REFORM AND PERSECUTION IN NORTH CAROLINA METHODISM

An Account of the Expulsion of Granville Union Society Members from the Methodist Episcopal Church

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In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the United States, a young nation still reeling from its successful struggle for independence from British rule, found itself aching from the growing pains inherent to change and progress. With the end of the War of 1812 with Britain, the citizens of the United States found themselves veritably free from the vestiges of European domination which had lingered menacingly since the Revolution.

Paralleling the changes being made by the government of the United States to this newfound freedom were those being made by the nation's social and religious entities. The adjustments being made in the political structure of the American government were clearly reflected in the life of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States. The nation was adapting to the transposition from a monarchical to a democratic form of civil government. This, along with the "rise of the common man" of Jacksonian Democracy during these early years of the nineteenth century, gave the church the opportunity to exist within a more populist form of government. In such a climate of change and political reorganization in the governmental and social structures of American life, the Methodist Episcopal Church was bound to be influenced in its own polity. The desire for an organizational break with British Methodism, a church so closely tied to British Anglicanism, was inevitable. An early proponent of reform in the Methodist Episcopal Church (the name by which American Methodism chose to identify itself) asked: "... as the great, the holy, and the wise, (though not infallible) Wesley, was invincibly attached to the Church of England, was it possible for his prepossessions, or did they lead him to bestow on the Methodist Church in America, such a form of church government as is best suited to our condition—as is most conducive to our union and prosperity?"

For those seeking reform, the answer to this query was no, for they found incompatible their desire for a representative church polity and the

inherited British form of church government, a system dominated by professional clergy. The central factor motivating the Reformers was the desire to gain rights for local preachers and laypersons, heretofore unrepresented, equal to those already afforded to the itinerant clergy. In every General Conference session from 1808 through 1828, the Reformers pushed for changes in church polity.²

The battles which raged between Reformers and those preferring the status quo were at times heated. Accusations flew wildly from one side to the other. Laypersons as well as clergy became entangled in what must have seemed an unremitting web of snarled emotions and ideas. A circular distributed by the Roanoke District Conference in 1822 to its local preachers read: “... the enormous prerogatives, with which the itineracy have exclusively invested themselves, is at variance with ‘the refinement and liberality of the country and age in which we live’ and contrary to the plainest maxims of common justice.”³

Laypeople as well as local and ordained clergy became emotionally entwined in the controversy over reform. The laity, feeling their new freedom as represented citizens in a democratic society, wanted this freedom carried over into the ecclesiastical life also. One layperson wrote:

Tyrants, whether civil or ecclesiastical, tremble when an appeal to their subjects is made; because they are well assured, if Christians become enlightened, and investigate their rights, that they will rise in the majesty of their strength to assert them ... Who, that has ever seriously thought on the government of the Methodist Church, does not condemn it as tyrannical, unjust, and oppressive? What legislative rights and privileges are reserved to its private members? None. They are completely the vassals of the preachers, and are bound to obey the laws and regulations of a set of men, who arrogate to themselves exclusive legislative power, without any kind of authority human or divine ... we are decidedly hostile to that policy which gives the whole government of the Church into the hands of the ministry. The people have no vote in the choice of their legislators—they are distinct from them, and ought never to submit to their legislative acts until they shall become represented.⁴

The response of those in positions of authority to the calls for reform were quick and often harsh. Those opposing reform made accusations of “inveighing against the discipline of the church,” and of actions aimed at schism, against the Reformers. Methodist publications were closed to the views of the Reformers. The battle between Reformer and non-reformer was clearly joined. Censure, reproof, and persecution of the Reformers was soon to follow.

Some within the hierarchy of the church sought to appease the Reformers by moving to resolve some of the issues dividing the two par-

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ties. One such effort led to the establishment of district conferences for local preachers, giving them limited power over their own affairs, while not completely granting them equitable status with itinerating preachers. At the General Conference of 1820, a compromise on the issue of the election of presiding elders was reached after considerable debate. The compromise allowed the election of presiding elders by the preachers, but those elected were to come from a list of nominees suggested by the bishops. Significantly, more than two-thirds of those voting at the General Conference voted in favor of reform. But in 1824, at the next General Conference session, this provision for the election of presiding elders was withdrawn. It was declared unconstitutional by an extremely close vote. District conferences, their effectiveness limited, soon failed and were discontinued.

