"AND OBEY GOD, ETC."
METHODISM AND AMERICAN INDIANS
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In reminiscences about his brief missionary work among the Ojibwa people, Methodist minister Thomas Fullerton recalled the advice he gave to one potential convert: "I required him, if he would be one of us to have his hair cut off, dress as near as he could in civilized garb, keep himself clean, and obey God &c." As the admonition reveals, historical Methodist relationships with Native Americans involved much more than the simple proclamation of the gospel. Missionaries also functioned as carriers of white American culture, which often was linked to the Christianity they sought to promote. Evangelical efforts were influenced by encroaching white settlement, and the missionary ventures were complicated by twists and turns of federal Indian policy. Native responses to all of this cannot be seen simply as spiritual decisions but must be viewed also as responses to wide-ranging cultural conflict and disruption.

The following somewhat impressionistic survey is intended to provide an interpretive overview of historical relationships between Methodism and American Indians. More detailed discussions of virtually every subject raised here are available elsewhere, but this article hopes to contribute by drawing an outline of the story in broad strokes. Those unfamiliar with the subject may find it a helpful introduction, and specialists may be stimulated by some bold generalizations they can test or challenge. This overview inclines more toward offering interpretations or generalizations, both standard and provocative, than to detailing the names and dates associated with various efforts, but a bit of both is attempted. Finally, even distillation has its limits; this summary focuses on the nineteenth century. The twentieth century, with its greater appreciation for cultural pluralism and self-determination, deserves its own discussion.

Methodist Missions Before The Civil War

One might expect Methodism to be exceptional in the amount of effort it gave to Indian missions, because even its founder was interested in being a missionary to Native Americans. John Wesley's venture in Georgia (1736-1737) was a fiasco, for well-known personal reasons, but he entered into it with great enthusiasm, naive about American Indians and

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hopeful that his work among a simple and innocent people would help his own soul. Instead he was appointed as a minister to the colonists, and when he expressed desires to leave the settlements and work among Indians he was refused permission. Governor Oglethorpe wanted his settlers provided for, and the Chickasaws said that warfare made the timing inappropriate. Wesley’s contacts with Indians were brief, limited to a few delegations that visited Savannah. On his return to England, disheartened by his romantic and other misfortunes, Wesley recorded in his journal some general descriptions of Native Americans that were simply vicious. All of the Georgian Indians, except perhaps the Choctaws, were “gluttons, drunkards, thieves, dissemblers, liars...implacable, unmerciful, murderers...Whoredom they account no crime, and few instances appear of a young Indian woman’s refusing any one.” The Chickasaws were “extremely indolent and lazy, except in war.” Wesley did not claim that these descriptions were based upon personal observation. They were, instead, a consensus of the descriptions he had heard from traders and others, but Wesley reported them without a hint of a disclaimer. He had traveled far from his earlier impression of American Indians as uncorrupted. Later, removed from the Georgia experience and established as the leader of a growing religious movement, Wesley wrote to Francis Asbury (1787):

one thing has often given me concern...the progeny of Shem [Indians] seem to be quite forgotten. How few of these have seen the light of the glory of God since the English first settled among them! And now scarce one in fifty among whom we settled, perhaps scarce one in an hundred of them are left alive? Does it not seem as if God had designated all the Indian nations not for reformation, but destruction? How many millions of them have already died in their sins! Will neither God nor man have compassion upon these outcasts of men? Undoubtedly with man it is impossible to help them. But is it too hard for God?...Pray ye likewise the Lord of the harvest, and he will send out more labourers into His harvest...

Neither Asbury nor Thomas Coke responded with any burst of attention to Indian missions. Historian Wade Barclay cites this casual remark in Coke’s journal as an indication of attitudes: “We have in this state [North Carolina] got up to the Cherokee Indians, who are in general a peaceable people. I trust the grace of God will in time get into some of

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5Telford, Letters I, p. 188.
6Telford, Letters VIII, pp. 24-25.
their hearts.” Journals and conference minutes provide a few passing references to two or three Indian converts or to an intention to start a mission among Indians, but nothing verifiable resulted. As Barclay has summarized,

It cannot be said that the missionary zeal of the earliest Methodist pioneers expressed itself in extensive efforts for the conversion of the Indians. Wherever their labors extended they must have come in contact with them but evidence is lacking that, at any time during the closing years of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, organized effort was made by Methodists for their evangelization. 8

Methodist societies were organized in America by 1766, and a national church was officially established in 1784, but Methodists cannot claim the beginning of an “official” continuing Indian mission until 1819. From that beginning through the Civil War, Methodist Indian missions might be summarized principally in four clusters: the “first mission” among the Wyandots, missions in the southeast that followed natives when they were removed to Oklahoma, efforts by Canadian and United States Methodists in the Great Lakes region, and the fabled mission of Jason Lee and others in the northwest.

The efforts of John Stewart among the Wyandots in what is now northern Ohio are generally acknowledged as the first Methodist mission to American Indians. Stewart, a “mulatto,” part black and part Indian, joined the Methodist church as the result of a camp meeting, probably in 1814. 9 Some time later while praying in the fields Stewart heard voices that seemed to come from the northwest, saying “Thou shalt declare my counsel faithfully.” 10 Without church sponsorship, he responded to his call to preach by literally traveling northwest, eventually settling among

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9Barclay I, p. 200.


10Finley, History of the Wyandot Mission, p. 76.
the Wyandots at Upper Sandusky. He recruited Jonathan Pointer, a black, as his interpreter. Preaching, singing, and praying, Stewart converted Pointer and several native leaders, including Between-the-Logs, Mononcue, and Squire Grey Eyes. Stewart also encountered problems with church authorities, because he had administered baptism and performed a marriage ceremony without appropriate credentials. In 1819 he applied to a Quarterly Conference held near Urbana for a Local Preacher's license and received it. The Methodists thereby became more fully aware of Stewart's efforts, and the 1819 session of the Ohio Annual Conference took the mission under its wing, appointing local preacher James Montgomery as missionary "to the northern Indians," chiefly the Wyandots, with Stewart as an assistant. This was "the first appointment by the Methodists of a missionary officially designated as such, to the American Indians." 11 Several other missionaries followed, the most noted being James B. Finley. Stewart continued with the mission but struggled with ill health, dying in 1823 at the age of thirty-seven.

