

The Social Sources of Denominationalism: Methodism*

by Russell E. Richey

The *great iron wheel* in the system is *itinerancy*, and truly it grinds some of us most tremendously; the *brazen wheel*, attached and kept in motion by the former, is the *local ministry*; the *silver wheel*, the *class leaders*; the *golden wheel*, the *doctrine and discipline of the church*, in full and successful operation. Now, sir, it is evident that the entire movement depends upon keeping the *great iron wheel of itinerancy* constantly and rapidly rolling round. But, to be more specific, and to make an application of this figure to American Methodism. Let us carefully note the admirable and astounding movements of this wonderful machine. You will perceive there are "wheels within wheels." First, there is the great outer wheel of episcopacy, which accomplishes its entire revolution *once in four years*. To this there are attached *twenty-eight smaller wheels*, styled *annual conferences*, moving around *once a year*; to these are attached *one hundred wheels*, designated *presiding elders*, moving *twelve hundred other wheels*, termed *quarterly conferences*, every *three months*; to these are attached *four thousand wheels*, styled *travelling preachers*, moving round *once a month*, and communicating motion to *thirty thousand wheels*, called *class leaders*, moving round *once a week*, and who, in turn, being attached to between *seven and eight hundred thousand wheels*, called *members*, give a sufficient impulse to whirl them round *every day*. O, sir, what a machine is this! This is the machine of which Archimedes only dreamed; this is the machine destined, under God, to *move the world, to turn it upside down*.¹

The genius of Methodist organization has often been remarked. George Cookman in the above passage employed the vision of Ezekiel as a figure to suggest the heavenly design of its operation. Abel Stevens, seeing the danger of barbarism in the spread of population beyond the reaches of religious influence, conceived of Methodism as a "religious system, energetic, migratory, 'itinerant,' extempore, like the population itself" necessary for and "providentially designed" for the United States.² This theme expanded and secularized has received

*From the new book, *Denominationalism*, edited by Russell E. Richey. Copyright © 1977 by Abingdon. Used by permission of the publishers.

1. George G. Cookman, *Speeches Delivered on Various Occasions* (New York: Published by George Lane for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1840), pp. 135-37.

2. Abel Stevens, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States* (4 vols. New York: Carlton & Porter, 1864-1867), I, 25-28.

scholarly affirmation by William Warren Sweet in his works on Methodism and American religion. Methodist organization has been celebrated; it has also had its detractors—prophetic voices from within, some of whom exited in the name of republicanism or antislavery, and critics from without. One such critic, the Baptist J. R. Graves, organized his reflections under Cookman's image of *The Great Iron Wheel*. Its machine-like characteristics impressed Graves as "a crushing military *despotism*," "the very system of the Jesuits of Rome," "Antichrist," "spiritual tyranny," "clerical despotism," a threat to free institutions.³

It is not the purpose of this paper to review or resolve the debates over the character, efficiency, methods, leadership, and impact of Methodist organization which have raged from the earliest days of British Methodism. Rather, the purpose of this paper is to pursue a point implicit in the fact and substance of the discussion about Methodist polity. The thesis expressed in the title is that the distinctive form of the church that we know as the American denomination and designate as 'denominationalism' is deeply indebted to Methodism. The principle of organization in Methodism has become the principle of denominationalism. And Methodism was the religious movement which first fully, effectively and nationally exemplified that principle. Methodism, to borrow (with alteration) H. Richard Niebuhr's phrase, was a significant social source of denominationalism. This thesis will have to be qualified in a number of important respects, Methodism's borrowings acknowledged, the role of other denominations and religious movements admitted and the place of denominationalism in larger societal and intellectual transformations noted. The qualifications should serve to suggest the complexity of the history of denominationalism and to raise questions about the ethical and sociological reductionism that has allowed to stand as explanation of denominationalism. The thesis when appropriately qualified should suggest that the form (as well as the idea) of denominationalism is rooted in vital religiosity. Denominationalism as a form of the church is not simply the resultant of the several divisive compromises of the Christian

3. J. R. Graves, *The Great Iron Wheel: or, Republicanism Backwards and Christianity Reversed* (12th ed., Nashville: Graves, Marks and Rutland, 1856), pp. 157, 162, 169.

gospel.⁴

Denominationalism as a Problem

A contemporary of the maturity of American denominationalism, Robert Baird, celebrated its basic principle. The voluntary principle, he suggested, evoked Americans' "energy, self-reliance, and enterprise in the cause of religion."⁵ More than adequate to the challenge posed by disestablishment and an expanding population, it betrayed the real genius of free enterprise, the American (Anglo-Saxon) peoples and American religion and bespoke the will (hence voluntarism) of Americans to make religious freedom work for the kingdom of God. That it produced separate denominations was not disturbing because the denominations, at least the evangelical denominations, were unified in a common mission.

