Our Methodist Protestant Heritage

by John B. Warman

They called themselves “Reformers.” They were called “Radicals.” They formed “Union Societies.” They were accused of causing disunion. They said they had been expelled. They were charged with schism and separation. They called themselves Methodists and they were “Methodist Protestants.” They were a motley crew: itinerant preachers, who resented the unchecked power of bishops and superintendents; local preachers, who had served as itinerants and, now located, found themselves disenfranchised on the very circuits that, as itinerants, they had called into being; and laity who had imbibed the spirit of the American Revolution and so wanted participatory democracy in their church structure. The Methodist civil war of the 1820’s did not come to birth without a long period of gestation.

The Long Roots

Dissension was ab origine. From the beginning of the Methodist work in America there was serious division over the question of authority.

Robert Strawbridge, the man called “strange” by Asbury, at the very least shares with Philip Embury and Barbara Heck the honor of founding Methodism in America. Yet Strawbridge was squeezed out of the Conference for refusing to submit. He died in 1781, and, in 1784, the position on the sacraments he had held for two decades became the position of the Christmas Conference. When he died, four-fifths of all members of Methodist Societies in America were found in the fields primarily tilled by Robert Strawbridge.¹ This greatest (save only, Francis Asbury, and that a perhaps) of the founding fathers has been little honored because he dared to dissent. It is worth noting that a belated recognition may be beginning to grow. Within the past few years the Historical Society of the Baltimore Conference purchased his home at a price of $55,000. At long last it has become one of our United Methodist Shrines.

The seventh Annual Conference that met at Brokenback Church, Fluvanna County, Virginia, in May 1779, almost broke the back of the Church over the issue of authority and a north-south separation was most narrowly averted.

In 1792, James O'Kelly offered his resolution that would have granted a preacher liberty to appeal to the Conference from his appointment by the bishop. The resolution was debated for four days and defeated at an extended night session. At that conference O'Kelly left by the main entrance to found the Republican Methodist Church, McKendree followed by way of a revolving door; and, later, as bishop, he exercised vigorously those same powers he had denounced as being "arbitrary and despotic."

**The Precipitating Events**

In the General Conference of 1812 Nicholas Snethen, whom Asbury called his "Silver Trumpet," introduced a petition calling for the election of presiding elders from a panel to be nominated by the bishops. It did not prevail. The same petition was offered by others to the General Conference of 1820. This time it was adopted by a vote exceeding two-thirds. Bishop McKendree lodged a vigorous protest. Joshua Soule, newly elected to the episcopacy but not yet consecrated, declared in writing that, if consecrated, he would not carry out the resolution. The measure was suspended for four years and then defeated by the General Conference of 1824. Interestingly, the same proposal was again presented to the General Conference of 1876 and again defeated. It remains in 1978 as a possibility favored by many.

As a consequence of the action of 1820, a prominent layman in Philadelphia, William A. Stockton, began in 1821 to publish a magazine, *The Wesleyan Repository*, to provide a forum for the discussion of this and other matters of interest to the Methodist Episcopal Church. In its pages, the question of lay representation in the Annual and/or General Conference was raised. In the General Conference in Baltimore in 1824 various memorials were introduced calling for such representation. The Conference denied all such memorials and by a 63 to 61 vote issued a circular declaring: "If by rights and privileges it is intended to signify something foreign from the institutions of the church, as we received them from our fathers, pardon us if we know no such rights, and if we do not comprehend such privileges."

In response to the circular a meeting was called of those who termed themselves "Reformers" and a dual course of action looking toward the General Conference of 1828 was decided upon. *The Wesleyan Repository* was replaced by a new periodical to be called "The Mutual Rights of the Ministers and Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church." It was further determined that the Reformers should organize themselves into "Union Societies" to exchange
views and to prepare to influence the next General Conference. (If this seems to parallel a contemporary movement, I can only say that human nature is remarkably constant.) Ansel Bassett, a leading historian of the Methodist Protestant Church, says of these decisions:

“lt was distinctly announced and reiterated that the object of this periodical and of the Union Societies was by no means to alienate any from the church, or induce them to leave her communion, but to exhort them to cleave to her to the last extremity, and to unite as one man in a mutual and general effort to obtain a representative form of church government, which should extend to the people as well as to the preachers.”2 Then, as now, no one wished to divide the Church; only to control her.

