"THE ADVANTAGES OF LIBERTY": 
DEMOCRATIC THOUGHT IN THE FORMATION OF THE 
METHODIST PROTESTANT CHURCH 

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It has long been observed that the reason the Methodist movement proved overwhelmingly successful in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was its concern for the commoner. With an emphasis on religious experience and intimate community among the believers, Methodism became a mass movement.

As a popular movement in the upper south and Middle Atlantic states, Methodism had appealed to the dispossessed of society. Its adherents in the United States tended to come from the farms of the nation, from those who served the wealthy in town, or those serving on plantations in the south. These people felt unappreciated and ignored by those who held power in the institutions that governed their lives—including the church (notice, for example, how African-Americans in the south responded to Methodist and Baptist preaching). People suddenly felt new hope in their identity, a sense of value, and release from the strictures of society. The church became a world with values and expectations radically at odds with those of the world outside its fellowship. Donald Mathews has observed that, "... whether or not a person was a member of the gentry and had fine clothes and a position of worldly authority was not important because these distinctions were based on ephemeral things. . . . They were saying that the conventional distinctions of society were not authoritative for them."1 Francis Asbury, although the undisputed authority in the Methodist Episcopal Church, was a man of the people and realized the value of the church to the powerless, largely unchurched, masses.

In a recent thorough and insightful study, Nathan Hatch documents the populist character of early American Methodism and its role in the "democratization" of American Protestantism. By democratization Hatch means a suspicion of central authority, rejection of the idea that only a few church leaders possess theological insight, a belief in the ability of each mind to correctly read scripture and discern truth if left unencumbered, and the rejection of scholastic Calvinism and its denial of human agency in the drama of salvation. Like Mathews, Hatch makes clear that

1Donald G. Mathews, Religion in the Old South (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 19f.
by the time of the bishoprics of Joshua Soule, William McKendree, and Nathan Bangs the democratic stance of the Methodist Episcopal Church was giving way to a more staid, bureaucratic, and centralized life as its membership became upwardly mobile. The denomination moved from a repudiation of the world to assimilation, from alienation to a desire for influence. The poor and rural membership tended to perceive that change to mean the radical, community-building, esteem-giving nature of evangelical Methodism, with its locus in the people and local classes (and its attendant zeal), was being lost. The result was agitation for localization of power and lay representation in the General Conference.

Both Mathews and Hatch make passing reference to the Methodist Protestant Church, which grew out of the reform movement arising in Methodism. Neither writer, however, shows the extent to which Methodist Protestantism continued to embody foundational elements of Methodism as a popular mass movement. This essay examines the democratic theory which underlay the formation of the Methodist Protestant Church. The legacy of democratization that began to ebb in the Methodist Episcopal Church was taken up anew by Methodist Protestantism.

The Methodist Protestant Church had its antecedents as far back as the efforts of James O’Kelly to challenge Francis Asbury’s power of appointment at the 1792 General Conference. The sentiment for localization of power and responsiveness to the needs of the church constituency did not end with the O’Kelly schism. Frederick Norwood observes that every general conference from 1808 to 1828 had movements afoot for reform. The reformers had three goals: the granting of more rights to local preachers, who were neither ordained nor represented at annual conference; lay representation at all conference levels; and the election of presiding elders by the travelling preachers. This last, the issue of presiding elders, became the central point of controversy in the 1820s because this office represented the power of the bishops. Says one writer: “These assistants to the bishops had come gradually into being, the General Conference of 1792 having given them their official title and duties and ordered ‘that they should be chosen, stationed, and changed by the bishops.’”

3Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 128f; Hatch, Democratization, 205-206.
In 1820 the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church met in Baltimore, and a motion was offered that presiding elders be elected by the members of the annual conference over which they held office. A compromise was offered by the bishops in which the bishops would offer three nominees for every position open. The motion was approved 61-25, with the further condition that the presiding elders would serve as advisors to the bishops in appointing travelling preachers. Obviously, this would have militated against the exclusive power of appointment by the bishops. As soon as this step was taken, the newly elected bishop Joshua Soule managed to persuade the conference not to carry out its decision. That action led to the coalescing of the reform forces, led by Nicholas Snethen, Alexander McCaine, and Asa Shinn. They published the *Wesleyan Repository and Religious Intelligencer*, succeeded in 1824 by the *Mutual Rights and Christian Intelligencer*. The opposition to them was headed by Bishops Soule and William McKendree, Nathan Bangs, and John Emory.  