Baird's treatment epitomizes a basic strength, but perhaps also a weakness, in analyses of denominationalism. Baird looked through the denominations and denominationalism to more fundamental realities—evangelicalism, mission, voluntarism, religious freedom. Many of the most penetrating discussions of American religious institutions have shared this trait; they have looked through or around denominationalism to what appeared most basic. Hence the best treatments of religious structures are to be found in works on evangelicalism, missions, volun-

4. H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Living Age Books published by Meridian Books, Inc., 1957) is generally acknowledged as the standard statement on denominationalism. Some of what is said here is directed against Niebuhr's treatment of denominationalism. It should be noted, however, that this paper is concerned with issues that are really implicit in Niebuhr's analysis and that his basic arguments are not under review. Niebuhr's theologically-informed sociology, despite the title, does not seem to concern itself with denominationalism as a form of the church. Rather he seems to be concerned with the divisions in Protestantism and the factors of caste and class that explain their origin and perpetuation. He assumes the Weber-Troeltsch church-sect typology and the sect-to-church (denomination) movement. His concern is to bring into view the less-than-ideal dynamics which are productive of the ideal types. This work, widely admired by historians, is more useful for its explanation of specific denominations and their social sources than for the perspective provided on denominationalism *per se*.

5. Robert Baird, *Religion in America—A critical Abridgment with Introduction by Henry Warner Bowden* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970; published in 1844 and 1856 in the United States), p. 124. This volume with Philip Schaff's *America* (1855) remains one of the most penetrating analyses of voluntarism and denominationalism.

tarism, religious freedom, toleration, religious pluralism, separation of church and state, religion and the nation. There are, of course, no want of studies of particular denominations and ample numbers of works treating the denominations together. But Americans have been strangely reluctant to look directly at what is celebrated frequently in passing, the denominational form of the church. This reluctance must be attributable, at least in part, to a Christian conscience uneasy about divisions in the body of Christ. This uneasiness, expressed most eloquently in H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, has occasioned the search for unitive realities and unwillingness to speak about what is experienced on a day-to-day basis. Denominationalism has been left to the sociologists, whose ideal types (suggestive as they are) do not exhaust what historians and members of denominations ought to know about it.

Denominationalism as a Form of the Church

The denomination and denominationalism are dynamic religious structures and processes which have altered considerably in the several centuries during which the term "denomination" was being employed to designate religious movements. For that reason it is important to specify that denominationalism will be used for the pattern of inter-institutional and intra-institutional structures, processes and relations that existed among mainstream American Protestants in the 19th century. That delimitation, while arbitrary, provides the term with specific social meaning and is necessary for discussion of the origins and character of denominationalism.

It must be acknowledged at the outset that to unravel the thread of denominationalism is to separate it from the fabric into which it was woven and thereby to remove it from that to which it belongs and which gives it shape, purpose and significance. To affirm this is to acknowledge the value of the treatments of denominationalism under the rubrics mentioned above. Denominationalism is a form of the church possible in a society characterized by toleration or at least the spirit of tolerance, laws and customs supportive of religious liberty and *de facto* (if not legal) disestablishment. Denominationalism, then, has to be understood in relation to the sagas of religious liberty, the

democratic state and bourgeois society. Quite clearly, Baptists, Quakers and other Dissenting groups in their advocacy of and embodiment of religious freedom were social sources of denominationalism.⁶ So, too, the struggles in this direction within other religious groups in the several colonies were part of the social origins of denominationalism. The appropriation of the voluntary church was an essential ingredient, perhaps a precondition of denominationalism. The histories conceived under the several rubrics related to freedom do indeed describe important dimensions of the beginnings of denominationalism. They also point to denominationalism's place within the larger story of Western voluntarism, societal differentiation, organizational specialization and secularization. The denomination belongs within the array of associations—the free and often competitive institutions (essential to bourgeois, democratic society) — upon which de Tocqueville, Channing, Emerson and others commented. Association seemed the principle of democracy. Association in political life and association in civil (and religious) life were mutually reinforcing.⁷

Denominationalism, then, is to be seen as a form of the church adjusted to the realities of American society. It clearly is an adjustment to the realities of religious pluralism which characterized American society.

The most important descriptions of denominationalism have been sketched against this background. Among the most perceptive is Sidney Mead's depiction. It is worth quoting at some length:

The denomination is the organizational form which the free churches have accepted and assumed. It evolved in the United States during the complex and peculiar period between the Revolution and the Civil War.

