AMERICAN METHODISM AND ITS HISTORICAL FRONTIER:
Interpreting Methodism on the Western Frontier: Between
Romanticism and Realism

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In his long and richly informative essay on "Methodism on the Frontier," Theodore L. Agnew has discussed the various meanings of the word "frontier." It is used to refer to such different but related realities as a line between geographical areas (for example, an international border); or a line arbitrarily selected to demarcate a settled area from one unsettled; or an area just within the line of settlement, and hence constantly changing with the ebb and flow of migrating populations. This last usage is especially familiar when one talks about Methodism on the frontier in the first half of the nineteenth century. But Agnew goes on to point out that the term "frontier" is also often used to describe an entire way of life, or, quite characteristically in our time, to delineate any pattern of unusual challenge, and so we speak of such things as missionary frontiers, frontiers of science and medicine, urban frontiers, frontiers of space. On all frontiers, Agnew concludes, "the common theme is challenge"—challenge to the human spirit and the ingenuity of humanity to adapt so that "the essentials of the familiar may live on in the fresh atmosphere."1

In trying to deal with "American Methodism and its Historical Frontier" we are challenged to understand in a fresh way the meaning this important part of the nation's religious history has for life on the complex and perilous frontiers of the late twentieth century. In Methodist historiography the word "frontier" is indelibly associated distinctively with the westward movement of population in the nineteenth century, with the winning of the West, with the indefatigable circuit rider at the center of a continuously moving stage, facing numerous challenges of primitive travel conditions, of cultural barbarisms, and of human opposition. Often the circuit rider is presented as a very rugged individual in a time of a spreading philosophy of individualism throughout the nation, but then again we are shown him in the context of the camp meeting, surrounded by thousands, not infrequently cooperating with leaders of other denominations who were also his competitors, but preaching his heart out, and, at least as typical Methodist accounts and songs of the time put it, winning out over "the world, John Calvin, and Tom Paine."2

Much nineteenth-century Methodist literature interpreted the circuit riders as giantesque figures who "out-shoot, out-work, out-fight, and out-wit their contemporaries." In his impressive monograph, *No Foot of Land: Folklore of American Methodist Itinerants*, Donald E. Byrne, Jr. has shown that the tradition of the circuit rider as hero was industriously developed by early biographers and historians; for example, one of them could say that, ignited by the individualism, aggressiveness, and courage of the Revolutionary spirit, "Methodist preachers of that day reflected in their character and methods the very genius of that heroic time." In the twentieth century, one of the pioneers of what was then ardently believed to be a scientific and objective approach to church history, and himself not a Methodist, Peter G. Mode, enriched this tradition. One of the chapters in his book *The Frontier Spirit in American Christianity* was entitled "The Challenge of the Heroic," in which the circuit riders, whom he called "Wesley's greatest contribution to American evangelism," were interpreted in these words, to select just a few sentences from a long passage:

Many of them unschooled, and practically all unconcerned about the abstractions of theology, they were the prototypes of a new era of American religious chivalry. Hurling defiance at the materialism of the frontier, they followed the backwoodsman to his cabin. There, if only for a night or for a meal, they left the benediction of prayer, of a few comments upon some passage of the Scriptures, and perhaps of a tract, reviving the hallowing memories of the church of childhood days, and pointing out, perchance, the moral and spiritual hazards of backwoods life. Renouncing for weeks and perhaps for months the companionship of wife and the caresses of children, if not indeed, for their work's sake voluntarily choosing the unmarried state, these men often found their hospitality in Nature's chamber under the shadows of hurtling rocks or heavy forests, falling asleep, perchance wet and unfed, with far too little assurance that before morning the Indian might not be glorying in their scalp. Sometimes there was a bright spot—the camp meeting, with wagons bearing the happy companies to the religious festival of the year, with its songs, its shouts of triumph, and its converts prostrated beneath the glory of new-found Grace.

So in numerous accounts of past and present the saga of the Methodist march to conquer the West has been celebrated. Though today the historians of Methodism must be acutely aware of the story of the rise of black, German, and Methodist Protestant bodies, and not forget to deal with the slowly increasing role of women in denominational affairs, one of our first jobs is to call attention to the familiar story of the circuit riders and their great victories on the western frontiers.

