FROM THE GOSPEL CIRCUIT TO THE WAR CIRCUIT: 
BISHOP MATTHEW SIMPSON AND 
UPWARDLY MOBILE METHODISM 

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The shift to aspirations of "social respectability" within American Methodism in the 19th century has not been neglected in scholarship, nor has the prominence of the Civil War in the consciousness of the nation's religions lacked for attention. In this short paper I hope to attempt some initial strides towards a combination of these two broad themes: upward social mobility—what Donald Dayton has called the "embourgeoisment" of popular religious movements—and national patriotism, specifically in the context of the Civil War. More specifically, I hope to show how national patriotism played a part in the Methodist drive to be a nationally prominent denomination. The focus here will be Bishop Matthew Simpson, after Nathan Bangs probably the most famous (or infamous) Methodist leader of the 19th century. Through close analysis of two of his famous public addresses—his "war circuit" speech and Lincoln's funeral address—I hope to set out some of the lines of thought along which Simpson envisioned his church and nation. Both of these visions for Simpson were fired along the same trajectory of optimism and success, what Robert D. Clark, Simpson's last biographer, has called the "eloquent optimism of his age."

In Nathan Hatch's *The Democratization of Christianity*, Hatch describes what he calls "the lure of respectability" that pulled so many popular religious movements, including the Methodists, in the early to mid 19th century toward higher education, formal worship, new church buildings, and other trappings of "respectable" culture. As early as the 1850s, Methodists such as Peter Cartwright, a preacher and farmer from Illinois, were lamenting the shift the movement was making away from plain churches and dress, informal and emotional worship and preaching, and the loss of the preaching circuit to a more settled and genteel parish. Hatch points to Nathan Bangs as the preeminent figure within Methodism who represents this shift.

The leader of the "second generation" of American Methodism, Bangs began his ministry like many Methodists. After his sanctification experience, Bangs cut his long hair and removed the ruffles from his shirt, outward

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signs of the simplicity that was at the core of his religious experience and practice. But in 1810 Bangs was assigned to the New York Conference New York City circuit, and was appointed “preacher in charge” of five churches there. During his time in New York, which extended to the end of the Civil War, the number of churches in the city jumped from five to sixty—but Bangs was busy doing more than just proselytizing. Bangs waged a campaign to rid Methodist services of emotionalism and revival music, built more upscale churches, greatly expanded the Methodist publishing house, and pushed for a better educated clergy. Hatch summarizes the significance of Bangs in this way:

His [Bangs’] career and influence typified the allure of respectability facing insurgent religious movements. As their constituencies grew in wealth and social standing, it became difficult to retain their pastoral identity as defiant, alienated prophets. Bangs envisioned Methodism as a popular establishment, faithful to the movement’s original fire but tempered with virtues of middle-class propriety and urbane congeniality. If Asbury’s career represented Methodism’s triumph as a populist movement, with control at the cultural periphery, then Bangs’s career illustrates the centripetal tug of respectable culture. Dissenting paths have often, in America, doubled back toward learning, decorum, professionalism, and social standing.3

It was in a similar vein that Matthew Simpson worked for the “progress” of the Methodist church.

I

Donald B. Marti has written on the theme of social respectability among 19th century Methodists. In his essay “Rich Methodists: The Rise and Consequences of Lay Philanthropy in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” he says Methodists “after the middle of the nineteenth century . . . . spoke of their lowly origins with a new kind of pride. They began to congratulate themselves on how far they had risen.”4 Simpson was definitely one of those Methodists who celebrated the “rise” of the Methodists.

Simpson was born in 1811 in Cadiz, Ohio, baptized by Bishop Francis Asbury, and officially joined the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1829 after he experienced a conversion at a Methodist revival meeting in Dickersville, Ohio. In his journal Simpson paints the picture of his conversion as a peculiar moment of mental clarity, free from any emotion, despite the typical emotional responses of the revivals that was going on around him. He writes:

3 Hatch, 202.
There was much excitement, and while I purposed to be religious, still, being of a cooler temperament than many, while others wept and prayed earnestly I could not but listen to all that occurred around me. I was sincere, wished to be a servant of Christ, but did not feel any special earnestness of spirit . . . At the close of the meeting I returned home, said but little about my determination, but was firmly resolved from that day that, at the next opportunity, I would unite with the Church, which I did.

He studied medicine at Allegheny College from 1830 until 1833, all the while becoming more and more involved in church work. After just a year of informal medical practice, Simpson made the decision to enter church work full time, rode a regular and grueling preaching circuit for a year, and then was admitted on trial to the Pittsburgh conference in 1834. He was not long for parish work. From 1837 to 1839 he was professor of Natural Sciences and Vice President at his alma mater, then was president of Indiana Asbury University (later DePauw) until 1848. It was during this time, says Marti, that he began to cultivate relationships with the wealthy businessmen and politicians who were increasing in number as the “Western Frontier” continued its rapid growth and settlement.

Methodists shared this rapid growth. By 1834, the year Simpson was received on trial, Methodist numbers in Ohio were estimated at 70,000, worshiping in nearly 500 meetinghouses—the most numerous of religious folk in that state. Many of these Methodists shared in the material wealth of the booming frontier towns, and, as Marti points out, they “were sharing it with their ministers, especially Simpson.”