The Wyandot mission included not only a worshipping congregation but also a farm and a school. By 1826 the mission reported three hundred church members, fifteen Class Leaders, four native preachers, and seventy Indian children in the school. 12 The school boarded students through the week, but most returned home on weekends. As many as half of the Wyandot people were associated with Methodism, and many adapted considerably to white American culture. They erected a church, school, and housing similar to that owned by whites, and they established their own tribal store. They divided their land among families, introducing notions akin to private property, although the land was still considered part of the Wyandot nation and individuals had no authority to sell plots outside of the tribe.

In spite of these adaptations, the Wyandots were unsuccessful in resisting the federal policy of removing eastern Indians to the west. For almost fifteen years the Wyandots, especially the Christian faction, repeatedly voted down proposals to emigrate. Missionary James Finley vigorously defended their right to remain on their lands. 13 Yet pressures continued, and increasing murder and robbery by white neighbors eventually convinced a succeeding missionary, James Wheeler, that removal "might be for the best." 14 He continued to support Wyandot resistance, but a removal treaty was signed finally in 1842, and the Wyandots were relocated to Kansas a year later. Methodist missionaries followed. Christian Indians in their new location then became caught in the crossfire of

11Barclay, I, p. 203.
13Finley, Life Among the Indians, pp. 447-489.
the slavery issue, which divided the church as well as the nation, weakening the Methodist Wyandot community. By 1860 Wyandot tribal relations were dissolved, making individuals citizens of the United States. Some who wanted to retain tribal relations later accepted land in Oklahoma, further scattering the people. Cultural adaptation encouraged by sincere missionaries finally did not prevent disruption of the people.

Within a year after the Ohio Conference took responsibility for the Wyandot mission (1819), the general church chartered a Missionary Society. Methodists prided themselves on the missionary character of their entire church and previously had seen a special society as unnecessary, but in 1820 the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church was approved by General Conference "to enable the several Annual Conferences more effectually to extend their Missionary labours throughout the United states and elsewhere." At the beginning it was essentially a funding organization that assisted annual conference initiatives. With business conducted by a volunteer Board, it had no administrative budget and no paid staff officer for seventeen years. It had no power to approve or send out missionaries or to make direct appropriations of funds. Bishops and annual conferences drew on funds as needed. Thus, it was a weak Society in terms of centralized authority or direction, but its financial assistance enabled many annual conferences to undertake missions they could not otherwise afford.

Missions in southern states began only a few years thereafter. William Capers, later to become a bishop, is considered not only the "founder of missions among the slaves" but also "the pioneer of Methodist missions among the Indians of the Southern States." In 1821 he was authorized by Bishop McKendree to raise funds for Indian missions, and in 1822 he visited the Creeks to propose a mission. Missionaries were soon assigned, under Capers' superintendency, and the Creek mission

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19 Barclay I, p. 280ff.
eventually was the location for the Asbury Manual Labor School, attended by several natives who became strong Methodist leaders, most notably Samuel Checote.

Methodist initiatives among other southern tribes followed. Richard Neely’s Tennessee circuit bordered Cherokee villages, and in 1822 he began preaching among them. In 1825 the Mississippi Conference organized missions among the Choctaws and Chickasaws. Alexander Talley, celebrated as the “Apostle to the Choctaws,” was appointed a missionary to Indians in northern Mississippi in 1827. This flurry of Methodist activity in the 1820s claimed an estimated four thousand “Methodist Indians,” including native leaders such as Checote, James McHenry, John Page, Greenwood LeFlore, and John Boot.18

Creeks, Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles, all located in the southeast, have been popularly designated as the “Five Civilized Tribes” because of their agricultural subsistence pattern and their considerable adaptation to white American culture. Far more than the Wyandots just discussed, these tribes, (especially the Cherokees) developed governmental systems similar to that of the United States, established an extensive free public educational system, their own press, and more. Yet, as with the Wyandots, such acculturation made little difference when the federal government determined to remove Indians from eastern lands. With missions among four of the five “civilized” tribes, Methodists were just beginning in the 1820s when the disruption of removal came in 1829 and the following decade. The tragic “Trail of Tears” wrenched natives out of their homelands and relocated them in the dramatically different geography of what is now Oklahoma.

The most dramatic resistance to removal was offered by the Cherokees. When missionaries who supported the Cherokees were imprisoned, legal action began which eventually went to the Supreme Court in the famous case of Worcester v. Georgia. Samuel Worcester was a missionary for the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, a Presbyterian-Congregational agency, and the American Board was the most activist of Christian groups in attempting to defend Cherokee rights. Methodists were divided among themselves, with missionaries in the field taking strong political stands against removal but with conference bodies urging neutrality. Local or regional control of missions in the Methodist system worked in this case against courageous protests. As historian William McLaughlin has written, “although the Methodist circuit riders were sympathetic to Cherokee interests, those who appointed and supervised them spoke primarily for the interests of the white frontier settlers on the borders of the Cherokee Nation who raised the funds for the missions.”19

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18The membership estimate is from Babcock and Bryce, p. 23.
19William G. McLaughlin, Cherokees and Missionaries, 1789-1839 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 290. This is a superb comparative study of the efforts of various denominations among the Cherokees.
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Removal brought understandable bitterness, and many natives "lost faith in the white man and in the white man's religion." 20 Although relocation and reaction erected obstacles, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee conferences continued to send missionaries into Oklahoma. By 1844 they organized their own Indian Mission Conference, with 85 white, 33 "colored," and 2,992 Indian members. 21 In that same year the Methodist church divided into northern and southern bodies over the issue of slavery, and the Indian Mission Conference became part of the southern church. Leland Clegg and William Oden, historians of Oklahoma Methodism, suggest that "from 1848 until the Civil War, the primary work of the Indian Mission Conference was educational." 22 Federal policy was a major reason for the emphasis, because in that period the United States government permitted churches and missionaries to administer schools federally funded through Indian agencies and Indian National Councils. With such financial encouragement, Methodists established thirteen Indian schools in Oklahoma in the late 1840s and 1850s. Much of this was decimated by the Civil War, and church membership was cut by more than half.

