People came long before the evening service was scheduled to start. The main floor and then the galleries filled. By 7:30, the time the service began, people crowded the aisles, the vestibule, even the outside steps of the church leading down to the street. They were the fortunate. Many, numbering in the hundreds, could find no seats or standing room and had to return home. An undertone ran through the huge crowd. Then silence fell as a tall, slender man in his late forties entered the room from a side door. The service began. Opening words were spoken. A hymn was sung. A prayer was offered. Then the man slowly went to the pulpit. For a long moment, he looked at the people. He looked at the people he had served for three years. Then, without a note, he began to speak. 1

His text for the evening was taken from Matthew 12. The passage read: “Out of the abundance of the mouth the heart speaketh, for by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.” The passage could not have been more fitting. For his words, the words he would speak this evening, brought judgment. Some upheld him. Most, though, condemned him. He moved almost at once to what the people had come to hear. “It is useless,” he said, “for you or me to ignore the peculiar position in which you, as a church, have stood, and I, as your pastor, have stood for the last three years, a position not only peculiar, but very unpleasant, and in many respects painful.” 2 He then restated his position without equivocation. He told the people that he could not accept the inspiration of scripture in all its parts. He could not accept a sacrificial doctrine of the atonement. He could not accept an eternal punishment that foreclosed all possibility of repentance and forgiveness in a life beyond death.

The people listened intently. Many this night heard this departure from traditional doctrine with approval. Applause frequently interrupted the sermon. Its climax came with the declaration: “This more I say: I will and I must be mentally and spiritually free. And that at any cost. I would rather die in poverty deep, with the crown of liberty on my brow, than to live in a palace and wear chains.” 3 As these words hung in the air, applause, loud and sustained, filled the room. The meaning of these words

1“Liberal Methodism: Dr. H. W. Thomas Delivers His Farewell Sermon to the Centenary Congregation,” The Chicago Times, 13 October 1880, p. 8.
3Ibid., p. 281.
was clear. They declared retreat unthinkable. They issued a challenge to others. The time had come for others to act. Upon them fell the choice of toleration or removal. It was a decision they would now have to make.

This evening service contained elements of high drama. The man in the pulpit was Hiram Thomas. The date was October, 1880. The occasion was Thomas' final sermon as minister of Centenary Methodist Episcopal Church in Chicago, Illinois. At annual conference the following week, he would be appointed to another church. His three years at Centenary, the maximum church law allowed, assured this. The importance of the evening, though, lay in more than words of farewell. Much of what Thomas had done and said at the Centenary Church was unorthodox. Opposition to him, within the Centenary Church but mostly outside it, had grown. He would meet this opposition in full force at annual conference. Thomas knew this. In this final sermon, he announced himself ready to fight. The Chicago Times made clear the evening's significance: "He places himself squarely on record, throws down the gauntlet as it were to the conference, and tells plainly what he does, and what he does not and can not believe. . . . The reverend gentleman has given the conference full ground for action, and it now remains to be seen what the latter body will do."4

This paper is about Hiram Thomas. It looks at the man, his unorthodox thought and action. It looks also at the Methodist Episcopal Church and its response to Thomas. The paper, though, is about something larger than an individual and a church that moves relentlessly against him. It is about a church that finds itself in a new context. Through its reaction to Thomas, we are able to see the church's early reaction to an industrializing environment. From this experience, we are able to learn how the church met change, which may help us to minister better in a context of change today.

