

HOW METHODISM BECAME A NATIONAL CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES

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In a famous — one is tempted to say notorious — election sermon preached in the spring of 1783 just before the Treaty of Versailles was signed giving independence to 13 English colonies in the new world, President Ezra Stiles of Yale enumerated the religious resources of the United States and predicted that the future belonged to the contemporary leaders in roughly the same order: Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Dutch Reformed.¹ Rarely has a serious, not to say scholarly, projection been so totally wrong. To catalog his errors, Stiles failed to note that Presbyterians were the rising denomination and headed to the top of the list after they all but absorbed his own Congregationalists, that Baptists (whom he ignored altogether despite their being in third place already) were growing faster and would surpass Presbyterians in numbers if not in influence and power by 1800, that Baptists would soon be overtaken in numbers and Presbyterians in influence by a little known sect called Methodists, and that by 1850 the largest and ultimately most powerful Christian body in the United States would be the Roman Catholic Church.

Only a seer could have foretold the vast immigration which swelled Roman Catholic ranks, but it may well be that Presbyterians and, to a larger extent, Baptists have a legitimate grievance against President Stiles for undervaluing their denominational future in the new world. As for us Methodists, we may complain that Stiles ignored our burst of Revolutionary growth, but there can be no serious argument that in the spring of 1783 Methodists deserved more than a passing mention as a strange breed of colonial Anglicans, who were the unlikeliest candidates of all to become an independent national church.

Methodism had arrived in the new world in 1736-1737 when John and Charles Wesley came to Georgia as missionaries of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, and George Whitefield, who first visited America in 1738, became a leading figure of the Great Awakening

¹Ezra Stiles, *The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor* (New Haven: Thomas and Samuel Green, 1783).

during his itinerations through the colonies in the 1740's.² Methodism was merely a generalized phenomenon in those days, however, and nothing resembling organized Methodist societies appeared in America before 1766 when societies were organized more or less simultaneously in Maryland, Virginia, and New York. John Wesley himself does not seem to have been cognizant of these developments until 1769 when, in response to a plea for help, he dispatched Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmore on a missionary journey to America.³ Membership in the societies grew steadily, though slowly, so that by 1773 when the first conference of Methodist preachers was held in the new world 1,160 were reported as belonging — 500 in Maryland, 200 in New Jersey, 180 each in New York and Philadelphia, and 100 in Virginia.⁴ Although Robert Strawbridge, aggressive leader of the Methodist movement in Maryland, appears to have established himself from the beginning as a religious independent, administering the sacraments without benefit of ordination,⁵ the succession of Wesleyan missionaries seems to have been relatively successful in molding the colonial work to the English pattern — sacraments in the parish churches at the hands of priests of the Church of England and preaching and discipline in the Methodist societies.⁶

The American Revolution created a crisis, which then became an opportunity, for the Methodist movement in America. Methodism suffered the same disruption as the rest of the colonial Church of England, which, as the church of the enemy according to American patriots, was disestablished in the six colonies where it had privileged status. Though laypersons were often patriots, priests tended to be Tories. They frequently deserted their parishes to flee to England or loyalist Canada, and their buildings were then desecrated by marching armies and patriotic zealots. Wesley himself published a pamphlet, borrowed in part from Samuel Johnson, in opposition to the American

²On the Wesleys in Georgia, see Willie Snow Ethridge, *Strange Fires: The True Story of John Wesley's Love Affair in Georgia* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1971). On Whitefield, see Stuart C. Henry, *George Whitefield: Wayfaring Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957).

³J. Manning Potts, "Methodism in Colonial America, Sections 1-2," in *The History of American Methodism*, ed. Emory Stevens Bucke, 3 vols. (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957), I, 75-78, 80-91.

⁴*Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the Years 1773-1828*, 2 vols. (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), I, 5.

⁵Arthur Bruce Moss, "Methodism in Colonial America, Sections 3-9," in *History of American Methodism*, I, 123-125; Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism: A History of the United Methodists and Their Relations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), p. 66.