Methodist missions in Kansas might be included in the Oklahoma story, because most of them constituted the Kansas District of the Indian Mission Conference. Efforts of varying size and duration were attempted among the Kansas, Shawnee, Delaware, Kickapoo, Peoria, and Potawatomi, along with a continuation of the Wyandot mission. Most of these Native Americans had been displaced from their homelands in the east, in the removal story that now becomes repetitious. Of all these ventures the most noted has been the Shawnee Mission Manual Labor School. Reverend and Mrs. Thomas Johnson arrived in 1830 to establish a mission, and by 1839 they had added a school, assisted by a 2,240 acre land grant from the government. The school's farm included acres of corn, oats, Irish potatoes, garden vegetables, and Kansas' first apple orchard. Buildings included a mission house, a dining hall capable of seating two to three hundred people, dormitories, blacksmith shops, barns, cribs, granaries, toolhouses, a sawmill, and a steam flour mill. The establishment was so substantial that the first territorial legislature met in its buildings. At its height in 1854-55, the school enrolled two to three hundred students. The twelve hour school day was divided evenly between the classroom and manual employment. Like the Oklahoma missions, the school was disrupted by the Civil War. At least two major battles were fought in the vicinity of the Shawnee Mission, with the school's buildings serving as hospitals. In 1864 the Johnsons gave up the mission and moved to a farm where, a year later, he was shot and killed by one of Quantrill's guerrillas. 23

20 "American Methodist Missions" pamphlet, p. 20.
21 Ibid., p. 21.
22 Clegg and Oden, p. 28.
A third cluster of Methodist Indian missions arose in the Great Lakes area, including Canada, New York state, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. In the recording of “firsts,” Canadian Indian missions would claim the preaching of Joseph Sawyer to Indians of the Credit River in 1801 and the preaching of a single sermon by Nathan Bangs to Canadian Indians when Bangs stayed overnight with a trader in 1803. Sustained efforts in Upper Canda, however, began when the Genesee Conference in 1822 appointed Alvin Torry to the Grand River Mission (now southern Ontario), under Presiding Elder William Case. Ojibwa native leaders converted there became crucial for other Great Lakes area missions. Canadians formed their own Annual Conference in 1824 and a separate Methodist Episcopal Church of Canada in 1828, but the United States church continued to offer some assistance until 1832.

On the United States side mission beginnings were slower. In 1823 and 1824 James Finley, with two Wyandot chiefs, Monomcue and Squire Grey Eyes, and Jonathan Pointer as interpreter, made an extensive missionary journey to the Michigan Territory and Canada, but nothing lasting resulted. Sustained Methodist missionary efforts in the United States portion of the Great Lakes region did not really begin until the late 1820s and early 1830s, a decade after the rise of Wyandot and southeastern missions. The one exception was a short-lived mission among the Potawatomies; established by Jesse Walker in 1824, under sponsorship of the Missouri Conference, the Salem Mission was discontinued in 1829 because of removal to Kansas.

Beginning in 1829, several annual conferences sponsored a variety of initiatives. In 1829 Daniel Barnes was appointed superintendent of Oneida missions in New York state, but “the most effective evangelistic work was done by Daniel Adams, a young Christian Mohawk from Upper Canada.” Efforts were barely begun when many Oneidas began to move to the vicinity of Green Bay, Wisconsin, where John Clark came from New York City to superintend missions in 1832. Clark also helped establish missions in Michigan and at Sault Ste. Marie, although he had been preceded about two years in the region by the preaching of John Sunday, an Ojibwa leader converted in Canada. As new conferences were

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24The major source for information in the following paragraphs is Barclay II, pp. 143-169. For Canadian missions specifically, see Mrs. Frederick C. [Annie D.] Stephenson, One Hundred Years of Canadian Methodist Missions, 1824-1924 (Toronto: The Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, 1925). Another secondary discussion of a portion of the Great Lakes region is Frederick A. Norwood, “Conflict of Cultures: Methodist Efforts with the Ojibway, 1830-1880,” Religion in Life 48 (Autumn 1979), pp. 360-376.
26Barclay II, p. 146.
formed nearer the locations of Indian missions, they in turn would take responsibility for the work. Thus, in 1835 and 1836 John Clark was appointed to the Chicago District of the Illinois Conference and Alfred Brunson took charge of Wisconsin missions, also initiating new ones in Minnesota. In 1843 John H. Pitezel was appointed to Sault Ste. Marie and the surrounding area.

This list becomes dizzying, but the point to be made here is that most of the standard, well-known names cited above are not the ones who really spent their daily lives with Native Americans. Torry, Brunson, and Pitezel all published autobiographical reminiscences, and their books naturally help give them prominence, but in most cases they were busy traveling from mission to mission, to conference meetings, and to the east soliciting support. Often the real laborers in the field were unheralded, such as David King in Minnesota, one of the few non-Indian missionaries who made a substantial effort to learn a native language, or Electa Quinney among the Oneida, who like many other forgotten women served as a teacher in mission schools.

