

THE FOUR LANGUAGES OF EARLY AMERICAN METHODISM

RUSSELL E. RICHEY

Tuesday, 23d. [Dec. 1794]. I rode to Mr. Laine's, in Littleborough, and at 2 o'clock, I preached on John xi.3. I had a crowded congregation, and the melting presence of God was amongst us. Many of the people could hardly refrain from weeping aloud. . . . Some of the people then went home, but soon returned. One man being in deep distress, began to cry aloud to God to have mercy upon his poor soul. . . . I talked, prayed, and sung, and while I was singing a visible alteration took place in his countenance, and I was inclined to think his soul was set at liberty. . . . I then took my text and preached on 1 Peter v.7. It was not long before another man was taken with a violent trembling, and crying, so that my voice was almost drowned. I was forced to stop. I then prayed for him, and he became more quiet. I then went on with my sermon. There was a great weeping in every part of the house. It appeared as if the whole neighborhood was about to turn to God. I hope the fruit of this meeting will be seen after many days, and that the work of the Lord will revive from this time.¹

Early Methodists were not afraid of the voice. Indeed, as this entry from Jesse Lee's journal indicates, theirs might be termed a movement of the voice—a preaching, singing, testifying, praying, shouting, crying, arguing movement. In Methodism, people found their voice. Methodists quite literally discovered ways of giving a voice—young men were pressed, one might even say in the military vernacular 'impressed,' into preaching; hymn books virtually mandated congregational singing; love feasts made testifying into a quasi-sacrament; class meetings permitted the most outcaste of society to voice their inner concerns to God in the supporting presence of peers; shouting became a hallmark of Methodist utterance;² crying punctuated the discourse of both preacher and congregation; by arguing, Methodists stated and clarified their belief vis-a-vis prevalent, frequently Calvinist, options.³ Methodists, then, were not afraid of the voice. When individual Methodists found theirs, they typically had a lot to say.⁴ So they preached, sang, testified, prayed, shouted, cried, argued.

Their message may not have wrought a political revolution in the manner of the Puritan sermon.⁵ It did produce quite remarkable conversions, built a mass movement, created a national church, wrought a moral revolution. It produced effects that attest the cogency and power of the Methodist voice. Methodists spoke with a loud voice.⁶ They did not, however, speak always with a single voice. And by the turn of the 19th century, the careful auditor might well have heard some discordance and detected that harmony was proving difficult to sustain. The difficulty would increase with

¹Because of the excessive length of many of the footnotes they will be found at the end of the article rather than in the normal location.

time, for Methodists spoke to the new nation with not one but four voices, four languages, four formulations of doctrine.⁷ Had the four languages been so recognized and identified, Methodists would have quickly protested that the four were but parts that made one whole, that belonged together. The truth is that Methodist reliance upon four distinguishable idioms proved both a source of great strength and surprising weakness.

The Four Languages

The four languages might be individually designated as (1) popular or evangelical; (2) Wesleyan; (3) episcopal or Anglican and (4) republican. Each offered a surprisingly coherent and self-sufficient gospel. None was unique to American Methodism. Each was an ecumenical idiom. The unities produced by the four varied. Each pulled Methodists in a slightly different direction. (1) The popular language Methodists shared with all groups who made up the revival, those who spoke an evangelical or Pietist tongue. With it, all the children of the Awakenings could communicate. (2) The Wesleyan language defined the trans-Atlantic Methodist movement. Its terms denoted the particular features, practices, beliefs and rituals of Wesleyanism and bound Wesleyans together. (3) The episcopal language belonged to American Methodists because, with Wesley, they first claimed to be part of the Church of England and then in 1784 with Wesley's blessing became, in essence, a surrogate 'Anglican' church.⁸ However, this particular affinity, between the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Protestant Episcopal Church, produced more conflict than unity. (4) The fourth language, the republican, defined the tradition of British political dissent, of Whiggery, and became an ideological feature of the American Revolution and a constitutive feature of American political consciousness.⁹ By its use, Methodists proclaimed their patriotism and merged their voice with the other Protestant bodies that sought a national Christian unity for the new nation.

The four languages together shaped American Methodism. They seemed compatible. Indeed, Methodists experienced them as constituting a unitary and unified discourse. They have apparently gone undifferentiated to this point. And yet from the earliest days they did pull the movement in different directions. They prove difficult to illustrate because they seldom occur close together (at least, until well into the 19th century). Several utterances from the year 1798 do show their nature and proximity to one another.¹⁰ They also indicate the centripetal and centrifugal impulses of the four languages.