I

Hiram Thomas was born in what is now West Virginia in 1832. His parents farmed a modest acreage. The family was large. Of eight children, he stood in the middle with three older brothers and four younger sisters. When he was one, the family moved to a new farm near the Maryland line. It was here that Thomas spent his boyhood years. He worked on the farm and attended a district school until sixteen. Eager to learn, he then went to a village academy one hundred miles from home. He returned home two years later and continued his education under the instruction of a neighbor. He subsequently attended academies in Pennsylvania, and when the family moved to Iowa in 1854, he studied privately under a professor at Iowa Wesleyan University.5

5Austin Bierbower, ed., Life and Sermons of Dr. H. W. Thomas (Chicago: Smith & Fobes, 1880), pp. 11-12.
Two events in these early years would strongly influence him later. In 1851, at nineteen, he joined the Pittsburgh Conference of the Evangelical Association. He was now a minister. This event was obviously important because it set the direction his life would take. Perhaps, though, it was even more important because it marked the culmination of a long and difficult internal struggle. Thomas, without knowing precisely why, had always believed he would some day become a minister. But along the way, there were serious misgivings. Misgivings came from those around him. He was raised in a religious home. His father was a Quaker and his mother a devout Methodist. The family, however, did not encourage his interest in the ministry. They urged him to find his life's work elsewhere. Misgivings also came from within himself. Doubt about both the ministry and faith plagued him. He, though, did not run from misgivings. And he did not let them overrun him. He questioned, studied, prayed, and questioned more. A torturous path took him to conference membership. Once a minister, he never let it out of his sight. Increasing toleration and patience were the consequence. Looking back on these formative years, Thomas said: "I had a hard struggle of it. It was a weary way finding the light; it was plod and plead and pray. I think the great fight I had with my doubts and misgivings then made me very patient with all those who do not see these things just as I do."^6

The second event occurred in 1855. At twenty-three, Thomas fell ill. His health had always been precarious. This time it was felt he would unquestionably die. The doctor saw no hope. Family and friends consoled each other. They resigned themselves to the inevitable. But Thomas did not consider death inevitable. He thought his life unfinished. He saw more work to do. So on his death bed, he prayed that God might give him new life. He later spoke of that day: "O, he is going" they said, around my bed-side; but I told them it was all a mistake, I was coming instead of going. I told them I was going to live; that God had answered my prayer for life."^7 Health slowly returned. With it came Thomas' conviction that God had restored his life for a specific purpose. He did not know at the time what he was to do. But that he was to do something became an unshakable article of his faith.

His life in the ministry began modestly. He preached in small churches while continuing his education. His salary in these early years never exceeded one hundred dollars. Yet he was noticed. People came to hear him. Each church he served prospered. Friends considered his abilities large enough to make him influential nationally if he went to a major city. The family move to Iowa in 1856 brought him closer to a large city church. At once, Thomas joined the Iowa Conference of the Methodist Episcopal

^6 Ibid., p. 15.
^7 Ibid., p. 13.
Church. In the next fourteen years, he served many of its leading congregations. In 1869, Thomas transferred to the Rock River Conference in Illinois. Within three years, he was sent to the prestigious First Methodist Episcopal Church in Chicago. From there, he went to the First Church of Aurora and then returned to Chicago to serve Centenary Church, the largest in the Conference.  

II

The move to a large city church brought Thomas greater influence. It also brought him into a new world. Chicago was far different from the communities he had known in West Virginia and Iowa. In the 1840s, Chicago was a country town. Cows grazed in pastures a mile from city hall. Wolves occasionally roamed through the streets. Roads were unimproved. Buildings were uninspiring. But within two decades, by the time Thomas arrived, Chicago had become a city. Its population had grown from 10,000 to 300,000 people. Tasteful stores, impressive public buildings, fashionable homes now lined its well-maintained streets. More than two hundred schools educated its children. Seven newspapers reported its daily news.