Of course, with its dramatic, heroic, and romanticized overtones, that job has been overdone. Within forty years of the Christmas Conference Methodism had become the largest American denominational family, an amazing achievement. It came about not only because of advances on the

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8Ibid., p. 277.
4As quoted by Byrne, ibid.
western frontiers, but also because of successes in many other areas. Yes, Methodism grew on the western frontier, but it also expanded in the long-settled areas as already occupied fields were intensively cultivated and circuits were divided and redivided as the flocks multiplied. In noting the way Methodism more than doubled just in the years from 1796 to 1804, Lawrence Sherwood emphasizes that “This growth had been strong in the South, the West, and New England.” The heroes of Methodist outreach were not only in the West; Sherwood exclaims that “Many thrilling stories of devotion and courage could be told of the work of preacher and people as Methodism worked to extend itself in areas where it was already organized.”⁶ Agnew rightly reminds us that there were frontier-like conditions in northern, middle, and southern states in the earlier nineteenth century, and that when Methodism crossed the Allegheny Mountains it was entering a fourth frontier region, though that soon became generally regarded as typical. The western was certainly not the only important frontier for Methodism in the first half of the last century.

While we are trying to put things in perspective, we need to remember that the circuit riders on all four frontiers were not alone in their work, though they often were in their long journeys from station to station. Frederick Norwood was talking about what he called “Westward East” when he observed that “the effective combination of local preachers and travelling preachers was perfectly suited to the environment of the frontier. It was the combination of the two that worked the wonders.”⁸ And sociologist T. Scott Miyakawa in his study of Protestants and Pioneers further reminded us of the third ingredient in the Methodist brew, the people themselves, the faithful at the stations and in the classes, in saying “to explain the Methodist success we need to modify the more individualistic interpretations of western life and give greater weight to democratic organizations under leadership vested with authority but identified with the common people, responsive to the popular will, and outwardly free from aristocratic pretensions—a feature later associated with Jacksonism.”⁹ In looking at the circuit riders as they passed through every part of the country do not miss those hardworking, often taken-for-granted local preachers, nor minimize the importance of those among the men and women of the stations who worked with them, led the classes, and so often shared their crowded quarters and humble meals.

All this, however, is by way of perspective—the western frontier remains of primary importance for understanding American Methodism

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⁷Agnew, ibid., p. 502.
in the nineteenth century, if only because there was a whole succession of
Wests as populations pressed on past the Alleghenies to the Mississippi,
then across the prairies to the Rockies and through the passes to the
Pacific. The way that Methodism not only kept pace with but in many
places gained in percentage of members as populations moved westward
suggests the most important single reason that historians have spoken of
"the Methodist Age" of American church history. In 1895 a Presbyterian
historian, Robert Ellis Thompson, spoke of the transition to a Methodist
or evangelical period in American church life, in his very choice of terms
noting that something of the Methodist approach and spirit was absorbed
by other evangelical bodies. Several years later Congregationalist
Leonard W. Bacon picked up the idea in his summary volume of the mul-
tivolume American Church History series, *A History of American
Christianity*, noting that for a hundred years the character of Methodism
was impressed "upon the American church in its various orders," and
adding that he was not using the word "Methodist" in the narrow sense of
"Wesleyan.". In our time two Baptist historians, C. C. Goen and
Winthrop S. Hudson, have analyzed the concept of the Methodist Age
more fully, seeking to date it more precisely and to define it in careful yet
broad terms, but not rejecting it. In the third edition of his volume,
*Religion in America*, Hudson has declared that "the decades immediately
preceding the Civil War witnessed the triumph of the distinctive emphases
of Methodism in practically all the denominations." Thus it was the
whole Methodist family across the land, along with the evangelical bodies
that were influenced by it, that loomed with such importance in the story
of American Protestantism by the middle of the nineteenth century, but
the triumph on the western frontiers was and remains a very important
aspect of that whole and is the characteristic symbol of it.