The Popular or Evangelical Language

The popular language, because it was common and vernacular, is the least accessible today. It was the language of sermon, of class, of love

feast, of camp meeting, of prayer. Such oral discourse often proves inaccessible to the historian. Fortunately, it was also the language of the journal. And there we can hear early Methodism; there we can recover its popular voice. In the first citation from Lee, you have already heard it. Another, specifically from the year 1798 will recall its texture:

Tuesday, 29th [May, 1798]. I rode to the Vansant's, at the head of Chester, and preached at 12 o'clock on Gal. vi.7. *Be not deceived*. I had a very crowded house. I felt great liberty in preaching. The power and presence of the Lord was with us, and most of the people were in tears. Our hearts were closely united together, and I was much blessed amongst my old friends.¹¹

In the journals, the Christian life was an affectionate and expressive affair. Preachers spoke with freedom; words uttered in great liberty produced tears; hearts were melted; souls found mercy and were closely knit in love; a new community of 'brothers' and 'sisters' defined itself over against the world and the distinctions of sex, class, position and race that ruled therein; this new community reoriented itself toward Zion. Such terms recur through the journals.¹² They were richly biblical and doctrinally suggestive. They charted the Christian pilgrimage and the corporate life of the Christian community in terms that all could understand. They comprise a surprisingly coherent religious worldview, a popular evangelical or pietist worldview. On Methodist tongues, they shaped themselves into Arminian tunes. But this language was not, for the most part, employed for formal doctrinal purposes.

The Wesleyan Language

For that, Methodists invoked Wesley and drew upon a distinctly Wesleyan idiom. If Lee epitomized Methodism's popular tongue, in 1798 John Dickins and Ezekiel Cooper epitomized the Wesleyan language. They were successive stewards of the Methodist Book Concern. 1798 saw both at this task as Dickins succumbed in that year to the yellow fever that struck Philadelphia.¹³ It was the official and peculiar task of Dickins and then of Cooper to transmit the Wesleyan idiom. They did that through a rather remarkable series of publications, publications that sustained the remarkable publishing impulse of Wesley himself. So in 1798 Dickins saw that American Methodists had a *Pocket Hymn Book*, Wesley's *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament and Sermons*, all three of which formally defined Methodist doctrine. Dickins published and/or carried other works of Wesley, volumes descriptive of the Christian life which Wesley had edited, the current *Discipline* which transmitted and recast Wesley's *Large Minutes* for American usage, the *Minutes Taken at the Several Annual Conferences*—the record of the year's legislative gatherings—and *The Methodist Magazine*, 1798.¹⁴ This literature prescribed an official Wesleyan language, one that the preachers had a

stipulated duty to transmit. Their responsibilities included the charge, "To take care that every society be duly supplied with books."¹⁵ With those books, Methodists acquired that distinctively Wesleyan language. They spoke of classes, societies, circuits, quarterly meetings, annual conferences, stewards, local preachers, preachers, itinerancy, connection, discipline, love-feasts, perfection, spirituous liquors, slavery, our hymns, sanctification and the like.

Wesley had not intended that these terms define a self-sufficient religious system. He was adamant, in fact, that they not, that Methodism not separate itself from the Church of England. Yet, British Methodism gravitated in that direction even during his life. And, of course, American Methodists with his blessing became an independent church. He made provisions, when they did so, for the more distinctly ecclesial, sacramental, episcopal realities that he had always sought for Methodists through the Established Church. We turn to those provisions, that language, momentarily. Before doing so, we should observe that until 1784, American Methodists had really gotten along without the Established Church. Its clergy and parish churches did not dot the colonial landscape as it did the English countryside. A very few Anglican clergy cooperated with the American Methodists. And so American Methodists were tempted from the very start to regard this Wesleyan language as self-sufficient. After Wesley's death, British Wesleyanism did. In the Fluvanna schism, American Methodism came very close to the same policy. That possibility, of regarding the distinctly Wesleyan idiom as a self-sufficient religious system, would remain a Methodist temptation. American Methodists would be tugged by it every time they sought to converse with their British brothers and sisters. That conversation, in particular, required such Wesleyan terms.

The Episcopal Language

In the same year of 1798, the episcopal language was clearly stated in a volume that was "sold by John Dickins." That year *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America* carried a striking subtitle: "With Explanatory Notes by Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury." The two bishops undertook a rather revealing, and one should add, rare exercise of the teaching office. By their annotations, undertaken at the behest of the prior General Conference, they explained and defended Methodism's episcopal claims. They did so, at least in part, to answer the criticisms levied by James O'Kelly and to staunch the hemorrhaging loss of good Methodists to his protest schism.¹⁶

O'Kelly had challenged the episcopacy and the power thereof. Answering that charge proved to be a major thrust of the bishops' commentary. The first section of the *Discipline*, "Of the Origin of the Methodist Episcopal Church," lent itself to a disquisition, three times as long as the

section, defending Methodism's adoption of episcopal government, explaining the nature of Wesley's own episcopal authority, repudiating the conception of "an apostolic, uninterrupted succession,"¹⁷ and adducing the New Testament texts supportive of an episcopal plan. In the second section, "Articles of Religion," the bishops likewise marshalled the New Testament support for these Anglican affirmations.

The *Discipline* did not include and so no annotations were given to the text of the eucharistic rite or baptism. However, the comments on the specific articles devoted to the sacraments, "Of the Sacraments," "Of Baptism," "Of the Lord's Supper," and "Of both Kinds," sections XVI to XIX, clearly called to mind that aspects of Methodism's Anglican character. Short, later sections of the *Discipline* "Of Baptism" and "Of the Lord's Supper," would have had some of the same force.¹⁸

In the sacraments, in the Articles and in its episcopal government (bishop, elder, deacon), Methodists applied to themselves the terminology of Anglicanism. Theirs was not a high church after the fashion of Archbishop Laud, the Non-Jurors, the early Wesley or the 19th century Tractarians. It was an Anglican terminology familiar to Americans who had known the Established Church in the colonies.¹⁹ When it talked about its government, when it celebrated the sacraments, when it identified the core of its belief, when it ordained ministers, Methodism spoke an episcopal tongue.