Chicago, though, had not only become larger and more imposing. It had also undergone metamorphic change. Economic growth had moved Chicago from an agrarian to an industrializing society. The city now possessed new technology that could make durable elements malleable and fuse them together to control awesome motive power. Force, speed, and flexibility once only dreamed of were increasingly available for its use and misuse. The city, rich in commercial opportunity, was now given to wealth and its zealous pursuit. A heady optimism prevailed. Rags to riches, although much more often fiction than fact, filled the imagination of the new society and became its goal and creed. The city now also felt itself convulse. External economic and political forces threatened its stability. Intimately tied to the national economy, it fell victim to the country’s recurring cycle of prosperity and depression. National and state politics wrestled for influence at the city level. Moreover the state sought control of its government and revenues. Internal forces also threatened the city. It staggered under the impact of constantly arriving immigrants in overwhelming number, people incessantly coming and going, the rankling mixture of disparate ways of life. At one end, it fissured from vice, crime, poverty and at the other from the battering of crass new wealth for social status.

Ibid., pp. 15-16.
The Great Fire of 1871 showed the spirit of this industrializing society. Its impact was devastating. Raging out of control for more than a day, the fire turned Chicago into an inferno. One citizen wrote his mother: “We are in ruins. All the business portion of the city has fallen prey to the fiery fiend. Our magnificent streets for acres and acres lined with elegant structures are a heap of sightless rubbish.”\(^{12}\) The fire destroyed virtually every building in an area covering three and a third square miles in Chicago’s central business district. The swath of destruction rent the city’s heart: property loss of $200 million; ninety thousand people left homeless; three hundred dead. Yet the wreckage did not rend its spirit. The city began to rebuild immediately. Within a year, a new city arose from these ashes. New buildings valued at $40 million demonstrated Chicago’s swelling industrial power. By October, 1872, twelve months after the fire, the volume of trade reached record levels, real estate values soared upward, civic pride glowed. The people of Chicago gathered to dedicate a monument marking both the calamity and the city’s “glorious resurrection.” Its rebirth was hailed a “triumph of energy and enterprise, an example worthy of emulation to the end of time.”\(^{13}\)

Chicago’s industrializing environment contained enormous implications for the Methodist Episcopal Church. Its traditional position began to conflict sharply with urban realities. The church saw itself and its otherworldly orientation at society’s center. But in the industrializing society, materialism bound to the pursuits and appetites of this world was the centripetal force. Change, said the church, emanated from within and so attention must focus upon the individual. Through the individual’s transformation, the world is transformed. But change in the city came rushing at the individual from without, from technology, the market, group force. Science, the economy, the collective unit, therefore, were the appropriate areas for concentration. The world molded the individual, not vice versa. The environment, the church claimed, possessed providential design and thus absolute laws of operation and conduct. But the city environment was painfully bewildering, and its diverse composition made norms relative. The church’s commission was evangelical. Its task was to gather members into its body. But the growth of the city’s population overwhelmed the church. It could not hope to stay abreast of the swelling numbers and their alien diversity.

In this new world, Hiram Thomas increasingly felt the tension between church and society. He saw a growing chasm between the two and could not remain silent. Others first began to hear his voice in the early 1870s when he was appointed to First Church in Chicago's downtown business district. Thomas believed the church must reach the people, all the people. So he took it to the fringe of society. Its doors were opened to the socially undesirable. The transient, the wayward, the criminal found themselves welcome at First Church. Thomas' concern for the outcast deeply impressed a reporter for the *Courier Journal*. He wrote: "There is not a wretch too vile, a soul too desperate, a heart too despairing to be reached and purified, reclaimed, made brave by his holy presence... We all know what kind of riff-raff hotel waiters are. The head waiter of one of our leading hotels, and formerly a vile wretch as could be imagined, sauntered into the First Church in 1874. He came again and again. The outreaching tenderness of the pastor enveloped him. He reformed and was converted. The result was eleven conversions among his hotel companions."\(^{14}\)