The denomination, unlike the traditional forms of the church, is not primarily confessional, and it is certainly not territorial. Rather it is purposive....A church as church has no legal existence in the United States....Neither is the denomination a sect in a traditional sense and

6. For a recent study conceived along these lines see William G. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent 1630-1883* (2 vols.; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971). See also Anson Phelps Stokes, *Church and State in the United States* (3 vols.; New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1950).

7. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Phillips Bradley (2 vols.; New York: Vintage Books, 1945), II, 123-28. William E. Channing, "Remarks on Associations," *The Works of William E. Channing, D.D.* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1883), 138-158. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "New England Reformers," *Essays. Second Series* (New and revised edition; Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1892), 237-270.

certainly not in the most common sense of a dissenting body in relationship to an established church. It is, rather, a voluntary association of like-hearted and like-minded individuals, who are united on the basis of common beliefs for the purpose of accomplishing tangible and defined objectives. One of the primary objectives is the propagation of its point of view.⁸

Mead elaborates the meaning of this purposive form of the church by noting a number of traits characteristic of denominations. They are (1) sectarian, primitivistic, and anti-historical; (2) voluntaristic, self-promotional, and activistic; (3) missionary; (4) revivalistic and therefore oversimplifying, Arminian, pragmatic, emotional, egalitarian and anti-intellectual; (5) anti-rational (anti-Enlightenment); and (6) competitive.⁹

Second to its purposiveness is another feature of denominationalism to which Winthrop Hudson as well as Mead draws attention. Denominationalism is predicated upon an understanding of the church as pluralistic yet united and in a sense ecumenical. "Denominationalism," Hudson suggests, "is the opposite of sectarianism."

The word "denomination" implies that the group referred to is but one member of a larger group, called or denominated by a particular name. The basic contention of the denominational theory of the church is that the true church is not to be identified in any exclusive sense with any particular ecclesiastical institution. The outward forms of worship and organization are at best but differing attempts to give visible expression to the life of the church in the life of the world. No denomination claims to represent the whole church of Christ. No denomination claims that all other churches are false churches. No denomination claims that all members of society should be incorporated within its own membership. No denomination claims that the whole of society and the state should submit to its ecclesiastical regulations. Yet all denominations recognize their responsibility for the whole of society and they expect to cooperate in freedom and mutual respect with other denominations in discharging that responsibility.¹⁰

Never adequately articulated but implicit in the self-understanding of denominations was the recognition that there was a unity of the church which transcended the observable

8. Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963), pp. 103-104.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 108-133.

10. Winthrop Hudson, "Denominationalism as a Basis for Ecumenicity: A Seventeenth Century Conception," *Church History*, XXIV (March, 1955), 32-50, p. 32. Compare Winthrop Hudson, *American Protestantism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 34.

disunity. The disunity, an inevitable result of human diversity, did not undermine unity on essentials, on fundamentals. It did not mean that individual denominations were schisms (as Niebuhr's analysis would suggest). It did mean that unity was not to be achieved through coercion. And it meant, most importantly, that the true church and its unity were not to be fully manifested in human institutions.¹¹ Denominationalism was a witness to the true church by its pointing beyond the divisions in human structurings of the church to the shared unity.

The denomination in the view of Mead and Hudson is a purposive structure and conception of the church implicitly unitive or ecumenical in character. A third feature of denominationalism related its purposive character to this wider vision. The denomination was instrumental to the Christianization of society—the Christianization of the new Republic and also of the world. The several denominations were united in building a Christian commonwealth in preparation for the coming of Christ's kingdom. In some instances this common task motivated and expressed itself in cooperative endeavor. The various voluntary societies — Bible tract, Sunday school, reform societies—were the most obvious reflections of the common end. More frequently the common end was sought through competition, competition among the denominations and competition of denominations with the voluntary societies. The competitiveness has sometimes obscured the common end. But commentators on American religion from Robert Baird to H. Richard Niebuhr, James Maclear, Elwyn Smith, Martin Marty, and Robert Handy have described the common efforts to erect a Christian (Evangelical Protestant) society.¹²

11. Hudson, "Denominationalism," 39-47.

12. Robert Baird, *Religion in America*; H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937); James F. Maclear, "The True American Union' of Church and State: The Reconstruction of the Theocratic Tradition," *Church History*, 28 No. 1 (March 1959), 41-62; Elwyn A. Smith, "The Voluntary Establishment of Religion," *The Religion of the Republic*, ed. Elwyn A. Smith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 154-182; Martin E. Marty, *Righteous Empire* (New York: The Dial Press, 1970); Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971). The very important essay by D. A. Martin, "The Denomination," *British Journal of Sociology*, 13 (March, 1962), 1-14, presents a similar portrayal of the denomination. Martin does not, however, relate the pragmatism or instrumentalism of the denomination to the end which legitimized the pragmatism, namely the building of the kingdom. Since the end of the kingdom