To be sure, Methodists understood that tongue to be an episcopal Methodism. The annotated *Discipline* clearly made that point. It did so by its very appearance, through the text, and in explicit commentary. The Wesleyan language and that of Anglicanism were put together. The page and a half which constituted section IV, "Of the Election and Consecration of Bishops, and of their Duty," insisted, for instance, that American Methodism's episcopacy simply gave suitable ecclesial expression to Wesley's style of leadership. We "must observe," stated the bishops, "that nothing has been introduced into Methodism by the present episcopal form of government, which was not before fully exercised by Mr. Wesley."²⁰ Elsewhere the notes commented on features of Methodism that were rooted in the Wesleyan movement and explained distinctive practices and structures. In that sense and as should be expected, the volume transmitted the Wesleyan language as well as the episcopal. The notes functioned—particularly through the common appeal to the New Testament and the practice of the primitive church—to cement the bond of Methodist and Episcopal idioms and warrant the church's name and self-understanding. And yet the bond was not always a firm or a happy one.

The Republican Language

In the year 1798, James O'Kelly epitomized the unhappiness over the episcopal character of Methodism. One of the eminent leaders of early

Methodism, O'Kelly sought directions for the movement that threw him into conflict with Asbury and Coke. He criticized Asbury's experiment with a council, prompted the creation of the general conference, and at the first, the General Conference of 1792, initiated a frontal challenge to episcopal power. He proposed, by motion, that preachers have the right to appeal to the conference the appointment made for them by the bishop. The motion eventually failed and O'Kelly walked out to form the Republican Methodist Church.²¹

It has been easy for Methodists to dismiss O'Kelly but, in fact, he spoke for many early Methodists. His cause had considerable more appeal than the numbers which rallied to his banner would suggest.²² In 1798, O'Kelly produced *The Author's Apology for Protesting Against the Methodist Episcopal Government*.²³ A few citations will illustrate his appeal and the language that sustained it:

If Christians are free citizens of Zion, they should prize those liberties, seeing they were purchased with the precious blood of Christ.

Thomas and Francis were our Superintendents, as Presiding Elders, according to John's appointment. But they were not elected by the suffrage of conference, although it is so written in the book of discipline.

Ah, Francis was born and nurtured in the land of kings and bishops, and that which is bred in the bone, is hard to be got out of the flesh.

O Heavens! Are we not Americans! Did not our fathers bleed to free their sons from the British yoke? And shall we be slaves to ecclesiastical oppression?²⁴

This was republican language, the rhetoric of the British Commonwealthman tradition, the worldview of radical Whiggery, the ideology of the American Revolution.²⁵ It described a world in which republics were rare and fragile institutions; where power ever threatened the liberties of the people; where authority transmuted itself into tyranny unless checked and vigilantly watched; where freedom's only hope lay in the collective resolve of a virtuous citizenry; where virtue easily succumbed to luxury or the inducements of power; where the fate of the republic therefore rested with the virtue or corruption of its citizens. Its recurrent terms were virtue, liberty, corruption, tyranny, republic, rights and reason.

Here, too, we find a coherent worldview; a richly elaborated mythology; a saga which fit the present into a history of republics and of tyranny; an account that situated today's perils in a narrative that recalled Israel's political experience, the republics of Greece, the Norman Yoke, the Glorious Revolution and now the American Revolution. O'Kelly effectively claimed that mythology and conjured up its visions of tyranny and corruption.

O'Kelly also strove to claim that mythology for Christian ends. He did so clumsily, proclaiming Christians "free citizens of Zion," glossing the distinction between church and state, and construing Asbury as tyrant. The generality of Methodists thought that he protested too much. It is

perhaps useful to distinguish his rhetorical maneuver from its political objectives. Then we might view him as a Methodist and southern participant in an enterprise dominated by Calvinists and New Englanders. This was a time when other Protestants, particularly those from the Reformed camp were struggling towards a theology that would embrace the new republic in the larger cause of God's redemption of the world. Behind that impulse lay a century and a half of colonial experience with a godly state and, of course, the challenges to establishments stimulated by the Revolution and new constitution-making. Intent on sustaining that godly civic order despite disestablishment, Reformed theocrats fought on several fronts. They saw conspiratorial visions everywhere.²⁶ In the year that O'Kelly wrote, eminent New England divines uncovered an international conspiracy that linked enemies to the Puritan way, Jeffersonians, the zealots of the French Revolution, Bavarian Illuminati and the Anti-Christ.²⁷ Eventually, Presbyterians and Congregationalists reworked this strident millennialism into a theology of the nation, a public theology, a Christian republicanism, that gave shape to both the national political culture and Protestant denominations. With this theology, they erected a Christian America.²⁸

With these Reformed contemporaries, O'Kelly shared little more than a fear of conspiracy. His theology was Arminian not Calvinist; his political rhetoric Jeffersonian not Federalist; his religious policy separationist not integral. Yet his rhetorical maneuver was one that would ultimately come to serve those Reformed purposes. They, like he, would eventually baptize republicanism. In that sense, O'Kelly's protest and his critique belonged to this larger effort to adapt the ideology of the Revolution to Christian use and to give Christian direction to the nation.