The movement of Methodism across the successive western frontiers
was such a vast and protean movement that it was difficult at the time and
ever since adequately and aptly to summarize it. The movement was
carried by a diverse group of itinerants who were for the most part strong-
minded, determined, able, and independent characters who cannot easily
be cast into a single mold. By selecting evidence with only a minimum of
care, interpreters of that day or ours can easily draw a bright, roman-
ticized picture of the Methodism of that time, or in the name of realism
they can so magnify its flaws and its problems that one can be led to

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10 Robert Ellis Thompson, *A History of the Presbyterian Churches in the United States* (c.
Sons, 1900), p. 176.
1981), p. 180. See also his article, "The Methodist Age in America," *Methodist History*, XII
(April, 1974), 3-15, and C. C. Goen, "The 'Methodist Age' in American Church History,"
wonder if this was a great chapter in American religious history or an un­fortunate one from which both Methodism and the rest of us have been lucky to recover. One senses that neither extreme is right, yet it has been hard to find that middle ground that will take account of the evidence we have, and that will somehow steer between an inflated romanticism and an overcritical realism. The movement was a highly controversial one while it was going on, and controversy persists in the effort to interpret it today.

Even a hasty glance at the accounts of contemporary observers from outside of Methodism shows how the controversies of the time influenced and perhaps often dictated what was seen and said. To pick an illustration or two from the negative side first, one might expect some bitter remarks from leaders of rival churches, and one is hardly disappointed. Hence a comment from an Episcopal bishop, Samuel Horsley, comes as no great surprise: “The great crime and folly of the Methodists consist not so much in heterodoxy as fanaticism; not in perverse doctrine, but rather in perverse zeal for the propagation of the truth, which is the pretence for that irregular ministry.” Here the old charges about irregularity were combined with those relating to fanaticism and excessive emotionalism, so often heard as often formally uneducated but very determined circuit riders pursued potential converts. Methodists themselves loved to tell stories about their own persistence and to glory in it, but what may look like persistence from the inside may look like fanaticism from outside. Agnew retells the famous account of the migrant who had moved his family from Virginia to Georgia to Mississippi Territory to get away from the circuit riders only to have one of them, Richmond Nolley, hail him before the wagon was unloaded. Nolley cut through the migrant’s caustic response to his greeting by saying, “My friend, if you go to heaven you’ll find Methodist preachers there; and if to hell, I am afraid you will find some there; and you see how it is in this world, so you had better make terms with us, and be at peace.”

Criticism of Methodist ecclesiology came not only from Episcopal quarters, however, but in most vigorous fashion from separatist Baptists, especially from those who became known as Landmarkists, and most es­pecially from the editor of The Tennessee Baptist, J. R. Graves. In a highly tendentious book, published in 1856, The Great Iron Wheel; or, Republicanism Backwards and Christianity Reversed, Graves argued from a position that asserted that the Baptist tradition he represented went back to apostolic times and possessed the only true Christian churches, all others being merely religious societies. Methodism, he repeatedly insisted, was not a true church, but was the granddaughter of the Church of Rome,
for him "the great whore and mother of harlots," the Antichrist, and the
daughter of the Episcopal Church, which he declared "is called by Christ a
harlot and an abomination." Hence, he said to Methodists, "your claim to
the title and consideration of a Christian Church is wholly groundless and
invalid. Your organization is not old enough by 1747 years." If you can
manage to stay with the book to page 71—there are still some 500 more
pages after that—you will find one of the things that was troubling him
most: "I am held up before the world, as are my brethren and Church, for
public reproach—made a hissing and a scorn by its thousands of circuit
riders—the travelling police of Methodism—before their congregations in
every city, village and hamlet, from one end of the land to the other." For
him, the indefatigable circuit riders had been turned into an army of gen­
darmes to spread what he believed was a network of error. In that day of
religious controversy, such a widely circulated book—the copy I used was
the 17th edition—soon drew many responses, conspicuously from William
G. Brownlow, Methodist local preacher and also an editor of a Tennessee
magazine, who rushed into print with The Great Iron Wheel Examined; or
Its False Spokes Extracted, and an Exhibition of Elder Graves, Its
Builder. His book opens on a level of high principle with these words:
"Who has not heard the name, and read more or less about the dis­
cussions, abuse, and bigoted intolerance of the notorious and self­
conceited J. R. GRAVES, editor of the "Tennessee Baptist!" ... His
paper is a low, dirty, scurrilous sheet, and is so regarded by many of the in­
telligent Baptists of the country, who refuse to patronize it." You can
see, with source material of that nature in plentiful supply, why it is hard
for the interpreter to arrive at a balanced judgment of Methodism on any
frontier!

