

## WHEN THEY ALL SAT TOGETHER IN DAYTON

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Just before mid-nineteenth century a scandalous episode occurred in the strongly Methodist city of Dayton, Ohio. The people of the new Wesley Chapel decided they would worship together by families, sitting together in the pew for worship. Worse, the minister was known to be encouraging what was widely called "promiscuous sitting."<sup>1</sup> The presiding elder of the Dayton District, George W. Walker, did not hesitate to take action. He wrote to the most revered ecclesiastical statesman in Ohio, James B. Finley, whom many called "the Old Chief": "I suppose you have heard of the Anti-Methodist Episcopal [events] that have been adopted here in seating their meeting house. Free seats, but the men and women mixed up together. A great sight in a Methodist church. I am told that Bro. Inskip is doing all he can to make them go ahead with it at all hasards."<sup>2</sup>

The fat was now in the fire. In 1847 the Ohio Conference, already concerned over laxity in discipline, had taken action, on recommendation of a special committee chaired by none other than the champion of "the old ways," James B. Finley. The regulations of the Methodist *Discipline*, which discouraged "pewed churches" and directed that men and women be seated separately, should be strictly enforced without any exceptions. He was thus identified with the traditionalists, opposition to setting aside of pews, and insistence on separation of the sexes. He submitted the report, saw it through approval by the Conference, and vigorously defended the provisions of the *Discipline* in the *Western Christian Advocate*.<sup>3</sup> Hence the incensed presiding elder expected benefit of the full influence of the doughty senior leader.

Before Finley could respond, however, he found himself in a very painful position. He had been invited to preach in Inskip's church in Dayton. He did so, and reported his surprising experience to the *Western Christian Advocate*.<sup>4</sup> Expanding on the amazing growth of Methodism in the city from humble beginnings, he looked out on a large congregation in a fine modern church. At first he had been uneasy at the sight of

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<sup>1</sup>In the 19th century the adjective *promiscuous* did not carry a necessary significance of sexual impropriety, although it did not exclude it. It did mean irregular, unprecedented, vaguely inappropriate.

<sup>2</sup>Walker to Finley, 14 Feb 1849, manuscript letter in James B. Finley Collection, Archives, Ohio Wesleyan University. This extensive collection includes a large number of original letters to Finley and a few from him.

<sup>3</sup>*Western Christian Advocate*, 15 Oct 1847.

<sup>4</sup>4 Apr 1849.

whole families sitting together in the pews, men and women together. It went against his own upbringing and the long tradition inherited from Wesley's England, enshrined in all the editions of the *Discipline*. What he saw here was directly contrary to what he had quite recently defended in and out of Annual Conference. But now he preached to this irregular congregation, with highly gratifying results. He ingeniously explained his change of heart as he wrote, "So long as the seats were free, I for one will make no serious objection."

The immediate consequence of this startling word was an explosion characteristic of Methodism in those days. The pages of the *Western Christian Advocate* overflowed with bitter denunciations of the unbelievable defection of the champion of the Old Ways. Before the battle was over the young minister in Dayton had been censured by the Annual Conference, the Old Chief had been bloodied and well-nigh abandoned by his former friends and cronies, and the whole mess came by appeal before the General Conference of 1852. This body firmly reversed the action.

### Dayton Revisited

This episode, sparked in Wesley Chapel in Dayton and inflamed through the whole church in 1852, is not well known today. Why should it be? One's first reaction is likely to be amusement, perhaps disdain, certainly not concern for a real live issue toward the end of the twentieth century. The problem of pews today is how to get the people out of those in the back and into those in the front, or perhaps how to get anyone in the pews at all. If whole families come and sit together on a Sunday morning, saints be praised!

Moreover, the story has been well told once by Paul H. Boase.<sup>5</sup> But that publication, now thirty years old, was of quite limited circulation and is now found almost exclusively in large research libraries. The article was admirably researched and written, but its readership belongs to another generation. Few persons have even heard of John S. Inskip, and those who have know of him chiefly because of his later association with the national camp meeting in Vineland, New Jersey, in 1867, which gave rise to the Camp Meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness.