The point here is not to refurbish O'Kelly and transform him from schismatic into hero. The point rather is that O'Kelly laid claim to a republican language that would increasingly become the Protestant idiom, and a Methodism idiom. It would give shape to the reform impulse that resulted in the Methodist Protestant Church. It also found its way into mainstream episcopal Methodism. That appropriation is illustrated in the historical narratives of Nathan Bangs and his successors. They wove the American republic into the fabric of Methodist history.²⁹

Babel or Pentecost?

Methodists found the four languages useful. They did not, in the manner of Calvinists or Lutherans, strive to bring the four languages into a common systematic framework. Rather they employed them as occasion demanded. At times, more than one seemed appropriate. So they juxtaposed them. Annual conferences frequently demanded several languages. The *Minutes* document the ease with which Methodists negotiated the

several languages, moved between them, employed them successively. Those for 1798, for instance, reported the traditional Wesleyan questions in terms of which the church ordered itself:

- Quest. 1. Who are admitted on trial?
- Quest. 2. Who remain on trial?
- Quest. 3. Who are admitted into full connexion?
- Quest. 7. Who are under a location . . . ?
- Quest. 8. Who are the supernumeraries?
- Quest. 9. What Preachers, have withdrawn themselves from our Order and Connexion?
- Quest. 10. Who have been expelled from our order and connexion?
- Quest. 12. Are all the Preachers blameless in life and conversation?
- Quest. 13. What numbers are in Society?
- Quest. 14. Where are the Preachers stationed this year?
- Quest. 15. When and where shall our next conferences be held?³⁰

The *Minutes* also framed questions in episcopal terms:

- Quest. 4. Who are the Deacons?
- Quest. 5. Who are the Elders?
- Quest. 6. Who have been elected by the unanimous suffrages of the General Conferences, to superintend the Methodist Episcopal Church in America?³¹

The Episcopal and Wesleyan terms, questions and processes were juxtaposed but not really conceptually unified. Nor has that yet happened.

Also in the *Minutes* appeared a question that elicited responses in the popular idiom. Quest. 11 read "Who have died this year?" The entry for John Dickins recounted his considerable services to the Methodist cause and proclaimed that "His works shall praise him in the gates of Zion." An entry for James King invoked popular images, but also entered a republican note:

He was about 24 or 25 years of age. — He gave his life, his labours, and his fortune to the Church of Christ and his brethren; and was a friend to religion and liberty.³²

Less formal accounts of conference also juxtaposed popular, Wesleyan and episcopal motifs. Jesse Lee reported on a 1798 conference. In his rendering, the tremendous power unleashed by the Methodist movement clearly presupposes and requires three of the several languages. The Wesleyan occasion — conference — and the episcopal rituals — ordination and eucharist — unleashed a revival which Lee could only convey with popular language.

Wednesday, 29th [August, 1798], conference began in Readfield; we were closely engaged all day; the next day we set in conference very early, and broke up at 8 o'clock. At 9, we held lovefeast, and had a large number of Methodists together, and none else. They spoke freely, and feelingly. It was a good time. At 11 o'clock Mr. Asbury preached a good sermon. . . . then we ordained Timothy Merritt, Robert Yellaley, and Aaron Humphrey, deacons, and Roger Searle, an elder. It was a very solemn time at the ordination; but the people were so crowded in the gallerys that were not

finished, that some of the joists gave way, and frightened the people very much for a few minutes, and some were slightly hurt. Then I preached on Rom. xvi.20. My soul was much animated with the presence of the Lord. The people were melted into tears. It was a precious time to many. Then we administered the Lord's Supper. I suppose there were above two hundred communicants; it was a most solemn time at the table. . . .³³

In Lee's account as in the official *Minutes*, the three languages function together. But did they, do they, really cohere?

Four Distinct Languages and Literatures?

At various points we have already suggested that Methodists adopted and used the languages without clarifying their relationships and compatibility. This point has been made frequently with respect to the Wesleyan and episcopal idioms and often illustrated with the confusion over ministry occasioned by the two sets of terms and processes by which and through which ministry is conceived.³⁴ Candidates proceed along two tracks into Methodist ministry, one culminates in conference membership, the other in elder's orders.

This essay extends that point to the two other Methodist languages. We have already illustrated each of their central concerns. We have also implicitly documented the fact that they differed sufficiently to generate separate literatures. The popular language produced journals and diaries. To it also belonged first-hand accounts of revivals and conversations, which in evangelical literature became a distinct genre of literature, "religious intelligence" or "missionary intelligence." Obituaries and correspondence frequently invoked popular terms as well. These items found space in *The Christian Advocate* and other 'popular' literature.