The 1824 General Conference declared the 1820 vote to elect presiding elders unconstitutional. As a result, supporters of reform organized 'union societies' to promote their program; some of them were expelled from membership in the church. Tension and arguments increased until the 1828 General Conference met and offered restoration of membership to those excised from church rolls on the condition that they resign from the union societies. In a statement hardly designed for reconciliation, the Baltimore Annual Conference of 1828 charged that the societies went "... far to defame and slander the Government and administration of the Methodist Episcopal Church."  

The union societies convened in November, 1828, as the Associated Methodist Churches, and became the Methodist Protestant Church in 1830 when a Book of Discipline and constitution were adopted. The new denomination's strength was greatest in the upper south. The list of delegates to the organizing convention of 1828 showed that 57 of 110 delegates came from Maryland and Virginia, and 92 in all were from Dixie.  

Surely this schism could have been avoided, for both sides were unduly alarmist concerning the evils of the other. However, once the stand was taken, taunts and insults exchanged, and the issues given theological, biblical, and ideological bases, schism may well have been inevitable.

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6 A fuller account of the history recounted here can be found in Norwood, Chandler, or Edward J. Drinkhouse, *History of Methodist Reform* (Baltimore: The Board of Publication of the Methodist Protestant Church, 1899), 2 vols.
II

The Methodist Protestant Church, established in 1820, is a representative democracy, and its organization was a protest against the religious monarchy developed under the leadership of the early bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church and against the autocratic manner in which that monarchy functioned in the epoch which immediately followed the signing of the Declaration of Independence.9

That quotation, biased though it is, reveals the single most important ingredient in Methodist Protestant thought: political theories of representative democratic government. The memory of the War for Independence and the political rhetoric attendant to it, the writing of the Constitution, and the ideal of Jefferson's agrarian utopia still lived in the minds of many. Even more, the 1820s (the era of Jacksonian democracy) marked a period of reform with its emphasis on the common people—movements for widespread public education, the glorification of the lower classes, and the reduction of property barriers for suffrage all characterized this impulse. This all had its impact on Methodist reform.

This theme runs through all the reform literature, implicitly and explicitly. The preamble to the “17 Articles of Association” of the Constitution of the Methodist Protestant Church stated, “Therefore, we, the delegates of the friends of a REPRESENTATIVE FORM OF GOVERNMENT in the Methodist Episcopal Church, elected and appointed by them to meet in Convention . . . with a due regard to the fundamental principles of civil and religious liberty, as recognized by the Constitution of the United States, and the several States in the Union, in common with other Protestant churches . . . .”10 The Constitution further asserted that “The right to be represented, where law is made to govern, is not only essential to civil freedom, but is equally the basis of religious liberty. Civil and religious liberty are intimately connected, they usually live and die together; and he who is the friend of the one, cannot consistently be the enemy of the other.”11

The Constitution did not explicate the apparently self-evident assertion that civil and religious liberties are connected, but Nicholas Snethen supplied the rationale for the argument above. Rejecting outright any union of church and state in a free nation, he posited that representative government is necessary in both secular and ecclesiastical institutions because human nature acts uniformly in both cases—that is, the inclination to ambition can only be checked by a system which allows control of those in power.12

10Cited in Drinkhouse, History of Methodist Reform, II: 211.
Bearing that in mind, Snethen found it inconceivable that "The constitution of the General Government of the United States, guarantees a republican form of government to all the states; but the constitution of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, monopolizes all suffrage and representation to travelling preachers. 13

Closely connected to this line of reasoning, as it was in the argument of the Declaration of Independence, was the emphasis on the natural equality and rights of all people, regardless of station in life. Only representative government of the type supported by the reformers could safeguard the rights of all within the church—indeed, they were already endangered, said the Rev. Henry B. Bascom: "Every man by the charter of his creation, is the equal of his contemporaries;—the essential rights of every generation are the same. . . . These rights, common to the great family of man, cannot be abolished by concession, statute, precedent, or positive institution; and when wrested or withheld from the multitude of mankind, by their rulers, may be reclaimed by the people, whenever they see proper to do it." 14 Asa Shinn, speaking to the 1828 General Conference, made clear the impact of political theory on the reformers, and the extent to which the belief in human equality informed their concepts. "Will your daring efforts to abridge the freedom of thought and discussion," he challenged the opposition, "pass unnoticed in this land of justice and independence, which reflects the light of civil and religious liberty over both hemispheres? Will the free born [sic] sons of America, whose fathers had such struggles to cast off the yoke of European despotism, be silent and respectful spectators of your ecclesiastical march after absolute dominion?" 15