The debate began to resemble agitation. Reasoned argument began to give place to fiery and mutual denunciations. Then the matter passed beyond words.

The Baltimore Conference, in April 1827, expelled Dennis B. Dorsey and William C. Pool. The former for having written a letter commending the writings of the Reformers. The latter for circulating “Mutual Rights” and for attending a meeting of a “Union Society.” Their cases were to be appealed to the General Conference of 1828 as to a court of last resort. In September, eleven local preachers and twenty-two laymen were expelled in trials of doubtful legality. The expelled formed an “Association” that pledged to abide by the “general rules of John and Charles Wesley.” A meeting was called of the “female members of the Methodist Episcopal Church” and more than fifty women declared support of the “Association.” Then in November, 1827, a General Convention of Reformers was held in Baltimore that prepared a memorial for presentation to the General Conference of 1828 asking for lay representation.

The General Conference met in Pittsburgh and the appeal of Dorsey and Pool was ably argued by Asa Shinn. His closing peroration brought tears to the eyes of many and a mood of healing and restoration seemed to fall upon the Conference. The vote was not taken immediately but was postponed till the next day. The long night gave time for the remembrance of mutual wrongs and recriminations and, on the morrow, the appeal was denied — as was the memorial from the Reformers’ Convention. The Reformers or Radicals were more outnumbered than they had been in 1824. The

2A Concise History of the Methodist Protestant Church, Ansel Bassett, p. 42.
Conference was not inclined to compromise. To the memorial favoring lay representation, the Conference replied:

The great head of the Church himself has imposed upon us the duty of preaching the Gospel, of administering its ordinances, and of maintaining its moral discipline among those over whom the Holy Ghost, in these respects, has made us overseers. Of these also, namely, of Gospel doctrines, ordinances and moral discipline, we do believe that the divinely instituted ministry are the divinely authorized expounders; and that the duty of maintaining them in their purity, and of not permitting our ministrations in these respects to be authoritatively controlled by others [namely, the laity], does rest upon us with the force of a moral obligation, in the discharge of which our consciences are involved. ³

The issue had now escalated to its true size so that it could be seen for what it was, a question of conscience concerning authority in the Church. How is purity of doctrine to be maintained? By hierarchical structures through which doctrines are expounded by those who have the obligation and opportunity to be informed by study and sharpened by reason? Or by some mysterious process of concensus wherein the whole people of God stumble together on the steep and rocky ascent toward truth?

On matters of conscience, compromise is seldom sought. Following the General Conference of 1828 expulsions and withdrawals proliferated as if popcorn in the popper. In Cincinnati, in July 1828, four ministers and ten laymen were charged; and expelled in August. At Lynchburg, Virginia, in October, two local preachers and nine laymen were expelled. Georgetown, District of Columbia, saw four. So it went, at various places, across the Church — and every expulsion resulted in other secessions.

The Main Event

On November 12, 1828, a General Convention of Methodist Reformers met in Baltimore, Maryland. There were more than a hundred delegates chosen from societies in eleven states and the District of Columbia. They drew up and adopted articles of Association for the government of Associated Methodist Churches. They also appointed agents to call into being organizations under the Conventional Articles (as they were called). Over the following two years sufficient societies were called into being to establish fourteen annual conferences. The delegates elected by these fourteen conferences then met in a General Conference held in St. John's Church, Baltimore, Maryland on November 2, 1830. At this Conference the Reformers who had called themselves "Associated Methodist Churches" now became "The Methodist Protestant

³Bassett, p. 52.
Church.” Between 25 and 30,000 persons were separated from the Methodist Episcopal Church.

It was an interesting experiment in church government. Clergy and laity shared power in the annual and general conferences and the heavens did not fall, neither did the millenium arrive. The right to station the pastors was reserved to the annual conference. Article VII, part 3 of the Constitution reads, “The Annual Conferences, respectively, shall also have authority to perform the following additional duties: — To prescribe and regulate the mode of stationing the ministers and preachers within the district; provided always, that they grant to each minister or preacher stationed the right of appeal during the sitting of the Conference.”