Some, though, were clearly not impressed. Thomas' gravitation to the socially deviant worried them. The funeral of John Coons turned worry into alarm. When Coons, an infamous billiards player, died, several ministers refused to conduct the funeral. They argued that the church at death had no obligation to one who had spurned religion and perverted society. Thomas, though, when asked accepted immediately. His remarks at the funeral received wide coverage in the religious press. Most denominational papers, including the Methodist *Northwestern Christian Advocate*, sharply criticized him. They found upsetting his words: "The church ought not to so represent the religion of the meek and lowly One as to make it seem far away from the world in sympathy, above it in mystery, nor to repel it by dogmatism. Nothing pains me more, or gives me more anxious thought than that the world's greatest need, and religion's great gift—man's want and God's fullness—cannot be brought together. It rests upon me with such a weight that I have sometimes almost felt that God calls me to a ministry at large outside of the church that I might get near to the hearts and homes of the people."\(^{15}\) The religious press found even more upsetting his concluding statement: "I stand with reverence at the close of an earthly life. The outward is partly seen of men. The inward—its struggles, its hopes, its fears, its joys, its sorrows—is known only to God. And to God the soul of our brother and friend is gone."\(^{16}\) Thomas had the audacity to imply that Coons, unconverted and a billiards player, was not now under automatic sentence of eternal damnation but with God.

\(^{15}\)Ibid., p. 23.
\(^{16}\)Ibid., p. 25.
Thomas' irregularities did not end here. He welcomed not only the outcast but the speculative philosopher. Thomas helped found the Chicago Philosophical Society and became its second president. Conservative and liberal Protestants, Catholics, spiritualists, skeptics, atheists met to discuss controversial ideas and ideologies. Attacks upon Christianity were frequent and unrestrained. Church members criticized Thomas' involvement in this group and severely rebuked him for opening his pulpit to Society members Gerald Massey and Henry Booth. From this platform, both men, well known for their unorthodoxy, assaulted the church and its doctrine in public lectures. A further outcry engulfed Thomas when he took to the pulpit to defend a Society member, professor Robert Swing of the Presbyterian Church, against heresy charges. Methodists condemned Thomas not for agreeing with what Swing said—they, too, found the doctrine of election and reprobation highly distasteful—but for insisting upon Swing's right to speak. Creedal barriers, they told Thomas, must be respected, not blithely overturned.

Opposition to Thomas mounted. Influential people within the church wanted him out of the city. They applied enough pressure to ensure his appointment to Aurora, Illinois when his three-year pastoral term at First Church ended in 1875. The appointment was a reprimand. Thomas, though, refused to listen. He instead demanded the freedom to inquire. He uncompromisingly sought truth, insisting only that his conclusions accord fully with reason. At the Aurora Church, he gave a series of Sunday evening lectures titled "The Origin and Destiny of Man." A local newspaper soon afterward published these lectures. In the preface, Thomas acknowledged his growing sense of uncertainty: "As to the views here expressed, I can only say that they are such as have taken shape in my own mind as seeming to be most reasonable, and possibly nearest the truth. On many points I felt—and feeling it, expressed—a sense of uncertainty. The dogmatists who know, or rather think they know, everything, will probably not find satisfaction in reading these pages."17

In these lectures, Thomas spoke with certainty about the natural order of creation and God's presence in human affairs. He spoke also with certainty about the individual's need for redemption and its source. Salvation resulted not from a propitiary death, he claimed, but from the individual's "knowledge of sin that comes from the law and his sorrow for sin that comes from the cross." But he was uncertain about the individual's origin and ultimate destiny. Thomas said concerning creation: "Whether man's origin is by a special act of creation or by gradual development from some germ of a lower type, I may surprise you by saying that I don't know. Is there a God back of creation? That is the fundamental question to set-

He said concerning eternal punishment: "After years of study, and an agony on this subject that none but myself can understand, I can only admit that I don't know and that I am very certain that no one else knows. Nor is it essential that we do know, or even believe in endless punishment in order to be Christians."  

Thomas returned to Chicago in 1877. Centenary Church, largest in the conference, wanted him in their pulpit. This once thriving church was now struggling with a declining membership and indebtedness. Its leadership felt Thomas could restore the church's vitality despite his unorthodoxy. So they pressed for his appointment and were successful.