Thus, by the mid-1820's, little progress toward reform in the Methodist Episcopal Church had been accomplished. If anything, the distance between those opposing reform and the Reformers was greater than ever.

Denied their freedom to speak on the subject of reform and deprived of access to the pages of their own Methodist publications, the Reformers turned to the establishment of what came to be called "union societies" for the mutual promotion of their cause. The first of these union societies was begun in Baltimore in 1824. The Baltimore Union Society was thereafter the model for all similar societies. Later in 1824, the Roanoke Union Society was formed at Sampson's meeting-house in Halifax County, North Carolina, for the purpose of promoting the cause for mutual rights among those Methodists interested in reform. The Roanoke Union Society took a conspicuous and early role in the reform movement. 5

In the reform publication, Mutual Rights, an author writing under the pseudonym "Paul," explained the reasons for the formation of these union societies. Their purpose, he stated, was to promote a systematic method of reform within the Methodist Episcopal Church in order to introduce a "well balanced form of government into their [the Reformers'] Church." The means of precipitating this change was threefold: First, by petitioning through the use of memorials and circulars the various annual conferences and quadrennial General Conference, the desires of the Reformers would be made known. Related to this first means of action was the second, that being the promotion of a reform publication in the shape of a periodical. "Paul" cited the effective use of the press by European reformers at the direction of Luther and others to bolster the use of this means to bring about the desired changes. Thirdly, the union societies were to be a vehicle through which reformers of like mind might join in common cause with others from other areas and states for edification, un-

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5 Edward J. Drinkhouse, History of Methodist Reform, vol. II (Baltimore: The Board of Publication of the Methodist Protestant Church, 1899), p. 84.
understanding, and for communication of events taking place in the reform movement, as well as for mutual support of those being persecuted for their reform beliefs. Also, these unions were purportedly designed to prevent withdrawals from the Methodist Episcopal Church of those who were dissatisfied with its polity.⁶

It is important to note that the union societies were always against separation, having no desire to leave the Methodist Episcopal Church. "A Methodist," a pseudonymous author (Ezekiel Cooper), and an avid proponent of reform stated: "It is said my essays lead to schism. I deprecate schism. But what is schism? Sure you would not call a friendly interchange of sentiments a schism. The friends of schism are to be sought for among the enemies of inquiry, the foes of investigation, who licence menaces to act as jailors, that they may thrust conscientious scruples into prison, and bind them in stocks."⁷

At one point, a group of Reformers did advocate secession, proposing a convention in New York of all desiring to organize a new church. In response to this secessionist group's request for representatives to their convention from the Baltimore Union Society, president John Chappell responded:

... we have made the declaration to the world, that we have no design to separate from the church, much less to divide it; but on the contrary, that we are labouring to prevent secessions and divisions. Our Union Society has organized itself, and instituted the publication, called the Mutual Rights, with intention to show to dissatisfied brethren, that a struggle is making, and will be continued, for the accomplishment of a better state of things, in the Methodist Episcopal Church. In doing this thing, we intended to prevent secessions, and consequently, any participation in the measures which you propose, would be inconsistent with our avowed intentions.⁸

The union society members saw themselves as a constituent group within the Methodist Episcopal Church, whose design it was to implement reform from within. Though they organized themselves under separate constitutions and bylaws and disagreed with the polity of their church at crucial points, the Reformers considered themselves, first of all, to be loyal members of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Only members of the Methodist Episcopal Church could associate with a union society, but all members, laity, local preachers, or clergy, were afforded equal representation.

In July, 1826, a letter, a portion of which is preserved below, was sent from Rev. William Compton, an itinerant in the Methodist Episcopal Church, to Rev. John Young, who appears to have been the local preacher at Plank Chapel in Franklin County, North Carolina, concerning an anticipated meeting of North Carolina Reformers.