⁶Coen G. Pierson, "Methodism and the Revolution," in *History of American Methodism*, I, 176-177.

cause against George III and Parliament, and, except for Francis Asbury, his missionaries returned home at the outbreak of hostilities. Asbury was unwilling to subscribe the patriot oath required in Maryland and holed up in Delaware, ceasing to travel for the duration of the war, and other preachers turned pietist and pacifist. Even the native-born preachers, who were far more apt to sympathize with American desires, were suspected of Toryism and persecuted; Freeborn Garrettson's name failed to protect him from beating and the threat of hanging. Methodists were cut off from one another by the British occupations of Philadelphia and New York, and religious life suffered except, perhaps, in areas to the south which were relatively unscathed by war.⁷

In a sense the Methodist advance had already begun before the Revolution and continued apace during the conflict. Adherents to the societies had more than trebled between 1773 and 1775, and between 1775 when Methodist preachers and the Second Continental Congress met simultaneously in Philadelphia in May to the spring of 1783, membership more than quadrupled from 3,148 to 13,740.⁸ Although Methodist strength in New York declined during the long British occupation, neighboring New Jersey had the largest percentage increase of any state during the war, and in Delaware and farther south in Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina, smaller percentages produced far more members. The large increase in Delaware probably resulted from the work of Francis Asbury during exile there, but the most interesting developments occurred in the states where the Church of England was disestablished during the Revolution.

Revivals had broken out sporadically in America since the Great Awakening, and what Jesse Lee called the "great revival"⁹ (a name often repeated) began in 1775 among Methodists and other evangelical Anglicans in the area south and west of Richmond, which was then little affected by the conflict. Revival fires were fanned during the war and spread into North Carolina. Native-born preachers predominated in Maryland and Virginia, and though many of the converts were from outside churches (85% to 90% of the population fell in this category at the time), as many more would appear to be communicants of the falling establishment. Methodist growth coupled with Anglican disruption put pressure on the preachers not merely to preach but also to administer the sacraments of baptism and holy communion as well. Of course, Strawbridge and his associates in Maryland had long

⁷*Ibid.*, I, 162-164; Norwood, *Story of American Methodism*, pp. 82-90.

⁸*Minutes of the Annual Conferences, 1773-1828*, I, 6-7, 18.

⁹Jesse Lee, *A Short History of the Methodists in the United States of America* (Baltimore: Magill and Clime, 1810).

engaged in the practice despite the lack of ordination, but the critical decision was the proposal of the Virginia preachers to take advantage of the situation and proceed with the cultivation of a full religious life in America. In 1779, after having considered the matter the previous year, the preachers in Virginia and North Carolina determined upon a novel solution to their difficulty. They would organize a presbytery of four — Phillip Gatch, Reuben Ellis, Thomas Foster, and Leroy Cole — to ordain each other and then as many preachers as wished to undertake sacramental administration. The decision precipitated a virtual schism in American Methodism. Northern preachers, meeting separately and confronted with different circumstances, mounted opposition to the decision of the southern brethren, refusing to consider them Methodists “until they come back,” and they pled for observance of traditional Methodist practice and offered their chapels to Anglican priests looking for places to officiate. In the end the northern preachers convinced the southerners to refer the matter to Wesley, who then sided against the proposed solution to a very real problem.¹⁰

Controversy over ordination and administration of the sacraments among the southern preachers served, however, to highlight for Wesley the dilemma of the entire Anglican communion in America. The Church of England in the colonies had long been an anomaly — an episcopal church without a bishop. The colonies had been under the vague administration of the bishop of London, and it was to St. Paul’s that candidates for ordination and confirmation (which fortunately was not considered an important matter by Anglicans or Roman Catholics in the 17th and 18th centuries) had to repair for the imposition of hands. When Americans were reluctant to go or lacked the funds, the bishop appointed to the colonial parishes misfits from the British ecclesiastical system. Although proposals for consecration of a bishop for the colonies had occasionally surfaced before the Revolution, not only Congregationalists and Presbyterians but also colonial Anglicans opposed the project as another intrusion of the power of the crown in American affairs, preferring the disadvantages of their present arrangement to another instrument of British tyranny.¹¹

With the coming of the Revolution American attitudes toward bishops began to change because there was no other way for Anglicans to insure an adequate supply of clergy, but British law forbade the

¹⁰Pierson, “Methodism and the Revolution,” in *History of American Methodism*, I, 176-180; Norwood, *Story of American Methodism*, pp. 90-93; *Minutes of the Annual Conferences, 1773-1828*, I, 9-13.