Yet there were contemporary observers outside of Methodism who
tried to strike a fair balance in their judgments. Philip Schaff's effort in the
1850's provides an illustration:

Its preachers have, in general, little or no scientific culture, but, on an average, a
decided aptness for popular discourse and exhortation, and they often compensate by
fidelity and self-denial for their want of deeper knowledge. They are particularly fitted
for breaking the way in new regions, for aggressive missionary pioneer service, and for
laboring among the lower classes of the people. Their zeal, however, is very frequently
vitiates by impure motives of proselytism, and indulges in the boldest aggressions on
other churches, thinking that it alone can really convert.

Some of the visitors from overseas seemed more impressed with the

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15J. R. Graves, The Great Iron Wheel; or, Republicanism Backwards and Christianity
Reversed (Nashville: Graves, Marks and Rutland, 1856), pp. 32-33, 71.
16William G. Brownlow, The Great Iron Wheel Examined; or, Its False Spokes Extracted,
and an Exhibition of Elder Graves, Its Builder (Nashville: published for the author, 1856),
pp. 19-20.
17Philip Schaff, America: A Sketch of Its Political, Social, and Religious Character, ed.
Methodist system than with the persons who managed it. A deputation from the Congregational Union of England and Wales in the 1830s found the American very much like the English Methodists:

both in their virtues and failings. There is a considerable measure of ignorance and extravagance in that as there is in this; and they are certainly quite as sectarian . . . . They depend here, as every where, rather on their method than the talent of their ministry, or the peculiarities of their faith; and this method has wonderful compactness and adaptation to its ends. They are a hive of bees, in which each one has his place, and each one has his work to do; and where each, by the movement of all, is constrained to fulfil it; and thus the whole duty of the busy and happy community is completed. . . . Whatever may have been their failings, they have done more, both in America and Canada, than any other body of Christians, to carry the means of instruction and worship to the most neglected and scattered portions of these regions, and have been most successful in their efforts of christian philanthropy.18

A Scottish traveler later in the 1830s made some not dissimilar comments, but with a significant addition. After a brief description of the circuit rider system, George Combe concluded:

By this machinery the thinly-scattered population of the west is preserved within reach of Christian ordinances and cultivation. The love of souls alone can induce men of ordinary attainments to embrace so laborious and ill-requited a profession.19

In view of the great variety of voices, Methodist and non-Methodist, American and foreign, that come to us out of the nineteenth century, it is hard to arrive at a balanced judgment about the role of this denominational family on the western frontiers. A very good example of a twentieth-century historian who has steered well between romanticism and realism is Louis B. Wright. In his book Culture on the Moving Frontier he makes a number of well-balanced observations; for example:

Much nonsense has been written about the emotionalism of the Methodist preachers. The Methodists . . . believed in an orderly system of worship, and many of their leaders, including Bishop Francis Asbury, frowned on too much ‘enthusiasm’ or emotionalism . . . . Though not every preacher lived up to the high ideals of John Wesley, prevailingly the Methodist preachers were a self-sacrificing and devoted group who did much to civilize the West. The integrity, courage, and common sense of circuit riders like Peter Cartwright won respect wherever they went.20

Wright went on to say that the civilizing influence of the itinerant Methodist preacher was incalculable, and is a subject that deserves further investigation—as do many matters that have here been touched on so quickly.

The Methodist people who labored on the western frontiers achieved much that the later Methodist bodies inherited, but, along with their fellow religionists on all the frontiers, they passed along some problems, too, that long plagued the churches. One was the determination to maintain an itinerant ministry and to resist settling. Like so many other things in that period that pattern was set by Wesley and Asbury. The latter had a fear of “locality”; he criticized other churches as hopelessly infected with it; in his “Valedictory Address to William McKendree” in 1813 he said “I wish to warn you against the growing evil of locality in bishops, elders, preachers, or Conferences.” Asbury did see that locality was essential in cities and towns, but the powerful emphasis that fell on itinerancy continued to hang over the Methodist bodies long after they moved from a frontier to an urban culture. In my few experiences of meeting with groups of Methodist ministers I still hear what sounds like expressions of guilt for the joys of stability whenever the earlier emphasis on itinerating comes up, as it quite often seems to do. Perhaps that is one of the costs of the great achievements of Methodism’s frontier period.