Popular literature rooted in Wesleyan command, example and instruction. Such colloquial expressiveness attested Wesley's own sense of the value of testimony. Wesley also generated and American Methodism continued to print and transmit a literature to sustain Wesleyan practice and institutions. The Wesleyan literary standards were *Minutes*, *Discipline*, hymnbooks, Wesley's own *Works*, the normative *Sermons* and *Notes on the New Testament*, and eventually successful magazines. This Wesleyan literature—really a Wesleyan literary revolution—fueled Methodist expansion.³⁵

Methodists generated 'episcopal' literature for doctrinal, liturgical and apologetical purposes—when formal self-expression was required. The first such instance was Bishop Coke's sermon at the 1784 organizing conference.³⁶ Among the most powerful was his episcopal colleague's 1813 Valedictory Address.³⁷ Apologetics produced the greatest volume. Attacked by Episcopalians and Calvinists, Methodists responded in episcopal mode. Among its early spokespersons were Martin Ruter, Nathan Bangs, John Emory, and Wilbur Fisk.³⁸

Republican literature roots in the formal declarations of "General Fast" and "General Thanksgiving" which the church issued in 1795.³⁹ It became a staple of Methodist reform movements. The Methodist Protestants, for instance, essentially recast Methodism into a republican mode. It also assumed great prominence in the Methodist Episcopal thought during and after the Civil War.

Four Doctrines?

More significant, and troubling, than separate literatures were the doctrinal tensions between and among the languages. It would stretch their differences to speak of separate doctrines. Methodists, after all, experienced them as compatible. They did, however, pull in different directions. They gave distinct answers to the fundamental questions which Methodism, with Wesley, took as its theological agenda:

1. What to teach;
2. How to teach; and,
3. What to do; that is how to regulate our doctrine, discipline, and practice.⁴⁰

Each, for instance, offered a distinct notion of what it meant to be the church. The definition most likely to come to mind was and is an episcopal one, formally rendered in the Articles and evoked in the liturgy:

XIII. Of the Church

The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the word of God is preached, and the sacraments duly administered according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.⁴¹

Whether early American Methodists regarded this episcopal definition, really a Reformation definition, as adequate to their connectional and missionary sense of the church we do not fully know.

We do know that when they spoke in popular terms about themselves, when they talked about Methodism as an ecclesial reality, they reached for a very different image. The term most frequently employed—the popular conception—was biblical. Methodists spoke of Zion, a term that evoked both historical Israel and the eschatological New Jerusalem. Asbury, for instance, rode into my home state in 1795 and observed:

This country improves in cultivation, wickedness, mills, and stills; a *prophet of strong drink* would be acceptable to many of these people. I believe that the Methodist preachers keep clear, both by precept and example; would to God the members did so too! Lord, have pity on weeping, bleeding Zion!⁴²

This popular notion lacks the formality and precision of the episcopal definition. It has compensating strengths. It locates Methodism in the economy of salvation, both historically and eschatologically. It identifies Methodism with the people of God, the corporate, trans-congregational reality of God's chosen ones. It legitimates a dynamic, political self-understanding and orientation to the world.

The Wesleyan contribution to ecclesiology — conference — lacks Zion's connection to salvation history. Nor is it frequently given doctrinal status. However, in conference and particularly in the quarterly conference or quarterly meeting, Methodists gave vivid expression to their sense of church in the present tense, to what it meant to live as the people of God, to what it meant to offer grace to lost sinners. Quarterly meetings dramatized Methodism's missionary conception of the church and of the gospel. Lee's report, cited above, captured the ecclesial drama. As conference, Methodism was ecclesial reality, a present reality, lacking the explicit historical and eschatological referent of Zion and the formal precision of the episcopal definition. However, conference and quarterly meetings made up in act what they lacked in form. They satisfied the episcopal definition with explosive eucharists and met the popular eschatological hope by revival.

The republican ecclesiology focused on the nation. A Christian republic, God's New Israel, a redeemer nation, a Christian America — the terms for it are various. Early Methodists gave somewhat hesitant and tentative assent to this Calvinist doctrine.⁴³ Their commitment to it gradually increased so that by mid-century at least the northern Methodists had made it constitutive of their self-understanding. They came to believe in *The Nation with the Soul of a Church*.⁴⁴ They viewed themselves as a national church, sometimes even *the* national church. The function of this conception was similar to Zion. Belief in a Christian America, in fact, represented the working out of a very biblical, indeed Hebraic and covenantal political theology in Reformed terms. It proved to be a compelling and powerful vision of Christian community, one that dominated American Protestantism and American society well into the 20th century. This is not the place to offer a sustained criticism of that vision. Suffice it to say that it lured Methodists into politicizing their ecclesiology, giving their missionary sense of the church a rather limited societal referent, fixing their purposes in national not global terms.

Implications

The different ecclesiologies offered distinct hopes, functioned with distinct notions of what constituted authority,⁴⁵ identified distinct purposes for corporate Christian life, conceived the unity of the church in distinct fashion. The four languages produced theological multiplicity on other doctrines as well, particularly in such areas as anthropology, soteriology, and ethics. The languages functioned, then, to offer Methodists a range of theological options, various identities, choices as to what constitutes Methodism. They did so when each generated a distinct theological option, as with ecclesiology; they did so even more frequently in combinations. For the most part, however, Methodism managed to hold together and live with its four languages.