¹¹On the issue of an Anglican episcopate for the colonies, see Carl Bridenbaugh, *Mitre and Sceptre: Transatlantic Faiths, Ideas, Personalities, and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

English hierarchy from passing on the historic succession to any who would not subscribe an oath of allegiance to the crown. Under these circumstances Anglicans interested in the American scene counseled different courses of action. In an anonymous pamphlet published in 1782, William White of Philadelphia suggested establishment of a nominal episcopate — like Wesley he actually preferred the title “superintendent” — to provide ordination and episcopal oversight until consecration in apostolic succession might be obtained.¹² Samuel Seabury, having been elected bishop of Connecticut by his fellow clergy, applied for consecration to an underground church, the non-juring bishops of Scotland who supported Stuart pretenders to the British crown.¹³ Wesley decided to do the job himself and provide episcopal leadership for his followers in America no matter what course was followed by the rest of American Anglicans.

Wesley's action, which was far more orthodox than what was proposed by the southern preachers and in the same spirit as White's pamphlet, was hardly precipitate. He had asked the bishop of London to ordain even a single priest to provide a sacramental life for Methodists in America, but had been refused. The plan of the southern preachers had shown him how desperate the situation was, and the gains recorded during the Revolution by precisely those same preachers proved how ripe was the field for harvest. Citing as his authorities Edward Stillingfleet's conflation of the orders of bishop and presbyter and Peter King's study of the church at Alexandria, Wesley laid hands on Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey as priests (he preferred “elder”) and consecrated Thomas Coke general superintendent for the Methodists in America, ordering him to consecrate Asbury to a similar office. Ordaining Coke, Whatcoat, and Vasey to provide spiritual leadership for American Methodists was merely the first step in setting his followers free from his direction from England and according their relations with the Treaty of Versailles. Wesley abridged the Thirty-nine Articles along the same lines that had been laid down by John Tillotson in the 17th century and created a Sunday Service based on the *Book of Common Prayer*, instructing American Methodists to employ these documents in creating a separate organization as befitted inhabitants of an independent nation.¹⁴

¹²[William White], *The Case of the Episcopal Churches in the United States Considered* (Philadelphia, 1782).

¹³Clara O. Loveland, *The Critical Years: The Reconstruction of the Anglican Church in America, 1780-1789* (Greenwich, Conn.: Seabury Press, 1956) is the standard authority on the organization of the Protestant Episcopal Church.

¹⁴*Minutes of the Annual Conferences, 1773-1828*, I, 21-22; Norman W. Spellman, “The Formation of the Methodist Episcopal Church,” in *History of American Methodism*, I, 197-206; Norwood, *Story of American Methodism*, pp. 94-102.

Wesley's ordinands proceeded to America, and on Christmas Eve, 1784, more than fifteen months after the Peace of Paris, Methodist preachers in America gathered at Lovely Lane Meetinghouse, Baltimore, to receive Wesley's latest missionaries and witness the consecration of Asbury. Actually the spirit of independence was running high, and the American preachers insisted on calling the meeting and ratifying each of Wesley's basic decisions, naming themselves the Methodist Episcopal Church in America — an interesting parallel to the Protestant Episcopal name adopted by mainline Anglicans for their organization. Asbury had refused consecration except that the American preachers elect him, which they did enthusiastically, and on successive days he was ordained deacon, elder, and superintendent — he later took the title "bishop" much to Wesley's chagrin — along with 12 or 13 others who were ordained deacon and elder. The preachers subjected Wesley's Articles to review and added an additional one, "On the Civil Rulers of the United States," approved but then ignored his Sunday Service, and published a *Discipline*.¹⁵

Establishment of the Methodist Episcopal Church marked the first effort by a body of American Christians to reorder their ecclesiastical relations following the Revolution, and, in spite of their small numbers, in a sense the Methodists set a precedent for other denominations in the United States. Between 1785 and 1789 the remainder of American Anglicans worked out the details of their bicameral General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church and secured the consecration of William White and Samuel Provoost of New York at the hands of the English hierarchy in 1787 through an unexpected amendment to the Act of Uniformity. They healed the schism which had resulted from the irregular consecration of Seabury and incorporated his faction into their organization, involving him in the consecration of James Madison of Virginia as the first bishop to bear the credentials of their American church. In 1788 Presbyterians, though lacking the disabilities fastened upon Anglicans by the Revolution, decided to reconstruct their denomination by federating their presbyteries into a General Assembly resembling the official body of the Church of Scotland. Presbyterians had already healed their schism, dating from the Great Awakening, between Old Side and New Side or the Synods of Philadelphia and New York, and it was a reasonably simple process for them to subject the Westminster Confession and forms of governance and worship to their scrutiny and