⁶Samuel K. Jennings, An Exposition of the Late Controversy in the Methodist Episcopal Church (Baltimore: John J. Harrod, 1831), pp. 142-44.
⁸Jennings, An Exposition, p. 145.
Dear Brother,

Yours by Mr. W(iggins) I received. But in consequence of a two days meeting I am to have at Bethel, the 3rd Saturday and Sunday in this month, it will not be in my power to attend at Plank-Chappel. As to the disaffected party, I am clearly of opinion, that, if to scatter among your people their scismatick poison, be the object of their coming to the Chappel, it is the duty of the Trustees to shut the doors against them. In this the discipline of our Church will bear you out. Trustees are persons in trust to [see] that our Meeting-Houses, be “for the use of the Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America, according to the rules and discipline which from time to time may be agreed upon and adopted by the Ministers and preachers of said Church, at the General Conference in the United States of America” ([see] the form of Discipline, last Edition, page 165). Now it is no secret, but a notorious fact, that if to inveigh against the Disciplines of our Church is the object of these disaffected Men, in appointing the aforesaid Meeting (Which we [see] is their custom) that it is the duty of the Trustees of our house of worship to shut their door against them, for such conduct is not “according to the rules and discipline of said Church,” but in open Hostility against them. Nor will you act as true friends to the Church unless you take a firm and decided stand in favour of her interest. If then you have a majority as trustees, your course is straight before you. In the circle of my labours, so far as I know, we are all at peace about Church government. Though vital religion is at a low ebb . . .

Yours in love
Wm. Compton

The role Rev. William Compton was about to play, as a result of the events which ensued after the meeting of Reformers referred to in the letter above at Plank Chapel, would make him infamous in the eyes of some. William Compton was born in London, moving to America when he was four years old. In this country he spent nearly forty years as an itinerant preacher in the Methodist Episcopal Church serving in both the Virginia and North Carolina Annual Conferences. Admitted on trial in 1809, Compton was brought into full connection and ordained a deacon in 1811. His ordination as elder followed in 1813. Rev. Compton itinerated during his years in ministry throughout Virginia and North Carolina, serving several years as the Presiding Elder of the Neuse District (1821-24).


After being superannuated for a number of years, Rev. Compton became Presiding Elder of the Newbern District in 1846, dying the next year in Oxford, North Carolina, of apoplexy. Of William Compton we find written:

Brother Compton was a methodical man; he worked by rule. He seemed never to be hurried . . . He was eminently a man of one book. He studied little but the Bible, and with that blessed volume he had a singular familiarity . . . His style in the pulpit was plain, clear, and forcible. He dealt more with the practical tendencies than with the speculative connexions of evangelical doctrine. He was, therefore, a preacher for edification; and being a man of prayer, a spiritually minded Christian, his ministrations were with earnestness. There are many, more brilliant preachers than Brother Compton, but few safer . . . The modesty and sweet simplicity of his manners made him such an old man as young men must love. Pain and trouble had not made him irritable. In patience he possessed his soul, and greatly free from ambition for earthly distinction he has gone to a crown and a throne, leaving the church the favour of a blessed memory.11

Some of any “pain and trouble” suffered by William Compton might surely be traced to his unpopular role in the proceedings against certain Reformers after their organization into a union society in North Carolina. The peer pressure placed upon local preachers and itinerants to join the Reform movement must have been intense at times. John Young, a local preacher and the recipient of Compton’s letter quoted above, was a victim of this pressure. Apparently aware of the intentions of certain Reformers to meet at his church, Young had written to William Compton for counsel. It is unclear if Rev. Compton was at that time on location in Granville County or whether he was in fact the Presiding Elder for the district of which Young’s church was a part. In a journal entry dated May 28, 1826, John Young, writing of his dilemma, noted:

... but I am yet tempted by the Devil and at times (even) my old friends with whom I have taken counsel together appears to me as strangers, because I don’t join with them in condemning the best Church Government in the world as I believe but I yet love the Methodist the doctrin Desciplin and government and I hope I shall live and die a Methodist in heart and life and if so I have no doubt but I shall go to heaven therefore let others continue about the shadow of Religion I want the Substance for it is not the form or the best Government in the world that will save me from hell therefore Holynys alone will give me admittance into Glory.12