Under this system some Conferences (for example the Maryland Conference) placed the responsibility of stationing the ministers on the Conference President. In other conferences the appointive power was lodged in a “stationing committee” equally divided in membership between clergy and laity. Whether by President or Committee the task was not so difficult as that of a bishop’s because clergy could be left “without appointment” and charges without pastors. The President or the Committee acted the role of a broker and served as the bargaining agent between clergy and congregations. A pastor could not be made to go where he was unwilling; nor could a congregation be compelled to accept a pastor it did not want.

It is my impression and remembrance that the Methodist Protestant Church was infused with the spirit of independency. Each congregation was as independent as it could afford to be. The Annual Conference was a loose alliance of local churches. Yet it held together like a family. Both congregations and Conferences were small in membership. The Conference sessions were moved about from church to church and the members were housed in the homes of the congregation. Consequently they came to know each other well and, whether clergy or laity, when travel was necessary, they knew other homes where they would be honored and welcome guests.

The coming into being of the Methodist Protestant Church had a dampening effect upon the cause of lay representation within the Methodist Episcopal Church. Within that communion the denial of lay representation had been made a matter of conscience and a heavy price had been paid. That price grew no lighter as Methodist Protestant spokesmen justified the separation by accusing

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4Any of the several Disciplines.
Episcopal Methodism of being antithetical to the "American spirit of democracy." There was no mention of lay representation in the General Conference of 1832. In 1840, the Conference declared it to be "inexpedient," but each General Conference thereafter saw the issue raised. In 1850, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South voted to allow one layman from each district to attend the annual conference "with the right to speak and vote on all questions relating to the financial and secular interests of the Church." In 1860, the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church authorized a referendum on the issue with the result of its being rejected by both clergy and laity. In 1866, the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South voted for equal lay representation in the General Conference, and this became effective with the General Conference of 1870.

In the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1868 the majority favored lay representation and authorized another referendum which provided for the admission of lay delegates to the Conference of 1872. This time the referendum was favorable to lay representation. Even so, it was not until Methodist Union in 1939 that the laity received equal representation across the whole life of the Church.

As a child of the Reformers (or Radicals, if that pleases you more), let me confess my conviction that the separation of the 1820's was a sin against the Gospel of Reconciliation, a sin that greatly weakened the witness and the influence of Methodism on American life. It was sin on the part of each and all: old side and new side; regulars and reformers; stand-patters and radicals. It was the sin the brightest and best fall into when they exalt the abstract over the personal and give allegiance to doctrines about the Christ rather than to the Lord Christ.

This difficult, rough-textured strand of our heritage (the Strawbridge, O'Kelly, Methodist Protestant, perhaps Good News line of creative discontent that refuses to accept institutional conformity) is not a strand to be rejected and cast out. It is sometimes disruptive, always difficult to live with, but in the challenge and response tremendous energy is created that, harnessed, can move the Church forward.

I want to lift up some of the personalities that clothed with their flesh the call for lay representation.

Perhaps first of all was Nicholas Snethen (pronounced Snee-then). As a young man he was chosen by Francis Asbury to be his traveling companion. In that capacity he preached so well that he
earned the sobriquet of "Asbury's Silver Trumpet." He entered the itinerancy in 1794 at the age of 25. A tall man with dark curly hair, he had a commanding presence. Moreover, he was a scholar well read in poetry and science; a linguist able to read and translate in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and French. In 1800, he was the Secretary of the General Conference and the youngest of the Committee of Three chosen to make answer to O'Kelly's "apology." Even then he was, as Asbury knew, an advocate for lay representation. Perhaps because of this he was the one chosen to make the "Reply" which the committee had prepared while under the guidance of Asbury. Although he advocated lay representation, he was an enemy of schism. It was not until the expulsion of Dorsey and Pool by the General Conference of 1828 that Nicholas Snethen was willing to consider separation.

Bishop Edwin Holt Hughes said of him, "Nicholas Snethen's career is an instance of balanced ministry — in spite of the fact that he became best know for his emphasis on the possible and rightful place of the layman in the promoting of God's Kingdom. He was an evangelist as well as a reformer; and an educator as well as an agitator. His life became related to all the great issues of his day. The fact that he was chosen as the Chaplain of the House of Representatives of the United States is an evidence that he was far more than an exhorter upon God's platform." 