¹⁵Spellman, "The Formation of the Methodist Episcopal Church," in *History of American Methodism*, I, 206-232; Norwood, *Story of American Methodism*, pp. 98-102.

adopt them as their own.¹⁶ Other denominations were simultaneously undergoing the same process, and even Roman Catholics in the United States were given permission to meet and elect a bishop rather than receive one through Vatican appointment.¹⁷

Observing these developments, John Henry Livingston, Dutch Reformed leader in New York, wrote to a friend that "the Churches in America are all assuming a new complexion. From being the appendages of national churches in Europe, they have become national churches themselves in this new Empire."¹⁸ "A national church" — here was a splendid conception for Americans becoming newly self-conscious of their place in the sun. Although it was clear that the United States would never have a national church in the European sense — no sect was ever likely to win the allegiance of a majority of the people nor should be allowed to do so, as both statesmen and churchmen believed — national denominational organizations were a present possibility, and American church leaders set out to create them — independent, united coextensive with the nation, and powerful enough, singly or in concert, to play a role in shaping the national morals and culture.

Although the process of nationalization had been begun by Methodists, Presbyterians probably did most to create the ecclesiological form of an American national church. Their General Assembly was not only independent and representative of Presbyterian factions in the United States — at least until 1810 when revivalists in the interior set up their rival Cumberland organization — but was powerful and influential enough to be compared to the Congress of the United States. Lacking a base in New England but closely allied with Congregationalists there through the Puritan heritage of theology and polity, Presbyterians entered into an entente with the Congregationalists which eventually brought Congregationalist commissioners into the General Assembly and, under the terms of the Plan of Union of 1801, made the denominations partners in evangelizing the nation through new congregations, revivals, schools and colleges, and

¹⁶On the organization of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, see Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition: A Re-examination of Colonial Presbyterianism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949).

¹⁷Edward Frank Humphrey, *Nationalism and Religion in America, 1774-1789* (Boston: Chipman Law Publishing Company, 1924) gives convenient summaries of various denominational stories within his chronological limits. On American Catholicism, see the excellent summary of the history of the church by John Tracy Ellis, *American Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).

¹⁸John Henry Livingston to Dirk Romeyn, March 1, 1788, quoted in Alexander Gunn, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Henry Livingston* (New York: W. A. Mercein Printer, 1829), pp. 298-299.

support of a network of voluntary societies intending every known variety of moral and religious reform.¹⁹ Episcopalians had the form though not the substance of such an organization, but they were destined to trail other churches in size of constituency and had to await the generation of John Henry Hobart to recover from their Revolutionary disaster and create the network of missionary dioceses that signaled their desire to expand with the nation. In 1814 the Baptists, already ahead of Presbyterians in numbers, tried their hand at forming a national church. Their General Missionary Convention was a looser sort of organization, which lacked the power of the General Assembly, and never really embraced primitive or antimission elements within their denominational family, but it signified the same intention to evangelize and shape the destiny of the nation as did the Presbyterians' national church. Other denominations tried and failed. The Lutherans' General Synod and the Dutch Reformed break with the Classis of Amsterdam and ill-fated Triennial Synod with the German Reformed reflected their desires to be regarded as national churches, but internal conflicts and waves of new immigrants from Germany undercut their best efforts. After the convening of the First Plenary Council in Baltimore in 1852 American Catholics may be said to have possessed national organization although the church in the United States did not secure independence until 1908 and was maintained as an adjunct of the Congregation for Sacred Propaganda. Of the remaining denominations in the early days of the republic, only Methodists were in a position to build a national church which could rival and surpass the Presbyterians' organization.

The Christmas Conference of 1784 gave American Methodists independence, a name, two superintendents or bishops (three if Wesley is included), an ordained clergy, and the basic documents of ecclesiastical organization, but it failed to settle the question of how the Methodist societies would become a church. Indeed, it did not decide what would happen if, as turned out to be the case, mainline Anglicans received a more regular form of episcopal consecration. That issue was settled in the end by default as much as by any conscious decision. Relations between Methodists and their Anglican priests had been far from amicable before the Revolution, and during the dark days of conflict when few priests were available to administer the sacraments and the Virginia preachers struggled with embracing a full ministry themselves, Methodists and Protestant Episcopalians became different