In his conversation, in his teaching, in his sermons, Thomas at the Centenary Church continued to question and to probe. This pilgrimage of the mind led him to reject the doctrines of an inerrant scripture, a sacrificial atonement, an eternal punishment. Since the individual was fallible, he reasoned, so must be the product of the individual's work, including scripture. A sacrificial theory of the atonement that made Christ sinful and God an angry tyrant offended the mind and the heart. Christ died not to propitiate God but to secure the world's moral order and to attract repentant individuals through the impelling agony of his vicarious suffering. The doctrine of eternal punishment, he claimed, contradicted the moral law and the notion of an eternal God of love. At the funeral of an adulterous woman, shot to death by her enraged husband, he declared:

According to the popular conception and teaching, there is but little, if any, hope in the future for this murdered wife—cut off without a moment's warning or time for preparation for death. But the husband—the murderer—can go to jail, and after six weeks, die happy on the gallows and go straight to heaven. I don't believe it! If there is a hell he must go to it, for a while at least. And it would seem that there must be some chance for this poor murdered child to do in the future what she was cut off from the opportunity of doing here.

His position in itself was highly alarming. It moreover possessed a thought process that upset the structure of Methodist doctrine at three foundation points. First, Thomas made doctrine center not in the knowledge of God revealed through scripture, but in the condition of humankind perceived through the mind. Second, he looked for truth not in the light of absolute certainty, but in the darkness of the unknown. Truth was not self-evident, a matter of dogmatic statement that one acquired intuitively. Rather, it was opaque and rational. One must relentlessly
pursue truth through a piercing inquiry that subjected all propositions to the test of reason and empirical observation. Doubt, which in Methodist orthodoxy meant apostacy, was its portal and pathway. Third, he gave God and the individual movement and made Christ stationary. God was not a distant, immovable lawmaker, but a loving Father who in diverse ways reached out to the fallen individual. The individual was not locked hopelessly in a state of sin that required propitiation, but capable of responding penitently to acts of love. Christ, though, was a transfixed agent of God's love. Christ suffered not to remove sin but to induce shame so that individuals themselves could break the sinful cords that bound them.

Now Thomas had gone too far. The church moved to stop him. At the 1878 annual conference, a special committee, operating in complete secrecy, considered his place in the church. Thomas knew he was on trial. But he knew neither his accusers nor the charges against him and so was unable to defend his position. He late one evening wrote his own indictment and requested a hearing before the conference body. In plenary session, the clergy heard his defense. Then by a vote of 212 to 7, they censured him. He was permitted to return to Centenary Church with the provision that orthodoxy be fully observed.

Orthodoxy proved too restricting. Thomas spoke with increasing volume of the need for intellectual freedom. The 1879 annual conference was tolerant. But the 1880 conference was not. It acted swiftly. W. H. Tibbals, in an unprecedented move, petitioned the clergy to dispense with a Select Committee and "kindly but firmly" request Thomas to resign voluntarily for the good of the church. The motion passed 110 to 49 with 65 abstentions. With this vote, the clergy, in effect, denied Thomas a trial and standing him mute before the conference body convicted him of heresy. Thomas, though, refused to resign. So a trial became necessary.

The trial was largely perfunctory. The conference had already made its will known. The outcome was never in doubt. The prosecution charged Thomas with precipitating dissension and disorder within the church and with leading its members into dissipation. The prosecutor, Matthew Parkhurst, argued that Thomas' denial of an infallible scripture destroyed the Bible's authority. Thomas, Parkhurst said, made scripture a matter of personal interpretation which stripped the Bible of its power to direct and enforce. His rejection of a sacrificial atonement distorted Christ's nature and purpose and left the individual mired in sin. His notion of a redemptive state after death encouraged the transgressor to postpone con-


version, to lose sight of the need for immediate reconciliation with God. Parkhurst concluded with a most devastating charge:

Now, I want to say, perhaps, the harshest thing that I have said tonight, and I leave it to burn. There are grey-haired godly men in this city, and there are broken-hearted mothers in this city, who are weeping over the ruin of their sons, whose downfall in theater-going, dancing, beer-drinking and card-playing began with their acceptance of these views from Dr. Thomas.