One can detect in these arguments for representative government and their emphasis on the rights of the commoner indications of the fear from which that reasoning grew: the fear of centralized authority. When fewer and fewer people are accorded increasing amounts of power, they tend to become arbitrary and unyielding in their use of authority to protect their own interests, the reformers posited—in short, theirs was an "absolute power corrupts absolutely" line of argument. Thus, Article 4 of the "Summary Declaration" argued that diffusion of power via lay representation and increased rights in the annual conferences "... is the only kind of government that can possibly reconcile, in any consistent way, the claims of authority, with the advantages of liberty." 16 Snethen had been even bolder as he described the usurpation of power from those under authority. An institution which requires "absolute submission" can exist only through

15 Quoted in Norwood, Story of American Methodism, 182.
16 Constitution of the Methodist Protestant Church, 3.
fear and ignorance, he claimed. To achieve them, "The education and instruction of the great mass of the people are neglected, and learning is made a kind of mystery or political secret, into which none but favorites are initiated. All that is communicated to the governed, is intended to convince them of their own ignorance and weakness, and the wisdom and strength of their superiors." 17

It was this potential for arbitrary control that Snethen, McCain, and the others saw betokened in the Methodist episcopacy—and the action of Soule and McKendree at the 1820 General Conference lent credence to the fear. It was true, they admitted, that Wesley had maintained unquestioned sway over every aspect of the Methodist societies. However, he alone, as patriarch of the movement, held title to such ascendancy—the 'elder sons' in the Untied States (Asbury, Coke, and those bishops who followed) had no right to arrogate complete power to themselves. The episcopacy of the Methodist Episcopal Church could not be validated by an honest search of scripture or from the practice of John Wesley, they charged. Such power in the hands of a few could only be likened to the 'popish' exercise of authority found in the Roman Catholic Church. 18 One evidence of this improper exercise of power was the bishops' removal of the disciplinary trial of a church member from the jurisdiction of other church members (politically: a jury of peers) to be put in the hands of the travelling preachers alone. This eroded, said the reformers, individual church identity. Snethen argued that "... the primitive churches were confederate and not indivisible, like the modern episcopal hierarchies." 19 As a result, when the new denomination was established in 1830 many delegates pushed for the name Associated Methodist Churches over against that of the Methodist Protestant Church—an action that stemmed from this fear of centralized authority and understanding of ecclesiology.

The value of a representative polity, of course, was that it provided a system of checks and balances against unlimited and abusive exercise of authority. Bascom held that any system of church government that abrogates from the people a voice in its legislation fails to provide a necessary "balance of power." 20 Snethen concurred, and wrote that "... the passions of men in official stations, do not become docile and inoffensive, in proportion, as legal checks and restraints are removed; and that there is infinite danger in trusting unlimited power in the hands of any man, or sets of men." 21

17 Snethen, "An Essay on 2 Tim. 1 Ch. 7 v.," in Essays on Lay Representation, 288-289.
18 For this line of thought see Snethen, Essays on Lay Representation, 37-53 and 233-234; and Drinkhouse, History of Methodist Reform, I: passim.
19 Quoted in Drinkhouse, History of Methodist Reform, II: 269.
Behind the fervency and alarm of this political theory lay the perception that Methodism was losing its original simplicity, community, and concern for the believers as the bishops became further removed from them. In short, as the denomination became more middle class, more centralized, and wealthier, the reformers believed the bishops and presiding elders were losing touch with the needs and wishes of the church members. The documents of the movement confirm Mathews' assessment of these sentiments as the reactions of the "disinherited" (whether they really were so or not) against those whom they perceived to be stripping them of their rights and dignity.