¹⁹On the Plan of Union, see James Hastings Nichols, "The Plan of Union in New York," *Church History*, 5 (1936), 29-51; on the national reform societies, see Charles I. Foster, *Errand of Mercy: The Evangelical United Front, 1790-1837* (Chapel Hill, N. C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1960).

people. Wesley's irregular ordination drove a wedge into American Anglicanism — White had had to withdraw his similar proposal to keep the peace — and the death of the founder of Methodism in 1791 precluded his working for reconciliation. On no fewer than four separate occasions between 1784 and 1792 — during the Christmas Conference, in 1787 when White consulted with Charles Wesley about the problem, in 1791 when Coke tried to obtain episcopal consecration much to Asbury's consternation, and in 1792 when Bishop Madison tried to construct a basis for union in the General Convention — attempts were made to bring Methodists and Protestant Episcopalians together, but in the end no one much cared.²⁰ The Methodist course was set as was the Episcopalian, and, thereafter, no serious discussions of a union were held until the 1950's.

The passing of attempts to heal the Anglican schism in America coincided with the creation of a General Conference in 1792, although the organization was less a rival of the General Convention or General Assembly than a feeble effort by American Methodists to find a suitable means of transacting ecclesiastical business. The General Conference of 1792 is memorable because it, though itself a democratizing limit on the sometimes autocratic powers assumed by the bishops, shut the door on James O'Kelly's challenge to the appointive power exercised by Francis Asbury and prompted the first major defection from the Methodist Episcopal Church. O'Kelly led his followers out into the short-lived Republican Methodist Church from whence they became Christians in New England or flowed into the Campbellite movement on the western frontier. The General Conference of 1792 had been called for the purpose of dealing with O'Kelly's agitation, but before it adjourned, it approved a plan for a quadrennial gathering of the entire body of preachers to replace the annual conference, begun in 1773, which now met in multiple sessions due to the geographical distances involved. By the time the General Conference next convened in 1796, separate annual conferences were erected under its authority, but it was not until 1808 that the General Conference enacted the semblance of a constitution in the form of six restrictive rules or became a delegated body to avoid undue influence by the Baltimore and Philadelphia clergy and guarantee an equal voice to the remote segments of the church. Sometime after 1808, but not much before, could Methodists begin the claim that their General Conference, like the Presbyterians' General Assembly, brought together representatives from across the country and rivaled the

²⁰Norwood, *Story of American Methodism*, pp. 120-122.

Congress in its representation of the nation.²¹

Methodists did not, however, await the creation of a General Conference before thinking of expansion, and, in a sense, the ways in which the Wesleyan movement remained a society rather than a church vested Methodists with their missionary capabilities. In his volume on Presbyterians in the classic American Church History Series, Robert Ellis Thompson tagged the early 19th century the "Methodist" phase of the story,²² and, for a time, the denomination did set a style among American churches. In 1798 the Congregationalists' General Association of Connecticut resolved itself into a missionary society to undertake its part in evangelizing the nation and, ultimately, the globe. Methodists, however, had no need to form themselves into a missionary society, for in both conferences and congregations they already possessed a missionary organization. Methodists sometimes joined the nondenominational societies for circulating Bibles and tracts, promoting foreign and domestic missions, and reforming slavery or drunkenness, which the Presbyterians and their Congregationalist allies foisted upon early 19th century America, but in reality they found no necessity to do so because their conference had already created the type and stood as society enough for evangelizing the frontier or foreign shores, distributing Bibles and other Christian literature, or protesting slavery and strong drink.

Methodists undertook their domestic mission well. Even before the Christmas Conference, Methodist preachers had appeared in western North Carolina in 1782, and the following year Holston in southwestern Virginia and eastern Tennessee and Redstone in western Pennsylvania were named as circuits. By 1786 Methodist missionaries were in Kentucky and the next year in central Tennessee. By 1790 Methodists were spreading across Pennsylvania and New York into Ohio. In 1786 Beverly Allen was given "all Georgia to range in," and in 1790 Jesse Lee was assigned to round out the Methodist work in another direction when he was appointed presiding elder of a mission into the Congregationalist citadel of New England, from whence circuits were to be extended into Canada later in the decade. In 1800 Tobias Gibson was appointed to Natchez and made an heroic journey from South Carolina to Nashville and thence by canoe down the Cumberland, Ohio, and Mississippi. Illinois was reached by 1803, Indiana, though further east, by 1806, and the Mississippi was crossed into Missouri by 1807, placing Methodist frontiers far beyond those of

²¹Frederick A. Norwood, "The Church Takes Shape," in *History of American Methodism*, I, 433-452; Norwood, *Story of American Methodism*, pp. 122-129.