Then there was Asa Shinn — Shinn the eloquent — Shinn the sensitive, finely balanced lover of justice. He was raised a Quaker, converted as a Methodist at 18, an itinerant preacher at age 20. Self-taught from the barest of beginnings, he never saw or knew of a clock until he was past twenty years of age. It was he who conducted the defense of Dorsey and Pool at the General Conference of 1828. So eloquent was he, so melting his plea, that all hearts were touched and the tears flowed free. Bishop Soule was in the chair and when the call for a vote was made, he refused. Asa Shinn then asked his authority for the ruling. The bishop answered, "I let you know we govern by divine authority." He then added, "If the vote should now be taken, you would gain all you desire." Mr. Shinn answered, "Then I have nothing more to say." When the vote on the morrow expelled Dorsey and Pool, Shinn was so crushed by what seemed to him to be an act of utter injustice on the part of the Church he loved and served that he was thrown into a state of melancholia that disabled him for some months. Thereafter he alternated between

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*Francis Asbury's Silver Trumpet*, Harlan L. Feeman, p. 14,

*History of the Methodist Protestant Church*, Ansel Bassett, p. 413.
long periods of great mental clarity and acumen and brief periods of mental derangement. His closing years were spent in an asylum. When quite young he was kicked in the head by a horse and carried the resultant indentation to his grave. It was commonly supposed that his wound was the cause of his troubles.

The Reverend Samuel Clawson was the Peter Cartwright of the Methodist Protestants. He was the epitome of the rugged, unschooled pioneer circuit rider. He served one station appointment in his long ministry and did not care for that. Listen to the account of his conversion and call to preach as told by the Reverend James Robison.

"When quite a young man he was deeply convinced of sin, and awakened to a sense of his lost condition as a sinner in the sight of a holy God. In this state of mind he earnestly sought the pardoning mercy of God, but for a long time seemingly in vain. He was diligent in the use of God's appointed means of grace, reading the Bible, praying at his bedside, in the woods and at the prayer and class-meeting, sometimes walking a great distance to these meetings, always held in the house of those who feared God. On one occasion, as he once told me, he went to a prayer-meeting which was held at the house of a neighbor on a Sabbath morning. The house was built in the middle of a field that was but partially cleared, the brush was picked and burned, the stumps all standing, and the logs lying thick on the ground. In this log cabin quite a number of pious neighbors were gathered for prayer and class-meeting. 'My distress,' said he, 'was very great, but the brethren and sisters prayed earnestly for my salvation. I prayed, too, with all my might, when quick as a flash of lightening my burden fell off, and my soul was filled with joy unspeakable. I sprang from my knees, so they told me, until my head touched the ceiling boards, not knowing what to do with myself, or how to express my gratitude to God for what He had done for my soul! I felt the house was too little for me, and with a bound, I cleared the door and took my course round the field, leaping over logs and stumps and rocks, shouting glory, glory! at every bound. The whole congregation were out after me with all their might, fearing I would kill myself, but I cleared everything in my way, and felt as though I could fly. They pursued me round and round, and tried to head me and catch me, but all in vain. At last I struck for the house, but it was empty. I fell down on my knees and poured out my gratitude to God in shouts of praise, while the brethren came in puffing and blowing, some laughing and some crying for joy. I gave myself wholly to God then and there, and felt that He had called me
to preach. I went home and told my mother what the Lord had done for me, and she cried for joy; but when I told her I must preach the Gospel, she lifted her hands in astonishment, and said: "O, Samuel, you foolish boy; how can you preach the Gospel without a college education?" (She was a Presbyterian, and thought no one should preach who was not educated for that purpose.) I told her the Lord would help me. And so the Lord did. Many hundreds who were converted under his ministry are the witnesses of it."

