METHODOIST HISTORY

Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., Editor
Louise L. Queen, Managing Editor

VOLUME XXI OCTOBER 1982 NUMBER 1

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THE RISE OF THE NEW ENGLAND METHODIST TEMPERANCE MOVEMENT, 1823-1836

Douglas J. Williamson

With respect to the issue of human consumption of alcoholic beverages, the 1976 Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church states: “We affirm our longstanding abstinence from alcohol as a faithful witness to God’s redeeming love for persons.” When I happened upon this doctrinal statement I had already become engrossed in an investigation of the life and works of the Reverend Wilbur Fisk (1792-1839). In the 1820s and 1830s Fisk provided stalwart leadership for New England Methodism, both in doctrinal controversies and social reform. Temperance reform was one of the causes in which Fisk most diligently exerted his leadership. The subject of the following paper has, therefore, grown and developed from an initial interest in the role of Wilbur Fisk in the detailed history underlying the modern American Methodist position concerning alcoholic beverages.

Minuval investigation revealed that the only available historical work dealing exclusively with Methodist temperance reform efforts has been Methodism and the Temperance Reformation, written by the Reverend Henry Wheeler in 1882. Wheeler, however, focused primarily upon the development of the official Methodist Episcopal position on the “alcohol question,” and not upon the techniques and arguments used to buttress the temperance movement in its early years. In recent years, Richard M. Cameron’s Methodism and Society in Historical Perspective and Frederick Norwood’s The Story of American Methodism have provided a clearer understanding of the intriguing heritage of the American Methodist temperance movement. Nevertheless, no one has captured the sense of urgency and the fervor with which the problem of intemperance was confronted by many Methodists in the third and fourth decades of the nineteenth century.

Additional research uncovered the important role played by the New England Conference in early nineteenth century Methodist temperance reform. This revelation led me to pursue the pages of Zion’s Herald, the Methodist newspaper published in Boston (and for a few years, in New York) beginning in 1823. The Herald became my chief research tool for two reasons: first, since the primary contributors to the Herald were New