



DISCOVERY

edited by
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CHURCH TRIALS OF EARLY METHODISTS

A fascinating research project is the study of the church trials of early Methodists. Many of the trial papers are still extant, some written in the greatest detail. In other instances a brief summary of the findings and recommendations of the committee are in existence and often give a satisfactory picture of what took place.

A great many questions arise in connection with the trials. Why, for example, were the people involved willing to submit themselves to the judgment of a court with no authority to subpoena their attendance and testimony? It is true some persons showed their contempt for the authorities by not appearing for trial and were summarily dismissed from a particular Society, but a large proportion of the defendants did appear, and in many instances submitted to the judgment of their peers. It is an over-simplification to say that they feared for the safety of their souls, especially since other denominations were often ready to receive them. The answer must be found on a deeper level and with a clear understanding of the psychological and social forces which strengthened the church's hand.

Another question concerns the number of trials of laymen in the early days of American Methodism as compared with today. Toward the middle of the nineteenth century the trials numbered fewer and fewer until today they have practically disappeared. Why? These and similar questions are worthy of study.

The trial records are also valuable in that they give a picture of the social customs, mores and general attitudes of the community, particularly the church community. In the archives of the Historical Society of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference at Old St. George's, Philadelphia, there is a slim volume in manuscript form entitled, "Record of Trials in the M. E. Union Church, A.D. 1821." The trials were written in summary form and touch a great variety of subjects. A considerable number deal with financial accounts. Apparently, when a Methodist became insolvent his accounts were examined to see whether or not he had dealt honestly with his neighbors.

Other trials deal with attendance at dances, balls, and, in one instance, the attendance at a ball by young people without their parents' knowledge or consent. A brief sermonette is included in the findings of the committee. In fingering through the tall volume one finds the usual cases of immorality, although comparatively few in number. One trial deals with the visit of a member to a "Nicro-mancer" [sic], and in the findings of another case it is stated that the defendant admitted he was "reprehensible," whatever that might mean. Because of his repentance, however, he was recommended to his former standing as a probationer in the church.

The early Methodists took their trials seriously. Evidently there were two sets of records kept by the committee at Union Church: one, the notes made by the secretary during the trial, and two, the summary of the case and the recommendations of the committee which were recorded in a bound volume. Unfortunately, the notes which were usually written on loose paper and not kept in a book, are missing except in one particular case noted immediately below. Despite its title, moreover, the volume contains trials from October 29, 1821 to January 13, 1837. A footnote points out that some of the trials "which were but few" were omitted in 1836 since the secretary "did not receive" the record book "until near the end of the . . . year." In all, there are forty-nine trials.

Since much of this kind of material is probably still extant in various United Methodist Depositories, it might well serve as a basis for a doctor's thesis that would provide an excellent picture of the life and attitudes of the American Methodist people. The following are a sampling from the volume, the first example being from the actual notes of the secretary:

Philadelphia, May 23rd, 1836.

In the case of George C. Wilson versus John Peterson. Rev. Samuel Keppler, Preacher in charge of Union Church, appointed the following committee. vis. Samuel Ashmead, Michael S. Johns, James I. Boswell, E. D. Wolfe, Thomas Wilmer.

Rev. Samuel Keppler stated to the committee that George C. Wilson had brought charges against John Peterson for sewing [sic] him at the law, contrary to the discipline of the church, and called upon the parties to know whether they had any statements to make to the committee.

G. C. Wilson stated that said Peterson came to his store in a very bad spirit and said I have warned you repetedly [sic] concerning that water course, and then, (shakeing his fist under my nose) said I'll fix you old fellow. John Peterson stated that he had called upon Wilson to inform him of the trespass of said Wilson, by turning the water from of[f] his (Wilson's) premises upon the property of Peterson, thereby causing loss to said Peterson in consequence of the person who had agreed to purchase Peterson's property throughing [throwing] up his bargain, and Peterson wished to know of Wilson what

amount of damage he would allow him, and to have the nuisance removed immediately. But as Wilson would make no allowance nor remove the nuisance complained of said Peterson left him, promising him (Wilson) to compel him to do so.

Wilson stated a number of particulars concerning the cleansing [sic] of a privy, that said Peterson left his (Wilson's) yard in a very dirty state that he (Wilson) had the privilege of turning the water of the yard into the privy. Peterson acknowledged the right of Wilson to turn the water into the ground as he understood it, but not into the privy. But the complaint was that Wilson turned the water from the roof of his house upon his (Peterson's) premises and this was the reason why he (Peterson) had sewed [sic] Wilson.

The Committee retired for consultation and in a few minutes returned to enquire whether the nuisance complained of was yet removed. Wilson and Peterson agreed that the nuisance complained had not been removed, but still existed. After some further deliberation on the part of the committee they made the following report.

I. Harmistead, Secty.

Report. The report was not included in the notes and one must turn to a brief summary of the case in the bound volume which leaves out the details of the privy, etc., and then states the judgment of the committee:

The Committee are of opinion that as the grievances set forth by Bro. Peterson in justification of the course pursued by him still exists, and that contrary to article of agreement in the deed—he was therefore justifiable in taking the case to the tribunal [as] he has done, that being the only proper one to decide upon it.