Its failures at unity had something to do with language. The different possible Methodist identities and the linguistic cacophony partially explain later fissures in the Methodist movement. There is rough correspondence, for instance, between republicanism and the Methodist Protestant Church; between popular concerns of early Methodism and both black Methodism and the Holiness movement; between episcopal emphases and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South; and between Wesleyan self-understandings and the Methodist Episcopal Church. It is instructive, for instance, that one of the African American Methodisms, chose to imbed Zion in its name. Nevertheless, these correspondences are only rough. Each movement typically drew on all four languages. The African Methodism Episcopal Zion Church, for instance, scrupulously maintained Wesleyan patterns and episcopal practices; in its pursuit of abolition, it also found republican values important. Still, the vitalities of popular Methodism were what made African Methodism attractive to black Americans.

If we do not find various Methodisms breaking cleanly along these linguistic lines, we might profitably understand their peculiar appeal and dynamic by studying the internal configurations and relative priority each gave these languages.

Similarly, we may find debates and disputes within each movement somewhat more intelligible when we take seriously Methodism's several frames of reference, of value and of commitment. The controversy surrounding diaconal ministry within United Methodism derives some of its murkiness and confusion from the several languages employed. The republican notion of rights and popular commitments (e.g., evangelism) get pitted against theological (episcopal) conceptions of the threefold ministry (deacon, elder, bishop) and Wesleyan expectations about conference membership. The fact that all parties to the dispute, at one level or another, claim each of the four languages further complicates communication and frustrates solution. Translators are needed.

If ways were to be found to bring these languages from juxtaposition into relationship, perhaps the church could speak and act with more clarity. The four languages, after all, have been claimed, have been used, have been valued, have even been championed. They represent rich intellectual inheritances, resources to be utilized, possibilities as well as problems for Methodism. But what relation have they had, do they have, will they have to one another? Is it Babel or Pentecost?

Notes

¹Minton Thrift, *Memoir of the Rev. Jesse Lee. With Extracts from his Journals* (New York: N. Bangs and T. Mason for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1823), 208-9. As the first great American-born leader of the movement, Lee gave voice to American Methodism. Note particularly the language; melting, weeping, singing, trembling, crying, revive. This strongly biblical and vernacular rhetoric typifies Methodist journals. It is a biblical vernacular, a biblical pietist vernacular, a biblical Wesleyan vernacular.

²Jesse Lee gave some indication of his understanding of and commitment to this loud Methodist voice in Fairfield, August 13th [1789] . . . "After meeting was over, a man came to me and said the women complained that I preached so loud that it made their heads ache, and they wished me to speak a little lower the next time I came: but I hope God will help me to speak hereafter, so as to make their hearts ache." *Memoir of the Rev. Jesse Lee*, 120.

³Lee, of course, took Methodism into the Calvinist stronghold of New England. An entry of 1795 typifies his stance:

"At night, I preached at doctor Hind's on Rom.ix.22. Here I endeavoured to show the unreasonableness of predestination; and how the people had fitted themselves for destruction; and yet, God had much long-suffering towards them. I further told them, a minister ought to pray the people, in Christ's stead, to be reconciled to God, warn them of their danger, and weep over them, and let them know that the Lord was not willing that they should be damned; but that they should come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved. I also endeavoured to show how unreasonable it was for a minister to say that God was willing to send his hearers to hell; and that they should bless God for sending them there. I had a comfortable meeting, and freedom in speaking. Just as I was going to leave the house, the minister came in, and abundance of people flocked into the room, expecting to hear us dispute, but after asking him a few questions *civilly*, we parted." *Memoir of the Rev. Jesse Lee*, 215-16.

⁴The finding of the voice was often traumatic. Lee reported the following concerning his first effort at preaching: "On the 17th of November, 1779, I preached for the first time in my life, at a place called the Old Barn." He preached several times soon thereafter, "and found much of the Divine Presence with me in public, yet I was so sensible of my own weakness and insufficiency, that after I had preached, I would retire to the woods and prostrate myself on the ground, and weep before the Lord, and pray that he would pardon the imperfections of my preaching, and give me strength to declare his whole counsel in purity . . ." *Memoir of the Rev. Jesse Lee*, 22.

⁵Harry S. Stout in *The New England Soul. Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) argues that the Great Awakening wrought a revolution in American discourse and this rhetorical revolution made possible the political revolution.

⁶On a day in 1790, Lee rode for a time with a man who had heard him preach but did not realize he rode with the preacher. "Ah! says he, these preachers speak louder than our ministers, and raise their heads, and spread their hands, and holler, as though they were going to frighten the people. I told him it would be well if they could frighten the people out of their sins."

The people responded in kind. They also shouted, or as in this case with Lee in 1799, they roared:

"Sunday, 10th [February 1799]. At Charlotte meeting-house, Mr. Asbury preached, and after an intermission of fifteen minutes, I preached. God was in the midst of us. Several young converts were present; and they with others, were deeply melted into tears; some of them could hardly refrain from roaring aloud. Glory be to God in the highest, for this meeting." *Memoir of the Rev. Jesse Lee*, 144, 247.

⁷The term 'language' in this paper obviously overstates the separateness and incompatibility of what might more judiciously be described as paradigm, frame of reference, meaning system. However, 'language' does underscore problems of translation, mutual intelligibility, reference, divergent meanings which this paper argues did haunt Methodist terminology. The use here is heuristic.

⁸In *The Garden of American Methodism: The Delmarva Peninsula, 1769-1820* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1984), William H. Williams suggests that Methodism's viability as a second English church was one source of its attractiveness (89-210).