As Baird recognized in dividing American religion into Evangelical and non-Evangelical denominations, and as recent commentators have recognized in analyzing the building of a Christian empire (society, establishment, kingdom), this unitive end of the denominations permitted and elicited degrees of participation. Religious, ethnic, racial, and regional factors affected the level of participation. Roman Catholics, Jews, and Unitarians were by definition and hostility excluded; Lutheran, and certain Reformed bodies allowed ethnic and theological factors to regulate the degree of their participation; Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists struggled over the implications of participation for tradition, theology, and polity; Black denominations, while animated by the passions of the Christianization of society, were by racial exigencies and racial prejudice excluded from full participation; Mormons, millennial groups, and utopians defined their Christian societies over against the dominant society; slavery and sectionalism finally wrought divisions within denominations and in the nation as a whole in the labor for a Christian empire. But when the spectrum of participation in the cause of building a Christian America is recognized, the fact remains that the dominant or normative conception of the denomination was this instrumental one. The denominations (Evangelical) singly and collectively were means, that is, instruments, for the Christianization of society and the building of the Kingdom of God.

H. Richard Niebuhr in *The Kingdom of God in America* recognized the dynamism, unity and force in American religion. In emendation of his stance in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* he analyzed the ideal of the kingdom of God on earth, showing it to have been a central preoccupation of American religious movements. But he continued to view the denominations as the halting places, the forms for preserving, the institutionalizations of these dynamic processes. Denominationalism marked the end of the dynamic movements

was what kept the tendencies to relativism, politicization, divisiveness and other human exploitations of religion in bounds, this omission is significant. To no small degree, it would seem to me, does the cynicism about the compromises of the denomination found in sociological literature derive from this oversight. To no small degree also do present difficulties in the denominations derive from their loss of the higher purpose and larger unity which once defined them and made them more than bureaucracies.

in the church. It was the end in the sense that in attempting to conserve and preserve, leaders created institutions which killed the spirit of the movements. It was an end in the sense that the denomination became an end in itself, thus displacing with a static structure the dynamic ideal of the kingdom of God.¹³

Niebuhr's conception is at variance with the view just set forth of the denominations as purposive voluntary associations, possessed of a vision of their place in a wider Christian unity and instrumental to the Kingdom of God and the Christianization of society. Niebuhr is probably right in viewing the denominations as eventually becoming ends in themselves. The question is whether they were intrinsically the death of Christian vitality; or more to the point perhaps whether they are by definition static, conservative, lifeless. Much depends upon the attitude held toward institutions and upon at what point in the life of the several movements they are to be defined as denominations. And this is related to the inevitability of the sect-to-denomination process which Niebuhr posits.¹⁴

These broad theoretical and historical questions cannot be addressed directly here. What can be investigated is the appropriateness of the view here set forth to the development of one denomination, the Methodist Episcopal Church. What can also be shown is how the vitality of institutional development within Methodism served as a model for the denomination-building process in other religious movements. Implicitly, then, Niebuhr is answered by showing Methodism in its dynamic phases to have been a social source of denominationalism.

Methodism as a Social Source of Denominationalism

The Evangelical denomination in early 19th century America was a purposive voluntary association, possessed of a vision of its place in a wider Christian unity and structured as an instrument for bringing in the Kingdom of God and

13. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, ix-xiv, 11-12, 44, 164-184, and esp. 177-78.

14. For discussion of this issue see Alan W. Eister, "H. Richard Niebuhr and the Paradox of Religious Organization: A Radical Critique," *Beyond the Classics?* Charles Y. Glock and Phillip E. Hammond, eds. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973), 355-408; Benton Johnson, "Church and Sect Revisited," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 10, No. 2 (Summer, 1971), 124-151.

Christianizing society. The denomination was then a missionary structure and by intention national in its aspirations. Where were its origins, its fabricators, its early manifestations? They were, as the second section above indicated, imbedded in the American and European experience, in the thrust of various religious movements, in the fact of pluralism, and in the conditions of religious freedom and disestablishment. To single out one religious movement as a social source of denominationalism is only to suggest a prevalence within it of influences from other religious movements and of trends affecting various facets of American and European society. To argue that Methodism was a social source of denominationalism is only to suggest that Methodism was representative, an early embodiment, an available model.

Methodism's role as exemplar of the purposive, ecumenical and instrumental church structure derived from the genius of Wesley; from the ambiguous status of early Methodism; from the new meaning conferred on Methodist structures and activities by its transference to the American environment where its Anglican context and ecclesiology were largely lost; and from its very successes. These factors and certain strategic and ethnic ones were to make it rather than Moravianism, a similar embodiment of the denominational principles and also a forceful mediator of Pietism's practical (purposive), ecumenical and reforming (instrumental) impulses, the effective transmitter of the denominational form of the church.