Page the Woman's Liberation Movement

We wonder what the Woman's Liberation Movement might think of the following, particularly the last two words:

Philadelphia October 24th, 1822.

The Committee Summoned by the Rev. Thomas Burch on the case of Margaret Curtis, accused of having left her Husband's bed and board, are unanimously of the opinion that she ought no longer to continue a member of the Methodist Society unless she immediately accomodates the matter with her husband & returns to live with him as an obedient wife.

Richard Benson
Thomas Kelly, Sr.
A. A. Palmer

An Honest Bankrupt

Philadelphia 6th February, 1823.

The undersigned being the Committee to whom the case of Joseph S. Cranmer was referred, find the following facts,—That at the time

he made his assignment his property at a fair valuation was worth Fifty five Hundred Dollars (having cost that much) and his Debts amounted to Thirty Eight Hundred Dollers. But owing to the stagnation of business he was unable to meet his payments as they became due, without sacrificing his property. In order therefore that his Creditors might eventually be paid the whole amount of their claims and himself and family rescued from want he took the steps he did—therefore from a view of the whole affair, the Committee do approve of the conduct of Joseph S. Cranmer in this business more especially as it appears that he has already paid Twenty two Hundred Dollars of his Debts and given his Notes payable with interest for the remainder.

John Wilmer
John Buckman
Rich. Benson

One Rescued, One Dismissed, One Restored

The undersigned a Committee to inquire into the case of Ann Robins, for being present at a Ball on the 22 of Feburary last—would express their disaprobation of such conduct, — Nevertheless taking into view her candid Confession and solemn promise not to be found in such a place again, with her views of the impropriety of such an act, would recommend that there be no further proceedings in her case.

April 23, 1822

John Gilder
Anthony A. Palmer
Hugh ?

Philadelphia May 30, 1822.

We the subscribers met at the House of the Rev. Tho. Burch to examine into a charge made against Lewis May, a member of the Methodist Union Church. By Isabella Murry also a member of the Methodist Church of the St. Georges Charge of this City, Of profane swearing, and rude behaviour in putting her out of the door, and withholding from her Just due of \$2.75. Mitchel Bennis Confirms the charge of swearing, that he M B both heard Lewis May swear and acknowledge he did Swear, The accused also acknowledged, he did Swear, and that he did contract with Mrs. Murry to serve his wife at one dollar pr. week.

The Committee therefore find Lewis May guilty of immoral conduct and ought to be Expelled.

Richard Benson
Lowther Taylor
Samuel Chubb.

Philadelphia Septer. 13, 1822.

We being a Committee to examine into several Charges brought against John Felty.

And after hearing all on both sides and giving it the most serious consideration, we are of the opinion, even from his own Statement that he is reprehensible, but recommend him to his former standing, as a

probationer, in the Church, hoping that as he has promised, he will be more watchful, Circumspect, and holy, in his life and conversation.

John Gilder

A. A. Palmer

Simpson Shepherd.

A Potpourri

A Mrs. Mary York was put "back on trial for six months" for permitting an assembly at her house at which there was dancing. The reasons were: "taking into consideration the high standing of our Sister both in Civil and Religious Society, the Exalted Station which she holds both in the Church and in the World, and the Evil likely to result to the Church of which she is a Member and to the cause of piety in general from the influence of so High an example should it pass uncensored— . . . "

There is no statement whether or not she repented, and one would need to examine carefully the membership rolls of the church to see if she later withdrew or what became of her.

In the case of a Mrs. Ann Manly Inn who visited a "Nicro-mancer," she did not "acknowledge the impropriety of her conduct" to the Committee but promised to do so to the preacher in charge and "promise him it shall not be again." This evidently satisfied the Committee, although they warned that if she failed to comply with her promise she would be "put back on trial."

One person guilty of being intoxicated was summarily dismissed from the Society, but another person who had come to "meeting on a sabbath evening in a state of intoxication," on expressing his penitence and his "confidence that the Lord had pardoned (him)" was recommended for mercy.

On August 13, 1827, Rachel Kildare brought charges against Hannah Dubosque, both members of Union Church. The Committee

. . . concluded that the accuser and the accused are both involved in apparent impropriety of conduct and the Preacher in charge be requested to give such reproof as he may think most adviseable.

One closes the tall, slim, browned copy of the trial book with a feeling that the leaders of the church were men of good sense and that, by and large, their judgments were carefully considered, just statements. The parties involved apparently thought that in the ecclesiastical courts they received the impartial justice sometimes denied in the regular courts of law with their tedious rules, cross examinations and legal loopholes.

In his *Religion on the American Frontier 1783-1840*, William Warren Sweet includes a chapter on "Church Trials Among Methodists in the Early West." Most all of these trials, however, are trials of the clergy, whereas the Trial Book mentioned above centers almost exclusively in trials of average church members.