⁹The literature on republicanism is immense. See the helpful discussions thereof by Robert E. Shalhope, "Republicanism and Early American Historiography," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser. 39 (April, 1982), 334-56. and "Toward a Republican Synthesis: The

Emergency of an understanding of Republicanism in American Historiography," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser. 29 (January, 1972), 49-80. See also Isaac Kramnick, "Republican Revisionism Revisited," *The American Historical Review*, 87, (June, 1982), 629-64.

¹⁰One could certainly illustrate these four languages with texts from most years after 1800. The choice of 1798 is somewhat arbitrary. As we shall see, it does afford us one of the earliest clear expressions of Methodism's adoption of republican ideas and a very powerful illustration of Methodism's episcopal self-understanding. Popular and Wesleyan language abound at all times. One virtue of such an early year is that we can see these several voices of Methodism in relative 'pure' form. For these reasons, the choice of 1798 seemed apt.

¹¹*Memoir of the Rev. Jesse Lee*, 236.

¹²A good sampling of the language of popular Methodism can be found in these entries by Lee for 1794 (in New England): "I had life and liberty in preaching, and the people paid great attention." *Memoir of the Rev. Jesse Lee*, 202.

"Sabbath I preached twice at Mr. Hutchen's, and the people were much melted under the word. I felt my soul much taken up with the things of God, and could truly say it was my meat and drink to do his blessed will. Then I went to N. Whiteirs' and met the class. The Lord was very precious to our souls and the people were much melted . . ." *Memoir of the Rev. Jesse Lee*, 203

"Thursday, 27th. They collected the neighbours together, and at 11 o'clock I gave them a sermon, on Col. iii, 14. It was a delightful season; my heart was humbled within me before God, and "I came to Mr. Bradford's at Farmington, and at 3 o'clock, I preached on John iv. 14. Here the Lord was pleased to visit us again with his blessed presence. Tears flowed from many eyes, and it seemed to be time of love." *Memoir of the Rev. Jesse Lee*, 205.

¹³For the roles of Dickins and Cooper in the Methodist book enterprise and the publications over which they exercised oversight, consult James Penn Pilkington, *The Methodist Publishing House. A History*, (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1968), 63-148.

¹⁴Eventually, American Methodist serials would lend themselves to the popular idiom. *The Methodist Magazine, for the year 1798* carried a subtitle that suggested such a purpose: "Containing Original Sermons, Experiences, Letters, and Other Religious Pieces; Together with Instructive and Useful Extracts from Different Authors." This was American Methodism's second effort at a serious magazine and the second (and final) year of the experiment. It could have passed as a British publication, for it carried virtually nothing American and was heavily dominated by Wesley's sermons, writings, and collected material. As such, it transmitted the Wesleyan idiom.

¹⁵*The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, with Explanatory Notes*, by Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury (Philadelphia, 1798); facsimile edition, edited by Frederick A. Norwood (Rutland, VT: Academy Books, 1979), 70. The 1796 General Conference had authorized the publication of *The Methodist Magazine* with this notation:

"N. B. The propagation of religious knowledge by the means of the press, is next in importance to the preaching of the gospel. To supply the people therefore with the most pious and useful books, in order that they may fill up their leisure hours in the most profitable ways, is an object worthy the deepest attention of their pastors."

Minutes of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church . . . 1796 (Baltimore, 1796), 15.

¹⁶*The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, with Explanatory Notes*, by Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury (Philadelphia, 1798); facsimile edition, edited by Frederick A. Norwood (Rutland, VT: Academy Books, 1979), iv, Advertisement to the Reader: "The last General Conference desired the Bishops to draw up Annotations on the Form of the Discipline. . . ." In his "Introduction," Frederick Norwood argues that O'Kelly's movement motivated these annotations.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 6. The italics appeared in the original.

¹⁸Neither, however, made clear reference to the actual service to be used. *Ibid.*, 118-20.

¹⁹On the character of colonial Anglicanism see Frederick V. Mills, Sr., *Bishops by Ballot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) and Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

²⁰*The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, with Explanatory Notes*, 40.

²¹On O'Kelly and these events, see *The History of American Methodism*, ed. Emory S. Bucke, 3 vols. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), I, 429-52.

²²William Warren Sweet acknowledged losses to the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1795-96 of almost 10,000 but attributed some of that to other causes. *Methodism in American History*, rev. ed. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1953), 134.

²³(Richmond: John Dixon, 1798).

²⁴*Ibid.*, 4, 9, 21, 38.

²⁵For historiographical treatment of this tradition, see note 8 above. Classic treatment can be found in Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) and Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1972).

²⁶On the prevalence of conspiratorial visions and the underlying causes thereof, see the brilliant exposition by Gordon S. Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser. 39 (July 1982), 401-41.

²⁷Nathan O. Hatch examines this preaching and the longer political experience that gave shape to it in *The Sacred Cause of Liberty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 139-75.

²⁸These developments are treated in a variety of works. See especially Fred J. Hood, *Reformed America* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1980); Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America. Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); John F. Wilson, *Public Religion in American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979); and Martin E. Marty, *Religion and Republic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

²⁹This point is worked out in greater detail in a forthcoming essay, "History as a Bearer of Denominational Identity: Methodism as a Case Study."