What was Methodism's genius? It was largely the genius of Wesley. By upbringing, education, inclination, and theology John Wesley was, as Frank Baker has argued, a High Church Anglican, an early bigot for the Church of England, whose later comprehensiveness represented an appropriation of that other spirit of the Anglican Church.¹⁵ Wesley's experientially and theologically derived eclecticism, his maturation as a folk theologian,¹⁶ or catholic theologian¹⁷ did not dissolve Wesley's dedication to the Church or his resolve to maintain the evolving Methodist connexion within it. By principle and prejudice averse to falling in with the Dissenters, Wesley through the force of his

15. Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970).

16. Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. vii-viii.

17. Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), 13-22.

own indomitable will and a richly textured Evangelical-Anglicanism kept his connexion in a formally and legally anomalous position. Methodism was not a new church; nor was it to be during Wesley's lifetime one of the denominations within Nonconformity. Poised between theological and legally constituted systems of ecclesiastical authority, the Methodist structures could, like the Pietist structures that preceded them, be governed by their purposes. Methodism was purposive, a leaven within the Church, a movement to spread Scriptural holiness across the land. "The chief design of His providence in sending us out is, undoubtedly, to quicken our brethren." "We look upon the Methodists," Wesley affirmed, "not as any particular party...but as living witnesses, in and to every party, of that Christianity which we preach."¹⁸

Affirming Methodists to be distinguished only in their commitment to "the common principles of Christianity" (not by opinions, emphasized phrases or parts of religion or "actions, customs or usages, of an indifferent nature"), Wesley asserted,

By these marks, by these fruits of a living faith, do we labour to distinguish ourselves from the unbelieving world, from all those whose minds or lives are not according to the Gospel of Christ. But from real Christians, of whatsoever denomination they be, we earnestly desire not to be distinguished at all, not from any who sincerely follow after what they know they have not yet attained. No: "Whosoever doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother." And I beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of God, that we be in no wise divided among ourselves. Is thy heart right, as my heart is with thine? I ask no farther questions. If it be, give me thy hand.¹⁹

Methodism was a purposive religious society, a people, dedicated to the spread of scriptural holiness as a way of life and it was, at least by its own intentions, unitive in character. Its

18. John Wesley, "Reasons against a Separation from the Church of England," 1758, *The Works of John Wesley* (3rd ed., 14 vols., London, 1829-31, Zondervan Publishing House reproduction), XIII, 227, 228. Wesley charged his people: "Ye are a new phenomenon in the earth,—a body of people who, being of no sect or party, are friends to all parties, and endeavour to forward all in heart-religion, in the knowledge and love of God and man. Ye yourselves were at first called in the Church of England; and though ye have and will have a thousand temptations to leave it, and set up for yourselves, regard them not; be Church-of-England men still; do not cast away the peculiar glory which God hath put upon you, and frustrate the design of Providence, the very end for which God raised you up." "The Ministerial Office," Sermon XXV, *Works*, VII, 280.

19. "The Character of a Methodist," *Works*, VIII, 341-42, 346-47.

structures and disciplines were instrumental to these ends. Wesley was candid on this point.

What is the end of all ecclesiastical order? Is it not to bring souls from the power of Satan to God, and to build them up in His fear and love? Order, then, is so far valuable as it answers these ends; and if it answers them not, it is nothing worth.²⁰

Wesley's understanding of the development of Methodism betrays this instrumental or pragmatic view of order. Methodists, he insisted,

had not the least expectation, at first, of any thing like what has since followed...no previous design or plan at all; but every thing arose just as the occasion offered. They saw or felt some impending or pressing evil, or some good end necessary to be pursued. And many times they fell unawares on the very thing which secured the good, or removed the evil. At other times, they consulted on the most probable means, following only common sense and Scripture: Though they generally found, in looking back, something in Christian antiquity likewise, very nearly parallel thereto.²¹

Also reflective of Wesley's instrumental view of order or structure was his willingness to borrow what seemed to work—classes, bands, lovefeasts, covenant services, watchnights. The efforts to save souls produced a remarkable freedom over the structuring of the religious life.

Expediency, "inspired practical improvisation," common sense, pragmatism, eclectic borrowing, the ability to recognize the general applicability of a successful local experiment, the willingness to be tutored or corrected by experience and the Holy Spirit was the Methodist way.²¹ This experimental ap-

20. John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* Standard Edition (London, 1931), II, To 'John Smith', pp. 77-78.