The jury, made up of twelve conference ministers, heard the words that Parkhurst left to burn. They heard also the voice of the conference. Thomas was convicted of teaching false and pernicious doctrine. The penalty was expulsion from the ministry and the Methodist Episcopal Church.

IV

The conviction of Hiram Thomas calls for examination. Why was the conference determined to expel him? Thomas thought the conviction unjust. The day after the trial, his counsel, H. W. Bennett, told the presiding elder of the Chicago District they would appeal. The doctrinal standards, Thomas insisted, were ambiguous. They lacked the precision needed to draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable teaching. Moreover, he felt himself fully consistent with Methodism's historic nature and purpose. "My conception of Methodism," he explained, "has been that it is a large, heartful, soulful, singing and praying congregation moving upon the life of the world that could tolerate any views peculiar to myself, so long as I was in hearty sympathy with its purpose and for a quarter century I have been trying to persuade my fellow beings to turn from sin to righteousness." To support this position, which put evangelical purpose before doctrine, Thomas cited the church's founder and animating spirit, John Wesley. Wesley was theologically eclectic, casting his thought from experience, and in the societies required only a kindred heart. Most important, Thomas knew others stood with him. He said:

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26Ibid., p. 16.
28Letter of H. W. Bennett to W. C. Willing, 10 September 1881, Northern Illinois Conference of the United Methodist Church Archives, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois.
29Record of trial proceedings, 7 September 1881, Northern Illinois Conference of the United Methodist Church Archives, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois; Austin Bierbower, "Dr. Thomas and the Methodist Church," The International Review 12 (February 1882): 147-152.
30Minutes of the Thirty-Ninth Session of the Rock River Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1878, p. 13.
I have stated I could not accept the 'verbal' theory of inspiration, and many of you said that you could not accept it. I have stated I hold to the 'moral' and not to the 'penal' theory of the Atonement and many of you declared that you do not hold to the 'penal' view. I have stated that I could not accept the doctrine of a hell or material fire; and some of you have said that you do not believe it nor teach it. And yet you charge me with heresy for not believing the very things that you yourselves do not believe.  

The conviction can be partly explained from the perspective of church dogma. The church traditionally considered its perception of truth timeless. Its doctrine did not change with unfolding events. Rather its directives were meant to shape the way events unfolded. Thomas' outright rejection of dogma, his willingness to embrace doubt and follow its lead into uncharted areas of thought, was intolerable. He must be silenced. The church had no other alternative.

The conviction can be partly explained from the perspective of the church's eroding authority in an industrializing society. The church silenced Thomas to counter its opposition and strengthen its hold upon society. It felt this action necessary because of assault from outside. Science threatened to displace the church's authority and nullify its doctrine. Dazzling new discoveries gave science a magnetic appeal. Moreover its theory of evolution discredited the doctrines of a rational first cause and a providential government. Rationalism and the Higher Criticism also undermined the church's thought. Rationalism rejected mystery and miracle making the supernatural problematic. The Higher Criticism probed the Bible for error and inconsistency and for some made scripture problematic.

Assault also came from within. Thomas correctly insisted that others were unorthodox. Signs of a growing internal rupture among the episcopacy, the clergy, and the laity were evident. The 1878 annual conference that first indicted Thomas might also have indicted the presiding bishop. Portions of Bishop Foster's theology in his book Beyond the Grave alarmed the orthodox Methodist. A statement reached the General Conference floor in 1880 denouncing his book for doctrine contrary to "the Articles of Religion, the Apostles Creed, and Holy Scripture as taught by orthodox evangelical Churches." Other members of the clergy pressed against the boundaries of orthodox thought. A. D. Field, a conference minister during these years and its respected historian, wrote: "If the Con-

ference were at any time brought to a test, for instance, as to the nature of the resurrection body, and made to comply with Watson's *Institutes*, there would be a flinching, and that, too, among many men who have been General Conference officers." Field was highly critical of Thomas. He declared that because of Thomas "societies planted by the money, and labors, and prayers, and tears of true men, in a year were warped from their old standing onto liberal ground." His statement, meant to rebuke Thomas, revealed church members open to new ideas.