As anticipated, the Reformers, led by Rev. Willis Harris of the Tar River Circuit, and a resident of Granville County, North Carolina, met at Plank Chapel and there organized the Granville Union Society.13 Of the gathering, John Young wrote: “Friday a meeting began at Plank Chapel and ended on Sunday called Union meeting but it was far from such a

11Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the M. E. Church, South for the Years 1845-1846 (John Early for the M. E. Church, South, 1846), p. 130.
meeting, there was three good Sermons Preached in the three Days as to the other part of the meeting it was awfull and attended with angrily disputes. I hope never to be at such another meeting.”

The formation of the union society is described in a letter from the Granville Union Society to the Baltimore Union Society as follows:

On the fourth Friday and days following in July, 1826, we met at Plank Chapel meeting-house, in Tar River Circuit, for the purpose of organizing a Union Society, which we proceeded to do, after prayer, in the following manner:—A brother arose and proceeded to inform the congregation of the objects of the meeting, namely, to unite for the purpose of petitioning the General Conference to grant to the Methodist Church an equitable representation form of government; and after having answered all the objections which he had heard urged by the old side brethren in a very satisfactory manner, he called on all who were friendly to the wished for amendment to take seats in one square of the meeting-house, which was accordingly done.

Officers were then elected and about fifteen persons, among them, Lewellin Jones, Rigdon Valentine, Thomas H. Hunt, William B. Mann, J. J. Hunt, and Rev. James Hunt, a local preacher, became the first members. A constitution for the newly formed union society was presented and approved as well.

Many of the old side Methodists (those opposing reform) were understandably disturbed by the formation of the Granville Union Society. Upon hearing of its inception, Rev. Benton Field, the preacher-in-charge of the Tar River Circuit, of which Plank Chapel was a part, was incensed when told that some of his constituents had associated with the society. Benton Field’s first act was to forward a letter of reproof to the union society members who were part of his circuit. “I am sorry to learn that you, with several others, have associated in order to use your endeavors to sow dissensions in our societies by inveighing against the discipline of our church,” wrote Field. “It therefore now becomes my painful duty as preacher in charge to administer reproof to you for your unscriptural and peace-destroying conduct; and if you see proper to yield to reproof so far as to engage in future to leave off such pernicious conduct, I shall rejoice to hear the same; but if you refuse, you thereby bring me under the necessity of calling you to account before the church to answer for your conduct.”

But the Reformers were firm in their advocacy for change in the polity of their church. Feeling no remorse and seeing no reason to repent for their “pernicious conduct,” those receiving Field’s letter of reproof chose not to reply at all, continuing in their move for reform through the newly constituted union society. As a result, they were subsequently brought to trial at the behest of Field. The trial was held in a tent adjacent to Plank Chapel meeting-house before members of the class to which the

16Ibid., p. 95.
Reformers belonged. The trial commenced on Sunday, September 3, 1826, as John Young indicates in his journal entry of that day: "Brother Dey preached a good sermon from St. James 1st Chapter & last verse. But after that a very disagreeable peace of business came on hand dealing with those members that set themselves for Reformers and [four] was Excluded by vote of the society and one appealed to Quarterly Meeting Conference."17

The four men brought to trial, Lewellin Jones, Rigdon Valentine, William Mann, and Thomas Hunt, were charged with endeavoring to sow dissensions in the church and inveighing against the doctrines and discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church. According to accounts of the trial, Benton Field, failing to substantiate the charges against the Reformers, asked the jury of fellow churchmen not whether they considered the accused guilty or not guilty, but instead charged: "You that believe their being members of the Union Society will have a bad effect, will rise up." A majority of those present, responding to this question, rose and thus convicted the four Reformers. Rev. Benton Field then declared the men expelled from the Methodist Episcopal Church. Much confusion prevailed as word of the harsh verdict spread to those awaiting the outcome of the trial in the nearby church. Four days later, Rev. James Hunt, a lay preacher, was brought to trial before a committee of his peers. Every effort was made by the prosecutor to remove any from the jury who might be sympathetic to the reform movement. The will for reform was so prevalent among lay preachers, that it proved a difficult task to find such an impartial group of jurors. Finding no cause to justly convict Hunt of the crime against the Church for which he was accused, the jury, consisting of William Compton, a Brother Hines, and John Young, Sr., declared him innocent. Rev. Compton, soon to play a crucial role in the appeal of Lewellin Jones, was to find himself embroiled in controversy because of the declaration of the innocence of Hunt.