Secondly, in this same period and also involving the whole church came the yielding to public pressure on the issue of slavery. Soon after the Christmas Conference Asbury and Coke, who had taken antislavery stands, found it best to tread carefully; as Coke summed up the position taken by the conference in 1785, “We thought it prudent to suspend the minute concerning slavery, on account of the great opposition that had been given it, our work being in too infantile a state to push things to extremity.” Then in 1816 the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church voted concurrence with a sad though prophetic committee report that foresaw the agony that lay ahead yet felt powerless to do anything about it. The crucial paragraph was this:

The committee to whom was referred the business of slavery beg leave to report, that they have taken the subject into serious consideration, and, after mature deliberation, they are of the opinion that, under the present existing circumstances in relation to slavery, little can be done to abolish a practice so contrary to the principles of moral justice. They are sorry to say that the evil appears to be past remedy; and they are led to deplore the destructive consequences which have already accrued, and are likely to result therefrom.

Slavery was indeed a challenge to the whole church, but one that in the period with which we have been dealing was largely bypassed in the predominantly white Methodist bodies except by a courageous few.

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22As quoted by Rudolph, Francis Asbury, p. 180.
Another problem that still plagues Methodism is the tension between order and freedom, between regularity and spontaneity. Asbury again can be seen as a contributory factor in this human dilemma as it has troubled Methodism; one of his best biographers observes that "Asbury, the champion of the camp meeting, was at the same time Asbury, the enemy of disorder."24 In the summer of 1805 the bishop wrote to a presiding elder that he was sure that the camp meetings would "shake the formality of religion out of the world," but before the year was out he wrote to a pastor that "My continual cry to the Presiding Elders is, order, order, good order. All things must be arranged temporally and spiritually like a well disciplined army."25 I suppose that the tension between the longings for spontaneity and for order can be found to some measure in all religious bodies, but it has been a characteristically difficult and sometimes destructive tension for Methodists, one that was very much intensified by the history of this denominational family on the western frontiers.

In the effort to interpret Methodism's experience on the western and on other frontiers in the first half of the nineteenth century one needs to keep many things in mind, always trying to penetrate through the rhetorics of inflated heroism and of over-rigorous criticism, of flowery romanticism and unimaginative realism. After forty years of working at it I can still hear William Warren Sweet's voice and remember his blue pencil marks on my seminar papers as he pressed for the facts and then for their careful interpretation. By him and others we were taught to use the historical method carefully and with integrity, and to remember that the only way one can even begin to approach objectivity in historical judgment is by understanding and accepting one's own subjectivities along with those of others and being suspicious of them all. We have learned to keep our commitments to a method in clear and open tension with our commitments to faith and church. In his unforgettable book, *The Historian and the Believer*, Van A. Harvey sharpened the tension between those two persons within us in an acute way. Yet he also observed that "A fact cannot provide the ground or the object of faith when faith is properly understood, although it can awaken faith and provide the symbols that faith uses."26 While trying as an historian to do some interpreting of Methodism on the western frontiers by reviewing as many facts as I had time and patience to look at, glorying in the fascinating collections of myriads of them in sourcebooks and histories and aiming to give a properly critical overview, to my surprise I found myself being instructed in faith too. Even as I tried to cut through the rhetorics of controversy, partisan piety, and heroics,

24Rudolph, *Francis Asbury*, p. 120.
even as I tried to grasp those homely and unpleasant realities of the circuit riders' existence that Donald Byrne documented in such sections of his book on the folklore of the itinerants as the one entitled "Vermin, Filth, Hogs and Hominy," the facts unexpectedly deepened faith. For all the limitations and quirks of the circuit riders, for all that could be said of them after applying such historical, psychological, sociological, and theological analysis and criticism of which this interpreter is capable, still the impression came unmistakably that as a group many of them had been given an authentic glimpse of the gospel relevant for their day and generation and not entirely without relevance to ours. They had come to know about those mysterious inner channels which by grace through faith connects us to powers above and beyond human powers, with the Eternal One. Always as through a glass darkly they had seen the gospel of the new life in Christ, and in broken but strangely effective ways they brought it to others. Though they spoke about it in tones that might sound quaint to us, they knew that the Spirit was active in the Church, and hence came the courage to do what they knew they had to do. The historian as historian can point to the facts as the story is interpreted; the facts point to a chapter of faith that is Methodism's heritage—more than that, it is the heritage of all Christians. Yes, you can explain that meteoric rise of a brand new church of 1784 into the largest denominational family in America not forty years later in wholly human and natural terms, but after trying that my witness is that then you might have missed that to which the facts really point. Though the circuit riders dismounted long ago, they preach to us still and teach us yet.

27 Byrne, No Foot of Land, pp. 198-205.