There are other good reasons for taking another look at this conflict which exacerbated such passions around 1850. It is now well known and almost no attention has been paid to it in historical publications. More important, no one has noticed the curious internal contradiction in the almost universal juxtaposition of the twin facets, that is, free seats and separation of the sexes. The one is pervasive, the other restrictive. These

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<sup>5</sup>Paul H. Boase, "Let the Men and Women Sit Apart," *Bulletin of the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio*, XV (1957), 33-48.

twins were usually regarded as identical, or as saying the same thing in two different ways.

But they were not identical. In fact, they represented contradictory tendencies in the church. Free seats was supposed to mean rejection of rented pews, hence "democratic," equal seating for all. Separation of men and women, on the other hand, was supposed to prevent improper mingling, a restriction on freedom of seating, hence "authoritarian" or traditional. Worshippers were to be free to sit anywhere, without regard to pews. But no! Men have to sit on one side, women on the other. By like token one may understand pewed churches as progressive, a modern recognition of the unity of the family in the church (as well as a means for improving local finances). But no! The basic equality of all of God's children, rich and poor, must be maintained by free sitting. But no! Women must sit separately from the men.

There was a regional coloring. Eastern Methodists tended to favor, or at least tolerate, family pews, as being progressive and modern. Western Methodists tended to resist the trend, defending the "old ways" against new-fangled innovations in the big cities. They were "democrats," standing firm against the aristocratic domination of the rich. Defend free seats (keep the sexes apart!). We are easily enmeshed in those slippery terms especially dangerous for historical study, liberal and conservative. Who are the liberals and who the conservatives here? The pewed churches of New England, derived from the evolution of Congregationalism, were expressions of a conservative, or aristocratic, trend. It is easily seen as a means of keeping undesirables (= the poor) out. But they made progress in allowing families to sit together, itself a measure of equality. Free sitting was an expression of democratic freedom in which all, rich and poor, stand equal before God. It is easily related to the Wesleyan doctrine of free grace. But keep men and women apart; break up the Christian family *in church*.

So now who are the liberals and who the conservatives? Who the authoritarians and who the democrats? The habit of linking free sitting with separation of sexes attempts to bring together diametrically opposed ideas. Complicating overtones of this inconsistency may be traced in the political history of the times, illustrated by the various roles of President Andrew Jackson. It was further complicated by the tremendous pressures centered on the institution of slavery.

So far as the struggle in Ohio is concerned, only two persons succeeded in separating pewed churches from separation of the sexes. Finley described his change of heart at Dayton in the *Western Christian Advocate*, and had concluded, "So long as the seats were free, I for one will not make serious objection," if families sit together. The other person was John Inskip.

It should be obvious by this time that another, unacknowledged factor was working here. Free sitting in the Wesleyan tradition meant two things: no pew restrictions, explicitly stated, and separation of men and women, implicitly assumed. John Wesley had insisted there be no exception to seating men on one side and women on the other. This is what Finley had been used to. This is why he was so shocked at his first view of men and women sitting together in church. He was surprised to discover that the practice of families together in worship made some kind of sense. "Promiscuous sitting" was not so repulsive after all. While we are dealing with these sociological aspects, it may be worth noting that apparently no one noticed that the possibility of children being together with both parents had considerable significance for Christian nurture. Pewing permitted families to be together in the presence of God. That it also involved aristocracy, wealth, and exclusiveness was a separate matter. If you had family pews, you could no longer segregate men and women. Here, therefore, is another reason for taking another look at the episode in Dayton. It has not been looked at seriously since the advent of women's liberation and the rise of historical study of the role of women in the development of the church. Boase was writing when only the early ripples of the feminist movement were lapping at the shores, a couple of decades before the storm of women's liberation crashed in.

I must confess that as author I approach the subject with feelings not appropriate to historical research: amusement, sadness, impatience. I find it incredible that responsible ecclesiastical leaders, so admirable in so many ways, could have engaged a century and a half ago in so bitter and destructive a controversy over whether families might sit together in worship, so utterly trivial and silly. It would seem to be quite irrelevant to the life of the church today. But is it so? In the light of Wesley's dictum that the people of God grow or die, and in the light of recognition of the role of women, the story is not so trivial after all. We may smile at yet another manifestation of the human comedy; but we dare not smirk in assumption that our issues are more important than theirs.