³⁰*Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, Annually Held in America; from 1773 to 1813, Inclusive* (New York: Published by Daniel Hitt and Thomas Ware, for the Methodist Connection in the United States, 1813). "Minutes Taken at the Several Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for the year 1798," 200-15.

³¹*Ibid.*, 201-04.

³²*Ibid.*, 205. The line from Dickins appeared in italics in the original.

³³*Memoir of the Rev. Jesse Lee*, 230-40.

³⁴Conception here refers to both the coming to understanding and the coming into being. For discussion of the variety of tensions in Methodist understanding of ministry, see my colleague's excellent volume, *The Yoke of Obedience. The Meaning of Ordination in Methodism* by Dennis M. Campbell (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), especially 72-97.

³⁵The literary fare for the Methodist faithful constituted an impressive and meaty diet. In the year 1798, for instance, Dickins placed this advertisement in the rear of the *Pocket Hymn Book*:

The Following Books are Published by John Dickins . . . For the Use of the Methodist Societies in the United States of America . . . Sold by the Publisher, and the Ministers and Preachers in the several Circuits.

The Arminian Magazine

Thomas a Kempis

The Form of Discipline . . . with Treatises on Predestination, Perseverance, Christian Perfection, &c.

The Form of Discipline . . . with Explanatory Notes

The Experience and Travel of Mr. Freeborn Garrettson

An Extract on Infant Baptism
 Children's Instructions
 An Abridgement of Mrs. Rowe's Devout Exercises of the Heart
 The excellent Works of the Rev. Mr. John Fletcher, complete, in six volumes
 A Funeral Discourse on the Death of . . . John Wesley
 The Saints' Everlasting Rest
 The 1st volume of Mr. Francis Asbury's Journal
 A Tract on Slavery
 The Rev. John Wesley's Journal, vol. 1st.
 The Family Adviser and primitive Physic
 The Rev. John Wesley's Life
 Spiritual Letters, &c. by the Rev. John Fletcher
 Sermons by the Rev. John Wesley . . . 1st and 2nd vols.
 Doddridge's Sermons to Young People
 A Scriptural Catechism
 Minutes of the Methodist Conferences . . . 1773 to 1794 inclusive
 The same, for several late years, separately
 The Life of Monsieur De Renty
 Jane Cooper's Life and Letters
 Nicodemus, a Treatise on the Fear of Man
 Defense of Methodism
 Manners of the Ancient Christians
 Dr. Coke's four Sermons
 The Methodist Magazine

³⁶Thomas Coke, *The Substance of a Sermon, Preached at Baltimore . . . Before the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, on the 27th of December, 1784, at the Ordination of the Rev. Francis Asbury to the Office of a Superintendent* (Lond, 1785).

³⁷*The Journals and Letters of Francis Asbury*, ed. Elmer T. Clark, 3 vols. (London: Epworth Press; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), III, 475-92. This statement was an oral publication.

³⁸For the controversies that elicited these defenses, see "Anti-Methodist Publications (American)" by Lawrence O. Kline, *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, ed. Nolan B. Harmon, 2 vols. (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1974), I, 115-19.

³⁹*Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, Annually Held in America; From 1773 to 1813, Inclusive*, 162-64.

⁴⁰These were the questions Wesley posed at the first conference, questions that, over time, generated the structure and emphases of the Methodist *Large Minutes* and *Discipline*. "Minutes of Some Late Conversations Between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others," *The Works of John Wesley*, Jackson edition, 14 vols. (London, 1872; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), VIII, 275.

⁴¹*The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, with Explanatory Notes*, (1798), 18.

⁴²*The Journals and Letters of Francis Asbury*, ed. Elmer T. Clark, 3 vols. (London: Epworth Press; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), II, 46. The entry is March 30, 1795.

⁴³This point is elaborated in "Early American Views of the Nation: A Glass to the Heart," *Reflections Upon Methodism During the Bicentennial* (Dallas: Bridwell Library Center, SMU, 1985), 91-103.

⁴⁴That phrase, from G. K. Chesterton, forms the title and motif of Sidney E. Mead's book, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975).

⁴⁵The other points in this litany have been, at least, hinted out. Authority deserves more attention than can be given here. An example might help. Recently Methodists have taken to viewing authority in relation to a Wesleyan quadrilateral—scripture, tradition, reason and experience. On one cut through these languages, we might associate the elements of the quadrilateral respectively with popular, episcopal, republican and Wesleyan languages.

At a deeper level of analysis, we would need to recognize each of the languages as possessing its own notion of all four elements of the quadrilateral. For instance, the republican language had its own hermeneutic for reading scripture, a very covenantal one, much commented upon in historical and literary studies of Puritanism, (see, for instance, the work of Sacvan Bercovitch). The republican sense of tradition, of history as the struggle between liberty and tyranny, and of golden ages of republican government, we have already noted. For republicanism, reason was a virtual idol. Reason had strongly empirical, Lockean overtones until those were recast by the Scottish Common Sense philosophers. Common sense became powerful among Methodists as among other Protestants. Republican views of experience was affected by this shift in epistemology. Increasingly in the 19th century, experience was construed as common sense. Appeal to American experience, to American common sense also become common. Similarly, the other languages had their conceptions of what we now regard as quadrilateral.