There was growing concern about increasing wealth in the denomination, the purposes to which the money was put by the bishops, and how the bishops began to listen to the wealthy instead of less prosperous church members. In a dispute that was full of personal insults and trenchant charges, Alexander McCaine made one of the most cutting remarks in responding to John Emory's *Defence of Our Fathers*, which had in turn been a critique of McCaine's *History and Mystery of Methodist Episcopacy*. McCaine charged that Emory aspired to the episcopacy, and that his *Defence* was not to shield the first bishops from attack, but to promote himself to that office. Why would he do so? For power and status among the well-to-do. "What ecstasy to see his likeness," McCaine said, "executed by Longacre in his best style of engraving, put in the [Methodist] Magazine, placed in the windows of print shops, or hung up in the parlors of the wealthy Methodists, with this inscription, 'John Emory, D.D., one of the bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church.'" McCaine wrote further: "In addition to the influence which the love of honor, and the love of power may have had, the love of money may also have had a share, in bringing forth the 'Defence of our Fathers.' For when a bishop in the Methodist Episcopal Church is elected, he is elected a bishop for life. His support, and the support of his family, is no longer precarious or uncertain, depending on the stewards, or on the voluntary contributions of the members." McCaine wrote further: "In addition to the influence which the love of honor, and the love of power may have had, the love of money may also have had a share, in bringing forth the 'Defence of our Fathers.' For when a bishop in the Methodist Episcopal Church is elected, he is elected a bishop for life. His support, and the support of his family, is no longer precarious or uncertain, depending on the stewards, or on the voluntary contributions of the members."

Snethen lent his considerable forensic skills to this idea, noting that "Every [meeting] house that is built, and every collection that is made, adds to their consequence, by increasing their influence. Poor bishops of rich dioceses, are not common; and poor universal bishops are much less so." Later, in the introduction to *Essays on Lay Representation*, he wrote scathingly of the possibility for backsliding in this new-found wealth. It

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is helpful to quote from this passage, for it illustrates well the issues of
democratization:

The maxim once was; and if not a golden one, it was regarded as a true one, 'Let all
our houses be built plain; otherwise rich men will become necessary to us, and then
farewell to Methodist discipline.' Does it cost no more money to build and support
colleges and schools, than to build plain houses? And can all this money be obtained
without rich men becoming necessary to us? ... The money all comes of the laity,
and will the poor never complain? But what was that Methodist discipline, which the
necessity for rich men might oblige travelling preachers to bid farewell to? ... Would
there be nothing like bribes, or bartering; no tacit understanding, like, if you will not
discipline me, I will pay; if you do, I will not pay? Who can help seeing the difference
between birth right liberty, and liberty so purchased? ...

When the rich of their abundance shall have cast their millions into the college
treasury, can you believe, that ... learned gentlemen, and gentlemen's sons, will be
expelled from these seminaries of learning for speaking evil of travelling preachers,
and all the wealthy contributors, say amen, to it?25

The stringency of the Methodist discipline, the fervency and simplicity
of faith, and the rights of the poor were in grave danger,
Snethen believed—and all because of the growth of the financial resources available
to the bishops.

The reform movement garnered the support it did because there were
sufficient numbers of the laity who believed the lack of legislative voice
and reliance of the church on the wealthy were symptoms of a lack of
concern and respect for them. Mathews holds that “They felt themselves
being demeaned and pushed aside by changes that reminded them all too
forcefully of their own poverty and powerlessness.”26 Snethen thought
the fellowship of the members was destroyed as well by the removal of
church discipline from the local congregation. Mutual oversight of the
believers’ lives had gone far in building communal bonds, but now “... the
members do not have the same care one for another; if one member suffer,
al the members do not suffer with it; and if one member be honored, all
the members cannot be honored with it.”27 Consequently, “The laity are
feeling an importance, which must be followed with feelings of independ­
dence.”28