Most important were native leaders, and in the Great Lakes area four names arise again and again. John Sunday, an Ojibwa chief already mentioned, was the “first generation” among the four. Canadian missions then helped bring three other important leaders into the church: John Johnson, George Copway, and Peter Marksman. In the fall of 1837 the Illinois Conference approved funding for an interesting experiment in leadership training. They wanted to send the three Ojibwas to Ebenezer Manual Labor School near Jacksonville, Illinois, to be students alongside three non-Indian youth who had committed themselves to missionary service: Samuel Spates, Allen Huddleston, and “One Weatherford” (first name unknown). The Ojibwa youths were to gain knowledge of Christianity and “civilization,” while the non-Indians were to gain knowledge of native language and culture through acquaintance with their Ojibwa fellow students. After two years at the school, all except Weatherford emerged to provide substantial leadership in the Great Lakes area. The three Ojibwas became quite renowned. Copway, although criticized by some fellow workers and historians, published a widely distributed autobiography. Peter Marksman has been called by one historian “the outstanding

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Michigan Methodist Indian preacher of the nineteenth century”; John Pitezel published a book-length account of Marksman’s life. Johnson was an active Methodist missionary until an unhappy dispute caused him to leave in 1848; thereafter he achieved greater prominence as an Episcopal priest (Enmegahbowh) and an associate of the noted Bishop Henry B. Whipple. Huddleston died of illness in December, 1839. Spates worked among the Ojibwa until the general unrest surrounding the Dakota War of 1862 (also known as the Great Sioux Uprising), when he began serving non-Indian parishes in the Minnesota Conference.

In spite of the many names and scattered mission locations, the Great Lakes missions never gathered great numbers, especially when compared with the Indian Mission Conference encompassing Oklahoma and Kansas. On the eve of the division of the Methodist Episcopal Church into northern and southern bodies (1844-45), Indian church membership was reported to be 4,339, with 3,557 in the Indian Mission Conference. When the church divided, the northern body was left with nine missions, fourteen missionaries, and an Indian membership of 778.

The fourth cluster of missions, in the Pacific northwest, relates tangentially to the first Methodist mission among the Wyandots. When John Stewart arrived among the Wyandots he was encouraged and assisted by the government Indian subagent there, William Walker Sr., and his wife Catherine Rankin Walker. He, a non-Indian, had been captured by the Delawares as a child and was eventually adopted by the Wyandots; she was the daughter of an Irish Indian trader and a mixed-blood mother. Thus, although their blood-relatedness to the Wyandots was not strong, they were considered a part of the Wyandot community. Their son, William Walker, Jr., active in the Methodist mission, was in St. Louis in 1831, making arrangements for the transfer of his people to Kansas, when he encountered a delegation of four Nez Perce and Flathead leaders who were also visiting the city. Fourteen months later Walker wrote a letter which was soon published in the New York Christian Advocate and Journal, recounting the story of how the four Indians had traveled over 2,000 miles to plead for the white man’s “Book of Heaven” and some missionaries. Such a delegation did indeed visit St. Louis, but it

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is doubtful that their major purpose was religious. Walker's letter drew
"on his own piety and a fertile imagination" (in historian Ray Billington's
words), but the results were spectacular. Money poured into the
Missionary Society, and Jason Lee with four companions arrived in the
northwest in 1834 to commence the Methodists' Oregon Mission. Within
two years Presbyterians had also begun two missions under Marcus Whit-
man and Henry Spalding.32

Lee was a persuasive promoter and the mission expanded rapidly, in
both personnel and locations. Six stations were founded, with a missionary
staff of seventy. Lee envisioned a full cultural program, with manual labor
schools, farms, the erection of Euroamerican-style houses, mills, and
more. Unfortunately there were not as many Native Americans in the area
as Lee had estimated, and many were disturbed by the influx of non-
Indians, who threatened to take over their land. Daniel Lee, Jason's
nephew and a missionary, wrote in 1843: "Of the mass [of the Indians] it
may be said that three-fourths and more appeared careless and indifferent
about the teachings of the gospel, and many of these were even against
hearing it preached, that they might go on in their heathenish practices,
and in direct opposition to its commands, unrestrained." 33

Other missions had been sponsored by various annual conferences,
augmented by financial assistance from the Missionary Society, but this
venture, so far removed geographically from settled annual conferences,
was more directly dependent upon the Missionary Society. In the 1840s
the Society began to shrink back from the great cost of the Oregon Mis-
ion, and when they began to hear complaints from other missionaries
about Lee's management, he was replaced in 1843. Lee traveled east,
defended himself, and was exonerated by the Society's Board, but the mis-

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sion was now in other hands. The Board wanted the Oregon Mission
reduced, and in 1844 all but two of the mission stations were abandoned.
In 1845 another was liquidated, and in 1847 the last was handed over to the
American Board (Presbyterian-Congregationalist) free of charge, on the
condition that they would continue the mission. Thirteen years after the
venture had begun in great excitement, the Methodist Oregon Mission was
terminated.34

Jason Lee and his Methodist mission have been the subject of much
writing, a disproportionate amount if measured by the mission's lack of
success in converting Indians. The episode is colorful, from beginning to
end, which helps draw attention, but the major reason is Lee's role in the
settlement of Oregon. The area was jointly occupied by England and the
United States, and U.S. hopes for a final claim of the land rested upon its

32Ray A. Billington, "Oregon Epic: A Letter That Jarred America," Pacific Historian
(Summer 1968), p. 34. Reprinted from Together, November 1959.
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34Barclay II, pp. 200-262.
ability to fill the region with its own settlers. Excitement about rich, fertile valleys, helped turn a trickle into a flow of settlement. In fact, historians love to debate Lee's true motivations. Was he sincerely interested in missionary work among Indians, or was it a cloak for purely materialistic colonizing ambitions? Whatever his motivation, the significance of Lee's work rests more with his role in the annexation of Oregon than it does in providing a model for Indian missions.35