One of the greatest of the founding fathers was George Brown. He was born in western Pennsylvania in 1792. Soundly converted at the age of 21, he became an itinerant preacher of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1815. He was tall, strongly built, and a power preacher and writer. An encounter in 1821 with a Dr. Stanton (whose son was to serve as Secretary of War under Lincoln) first caused George Brown to question his church’s system of government. He became one of the frequent contributors to Mutual Rights and was one of the first to secede. He was a member of nine General Conferences and delegate to three General Conventions of the Methodist Protestant Church. He was several times a Conference President and served a term as editor of The Western Methodist Protestant. In 1829, he was called to be pastor for the Reformers (Radicals) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The majority of the Pittsburgh membership and seven of the nine trustees were committed to reform. These called George Brown. Bishop Roberts also appointed a pastor to the charge (first a W. Lambkin and later a Z. Costen). So for a time both parties used the old Smithfield Street Church, fondly called “Brimstone Corner.” The church had been chartered by the state not as the First Methodist Episcopal Church but as, simply, the First Methodist Church of Pittsburgh. During the summer and fall of 1829 the new side worshipped in the church at 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. and the old side at 11 a.m. and again in the evening at 7. As November drew on the need for a later hour became apparent to the Reformers. Without consulting the other side they set their new Sunday service for half-past ten.

That day arrived. At 10 o’clock Brother Brown entered the church to find the Reverend Z. Costen already there but barred from entering the pulpit by Stephen Remington who was a man of impressive physical proportion. Brown entered the pulpit, the choir and congregation took their places and the service began. As the first hymn moved toward its close the men of the old side

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1Recollections of Samuel Clawson, James Robison, pp. 22-24.
congregation entered the front door and moved down the center aisle as far as the altar rail. The new side men came out of the pews by the side aisles and met the foe at the altar just as the hymn ended. But before a blow could be struck George Brown called out, "Let us pray." Some knelt where they were and all bowed in silence. The prayer was long, very long. It was also tender and couched in words of reconciliation. The Reverend Mr. Costen made his way quietly into the pulpit and standing with Brother Brown added his "Amen" to the several petitions. At long last, the prayer closed and one party left by the center aisle as the other returned to places in the pew. A scandal had narrowly been averted.

The property dispute moved through the courts. In 1832, the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania ruled for the Reformers. They received all the property: Old Brimstone Corner, the new building (located where the elevators of Kauffman’s Store now run) and the cemetery (located where Union Station is now). Having won the property, the Reformers kept half the cemetery and the new building, which they had constructed. They gave half the cemetery and Old Brimstone Corner to the Methodist Episcopal Church; which was half an answer to the old prayer for reconciliation. 8

Finally, there was Peter T. Laishley, M.D., who was the strong leader in western Pennsylvania and West Virginia. He was a native of England, a local preacher in the Republican Methodist Church and so an O'Kellyite, and a medical doctor in practice in Fayette County, Pennsylvania. He joined the Methodist Protestants and entered their itinerancy in 1832. He was a member of four General Conferences and a delegate to two General Conventions. He was thirteen times elected Conference President: five times in the Pittsburgh Conference and when the West Virginia Conference was separated from that body, he was elected its president and reelected seven times more. We mention him here, however, because he is an illustration of how the vocation of Christian ministry runs through generations of some families like a persistent virus. Peter T. Laishley’s four brothers were all priests in the Church of England. In part, he ran away to America to escape that profession, but the call proved too strong to forever evade. His eldest daughter’s five sons all became itinerant ministers in the Methodist Protestant Church; although one of them later backslid to the Baptists and another went to Johns Hopkins and became a medical doctor after twenty years in the itinerancy. These were the

8Recollections of Itinerant Life, George Brown, Carroll & Co., Cincinnati, 1866.
Conaway brothers. The eldest daughter of the eldest son also had five sons but only one of these became a clergyman. He entered the Pittsburgh Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church in 1937; became a Methodist in 1939; and a United Methodist in 1968. In 1972, he was elected to the episcopacy, but better than that, in June, 1977 his youngest son was ordained an Elder in the Western Pennsylvania Conference.

He is grateful to you for the opportunity of doing this paper. He is also grateful to Bishop Fred G. Holloway who was kind enough to read the first section and to give a reminder of the Strawbridge Memorial and to add valuable information on the varying practices of conferences in their first stationing procedure.

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