21. "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists," *Works*, VIII, 248. Compare the entry: "One of the most important points considered at this Conference, was that of leaving the Church. The sum of a long conversation was, (1) That, in a course of fifty years, we had neither prematurely nor willing varied from it in one article either of doctrine or discipline; (2) That we were not yet conscious of varying from it in any point of doctrine; (3) That we have in a course of years, out of necessity, not choice, slowly and warily varied in some points of discipline, by preaching in the fields, by extemporary prayer, by employing lay preachers, by forming and regulating societies, and by holding yearly Conferences. But we did none of these things till we were convinced we could no longer omit them but at the peril of our souls." *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock, Standard Edition (London, 1938), VII, 422 (1788).

22. Frank Baker, "The People Called Methodists—3. Polity," *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, Rupert Davies and Gordon Rupp, eds. (London: Epworth Press, 1965), vol. I, pp. 211-255, p. 213; John Lawson, "The People Called Methodists—2. Our Discipline," *Ibid.*, pp. 181-209, p. 183; Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists," 248-268.

proach to structure, appropriate to the experiential mood of the 18th century, was evident throughout the development and records of Methodism. Methodism's structures were instrumental to its unitive purposes. The bands, classes and societies, itinerancy, circuits and conferences, rules, directions, minutes, sermons, *Notes upon the New Testament*, the preachers and leaders—the social network that comprised the Methodist connexion was as the "Large Minutes" declared "to reform the nation and to spread scriptural holiness over the land."

British Methodism was in its own estimation no denomination or church. Yet in its national aspirations and missionary style, in that its structures were instrumental to its unitive purposes, Methodism embodied what was to become the denominational principle. Of course, British Methodism's denominationalism was in the very real sense suspended. Wesley's churchmanship kept the connexion from perceiving itself and being perceived as a new form of the church, the denomination. By Wesley's death when the connexion was in the process of becoming independent, the organizational and missional principles constitutive of the denomination would be appropriated by the Dissenting denominations. These facts have obscured the development of denominationalism. It appears that Methodism's denominationalism consisted in its break with the Church of England and reconstitution as an independent body. The survival after the founder's death, the agonies over authority, ordination, licensing, sacraments make this reading plausible and in one sense accurate. British Methodism could not be fully a denomination until the structural principles it embodied were allowed to become fully determinative of the connexion. This could happen when the efforts to be part of the Established Church were stopped. But it was not the actual break that made Methodism a denomination; what made Methodism a denomination was its inner structuring.²³

By the same token the Dissenting denominations may appear to have been denominations for the duration of the 18th century. They bore that name. Were they not denominations? By the criteria established here—purposive, unitive, instrumental, national, missionary organization—they were, in

23. For analysis of the separation as the working out of "Wesley's Logic rather than his Words," see A. W. Harrison, *The Separation of Methodism From the Church of England* (London: The Epworth Press, 1945).

fact, not. Until mid-century the primary institutions in Dissent were Dissenting (rather than denominational) and the Presbyterians, Congregationalists and General and Particular Baptists were names, denominations, given to ministers and congregations loosely bound by history, belief and practice. The primary self-identification was that of Dissenter.²⁴ Internal structuring of Congregationalism gathered momentum in response to the growth of rational and heterodox currents in Dissent in the 1730's. It was not, until evangelicalism impacted itself upon both Congregationalists and Particular and General Baptists in the final third of the century, that they developed structures or recast structures—ministerial associations and academies initially—for purposes of self-propagation and mission. Their maturity as denominations was as evangelical denominations, purposive in character, whose unitive and missionary intentions manifested themselves in the work of Carey and company. Whether this denominational form is borrowed from Methodism is difficult to say. What can be said is that the evangelicalism that through the agency of Wesley informed the organization of Methodism came by the end of the 18th century to inform Baptists and Congregationalists as well. The Presbyterian interest languished until revived by Scottish missions in the South. The Unitarians who emerged out of Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Baptist and Anglican ranks began the process of organization in the 1790's. In their own way—hardly evangelical—they developed structures for growth and elaborated a theology in its own terms unitive which together provided them the denominationalism necessary for the stabilization of their cause.²⁵

Methodism's contribution to denominationalism was ironical. Wesley's efforts prevented it from falling in with the

24. Both varieties of Baptists were somewhat exceptional in that they did by organization, belief, practice and class mark themselves off from all paedobaptists, other Dissenters included. See Russell E. Richey, "English Baptists and Eighteenth-Century Dissent," *Foundations*, XVI, (October-December, 1973), 347-354.

