁵⁶ Thus in Methodism the Lord's Supper became more of a symbol of a uniform morality than either grace or mystery.

The disciplinary function of the Lord's Supper was facilitated by administering the sacrament apart from the preaching services. There is some indication that for a few years after the Christmas Conference the Lord's Supper often followed a regular preaching service. Even under these circumstances, however, the preaching service may have been in the open to accommodate large numbers, with those who had sacrament tickets retreating to the chapel after the preaching.⁵⁷ Soon, however, the pattern developed of celebrating the Supper in conjunction with a love feast, which was held on Sunday mornings before the preaching service at a quarterly meeting.⁵⁸ It was the love feast that had largely replaced the Lord's Supper prior to 1784,⁵⁹ and this later custom of holding the two at the same time may have led to a partial fusion. This resulted in a form of observance more consistent with

⁵⁰ *Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, I, 319, 683, II, 300, 485, 519.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, I, 728, II, 121, 474.

⁵² *Ibid.*, I, 728-729.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 544.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 706.

⁵⁵ Phoebus, *Beams of Light*, p. 144.

⁵⁶ Bangs, *Life of Freeborn Garrettson*, p. 224.

⁵⁷ Phoebus, *Beams of Light*, pp. 135-137.

⁵⁸ *Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, I, 714-715.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

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American Methodism than the rite which remained in the *Discipline*.

The love feast was a Moravian restoration of the agape meal of primitive Christianity that had been adopted by Wesley for the Methodist societies. Just as in England, the love feast came to have a vital role in American Methodism. In England there was a meal consisting of rye-bread and water, but this custom does not seem to have survived in the American version, or else it was so secondary that it was not mentioned.⁶⁰ Although there was some singing and praying, the primary component of the American service was testimonies in which various individuals "declared the great goodness of God to his or her soul."⁶¹ The testimonies were mainly a recitation of events surrounding the individual's being set "at liberty," although they often included an account of God's dealing with the soul throughout life. These encounters with the divine were considered the most significant events of one's life, and many of the early Methodist autobiographies are nothing more than an extended version of a love feast testimony.⁶²

Garrettson has recorded for posterity the following testimony given by one of the "pious sisters."

I was convinced all was not well with me; but knew not what I wanted, (this was previous to hearing the Methodists.) One day I took my Bible and went into the woods to read and seek the Lord. I sat down under a large tree, and was reading and weeping, and desirous to know what I should do to be saved: I at length listened and heard a voice saying unto me, Remove from that place. I knew not but it might be imagination, and read on till I heard it again a second and a third time. I at length removed from the place and sat down about twenty feet off. No sooner had I done this than a part of the tree fell on the place where I had been sitting. I looked up and saw the hand of God in my preservation, and was enabled to look to my blessed Redeemer, and he have me to know that all my sins were blotted out, and I returned to the house happy in the Lord. After this I had pleasure of casting in my lot among the Methodists, and I feel thankful to the Lord, and am now happy in the love of God.⁶³

As with the Lord's Supper, admission to the love feast was limited. The *Discipline* stated, "Let them (nonmembers) be admitted with the utmost caution: and the same Person on no account above twice, unless he become a Member."⁶⁴ This rule was followed almost without exception⁶⁵ but not always without difficulty. Cooper reported one instance of a love feast being interrupted several times by the attempt of people who were not members to gain admittance. Finally one "wicked young man" forced his way through a hole at one end of the

⁶⁰ Clifford W. Towlson, *Moravian and Methodist: Relationships and Influences in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1957), pp. 209-215.

⁶¹ Phoebus, *Beams of Light*, p. 95.

⁶² Thomas Jackson (ed.), *The Lives of Early Methodist Preachers* (2 vols.; London, 1846).

⁶³ Bangs, *Life of Freeborn Garrettson*, p. 224.

⁶⁴ *Minutes of Several Conversations*, p. 5.

