BOOK REVIEWS


In his *Doctrine in Experience*, Russell E. Richey, Professor of Church History at Emory University’s Candler School of Theology, continues to demonstrate why many consider him the foremost current historian of American Methodism. In this book, Richey brings together thirteen earlier essays in which he highlighted the value of historical analysis in order to comprehend and develop a distinctively Methodist doctrine and theology. The essays reflect contributions to Methodist studies that span almost a third of a century, with the majority having been written during the past dozen years, some appearing first in this journal.

The volume flows well organizationally and generally sustains the thread of the argument that Richey makes for historian as theologian. Although these individual pieces of work clearly were not originally intended to stand side by side within the covers of a single volume, for the most part, Richey is able to carry off his theme thanks to careful chapter organization and grouping. Many readers are well aware of his skills in editing volumes that contain many voices rather than a systematic presentation from a single author, as in his expert editing of the eminently useful United Methodism in American Culture series. In this volume, he edits himself just as skillfully and presents a cogent image of the Methodist movement in America and its effect on developing American Methodist doctrine and theology.

Richey notes in his introduction, “I look at Methodist praxis for its implicit theology” (xi), and in the following thirteen chapters, he succeeds admirably in being both theologian and historian. He is delightfully honest in using the first person plural pronoun when referring to his work as both historian and United Methodist theologian. Chronicling and advancing the distinctively Wesleyan theological approach as it has been and continues to be tempered by the American experience, he examines the ecclesiastical leadership styles of the Methodist movement, with separate discussions of the roles of the superintendent, including both general (bishops) and district, and ministerial formation of clergy. In three other chapters, he continues his longstanding exploration of Methodism and denominationalism by including his seminal essay on Methodism from *Denominationalism*, as well as an insightful consideration of the culture wars and an evocative essay that “twins” the development of the institutional structure of the general church and the local congregation.

The book is divided into four sections—Doctrine in Experience,
Itinerant Ministry, Conference and Connection, and Church and Sacrament. I personally found the essay on “the four languages of Methodist self-understanding” in the section on Doctrine in Experience to be particularly helpful, both for teaching my Methodist students at Union and New York Theological Seminaries and in the suburban New Jersey church where I serve as senior pastor. Understanding and deconstructing ideologically based language as a means of theological expression allows conversation to develop amongst groups that traditionally find it easier to ignore one another than seek to find a unified Methodist voice. Realizing that similar words spoken within even a single denomination have significantly different meanings for various speakers and listeners allows us to initiate a process of translation that may not necessarily engender acceptance but might serve to foster genuine dialogue. Using his historically-based approach and understanding Richey’s “four languages” have enabled me to engage both my seminarians and church adult study groups with increased appreciation for those who might otherwise be marginalized because of the “language” barrier.

Any small weaknesses in the book come from the boundaries Richey has imposed on himself for this volume. He does not explore any of his topics in depth. In addition, the subject matter may be too diverse for a single volume, ranging from the role of the district superintendent to Methodist contributions to education, especially higher education. Even the venues where the original papers were presented are diverse. He presented some of the essays as speeches to a well-defined, limited audience, such as a regional gathering of denominational leaders or a denominational task force, while he wrote others for the scholarly community. Cohesiveness and depth are necessarily elusive within those parameters. Finally, he tends to focus on professional and denominational leadership, often to the exclusion of the people in the pews. My unmet hope was that this volume would more directly consider how the Methodist experience was and is being shaped by the people of the church as well as by its leadership.

The value of the book, however, far exceeds these minor limitations. In the month or so that I have had this book on my shelf, I have consulted it many times on occasions not related to this review. I am using it for its information and even more for Richey’s insights. If you are a student of Methodism, you should have a place for it on your shelves, but leave space on your desk as well. You may find that it floats regularly between the two locations.

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For some time there has existed the need for an atlas of the Methodist movement, and the intent of this volume can be affirmed. The use of Google maps is innovative and quite exciting. Unfortunately, there is little else to commend in this volume. This reviewer has been in touch with the editor of the work and has been assured corrections will be made in another printing. The book is riddled with factual errors, statements of interpretation that are questionable, page headings that are at least in poor taste and in some cases offensive, and production qualities that are problematic.

The errors of fact are numerous. On page 10, there is a reference to John Wesley as “John Benjamin Wesley.” The latest scholarship has shown that John did not have a middle name. Henry Rack wrote on page 48 of his biography of John, *Reasonable Enthusiast,* “The tradition that he was baptized John Benjamin, though still occasionally repeated, was due to early nineteenth-century confusion with earlier children who died young.” Page 31 includes a map about Methodist schools and colleges. While I could not interpret all that was intended, the date of 1876 for Boston is wrong no matter whether you take the founding of the University, the theological school, or its move to Boston from another location. On page 32 there is a reference to the merger of the United Brethren and the Evangelical Association in 1946. From 1922 on, it was the Evangelical Church.