**Evaluations of Methodist Missions**

The cumulative impression left by all of this is not one of overwhelming success. Sacrificial labors notwithstanding, Methodist missions were hindered by several features of missionary history and strategy. Although Methodists saw their whole system as missionary in character and prided themselves on the circuit riders' effective work in following the westward flow of white settlers, Methodist missionary efforts were preoccupied with the white frontier. Aside from experience with American blacks, the church was relatively late in gaining experience in cross-cultural situations, both foreign and Native American. American Methodism's first, limited "foreign" experiences did not come until the late 1830s, beginning in the independent nation of Texas, among black American colonists in Liberia (neither of which were radically cross-cultural situations) and in South America.36 The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, in contrast, was involved in both foreign and Native American missions within a few years after its founding in 1810, and lessons they learned abroad about cross-cultural missions (the importance of the use of native languages, for example) could be applied promptly to efforts among Indians. The Roman Catholic Church, because of its international scope, had cultural diversity imbedded within it. Compared to many other denominations, Methodists were late in obtaining cross-cultural experience upon which to base missionary strategies.

Further, the Methodist system also made it difficult to share the experiences once obtained, because of a decentralized mission system. Annual conferences rather than a central mission board took most responsibility for Indian missions within their borders or in neighboring lands, as is illustrated in the foregoing narrative. Thus, personnel were generally recruited from white ministries, given local responsibilities with little or no special training, and with almost no benefit of contact with other missionaries to Indians around the nation. Because mission boards were

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primarily funding organizations, not given to considerable development of mission theologies, strategies, or training, early Methodist missionaries each had to “reinvent the wheel” until more centralized and powerful mission organizations developed, primarily in the twentieth century, or until missions clustered sufficiently in one region, as they did in the Indian Mission Conference.

In addition, the circuit riding system, built on the principle of itinerancy, worked poorly for Indian missions. The appointment system treated circuit riders almost as interchangeable chess pieces, moved from one appointment to another at least every three or four years. It was not unusual to take a minister from a white circuit, appoint him to an Indian circuit, and then a few years later appoint him once again among whites. Such mobility obviously made it difficult to adequately understand a culture or learn a language. M. A. Clark, an Oklahoma minister, complained in 1907 about this very hindrance. “Previous to this time,” he noted, “our church authorities would not allow a missionary to stay on a charge longer than four years. Imagine a missionary being changed from China to Japan and from Japan to Africa every four years. What could the church expect of him?”

In essence, the Methodists took an itinerant style of ministry that had served them well on the white frontier and attempted to apply it to Indian missions, where it was less appropriate. The difference was a cross-cultural situation, which required preparation for cultural understanding, more patience and sensitivity in communication, and more stable, long-term support. On the white frontier, rough-hewn preachers might communicate with the “common people” more effectively than would seminary-educated clergy, but in Indian missions unprepared white preachers had no such automatic advantage. The mobility of wide circuits and frequent shifts in personnel might be efficient in extending ministry among people of somewhat similar Euroamerican backgrounds. However, it was a mistake to assign circuit riders interchangeably when they had to move among tribal cultures so dissimilar that they spoke mutually unintelligible languages and held markedly contrasting cultural assumptions.

A factor which helped compensate for these hindrances in Methodist policy was the development of native leadership. Indeed, the early Methodist system in England and America relied heavily on local leadership while the circuit rider traveled a large circuit, sometimes returning to a specific point only after a month or two. Missions of all denominations found native leadership helpful. Among the Methodists it was especially crucial when missionaries had little facility with native languages and understood little of tribal cultures. Perhaps the weaknesses of Methodist mission strategy unintentionally fostered more Native

American leadership and made it more difficult for missionaries to take the place of native leaders in mission communities than was the case in missions of some other denominations.

Another feature of Methodist missions may have been an advantage among Native Americans, although it has seldom been discussed by historians. Methodist evangelism was based upon revivalism and camp meetings, and this approach naturally carried over into Indian missions. In many tribes, traditional religious ceremonies extended over several days and were social as well as religious events, with much peripheral activity. The sun dance and the green corn ceremony among several tribes might serve as examples. Extended, somewhat free-form camp meetings would seem more akin to such traditional events than would a brief one or two hour liturgical service. However, other denominations have offered similar arguments for their worship styles. Catholics and Episcopalians claim that the ceremonialism of their worship was more appealing to American Indians because it was congruous with the pageantry of native ceremonies.

The latter comments hint at a shift in attention in the study of Indian missions. It is no longer satisfactory to focus exclusively on the names of missionaries, the construction of buildings, and the examination of missionary intentions. Invisible in such accounts are Native Americans themselves, who were much more than passive pawns in the process. Calls for “new Indian history” in the past two decades remind us that Native Americans have histories of their own, involving developments within and between tribes and not always centering upon Euroamericans. When contact with whites enters the story, “new Indian history” emphasizes that natives brought their own viable cultures to the exchange and were capable of initiatives and critical responses. With its institutional focus, this survey does not purport to be such a history, but the emphases of “new Indian history” help all of us become more sensitive to the cultural role of missions.

Missionaries of all denominations were not only evangelists for their particular forms of Christianity; they were carriers of Euroamerican culture which they encouraged American Indians to adopt. Mission literature is filled with repeated references to a twofold task: to “Christianize and civilize” the Indians. From one perspective the missionaries’ cultural program was a humanitarian attempt to improve the lives of fellow human beings. From another perspective it was ethnocentric, with missionaries unable to distinguish between Christianity and

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white American culture. In yet another view, it was simply cultural imperialism. From the perspective of many Native Americans, it brought religious and cultural division to previously unified communities and functioned as the vanguard of a disruptive foreign presence.