²²Robert Ellis Thompson, *A History of the Presbyterian Churches in the United States* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1895), pp. 34, 95.

the Episcopalians and probably outstripping Presbyterians and Baptists.²³

In the long view membership increased as dramatically as the number and scope of circuits. Between 1783 and 1793 membership increased fivefold from 13,740 to 67,643. Then it declined for three straight years due to the O'Kelly schism, and membership did not equal the figure for 1793 until 1801. But then came denominational recovery and the harvest from the western revival, and by 1803 membership had topped the hundred thousand mark to 104,070, reached 214,000 by 1813, reached 312,000 by 1823, virtually doubled to 600,000 by 1833, and topped a million by 1843. Membership was growing so fast that it is impossible to isolate in the totals the effects of the black withdrawal into the African Methodist Episcopal Church and African Methodist Episcopal Church, Zion in the 1810's or of the Methodist Protestant schism of 1828 — surely more important ruptures in the denominational fabric than O'Kelly's spite against Asbury — and when northern and southern Methodism divided in 1844, each segment of the Methodist Episcopal Church soon became the largest and wealthiest denomination in its section.²⁴

Although Methodists were becoming more numerous everywhere — New England, Eastern cities, and the seaboard South — the event which seemed to shake the denomination from its O'Kelly doldrums was the western revival of 1800. The revival broke out among frontier Presbyterians and Baptists along the Kentucky-Tennessee border, but Methodists were soon engaged in the action. The western revival was to be noted for the strange behavior exhibited by those who claimed to have come under the sway of religion — dancing, shrieking, even barking like dogs — and it employed as its principal device the camp meeting where frontiersmen gathered from miles about to sleep out in the open and pray, commune, and exhort and be exhorted in brush arbors. Quite by chance, Asbury had scheduled a visit to Nashville as the revival was breaking out, and, although he counseled against many of the outward manifestations of spiritual experience, he came out in favor of the camp meeting. Methodists, thereafter, became proponents of camp meetings and a host of other new measures as the revival spread east as well as west. Although Charles Grandison Finney emerged as the leading evangelist of what became the Second Great

²³Richard M. Cameron, "The New Church Takes Root," *2/3 in History of American Methodism*, I, 289-290; *Minutes of the Annual Conferences, 1773-1828*, I, 15 *et passim*. The quotation is from Thomas Coke's journal.

²⁴*Minutes of the Annual Conferences, 1773-1828*, I, 18 *et passim*. Edwin Schell points out that O'Kelly losses may not be as great as sometimes imagined due to arithmetical errors in the minutes. I have not inquired behind the minute totals.

Awakening in American Protestantism, Methodists were its backbone and, perhaps, arms and legs as well, and even the Calvinistic Finney seemed infected by Methodist themes.²⁵

By 1820 Methodists were surpassing Baptists in members and beginning their century-long reign as the most numerous Protestant denominational family in the country, but as yet they had done little except prove their efficiency in dispatching missionary preachers and planting congregations. Leadership in printing and publishing evangelical literature, education, and social concerns belonged to the non-denominational, but "Presbygational," societies like the American Bible Society, the American Tract Society, the American Education Society, and the American Sunday School Union, which in the decade after the War of 1812 were establishing themselves as the evangelical conscience of the United States. Methodists might well have cooperated with these organizations, and often did, but revulsion with even the mild Calvinism of these bodies and a sense that their own denominational structure made such societies unnecessary led Methodists to support their own denominational agencies, which in the next half century outstripped the national evangelical societies.

Printing and publishing were, perhaps, Methodism's most successful venture. Wesley had pioneered in the publishing of evangelical literature, and the United Methodist Publishing House traces its heritage in America to 1789 when John Dickens was appointed book agent. Yet the early years of Methodist publishing enterprise are filled with financial disasters, and it was not until well along into the 1820's that Nathan Bangs began to find saleable titles like Adam Clarke's *Commentary* (continuously in print since 1824) and to experiment with religious periodicals like the *Christian Advocate*, which in two brief years before 1828 attained the largest circulation of any periodical in the country at 25,000 copies. The *Christian Advocate*, published in New York, found numerous regional imitators, and the denominational publishers branched out into literature for youth, women, and Sunday Schools in addition to the more intellectual *Methodist Quarterly Review*, which was to set records for continuous publication. Although in 1820, evangelical publishing was dominated by the Bible and Tract Societies, by the Civil War these operations were being outstripped by Methodist enterprises.²⁶

Methodists long trailed other denominations in founding

²⁵Theodore L. Agnew, "Methodism on the Frontier," in *History of American Methodism*, I, 494-523; Norwood, *Story of American Methodism*, pp. 156-163.