Expulsion from church membership did surely seem a harsh punishment for the accusations made against the Reformers. But the authorities of the church did feel that by Disciplinary provision, grounds existed for such action. The basis of the charges against the Reformers was most often the provision of the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church stating that "if a member of our church shall be clearly convicted of endeavoring to sow dissensions in any of our societies, by inveighing (uttering censure or reproach) against either our doctrines or discipline, such persons so offending shall be first reproved by the senior minister or preacher of his circuit, and if he persists in such pernicious practices, he shall be expelled from the church."18

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The reaction of both Reformers and their sympathizers to the use of such a rule for the expulsion of church members was understandably one of both amazement and disgust. Ezekiel Cooper, again writing under the pseudonym, "A Methodist," suggested: "Can anything more tyrannical be imagined, than the act of a puny man, who expels a member from a religious society, because he censured a fallible legislative body, in which he was not represented, for passing a law which deprived him of his inherent liberty of opinion and speech?!" Many called the disciplinary rule a "gag law," prohibiting the freedom of church members to suggest change or reorganization within the governmental structure of the church. One historian of the period advanced the opinion that, "so desperate were the straits in which the prosecutors found themselves when the Episcopacy finally sanctioned expulsion as the only method left to extirpate a movement which it was found logically impossible to meet." Another referred to the trials and expulsions of the Granville Union Society members as a "summary process of ecclesiastical lynching."

Some have suggested that the provision used in justifying the expulsion of the Reformers existed in the Discipline of the church as a result of the activities of O'Kelly and his followers in earlier years. But whatever its origin, those seeking a way to quell the fervent growth of the reform movement used it freely for the accomplishment of their own purposes. Concerning the misuse of this provision in the Book of Discipline by those opposing reform, one writer noted: "A man who labors to effect a change or repeal of a law or existing customs, and lives in peace with his brethren as an orderly member of society, cannot be clearly convicted of endeavoring to sow dissensions: but it must be confessed, that judges in judging of law as well as fact, may through misapprehension of its meaning, extend its penalties beyond the intentions of its original enactors."

The business of trials, persecutions, and expulsions of the Reformers of the Granville Union Society did not end at Plank Chapel. Lewellin Jones, one of the men first convicted and expelled, appealed to the Neuse District Quarterly Meeting Conference, held at Kingswood Meetinghouse. Acting as president of the Conference was Rev. William Compton. According to John Paris, the meeting consisted largely of a debate over mutual rights between the old side brethren and those favoring reform. At one point, Rev. Compton left his chair as president introducing a doctrine whereby a person might forfeit church privileges without actually committing any immoral act. The Reformers had often argued that "sowing dissensions or inveighing against doctrine or discipline of the church" required specific acts of immorality on the part of the one accused. Compton

19 Ibid., p. 123.
20 Drinkhouse, History of Methodist Reform, p. 86.
went on citing criminal cases in which those not actually involved in the act of murder or thievery had even so been tried and convicted of such charges for merely keeping company with the actual criminals. After making his case, the president then resumed the chair and put the matter of Jones' appeal to a vote. According to John Young on the vote concerning Lewellin Jones' innocence, "a large majority was against him." Subsequently, three more members of the Granville Union Society were expelled from the ranks of the Methodist Episcopal Church. These three, along with the four excommunicated earlier, then proceeded to appeal their case to the Virginia Annual Conference.