Viewed in terms of cultural systems, many missionary intentions that sound simple actually had far-reaching cultural implications. The effort to “teach Indians to farm” serves as an example. The very phrase is misleading, for most tribes had pre-contact subsistence patterns which relied on domestic agriculture in varying degrees; it is more accurate to say that missionaries were trying to introduce European agricultural practices and technology and were encouraging a more total reliance on domestic agriculture. When they urged mission Indians to farm more and to hunt or gather wild foods less, they were encouraging a less diversified subsistence pattern which sometimes proved disastrous when crops failed. In tribes where women had responsibility for domestic crops, attempts to get male mission Indians to farm asked them, in effect, to become women, altering native cultural understandings of sexual roles. Hidden behind some advocacy of agriculture was an assumption about the value of industriousness. If hunting appeared to be sport, while agriculture involved proper labor, even commanded by God in Genesis, any Indian who resisted missionary encouragement to farm could be judged lazy, by definition. The farming program also involved introduction of private property, for missionaries doubted that anyone would work in a communal field if one could harvest what another had worked hard to produce. Thus, if mission Indians were to “get ahead,” missionaries felt, land needed to be allotted to individuals or families, and then a whole new legal system would be required to protect the private property. Finally, when missionaries attempted to introduce their farming programs in nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes, it was often with the ulterior motive of locating the natives in one place so that they would be more accessible to preaching and teaching. Mission farms had many implications.40

Schools could be examined in a similar fashion. Boarding schools were more culturally coercive than day schools, for they clearly attempted to isolate children from their native cultural settings and to surround them with white American culture in microcosm. Children were given new names (often those of mission donors), new clothing, new haircuts, and a curriculum intended to introduce not only information but the values and worldview of the dominant culture.41 Literacy programs, which seem so self-evidently helpful, had their own cultural implications, especially if English was emphasized rather than native languages. The 1851 Annual


Report of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church declared: “With the English language, the Indian will acquire the elements of English literature, and the forms of thought, and the feelings which it represents, both social and religious. We doubt whether the Indians will ever be raised to a good state of civilization and religion, without the use of the English language. The influence of a language upon the principles, feelings, and habits of a people, is not appreciated as it ought to be.” In retrospect, Christians wonder whether some of the cultural program did not contradict Christianity’s own teachings, making people more greedy, less attuned to creation, and so on.

Such cultural discussion easily becomes tangled with value judgments. Condemnation of any and all change encouraged by missionaries runs the risk of freezing Native Americans into a sort of anthropological zoo, forgetting that native cultures adapted and developed as the result of intertribal contact long before they encountered Europeans. The ethical issue is whether change is forced or freely chosen, not the mere fact of change itself. From the opposite direction, some people justify the missionary cultural programs by easily referring to the inevitability of Euroamerican control of the continent; adaptation, it is argued, was important for American Indian survival. Yet the historical story tells of many who adapted but who lost land or encountered racist rejection nevertheless.

However one deals with the ethical issues, the cultural discussion helps non-Indians understand more fully the variety of responses to Methodist and other Christian missions by Native Americans. First of all, when missionaries encountered native resistance, other explanations are possible besides the work of the devil and the agitation of whiskey traders. John Hicks, a Wyandot chief, reportedly replied to an early sermon by John Stewart with these words:

I, for one, feel myself called upon to rise in the defense of the religion of my fathers . . . No, my friend, your disclaiming so violently against the modes of worshipping the Great Spirit, is in my opinion, not calculated to benefit us as a nation; we are willing to receive good advice from you, but we are not willing to have the customs and institutions which have been kept sacred by our fathers, thus assailed and abused.

Native Americans might be willing to dialogue with missionaries, mutually sharing and learning, but when Euroamericans totally condemned native culture and spirituality, although also claiming an intention to help, it was an affront. When this arrogance threatened to divide a native community or contribute to the loss of a homeland, the missionaries

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42 Annual Report of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1851, p. 71.
43 Joseph Mitchell, The Missionary Pioneer, or a Brief Memoir of the Life, Labours, and Death of John Stewart (Man of Colour) Founder, Under God, of the Mission Among the Wyandots at Upper Sandusky, Ohio (New York: J. C. Totten, 1829), pp. 31-32. Hicks eventually joined the Methodist mission, but the fact does not gainsay the depth of the sentiment.
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appeared dangerous. Fon du Lac chiefs said to an American Board missionary: "Those who sent you here want our country. You are their forerunner. They will come and ask for a little and then take a great deal." 44

Few conversions came while tribes lived in relative autonomy, able to relate to Euroamericans on fairly equal terms. When the encroaching white presence interfered more and more with traditional ways, and when military defeats crushed some native communities, conversions came more quickly. If Euroamericans had shown themselves to be more powerful, perhaps adopting their religion would give American Indians access to some of that power. Yet conversion was not merely capitulation. Christianity helped provide a new organizing center for disrupted lives. Even then, many Native Americans practiced selective adoption, retaining features of their native heritage while embracing some aspects of Christianity. Missionaries tended to offer their religion and their culture as a total package, but it was not always received that way. Oklahoma missionary John Jasper Methvin quoted Stumbling Bear as saying, "White man's road heap good, better than Indian road. But not all of the ways of the white man better than all the Indian ways. Some Indian ways best." 45

Methodists and Federal Indian Policy

Even prior to the beginning of the nineteenth century, the "civilizing" goals of Christian Indian missions were shared by the United States Government, and from the enactment of a Civilization Bill in 1819 onward, the federal role in Indian life increased. However, until the Civil War, one could argue that missionaries usually spearheaded the drive for acculturation. After the war the initiative seemed to shift into federal hands. Native Americans were increasingly confined to reservations; Grant's Peace Policy enlisted church workers as Indian Agents but under federal control; after the demise of that program's church-state cooperation, government schools and federal allotment programs shaped the scene. Missions remained, but they were no longer the vanguard or the focal point of Indian-white relations, and frequently they served the government's purposes.