²⁶William R. Cannon, "Education, Publication, Benevolent Work, and Missions," in *History of American Methodism*, I, 571-582; Norwood, *Story of American Methodism*, pp. 210-216.

educational institutions. In spite of the university origins of the movement in England, on the American frontier Methodists became extremely distrustful of the intellect. One of the principal items of business of the Christmas Conference was the creation of a college in Abingdon, Maryland, which was named Cokesbury in honor of the two bishops though Wesley was doubtless correct in finding the action pretentious. Cokesbury did not prosper, rarely attaining collegiate levels in its instruction and suffering disastrous fires, perhaps at the hands of its opponents. Other early Methodist colleges record much the same story. The first really successful Methodist institution was Wesleyan in Middletown, Connecticut. Although several other Methodist institutions — Randolph-Macon, Emory, Garrett, Dickinson, and the like — owe their origin or Methodist affiliation to the same era, they were all outshone by Yale and Princeton, and the great age of Methodist education did not occur until after the Civil War when the denomination gave birth to Drew and Boston, Vanderbilt and Duke, Northwestern, Syracuse, and Southern California.²⁷

The story of Methodist higher education may, indeed, give a clue to a curious facet of Methodism's career as a national church. When Princeton theologians confessed in 1832 that they could not satisfy all needs "with any one institution, as a great NATIONAL ONE,"²⁸ the days of the Presbyterians' national church were numbered. In 1837 the denomination was divided when Old School expelled New School, and then on the eve of the Civil War Presbyterianism was further fractured. Methodists also encountered their national crisis in 1844 when Bishop James O. Andrew found himself unwilling or unable to free his slaves, the northerners unwilling to allow him to preside over their conferences, and southerners unwilling to see a bishop deposed. The result was a schism, or more properly, a plan to divide the church. After 1844 white episcopal Methodism consisted of two branches — the Methodist Episcopal Church, which southerners insisted should be the Church, North, and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Sometimes these two branches thought of themselves as merely two parts of a single national denominational organization; at other times they thought of themselves as two separate churches, each manifesting

²⁷Cannon, "Education, Publication, Benevolent Work, and Missions," in *History of American Methodism*, I, 549-564; Norwood, *Story of American Methodism*, pp. 217-222; John O. Gross, "The Field of Education, 1865-1939," in *History of American Methodism*, III, 201-249.

²⁸"Domestic Missions," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, 4 (1832), 78.

the nationalist aspirations of its region.²⁹ Either way the churches operated the same, founding educational institutions, building up the publishing business, establishing foreign missions to spread not only the gospel but national culture into colonial areas, and planting home missions and creating supportive bodies among women, youth, and eventually, men of the denomination. One judges, moreover, that Methodist bodies, unlike Presbyterian sects, were more influential in their sections and possibly in the nation as a whole after their division than they had been before the denominational separation.

In 1785 in the wake of the Christmas Conference Bishops Coke and Asbury visited George Washington at Mt. Vernon to share their concern for the abolition of slavery in Virginia, and soon after Washington was inaugurated president, the bishops and two elders paid a courtesy call to express their congratulations, the first such visit, it is often said, from representatives of a religious denomination. Thus did American Methodists, whose very existence had been determined by political events, begin their participation in American politics.³⁰ Yet what was begun in the 1780's did not necessarily continue during ensuing years. Methodists were deeply divided between sectarian and churchly attitudes, individual piety and social awareness, withdrawal from and entry into political affairs, and except for a continuing debate over slaveholding and the emerging discussion over temperance — points at which individual and social morality coincided — through the early 19th century Methodists were not particularly involved in dialogue about society. After the division of the denomination, however, northern Methodists were free to identify their cause with antislavery, and during the Civil War the Methodist Episcopal Church emerged as one of the most important pillars of the Union war effort. Methodist laymen became soldiers, Methodist preachers raised regiments and volunteered for service as chaplains, Methodist bishops counseled presidents and buried them, while Methodist missionaries went south to occupy rebel pulpits and conduct relief and educational work among the freedmen. Even Abraham Lincoln was forced to admit that Methodists had made the largest contribution to the war effort although he diplomatically added it was merely because there were so many more of them than of other denominations. To the south, the other branch of episcopal Methodism was not as involved in