25. The argument in this paragraph is worked out in more detail in my essay, "Did the English Presbyterians become Unitarian?", *Church History* 42 (March, 1973), 58-72. See also R. Tudor Jones, *Congregationalism in England, 1662-1962* (London: Independent Press, Ltd., 1962); A. H. Drysdale, *History of the Presbyterians in England* (London: Publication Committee of the Presbyterian Church of England, 1889); H. W. Clark, *A History of English Nonconformity* (2 vols.; New York: Russell & Russell, 1965; first edition, London, 1913); Walter Lloyd, *The Story of Protestant Dissent and English*

Dissenters and becoming a Dissenting denomination. Yet the principles in the Methodist movement—what, among other factors, assured its growth and what Whitefield and company lacked—were to become the essentials in Dissenting denominationalism. For the bulk of the century critical of the Methodists, the Dissenters came eventually to emulate them. A movement which at all costs avoided becoming a denomination was despite its best efforts to be the quintessential one, not in the details of its polity or ecclesiology, but in the principles which, in fact, underlay them. Methodism, which has probably not received its proper recognition as a preliminary phase of the missionary movement, has also lacked credit for its contribution to denominationalism. Priority has been given to those who possessed the name—denomination—rather than to the movement within which the denominational principles were elaborated.

Denominationalism and American Methodism

The Methodist contribution to American denominationalism is not totally unacknowledged. Martin Marty in *Righteous Empire* comes close to crediting Methodists with the most basic change “in the administrative side of Christian church life in fourteen hundred years.”²⁶

William Warren Sweet argues that Methodists were the first to organize nationally.²⁷ The overall importance and influence of Methodism has driven some to speak of the 19th

Unitarianism (London: Philip Green, 1899); C. G. Bolam, *et al.*, *The English Presbyterians* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1968); Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists* (4 vols.; London, 1811-1820); A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: Kingsgate Press, 1947); W. T. Whitley, *A History of the British Baptists* (2nd ed.; London: Kingsgate Press, 1932).

26. (New York: The Dial Press, 1970), pp. 67-72.

27. William Warren Sweet, *The Story of Religion in America* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1939), p. 280. Sweet says: “The first American religious body to form a national organization was the Methodists and their priority in this respect is due to the fact that their national organization was largely worked out for them by Mr. Wesley.” *Ibid.* Again in *Methodism in American History* Sweet affirms that the Methodists were the first “to work out an independent and national organization.” (Rev. ed.; New York: Abingdon, 1954), p. 100.

century as the "Methodist Age".²⁸ The "stirrings" towards denominationalism within the Wesleyan movement noticed by Marty, the example of Methodist organization nationally cited by Sweet and the Methodist mediation of revivalistic, Arminian, practical, emotional lay Christianity analyzed by Hudson suggests a large but diffuse Methodist contribution to denominationalism. Here we are concerned with a more specific contribution of Methodism. It is the principle of denominationalism (of which the stirrings, organization and religiosity are expressions) that Methodism witnessed to most effectively in America. The principle was that the church or denomination (church order, church structure, polity, the church as a visible reality) was purposive, instrumental, missionary and though in aspiration national yet recognizant of sharing that aspiration with other denominations. The principle implied that the church order was not by divine constitution. It was a human creation. Of course, the human creation was in response to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but nevertheless it was an ordering of the church achieved in the present and designed to suit its activity. This denominational principle required *de facto* surrender of claims to be *the* church—to be the church continuous with the early church or to be the only church exemplificative of the New Testament. Methodism by the accidents of its creation and implantation in America witnessed to this principle.

Methodism's witness to this principle was somewhat clearer in America than it had been in England where as *ecclesiola in ecclesia* the claims to be part of "the church" were not fully surrendered. In America, especially after Independence, disestablishments and the agony of the transfer of Wesley's authority, Methodism was clearly what one critic quoting Coke called a "new plan." Indeed it was the critics who perhaps best

28. For a recent and critical discussion of this designation see Winthrop S. Hudson, "The Methodist Age in America," *Methodist History*, XII (April, 1974), 3-15. See also Jaroslav J. Pelikan, "Methodism's Contribution to America," *The History of American Methodism*, ed., Emory S. Bucke (3 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964), III, 596-614; Robert T. Handy, "Methodism's Contributions to American Life," *Christian Advocate*, X (April 7, 1966), 7-8; C.C. Goen, "The 'Methodist Age' in American Church History," *Religion in Life*, XXXIV (Autumn, 1965), 562-572; Douglas R. Chandler, "Towards the Americanizing of Methodism," *Methodist History*, XIII (October, 1974), 3-16; and Frank Baker, "The Americanization of Methodism," *Methodist History*, XIII (April, 1975), 5-20.