On page 40, one picture caption indicates the building of Mother Bethel AME at 1894; the first building was erected in 1794. The text indicates that Richard Allen was ordained an elder in 1799. He was ordained a deacon in 1799 and an elder (but not by the Methodist Episcopal Church) in 1816. On page 46, it is misleading to reference the photo at the top of the page as the “Site of the Andrew Trial.” Bishop Andrew was not on trial at the General Conference of 1844 but action was taken that would have caused him to desist service as a bishop. The sentence about the Andrew case and the General Conference “was again under abolitionist control” is problematic and fails to nuance the differences between anti-slavery actions and support for abolitionism. On page 59 the heading, “Here Extensions” must be a misprint. More substantively, the language conferences were annual conferences and not a part of the Board of Church Extension or Home Missions (name could be different in different eras). These are just samples of the factual errors.

Interpretive material and selection of what to include is more subject to differences of opinion. The absence of information and maps on global Methodism both involving the Central Conferences and the spread of Methodism through the British Conference is regrettable. There is also an absence of mission maps. Two of the chapter headings are offensive. These were “The Gift of Gab” referring to Irish Methodists (22) and “Brave Hearts,” referring to Native Americans. It is trivial and demeans serious study to refer to John Wesley’s “soap-opera missteps in youthful love for Sophia Hopkey” (14). Images are fuzzy, maps are littered with codes that
require care in interpretation, bar graphs are not effective in communicating information, and text is too detailed for an atlas.

The work under review uses current cartography to present historical information. Again, it is regrettable that a work claiming to be a historical atlas makes no use of maps that are truly historical in nature. There is much pain when a work is much anticipated but must be subjected to a severe critique. It is insufficiently reliable to be of use to seminary classes or anyone in learning more of the geography of Methodism.

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Priscilla Pope-Levison briefly sketches the lives and ministry of eighteen American women evangelists. The women reviewed include the famous, Sojourner Truth and Aimee Semple McPherson, and the little known, Jennie Fowler Willing and Helen Sunday. She intentionally reviews the large number of people who gathered to listen to them, the institutions these women founded, the literature they produced and their social and political impact. Pope-Levison focuses on the primary material these preachers left behind, including some previously unpublished archival sources (the sermons of Helen Sunday, Billy Sunday’s wife, being the most notable).

Through this volume Pope-Levison offers a modest correction to the standard historiography which has ignored the role of women in the history of American preachers/evangelists. She also desires to broaden the scope of women’s history by adding these women, typically ignored, to the standard list of social activists and reformers. Pope-Levison expands on the few existing historical treatments of women preachers by covering a broader time frame, “a 200-year period,” as well as a larger church tradition, “from Roman Catholicism to African American Pentecostalism.” (6) The breadth of the ecclesial coverage is tilted in the Methodist direction, as eleven of the women are located within the Wesleyan/Methodist/Pentecostal traditions.

This volume’s greatest strength is Pope-Levison’s consistent use of extended quotations. The reader is provided autobiographical insight into these evangelists’ conversion and call to preach. We are given a taste of their preaching style and content, and the typical response of the original listeners to their proclamation of the “good news.” Additionally, Pope-Levison allows each evangelist to express her opinion on the appropriate role of women; perspectives which are typically far more traditional than one might expect from these iconoclastic preachers. In the best chapters these lengthy quotations not only provide the reader with a balanced overview of the homiletic method and theological orientation of these women, but a remarkably intimate sense of their personality. Unfortunately, this is
not universally the case as we are given a somewhat uneven engagement with the eighteen subjects. For example, very little descriptive material is provided for Hulda Reese’s preaching. Since Pope-Levison’s efforts are well researched, we are left to surmise that some of these women simply did not leave behind a corpus of written material, especially of a biographical nature, which would allow insight into their personalities.

Pope-Levison does not assume that her readers have either an extensive knowledge of the Bible or American church history as she provides chapter endnotes referencing both. For example, her chapter endnotes on Amanda Berry Smith include descriptions of Methodist class meetings (#2), Methodist bands (#14), and the Methodist love feast (#22). Pope-Levison’s notes on Iva Durham Vennard include useful explanations of the deaconess movement (#6) and the holiness movement (#7). The volume is therefore highly useful as an introductory level survey source. She also provides extensive notes for both the primary and secondary sources she uses and it is easy to anticipate students pursuing their own research into the ministry of many of these women. Because the primary material is generally consistent and plentiful this volume can serve equally well at the masters’ degree level.

The only preacher who seems out of place in this treatment is Uldine Utley (1912-1995). Utley was a child evangelist whose active ministry ended when she was in her early twenties just prior to her marriage. One of Pope-Levison’s foci is the “domestic life” of these preachers, the manner in which they balanced the roles of wife, mother and preacher, and the way that they managed to negotiate their sense of call to preach within a societal context that often rejected the legitimacy of that call. These issues never came into play for Utley and her inclusion, especially as the last subject treated (the evangelists are arranged chronologically), leaves the reader with a concern that all of the women are somehow to be perceived as something of an anomaly or curiosity.

Overall, the reader is impressed with the dedication, persistence, and strength of these women. The significance of their accomplishments is amplified by the counter-cultural nature of their activities. Pope-Levison leaves us wanting to know more, not only about these eighteen women, but about the other neglected stories of those who have been excised from the historical record because they too did not fit into the standard historiography.

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