In any case, what we deal with here, unlike TV "docudramas," is all fact, no fiction. Here is the rest of the story.

### **The Outcome**

John S. Inskip was born in England and brought to the United States as a young boy. He joined the Philadelphia Conference, but soon transferred to Ohio. He had come to the conclusion that neither free seats nor separation of sexes was essential to Methodism, and began experimenting with seating of families together in pews. This practice became notorious through opposition by the presiding elder in Dayton and by a committee of inquiry established by the Annual Conference in 1851. As

a result, in spite of support for Inskip by Finley and others, the young man was censured—but in a very curious way. Methodists in Ohio were proud that they had avoided the errors of Presbyterians and others in accepting “pewed churches.” Thomas A. Morris (later bishop) wrote to Finley expressing satisfaction that the Presbyterians in Columbus now had a pewed church, because as a result all the poor people would come to the Methodists.<sup>6</sup> The Ohio Conference had for many years taken an overt and strong stand on the matter of free seating.<sup>7</sup> This reflected the position of General Conference, although the latter tended to be content with repeating old platitudes. Its equivocal application is reflected in legislation which proceeded from simple advocacy of “plain and decent” chapels to their equipment with “free seats” in 1820, modified in 1850 by “wherever practicable.” Ohio Methodists were in no compromising spirit. On this adamant rock young Inskip crashed, and Old Chief Finley stubbed his toe.

The censure in 1851 resulted from charges based on the report by the presiding elder and pressed by an able and conservative member, Granville Moody. The charges were two: Inskip had broken a pledge not to agitate the matter of family seating, and he had responded to admonitions with “contumacious treatment” of the Annual Conference.<sup>8</sup> Moody expanded his charges by reading several pages from a new book by Inskip not yet published, *Methodism Explained and Defended*.<sup>9</sup> In this work, ostensibly cast in a broader frame, Inskip went to great lengths to defend his interpretation of seating arrangements as among those “advisory” aspects of the Wesleyan tradition which were subject to evaluation and reinterpretation. Chapter six, on “Discipline of Methodism,” ran from pages 63 to 110 and was largely concerned with the issue of pews and “promiscuous sitting.” He argued that the general principle did not apply to each and every *local* situation. Local custom should prevail, because the essence of Methodism was in no way affected.

At the Annual Conference several witnesses spoke. Moody gave an address and Inskip replied. The vote went strongly against him. Whereupon the Conference took a curious additional action: “Resolved, that with Brother Inskip’s explanation before the Conference, they do not judge him guilty of a wilful and wicked breach of pledge, but admonish him of his error and pass his character.” Inskip believed this action was designed to discourage an appeal to General Conference, but that is what he fully intended to do and said so.

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<sup>6</sup>Thomas A. Morris to Finley, 21 Oct 1830.

<sup>7</sup>Cf., MS Journals ff 1830 and 1834, and *Western Christian Advocate*, 2 May 1834 and 20 June 1834; also MS Journals 1847 and 1849. From 1847, p. 130: “We as a Conference feel it our duty to adhere strictly to the letter of our discipline in all the foregoing regulations [rules on pews, etc.], and under no pretence, whatever to countenance an infraction of them.”

<sup>8</sup>MS Journals, 1851, 224.

<sup>9</sup>J. S. Inskip, *Methodism Explained and Defended* (Cincinnati: Applegate & Co., 1856).

Finley was caught in a most painful situation. He had changed his mind on the issue and had spoken for Inskip. He, hitherto the stalwart defender of the Old Ways, had betrayed the cause. Inskip, of course, welcomed this important support. He wrote to Finley shortly after Conference asking for continued support and expressing regret that the "Old Chief" had been treated so shamefully by Moody and others. Finley himself was going through a difficult struggle over what he should do; but finally, to Inskip's relief, agreed to put his considerable influence behind the appeal. "We cannot but feel indignant," wrote Inskip, "at the manner in which many have treated you in your old age."<sup>10</sup> But he was optimistic about prospects at General Conference, because powerful forces would be on his side. Members of General Conference would deride the provincial Ohioans, who "start back with holy horror at the idea of such a violation of the 'purity and integrity' of Methodism as they find in a man sitting down with his family."