²⁹Richard M. Cameron and Norman W. Spellman, "The Church Divides, 1844," in *History of American Methodism*, II, 11-85; Nolan B. Harmon, "The Organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South," in *History of American Methodism*, II, 86-143; Arthur E. Jones, Jr., "The Years of Disagreement, 1844-1861," in *History of American Methodism*, II, 144-205; Norwood, *Story of American Methodism*, pp. 197-209.

³⁰Cameron, "The New Church Takes Root," in *History of American Methodism*, I, 247-251; Norwood, *Story of American Methodism*, p. 120.

affairs of the Confederacy partly because it had espoused a doctrine of an apolitical church and partly because the Confederacy lacked a well-ordered, cohesive society, but Methodists fought bravely, Methodist chaplains filled the same role as in the Union armies and even revitalized their troops, Methodist people organized societies to care for soldiers' needs, and the officials of the publishing house in Nashville were known as Confederates of Confederates. Whether in Blue or in Gray, Methodists were acting the part of a national church.³¹

By the time of the Civil War the process of creating a national church, which had begun at the Christmas Conference of 1784, was largely complete, but there remained a question of how well the denomination would wear the label. In his Senate address on the Compromise of 1850, John C. Calhoun had lamented that three of the four religious bonds holding the nation together had snapped — Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist. Only the Protestant Episcopalians' national church remained intact.³² Calhoun's remarks, which incidentally confirm 19th century America's appreciation of national religious organization, pose an interesting question of the relationship between sacred and profane history in America, but there is probably a better case for Calhoun's view that church ruptures weakened the national fabric than for the assumption that churches merely responded to national tensions when they divided. After some real antagonisms during Reconstruction, the two branches of white episcopal Methodism timidly began in 1876 to repair their differences and draw together toward the union of 1939, which also included Methodist Protestants.³³ Roman Catholics and Episcopalians had done better in healing wartime wounds, but of the other national denominations — Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist — only Methodists have sought to restore their national church, and that belatedly although who is to say that that union did not aid what Vann Woodward has called the Second Reconstruction of the 1950's and 1960's.³⁴

Or, to approach the same issue another way, some years ago Professor Timothy Smith wrote a book called *Revivalism and Social*

³¹James W. May, "The War Years," in *History of American Methodism*, II, 206-256; Norwood, *Story of American Methodism*, pp. 239-248.

³²John C. Calhoun, "Speech on the Slavery Question," quoted in Richmond Croom Beaty, Floyd C. Watkins, and Thomas Daniel Young, *Literature of the South* (Chicago: Scott-Foresman, 1952), pp. 123-127.

³³Frederick E. Maser, "The History of Unification, 1874-1939," in *History of American Methodism*, III, 407-478.

³⁴C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 3-12.

Reform,³⁵ in which he argued that mid-19th century revivalism, in which Methodists were altogether prominent, gave rise to the social gospel movement in American Protestantism. Now Methodists played no great role in proclaiming a social gospel despite Professor Smith's thesis unless one defines it largely in terms of the temperance issue which so exercised our grandparents' generation of Christians. Pricking the nation's conscience, establishing settlement houses, affirming the rights of labor, and the like were often left to Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Congregationalists — the establishment churches of American Protestantism. Yet by the time the social gospel movement was recognized in America, Methodists had produced their version of a social creed, which was then adopted by the Federal Council of Churches, the predecessor of the National Council.³⁶

Now I leave you with a choice. Do we Methodists really seek to influence national affairs and call the nation to repentance and justice? Or do we merely come along after the battles are fought and won as with the reconstruction of nation and church or with the social gospel? Or, to pose another alternative, is our slowness to exert moral leadership precisely the result of our being a national church or a church resembling the nation — a popular church which has to fight its own internal battles and balance its own disparate collection of special interests before it can point the way for the country? I do not know the answer to such questions, but it does seem to me that they are critical for assessing the role of a national church after the Civil War and in the 20th century.

³⁵Timothy Lawrence Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth Century America*. (New York: Abingdon, 1957).

³⁶Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1914*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1940), pp. 280-301.