The most serious challenge to the authority of church thought, however, came not from assault but from apathy. A growing silence was heard amidst the clamor of theological strife. A commercial society given to secular pursuits made doctrine impotent not out of opposition but out of indifferences. Society's interest not only in the theological ideal but in idealism itself faded. Idealism fell to acquisition which became the measure of value. Whatever sold possessed value for the producer. Value inhered in what money could purchase for the consumer. Idealism fell to competitive survival. Property and status were pursued with dedication. They admittedly were false gods. Yet to renounce them, to refuse to honor and fight for them, made one competitively vulnerable. Idealism fell to what might be called pragmatic realism. The task was not to work toward the world's progress and the individual's perfection. The task was to make the best of what life offered. Not idealism, which elevated life, but adaptation, which made life comfortable or at least tolerable, increasingly shaped thought and behavior.

Possibly the conviction can also be partly explained from the perspective of worried people of influence. One of Thomas' supporters, Austin Bierbower, wrote in *The International Review* that powerful individuals within the church ordered his dismissal because he undermined their position. In his article, Bierbower pointed out that the denominational press continuously attacked Thomas. It refused to advertise a recently published volume of his sermons. It printed in full the arguments against him at the Judicial Conference but not a word in his defense. Bierbower reported that the editors of the *Northwestern Christian Advocate* accounted for their stance with the words: "We have to do it." Instruction, Bierbower claimed, had come from the Western Book Concern. He called the Book Concern the "Jesuit Order of Methodism." It acquired power through its patronage; through its representation of the Church Extension Society, the Sunday School Union, the church periodicals and other general agencies at the annual conferences; through

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36 Ibid., p. 43.


38 Bierbower, "Dr. Thomas and the Methodist Church," p. 161.
its counsel of bishops, presiding elders, and other conference managers. The Book Concern's power was felt especially at the annual conference. It influenced elections, legislation, and judicial proceedings. Conference managers, Bierbower said, found security in the Book Concern's power and so became its willing agents. They enabled it to mold the church's opinion and set its purpose.

The Book Concern, Bierbower maintained, moved against Thomas. His thought was reason enough. But even more damaging was his independence. On the eve of the fateful 1880 annual conference, Thomas told the Centenary Church: "I would rather die in poverty deep, with the crown of liberty on my brow, than to live in a palace and wear chains." Thomas, if Bierbower is right, was not merely speaking here for effect. He was speaking to a specific situation. The average minister, Bierbower said, did wear chains. He accepted the will of the Book Concern and its agents out of fear. To do otherwise, as Thomas' words implied, could mean appointment to an obscure church at a meager salary. Thomas, as his words made clear, would not allow himself to be intimidated. A man of his ability and prominence could not be ignored. He not only annoyed but with his popularity threatened the power structure. He would not bend. So he had to be removed.39

The will of the Book Concern, according to Bierbower, was made clear. The ministers knew they were to vote for removal and complied. Thomas told of a minister of strong standing who endorsed his thought in private conversation. But when a vote was taken on the conference floor, he stood against him. Afterward the minister came to him and said: "Now, Brother Thomas, I want to explain a little. You must remember what I said to you and you must have seen my vote. Well, what I said was what I believed, but I could not afford to go against the popular feelings."40 The ministers at the trial that followed the action of the 1880 annual conference were also told they could not afford to go against the popular feeling. At one point in the trial, a prosecutor said of a minister on the conference Investigating Committee who had supported Thomas: "I do not envy the position of that man in this Conference."41 This remark, Bierbower insisted, was not the only time the jury was instructed to think of themselves when they decided Thomas' fate.