And so it turned out. General Conference in 1852 received Inskip's appeal in spite of efforts to prevent its coming to the floor. A long trial ensued, in which Granville Moody made strenuous, effective, and protracted speeches in prosecution, and Inskip replied fully and effectively in his own defense. Finley, who had headed the Ohio delegation in 1848, had been denied any place in 1852. The *Western Christian Advocate* refused him any space. But the old leader was not at the end of his tether. He wrote to Abel Stevens, then editor of *Zion's Herald*, asking for hospitable reception.<sup>11</sup> It was generously offered. The influential eastern editor was amazed that Ohio Methodists could have acted so maladroitly. Finley did more. He headed a Dayton group in a memorial to General Conference. He enlisted the able support of Benjamin F. Tefft, President of Genessee College.<sup>12</sup> Nathan Bangs, who retired that year after a long and illustrious career in the Methodist Book Concern and as editor of both the *Methodist Quarterly Review* and the *New York Christian Advocate*, also joined the supporters of Inskip's appeal. The result was never really in doubt. Eighty-seven voted to reverse the action of the Ohio Annual Conference, only sixty-four (including the entire Ohio delegation) supporting it. A subsequent vote, ninety-eight to fifty-seven, gave permission in the *Discipline* for individual churches to choose their own method of seating.

Inskip was vindicated. Instead of returning in triumph to a still embittered Ohio Conference, however, he understandably transferred to the New York East Conference. In the east he continued a long and significant career as a leader of the evangelical wing of Methodism.

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<sup>10</sup>Inskip to Finley, 18 Oct 1851 and 20 Mar 1852.

<sup>11</sup>Finley to Abel Stevens, fall 1851, and Stevens to Finley, 16 Dec 1851.

<sup>12</sup>Tefft to Finley, 17 Dec 1851.

### Does It All Mean Anything Today?

What juice, if any, can be squeezed from this dried-up old controversy? Nothing obviously that will help in seating a congregation today, nor in learning the issues of sex, nor in understanding the relations between men and women. It invites cheap smirks from the sophisticated unchurched, who don't know how far the Christian community has come since mid-nineteenth century.

All that superficial judgment aside, however, it may, nevertheless, teach us much about the working of democracy in the church and about the slippery qualities of the terms liberal and conservative. The "democratic" Westerners, who loved freedom and opposed ecclesiastical tyranny, set themselves to keep the men and the women apart at all costs, even if that meant division of families, husbands from wives, children from parents, as they all approached God in worship. It is clear that strong undertones of male dominance lurked below the surface. No one actually said so, but everyone knew that Adam had learned much, to his peril, from Eve. Therefore "let the men and women sit apart." That is to say, prohibit family pews.

On the other hand, the "authoritarian" leaders of the eastern establishment, who defended the essentially aristocratic practice of encouraging special privilege to the rich who rented family pews for their exclusive use, a practice which easily carried over to the idea of control of the church by the "better elements," stood forth now in progressive, even "liberal" defense of the right of Christian families to worship together. The male leaders probably did not intend it, but they nevertheless were defending what later became explicit as the rights of women, equality of sexes, and female leadership in the church, both lay and clerical.

There is another lesson of broader application in this episode. Legal procedures within the religious community are likely to be counterproductive. They frequently spawn consequences opposite to those intended. There is scriptural support for this view. This means that United Methodists, from the Judicial Council on through leaders of all the local churches, should approach the letter of the law in the *Discipline* with caution. Frequently in the affairs of God and the world *no one* is right: all have fallen short. Ohio Methodists would have been better off with a more enlightened approach to traditional seating arrangements. Eastern Methodists could have taken thought to the social implications of the "pewing" of churches in large cities with many wealthy adherents. Perhaps also, students of history in the later nineteenth century may be well advised to suspend judgment on the apparently ridiculous antics of their forbears. Their understandings were not necessarily so superficial as might seem, even though their reactions to events were inappropriate.

Although the historian will avoid reading back into history the forces which belong to a later time, those later forces shed new light on a former event, bring to the surface factors long dormant, and sometimes demand a reappraisal. That is what this article has sought to do.