saw Methodism's strange role. From the Episcopalian John Kewley in the early 19th century to the Landmark Baptist J. R. Graves in the latter part of the century, Methodism was denounced as "merely a human device."²⁹ Methodists could and would defend their episcopacy, church order and theology, invoking providence and the Spirit. Not being the only imitators of the primitive church, experiencing their growth before American eyes, and making their pragmatic changes in Wesley's structures, Methodists were not in a good position to claim to be the unchanged church of the New Testament. They did, in the main, remain loyal to Wesley. But Wesley himself had charged them to chart their own purposive course: "They are now at full liberty simply to follow the Scriptures and the Primitive Church. And we judge it best that they should stand fast in that liberty where with God has so strangely made them free."³⁰ That freedom American Methodists had exercised and continued to exercise. From what Frederick Norwood calls its "lay begin-

29. John Kewley, *An Enquiry into the Validity of Methodist Episcopacy* (Wilmington: Joseph Jones, 1807), p. 4. Kewley repeatedly calls Methodism a "new plan." Graves's queries carry the same note:

"Were you asked if the economy of the Christian Church is of divine origin and appointment, you, in common with every other Christian, would answer, most emphatically, YES....Why, sir, in what light would a Protestant Christian be regarded in our day, who held and taught that the Christian Church was merely a human institution—a man-invented society or organization, like the institutions of Odd Fellowship or Masonry, and like them, subject to all the modifications of man's ever fluctuating and capricious fancy! Would not Christendom unite in a holy crusade against the sentiment?..."

Now, Methodism, considered as a church or society, is purely and clearly of *human origin* and device, and of a *very recent date*,—indeed, it cannot boast of as an illustrious a founder as Masonry, nor of as high antiquity, by some thousands of years. Solomon is claimed (I do not pretend to say it,) as the inventor of Masonry, and the cause of its organization, the building of the Temple; while John Wesley, *when an unconverted man*, is the boasted founder of Methodism, and the cause of *its* being organized into a Church was the *Revolutionary war!!*"

J. R. Graves, *The Great Iron Wheel*, pp. 34-35. For discussion of the range of anti-Methodist ideas see Lawrence O. Kline, "Anti-Methodist Publications (American)," pp. 115-199 and Frank Baker, "Anti-Methodist Publications (British)," pp. 119-122, *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, Nolan B. Harmon, ed. (2 vols.; Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1974).

30. *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, ed. John Telford, Standard Edition (8 vols.; London: The Epworth Press, 1931), VII, 239.

nings,"³¹ through the labors of Wesley's missionaries; through the early phases of organization by Rankin, Asbury and others; through the gradual elaboration of conference structures; through the trials of the Revolution; through Wesley's ordinations, abridged Articles of Religion, revised Sunday Service, and appointment of Coke and Asbury as joint superintendents, "Methodists stumbled their way from society to church."³²

The Methodist Episcopal Church formed at the Christmas Conference of 1784 was a denomination in the process of formation. The process of building the denomination was only just begun. The definition of episcopacy, refinement of the conference system, development of a delegated general conference, nurturing of the traveling ministry and class system, establishment through the Discipline of definite shape to the denomination, creation of a Methodist Book Concern and periodicals, and the testing of the denomination in early internal and external controversies made of Methodism a church order by intention national and governed by its purpose. It was a missionary order. There were limits to this purposive or functional character. These were clearly indicated in the response to James O'Kelly, the defensiveness evidenced on a variety of issues, the authoritarianism of Asbury and the conservatism so pronounced in the six restrictive rules of 1808. But this is only to say that the Methodists were not fully conscious of the significance of their own novelty and perhaps not a little frightened of it. Others saw this novelty and witnessed to it. In particular the United Brethren under Philip William Otterbein and the Evangelical Association under Jacob Albright, adopting Methodist structures and procedures for Reformed and Lutheran constituencies, maintained the Pietist ideal of being *ecclesiola in ecclesia*. In time other denominations would join these three in making their structures instrumental to the spreading of scriptural holiness over the land.

Though Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists and Christians reached that stage following different paths and by adapting and altering their own traditions, nevertheless in so doing they were replicating the Methodist pattern. As denominationalism reached maturity in the early decades of the 19th century, it did so as the joint testimony of distinct peoples

31. *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 61-69.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

and traditions that the Christianization of American society was to be their individual and common endeavor. That mission, as Robert Handy has so carefully shown in *A Christian America*, was the purpose of the denominations. Denominations were and denominationalism was purposive. To be sure there were social sources for each and all. But transcending the theological and ecclesiastical differences and the social, class and racial distinctions was a common endeavor. The denominations were instruments of the kingdom of God. Denominations were not, then, as Niebuhr argued, the end of the kingdom. They were, under the conditions of disestablishment and religious freedom, its beginning. They were not, in their earliest phases, ends but means. That they later became ends in themselves— as Niebuhr quite rightly asserts they did— was a sign that denominations as well as the quest for the kingdom had lost the original vision.