Following the failure of Lewellin Jones' appeal to the Quarterly Conference, a somewhat lively round of correspondence ensued between Rev. William Compton and a Mr. Ivey Harris, an articulate proponent of reform. Harris, writing initially, questioned Compton on the legitimacy of the use of the one disciplinary provision earlier referred to for the conviction of Lewellin Jones. Pointing to the release without conviction of James Hunt, who was tested on the same charges at a trial in which Rev. Compton sat as juror, Harris questioned the lack of consistency with which his adversary in writing had judged. Continuing in his argument for mutual rights, Ivey Harris posited: "Republican principles and equal rights are too precious to relinquish in a civil capacity, and thousands are beginning to see that Christ's freemen should enjoy, at least, equal privileges."24

William Compton, responding to Harris' question concerning any evidence against Lewellin Jones by which he might be justly convicted cited: "His [Jones'] subscription to the constitution of the Union Society (so called), the object of the votaries of which I have reason to believe, as to the major part of them, is to "revolutionize" the system of Methodist Church government, and so to alter its economy as finally to destroy itinerancy and establish a congregational system among us."25 And continuing he stated that "... when a man subscribes to an instrument of writing, the express object of which is to "revolutionize" the government of the Methodist Church, I think it my duty as a member of said church to be decided in my stand against him."26

The pen-wrought battle was to continue between Rev. Compton and Mr. Harris for some time. Perhaps in no other place do we see the contrariety between Reformer and old sider more aptly displayed than in these letters.27

In February, 1827, the seven expelled members of the Granville Union Society appealed their convictions to the Virginia Annual Conference.

24Paris, History of the Methodist Protestant Church, p. 104.
25Ibid., p. 106.
26Ibid., p. 109.
27These letters are preserved in their entirety in Paris' History of the Methodist Protestant Church.
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Conference, then assembled in Petersburg, Virginia. At the same time, they set up charges against Rev. William Compton for maladministration. Rev. Willis Harris, in a letter concerning the proceedings of the Annual Conference, wrote:

The Virginia Annual Conference, which sat in this place, has just risen. The Granville Union Society of North Carolina presented to it a petition praying that seven of its members lately expelled from the Methodist Episcopal Church for being members of said society be restored to their former standing. The petitioners alleged that although the charge exhibited against them was that of inveighing against the discipline, yet nothing was proved against them on the trial but their having joined the Granville Union Society. That when the preacher found he could not substantiate his charge, he put the following question to the society: 'You that believe their being members of the Union Society will have a bad effect will rise up.' That a majority of those present were of that opinion and rose up, upon which the preacher read them out as expelled. With the petition the Granville Union Society presented a charge against the preacher for maladministration; but the conference decided that it was not maladministration. Thus the door is closed on our unfortunate brethren, and opened for all the reformers to be pushed out of the church.28

Thus the ousted Reformers of the Granville Union Society reached the end of their search for restoration. Seven men, apparently chosen as sacrificial victims to be examples to others of a similar mind for reform, were ecclesiastically slaughtered and subsequently denied a place in the church they claimed to love. All of the expelled remained out of the church until 1828, at which time Rigdon Valentine, Lewellin Jones, Thomas Hunt, William Mann, and J. J. Hunt, set out to organize an "Associated Methodist" society, building a church, later known as Kittrell's Springs Church, in eastern Granville County. Such a move was a harbinger of things to come, for the Reformers, so long clinging to the desire to remain within the ecclesiastical bounds of the Methodist Episcopal Church, were soon to expedite by necessity a great schism in their beloved church to form the Methodist Protestant denomination.

As one looks back at this distressing chapter in the struggle for identity, it can only be left to conjecture whether schism was the inevitable means by which much needed change in polity would come. For as history was to show, many, if not most of the provisions for reorganization suggested by the early Reformers were realized in the reuniting of the two Methodist Episcopal Churches and the Methodist Protestant Church. If those advocating reform had been more patient and those supporting the old side more open to compromise, schism may have been avoided. What seems most important is that those who sought reform in the M. E. Church were ultimately successful in creating a denomination which recognized the mutual rights of all its constituents. Today, every United Methodist conference which meets, with its lay and clergy representation, owes its shape to the determined Reformers of more than a century and a half ago.