The question of Thomas' prolonged struggle remains. Why did he stay to fight a battle he obviously could not win? Motivation is always elusive. Two possibilities, however, can be immediately ruled out. It cannot be said he stayed because he had nowhere else to go. Other denominations from the outset made him attractive offers. When expulsion came, friends organized the People's Church for him. Hooley's Theater was

39Ibid., pp. 160-161.
40Bierbower, Life and Sermons of Dr. H. W. Thomas, p. 258.
41Bierbower, "Dr. Thomas and the Methodist Church," p. 161.
rented for Sunday morning and regularly filled. It cannot be said that he stayed because he became hardened to the battle. He admitted: "No one knows, not even my own family, how much I have suffered in feeling to know that the ministers in the church where I have labored so long have been pursuing me and trying to entrap me and to hedge my way. It has been painful to me beyond all expression."42

What must be said comes from Thomas himself. Thomas declared himself ready to fight because he could not turn his back on a church he had labored in for almost twenty-five years. It contained too much of his time and energy to leave without a battle. Moreover Thomas thought there was not sufficient cause for him to leave. He saw himself in full accord with the church's spirit and historical purpose and considered his teaching within the bounds of acceptable orthodoxy. Most important, Thomas believed he had to stay to defend the church against intolerance. He said: "There is involved in this controversy a question of far wider import than the life of any one man. It is the question of liberty; of the toleration of personal opinion by the ministers of our church. . . . We are in a transitional period, and the world cannot be held to faith by trying to tie it down to all the thinking of the past."43 Old formulations, he insisted, had limited application in a world suffering the pains of new birth. The church to speak meaningfully in a transitional age had to remove the barriers to thought.

V

Clifford Geertz, an anthropologist who writes about religion in culture, helps us draw conclusions about the Thomas episode. In his analysis of religion, Geertz stresses two points having application here. First, religion acquires force within society from its ability to give life meaning and shape. It provides a conceptual framework for the otherwise inexplicable. Ignorance, suffering, injustice threaten to break in upon the individual with chaotic impact. Religious formulations that make these experiences tolerable keep them at bay. When these religious concepts fail to account for experience, anxiety results.44 Second, religious belief is not based upon induction from daily experience. Belief comes instead from the a priori acceptance of authority which transforms experience.45

In these two points, we recognize Thomas and the prosecuting church. In a changing society, Thomas saw doctrine become suspect. Moreover he saw some doctrine become meaningless. Experience was moving beyond the reach of orthodox explanation. He, therefore, admitted to doubt and

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42Bierbower, Life and Sermons of Dr. H. W. Thomas, p. 281.
called for new inquiry. In a changing society, the prosecuting church saw
authority buckle. The church knew authority essential for belief, which
above all must be preserved in a time of transition. Doubt and inquiry
undermined authority and were a reflection of its weakened condition.
They were impermissible. Thomas and the prosecuting church showed two
aspects in the process of change. They showed the tension inherent in mov­
ing to something new.

Austin Bierbower’s observations suggest a fixed point in the midst
of change. He alone wrote of the Western Book Concern’s role in the ex­
pulsion of Thomas from the church. His assessment, though intriguing,
must remain suggestive at best. It, nevertheless, is indication of a con­
tant in human affairs. The desire to hold power is unchanging.

Thomas fell to a prosecuting church because in a convulsive time he
was unsure and insisted upon his right to say so. Moreover he declared
new thought necessary to minister in a changing society, a thought that
would take the church to its people and into the bowels of its sin. A pro­
secuting church that saw itself imperiled disagreed. Possibly Thomas also
fell to a power block that could not contain him. Others chafed under
the restraints of orthodoxy but when challenged submitted.

When Thomas left the church, it considered him a heretic. As the
church looks back upon him, it might now think him in some ways
prophetic.