⁶⁵ Phoebus, *Beams of Light*, pp. 63, 126, 211; *Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, I, 730, III, 131.

barn where the meeting was being held. For all his trouble the man was "put out through the same hole he came in."⁶⁶

The love feasts were the greatest source of fellowship and inspiration among the early Methodists and a primary occasion for experiencing great "freedom." This assembly of the "inner court" sometimes became functionally evangelistic as unconverted members and others present at one of the two allowed times often professed salvation during the love feast. Thus as in the other elements of Methodist worship, the love feast offered an occasion for the attainment of "freedom," the goal of which was incorporation into the homogeneous body of Methodism.

It has been suggested that the love feast and the Lord's Supper may have become fused into a single service. Officially this was never the case, but several references in Asbury's *Journal* indicate the strong possibility that the two were integrated at least on some occasions. The normal practice was the observation of a love feast at eight or nine o'clock on the Sunday morning of a quarterly conference meeting, with the Lord's Supper coming an hour later. The two were sometimes held in the same proximity at times other than the quarterly meeting. On January 16, 1790, while in North Carolina, Asbury made the following comment: "We had a good season at the sacrament; several spoke powerfully of the justifying and sanctifying grace of God."⁶⁷ Asbury either mistakenly wrote "sacrament" when he intended to say "love feast" or the love feast testimonies were a part of the observance of the Lord's Supper. Two later notations in the *Journal* indicate that the latter is the true meaning. In New Jersey on September 16, 1791 Asbury wrote, "Several of our sisters and of our brethren on this day (and on Monday at Bethel) after sacrament, testified to the goodness of God."⁶⁸ Two weeks later, Asbury, now in Pennsylvania, wrote, "After sacrament several bore their testimony for the Lord."⁶⁹ Other notations indicate a similar phenomenon.⁷⁰ On the basis of this evidence, no absolute conclusions can be drawn, but it does suggest that the Lord's Supper and love feast may have been fused into a single service for a time in early Methodism. This fusion would have been most consistent with other aspects of early American Methodist worship.

All of these Methodist services came together in the quarterly meeting, the most important single gathering in early American Methodism. The *Discipline* required assistants "to hold Quarterly Meetings, and therein diligently to inquire both into the temporal and spiritual State of each Society."⁷¹ The quarterly meetings, however, went far beyond this. They were held on Saturday and Sunday

⁶⁶ Phoebus, *Beams of Light*, p. 126.

⁶⁷ *Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, I, 621.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 695.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 61, 99, 215, III, 154.

⁷¹ *Minutes of Several Conversations*, p. 2.

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and Methodists from all parts of the circuit, as well as great numbers of the unconverted, flocked to the meeting. This was the occasion for the love feast and the Lord's Supper, and an abundance of preaching. Preaching often began on Friday evening and lasted until Monday morning.⁷² The quarterly meeting became Methodism's most effective tool of evangelism. It was not uncommon for hundreds of people to profess conversion during a single meeting. All of the major elements of the later camp meetings, which became so important in Methodism and American Protestantism generally after 1800, were present in these early quarterly meetings. The camp meeting thus became the finest expression of "liberty" and "freedom" in worship and symbolized community and uniformity rather than "frontier individualism."

It was no accident that the Methodists called the book which contained their form of worship a *Discipline* rather than a *Prayer Book*.⁷³ According to one of their spokesmen,

The doctrines of the Methodist church are stedfastly adhered to by the preachers whilst the forms in the administration of the gospel ordinances are generally omitted. — The form of prayer is not used at all. . . . But as it respects the admission of members, their rejection, their conduct, their character, &c. the Methodists adhere to the genuine spirit of their discipline. These remarks will rectify any mistake which might be made by those who judge of the Methodist economy from the volume published by the Societies — as that does not notice any departure from the printed regulations.⁷⁴

⁷² Halford E. Luccock, Paul Hutchinson and Robert Goodloe, *The Story of Methodism* (New York, 1949), p. 272.

⁷³ The only time that Asbury called it a "Prayer Book" was when he presented two copies to George Washington. *Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, III, 47.

⁷⁴ George Bourne, *Life of the Rev. John Wesley* (Baltimore, 1807), p. 344.