Thus, while one could continue tracing the development of mission institutions following the Civil War, including the founding of women's home mission societies, north and south, and the diffusion of missionary efforts among additional tribes, in a brief survey like this attention might properly move to Methodist roles in federal Indian policy. A general

44 Quoted by Robert H. Keller, Jr., American Protestantism and United States Indian Policy, 1869-82 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), pp. 5-6. Cf. ABCFM, transcripts of correspondence, 1827-78, in the Newberry Library, Chicago, F. Ayer to D. Greene, October 31, 1838, MS 141.
45 Our Brother in Red 7 (September 15, 1888), p. 7.
history of Methodism and Native Americans should include more than missions; Methodist attempts to influence federal policy, or a tendency to avoid such issues because they were "too political," are part of the story as well. Methodist attitudes toward federal policy could be shaped by people who had never met an Indian, and sometimes they ran contrary to the views of missionaries in the field. Much room remains for systematic study of Methodist views on public policy issues pertaining to Native Americans. What follow are some introductory impressions.

Three major features of federal policy in the nineteenth century were removal, Grant's Peace Policy, and the "Allotment Act" of 1887. The first, removal, has been prominent in the mission narratives already provided. Between 1816 and 1848 twelve states entered the Union, and in the process "scores of treaties were negotiated by which the tribes relinquished the bulk of their holdings east of the Mississippi and consented to removal west," immediately or eventually. Frequently accomplished through enticements or coercion (both subtle and not), the removal policy was based on the assumption that Indians had no right to block "progress." Governor William Henry Harrison asked, "Is one of the fairest portions of the globe to remain in a state of nature, the haunt of a few wretched savages, when it seems destined by the Creator to give support to a large population and to be the seat of civilization?" Others rationalized that removal also would be better for American Indians, because they would be isolated from the less elevating features of frontier contact, such as the availability of alcohol.

Missionaries and mission organizations were divided on the issue. Isaac McCoy, a Baptist, has become the best-known missionary proponent of removal, arguing that it would protect Indians from exploitation. Methodist missionary Alexander Talley also supported removal. Most missionaries among the tribes protested the federal policy, although historians can argue whether the opposition was based upon concern for native rights, self-interest in protecting from disruption the missions they had worked so hard to establish, or both. In the Cherokee case, although the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions was in the forefront of protest, two Methodist missionaries (James Trott and Dickson McLeod) were imprisoned for their support of Cherokees, along with their better-known ABCFM colleagues. In 1830 eight Methodist circuit riders signed a resolution expressing firm support for the Cherokee Nation, which served as a model for resolutions signed by missionaries of other denominations. The eight also wanted their denomination to issue "a public and official expression of sentiment" against oppression of the Cherokees, but it did not come. Later, James Finley among the Wyan-

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47Quoted by Hagan, p. 69.
48McLaughlin, Cherokees and Missionaries, pp. 291-292.
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dots also opposed removal. His reminiscences include the frequently quoted statement: "I have always been opposed to the removing plan, and have honestly told my sentiments to Indians and others. I used my influence to persuade the Indians not to sell, but to remain where they were; for if they were removed to the base of the Rocky Mountains, or beyond them, the white population would follow them... This was, and still is, the honest conviction of my mind." 49

Although missionaries who worked directly with Indians usually opposed removal, they received little support from denominational bodies. Circuit riders among the Cherokees were members of the Tennessee conference. The 1830 Tennessee Annual Conference not only refused to join the missionaries in protesting removal policies; they rebuked the missionaries for trying to push the conference into politics. The officer who arrested Trott described him as a preacher "who had been dis­countenanced by his own Conference for his officious and over-zealous interference in Indian politics." 50 Much of the church at large seemed to share a view published in the New York Christian Advocate in 1835: "With these matters it is not our providence to meddle. Our business is to 'preach Christ crucified'; and this, by the grace of God, we are resolved to do." 51

In spite of the hesitation to speak out on political issues, Methodist periodicals did issue some editorial statements about removal. The New York Christian Advocate, for instance, objected to the forcible ejection of people against their will, but it expressed "no opinion" on the justification of the removal program in general. 52 Regarding many of these editorial statements the generalization of historian William T. Hagan applies. "As usual," he wrote, "moral indignation over the plight of the red men varied with the distance from him. Those whites avid for Indian land or fearful for their scalps were ever inclined to classify him as subhuman and devoid of rights. Those far removed from the frontier detected great potential in the Indian." 53

The relation of churches to federal Indian policy took a decisive turn after the Civil War. In 1869 President Grant surprised most observers by announcing a church-related reform program to eliminate corruption and reduce violent conflict in federal-Indian relations. Commonly called his "Peace Policy," the program included church nomination and influence upon Indian agents, creation of the Board of Indian Commissioners, and expanded federal aid for Indian education and missions. 54

49Finley, Life Among the Indians, p. 452.
50McLaughlin, p. 295.
53Hagan, p. 70.
With long-standing charges that Indian Agents were corrupt and making fortunes at the expense of Native Americans, Grant asked Quakers and then other denominations for nominations of more suitable agents. While the agents would be legally responsible to the government, denominational organizations also were expected to exert oversight, making the precise responsibilities of both unclear. Linked to the nomination of agents was the allocation of agencies among denominations. On their assigned agencies, Grant explained, "the societies are allowed to name their own agents, subject to the approval of the Executive, and are expected to watch over them and aid them as missionaries, to Christianize and civilize the Indian, and to train him in the arts of peace." 55