trend: “And yet the Methodist Protestants were able to make inroads upon episcopal
Methodism because there was with the growth of Methodist academies, colleges, and mis­sions to slaves a sizeable group of people who felt left out. They criticized the affluence
of their coreligionists, an affluence which led to their wearing more richly ornamented clothing
than ‘old Methodists,’ and their building of churches in the 1830s and 1840s which were
more elaborate than the old meeting houses in which Francis Asbury had preached as if
they had been cathedrals.” Religion in the Old South, 129.
26 Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 129.
27 Snethen, “A Discourse on the Supremacy,” in Essays on Lay Representation, 314. The
language, significantly, is reminiscent of I Corinthians 12–14.
But those feelings of importance were tenuous, which made for the zeal of the claim and defense of the laity. Articles four and six of the "Elementary Principles" of the 1830 Constitution of the Methodist Protestant Church posited the "inalienable" right of each person to private judgment on points of doctrine, and the right of free expression—and denied to ministers "dominion over the faith of the saints." Snethen, always able to cut to the center of an issue, declared firmly the capacity, worth, and dignity of every person as he wrote that Americans could create and enforce laws as good as those of any monarchical government in the world—implying that Methodist Episcopacy denied they could.

Reflecting on the first twenty years of the Methodist Protestant Church, Edward Drinkhouse wrote: "It had been a crucial period; it was a test between centralized authority and individual spontaneity. . . . The new Church has and must continue to lose, such men as cannot use their individuality—they have no place in manhood suffrage and individual responsibility. It need not be said, however, that this idea is levelling and descending in its trend; to the contrary, the ideal of Christian manhood taught in the New Testament gathers about it all of that type, and uses many others by its upward educating process." That is to say, that a dependence on individuals—the laity—for the spirit of the church will not drag the church down and denigrate the gospel, but rather lead the people of God upward by the zeal, earnestness, and honesty of "Christian manhood." Can any more strenuous preservation of the dignity, value, and ability of the commoner be imagined in the face of a perceived erosion of respect for them? Here stands a classical Jeffersonian defense of the rights of all people to self-government.

The basis for the dignity of individuals was not only derived from a natural rights argument, however. All people are equal in sin and distort God's image, Snethen observed. But the gift of grace is also given to all people equally—God is no respecter of persons. Snethen wanted, then, to "... maintain, that in so far as the lost or effaced image of God is restored by the covenant of grace; it is restored to all believers generally, and not to any special part of them. And we would ask those who monopolize the legislative power of the church, in what the image of God consists in those souls who are thus lorded over by them?"

IV

Clearly, more was at stake in the reform movement that eventuated in the break of the Methodist Protestants from the Methodist Episcopal

29Cited in Drinkhouse, History of Methodist Reform, II: 258.
30Snethen, "Thoughts on Legal Changes and such Matters," in Essays on Lay Representation, 322.
Church than theories of church government found in the New Testament. This was the era of Jacksonian democracy. Democratic ideas, with their emphasis on the rights and potential of all people, were abroad in the land—concepts that lent themselves easily to opposition to the hierarchical episcopacy of Methodism. As Frederick Norwood, commenting on the 1824 declaration that the 1820 General Conference reform vote was unconstitutional observed: "The old bishops signed an address which specifically rejected the argument for democratic reforms in the church based on political precedents in government. Obviously, although Andrew Jackson cast long shadows over Wesley's children, not all were impressed." 33

The reformers perceived the extension of the bishops' ecclesiastical power to coincide with the diminution of "primitive" Methodism with its strict discipline, fervent faith, and appeal to scattered and forgotten folk in the south and west. To them the drift of the church was into a new aristocratic system, which left too many people hurt and disregarded by those with power. They felt compelled to respond with all the political and theological ammunition they could muster, given force by the need for recognition, esteem, and community the church had once given. It is impossible to quantify the forces that produced the Methodist Protestant movement—such issues as personal conflict, personal ambition, principles of right, and the need for self-affirmation do not lend themselves to empirical measurement. The influence of the democratic thought in the new nation, with the extreme emphasis on the rights of individuals and personal opportunity, on the Methodist Protestant movement should not be underestimated.

It is clear that the upward mobility of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the early nineteenth century created a backlash by and on behalf of the less wealthy members of the denomination. That reaction epitomized what Hatch meant by the democratization of religion in America. The rejection of all centralization of authority, the confidence in the ability of the common man and woman to interpret scripture correctly and identify the truth, the capacity of people for self-government, and the necessity for each person to accept responsibility for his or her salvation, all characterized that process and were central to Methodist Protestantism. The Methodist Protestants believed in democracy, both civil and ecclesiastical. Democracy alone, they believed, could secure the advantages of liberty.