The criteria for the allocation of agencies were not carefully defined, but it was generally assumed that previous activity on a reservation should have some bearing. If so, it was frequently disregarded. Of seventy-one agencies assigned in 1871, Hicksite and Orthodox Friends (Quakers) controlled sixteen, having been the first group invited to participate, on the basis of their legendary reputation for just dealings with Indians. Methodists were a close second, with fourteen agencies. Presbyterians received nine, Episcopalians eight, Roman Catholics seven, and a variety of other denominations received less. Catholics, who supported the most widespread and vigorous Indian missions at the time, felt cheated. Southern Methodists were also slighted, although the situation has been less often noted by historians. At least three-fourths of Methodist Indian mission activity was in southern hands in the 1860s and 1870s, but the northern church received all of the agencies in the post-Civil War context. Historian Robert Keller, Jr., exaggerates when he says that "the Methodist Church [northern] had virtually no Indian missions in 1870," but in comparative terms he is close to the truth. 56 Robert Whitner is a bit more careful in stating: "During the period in which the peace policy was in effect, the Methodist Episcopal Church had long since lost the great interest it once had in Indian mission work, and it made little effort and spent little money to implement or extend it." 57 The Peace Policy, then, allowed Methodists to undertake efforts they did not choose to finance themselves. "More than any other church under the Peace Policy," says Keller, "Methodists allowed the federal government to sustain their entire

55Grant's annual message to Congress, December 5, 1870, from James D. Richardson, comp., A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1902, ten volumes (Washington, D.C., 1904?) 7, pp. 109-110.
56Keller, p. 36.
Indian mission program.” 68

When Methodists received almost twenty percent of the agencies, critics charged religious favoritism. Grant had been raised in a Methodist home and associated with Methodism throughout his life, although he never joined the church. Catholics charged that in allotting agencies Grant had been duped as a “tool in the exaltation and propagandism of the Methodist Church.” One member of the Board of Indian Commissioners declared that the BIC had been nothing but a Methodist Kitchen Cabinet. Robert Keller’s assessment is that 69

although no direct evidence supports the specific charges against it, the Methodist Church did enjoy unusual power in Washington during the 1870s. Grant himself once remarked that there were three political parties in the United States: the Republicans, the Democrats, and the Methodists. 69

The Peace Policy did not seem to improve Indian Agents appreciably or bring much to Native Americans besides further pressure for assimilation. Its major result was interdenominational squabbling, with considerable evidence of anti-Catholic prejudice. Although it did not occur to people at the time, it was a “flagrant violation of the First Amendment.” 60 Religious division and growing government disenchantment brought a gradual withdrawal from the policy, finally terminated in 1882. Historian Whitner concludes that the record of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the Peace Policy was “largely a failure. It did little to improve the service or the condition of the Indian. It did much to perpetuate sectarianism and intolerance and bigotry in America.” 61

A third major phase of federal Indian policy was enacted in 1887 with the adoption of the Dawes Act. Missionaries and other non-Indians had long advocated the elimination of tribal communalism and the introduction of private property, so that Indians might “advance in civilization” and melt into American culture. The first Methodist mission among the Wyandots encouraged division of lands. In 1855 George Smith wrote about a Michigan mission, claiming that nothing would “prevent this mission from becoming self-supporting at an early day” if Indians could learn their hardest lesson, “economy in proper provision for the future.” That would be accomplished by a division of land among individuals and families. “Their community principles make it absolutely imprac-

68Keller, p. 55.
69Keller, pp. 24, 36-37.
69Keller, p. 213.
69Whitner, p. 281. Many would claim that “Father” James Wilbur of the Yakima agency was an exception to this claim of failure by Methodists. Carl Schurz called Wilbur “the most successful agent in the service.” For a less positive view, see Keller, pp. 55-56, 158-160. For other views, see Maurice Helland, There Were Giants: The Life of James H. Wilbur (Yakima: Shields Bag and Printing, 1980) and Robert Whitner, “Grant’s Indian Peace Policy on the Yakima Reservation, 1879-1882,” Pacific Northwest Quarterly (October 1959), pp. 135-142.
ticable—reducing the industrious and saving to the condition of the thriftless. . . .”

In the late 1800s a crescendo of voices advocated the elimination of reservations. Reformers who viewed themselves as friends of the Indian, including the Indian Rights Association, the Women's National Indian Association, and the Lake Mohonk Conferences, joined unknowingly with others who saw an opportunity for land acquisition in the dispersal of reservations. As a result, Congress passed the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887 which “enshrined as general policy what had been taking place piecemeal for years.” At his discretion the President could allot reservation land to Indians, conferring U. S. citizenship at the same time. Although land titles were to be held in trust by the government for twenty-five years, “surplus” reservation land was offered for sale immediately, and much allotted land passed out of Indian hands over time. The Dawes Act was a culmination of century-long pressures for acculturation.

Support for this policy was so widespread that it would be misleading to claim a special role for Methodists, but they were actively involved. The President of the Board of Indian Commissioners from 1881 to 1890 was Clinton B. Fisk, “a devoted Methodist who played an active role in the Methodist Publishing House and in General Conferences of the Church.” Daniel Dorchester, a Methodist minister, was appointed Superintendent of Indian Education just as the allotment plan was being implemented.

Led by missions in early years, and eventually dominated by the federal government, nineteenth century Indian-white relations included persistent efforts to eliminate native cultures. Frederick Norwood notes that “the only ultimate solutions of the Indian problem, it was firmly believed,” were (1) extermination and (2) assimilation. The churches may at least take credit for almost universally rejecting the first of these.” At times Methodists courageously stood for justice, against broken treaties, physical coercion, and predatory traders. In organization and education they were ill-prepared for cross-cultural encounters, but that worked serendipitously to promote the importance of native leadership. Yet whatever the helpful intentions and the particulars of mission strategy, the missions participated in the century-long push for assimilation. In doing so, non-Indian Methodists simply reflected common assumptions of their day, believing in the self-evident superiority of Euroamerican civilization and preparing American Indians for what seemed to be inevitable domination. The twentieth century has witnessed some revision of these assumptions, with the Wheeler-Howard (Indian Reorganization) Act of 1934 and with heightened appreciation of cultural pluralism and self-determination. It is unfair to judge people of one century by the cultural standards of the next, but Native Americans experienced the results regardless.

62 Annual Report of the Missionary Society of the M.E. Church 1855, pp. 73-74.
63 Hagan, p. 141.
64 Norwood, “Serpants and Savages,” p. 309.
65 Ibid., p. 310.