Simpson reveled in the new prosperity he was witnessing around him. In 1855, following the lead of men like Bangs, Simpson encouraged wealthy church members in Pittsburgh to erect Christ Church, the first American Methodist Church built in the Gothic style. Churches like Christ Church led to more and more changes: padded pews, carpets, high-church vestments for the clergy, formal worship and liturgy, and, of course, a minister cultivated enough and paid well enough to be able to function in the same social circles as the parishioners. In conferences such as Pittsburgh, the days of the uneducated and solitary circuit rider were coming to a close. The frontier’s all-weather clergy were being replaced by ministers with college degrees, who were paid “middle class” salaries, and who could speak in other public forums besides a clapboard chapel or a revival tent.

Simpson’s status inside Methodist Episcopal church structures was steadily rising as well, and in 1852 he was elected Bishop. The four years

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1Quoted from sections of Simpson’s journal reprinted in George Richard Crooks, Life of Matthew Simpson of the Methodist Episcopal Church (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1890), 26.


3Figures quoted in Clark, Life, 31.

prior, he had served as editor of an influential Methodist publication, the *Western Christian Advocate*. As editor he wrote not only on the tragedy of the split of the Methodists North and South, but also on the national political split North and South. He spoke out against slavery and against secession. In 1859 he was made president of Garrett Biblical Seminary.

Meanwhile, his political involvement continued to place him in the circles of those figures from the West who became suddenly more nationally prominent with the presidency of Abraham Lincoln, as well as Lincoln himself, whom he had met in Springfield, Illinois. It is Simpson's close proximity to the President, especially during the war years, for which he gained so much notoriety, at least among Methodists. Nearly every account of Simpson's life recounts the tale, apocryphal or not, of a conversation between Lincoln and Simpson during one of Lincoln's darker moments. An obituary for Simpson retells it in this way:

> To illustrate the influence which he [Simpson] exerted over President Lincoln, it is said that at a time when the great statesman was downcast and discouraged over the many troubles in which the country was involved, Bishop Simpson uttered the words, "Man is immortal till his work is done." The face of the President lighted up and showed the encouragement which he derived from the impressive words of his friend.  

Adding to the layers of the legendary stories about Simpson is the statue—that-almost-was—a statue of Simpson that was to stand on a monument to Lincoln, designed by Clark Mills, a well-known American sculptor. The monument was to be composed of several tiers, Lincoln on top, with smaller statues of several of his advisors and friends below, one of them intended to be Simpson. Simpson actually sat for a life-size model that was to be used to cast the mold, but plans for the monument were never carried out after Lincoln's assassination, and the statue of Simpson was later erected elsewhere, and alone.

Perhaps of all his war-time activities, Simpson became most famous for a speech of which he gave about sixty versions during a circuit of major northern cities. The speech was known by several titles: "Our National Conflict," "State of the Country," "The Providence of God as Seen in Our War," and "The Future of Our Country." This speech was given extemporaneously, and no written copy from Simpson's hand has ever appeared. But one of his contemporaries and faithful admirers, Clarence True Wilson, put

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*A clipping without complete bibliographic information from *Long Branch News*, Philadelphia (June 18, 1884). Clipping included in Matthew Simpson Papers, Drew University Methodist Collection, Methodist Library, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey.

*For details surrounding the monument, see James Kirby's article "The Bishop who Almost Stood with Lincoln" *Methodist History*, 7:31-37 (Oct. 1968). Kirby's opinion of the Bishop's political activities is rather dim: "As so often happens with ministers who embark on political or other activities outside their immediate concern, Simpson's zeal carried him beyond what might be regarded as appropriate" (32).
together a draft of the speech from newspaper reports and notes taken by various audience members. In several of the drafts of the pieced-together text Wilson has called it "The Lost Speech."\textsuperscript{11}

\section*{II}

The speech, if we accept the transcription as a faithful rendition of at least the spirit and basic imagery of the sixty-odd versions of it heard during the war, is a testament to that "eloquent optimism" to which Robert Clark refers. As I hope to show through my analysis of the speech, Simpson understood the United States, and during the war the Union, to be chosen of God to succeed, and to succeed greatly. This success was not only a moral success—he actually did not think abolition of slavery to be just cause for the war—but material and monetary success. Indeed, the material success was both the reward and the sign of the reward from God for his chosen nation. The war, then, for Simpson, was not a failure for the nation but a "purification," a tragic ordeal that would mature the nation, just as tragedy in an individual's life is to mature him or her for greater challenges and opportunities in the future.

Simpson offers this encouraging interpretation of the purpose and meaning of the war early in the speech: "We are passing through a purifying and our nation will come out a brighter, purer, and stronger people, and more glorious than ever before. The nation must be purified as by fire, and for that we are going through this war."\textsuperscript{12} Above all, Simpson understands the war as ordained by God, and as a predetermined victory for the Union; about these things there seems to be no question for him, either in this speech or in other printed and written sources from the war period. He argues in the speech that providence has bestowed upon the North several new technologies that will assist the North in its effort to conquer the South: railroads, advanced farm implements, and the telegraph all were provided to help assure victory.

Besides this kind of technological providence, Simpson believes that the new discoveries of mineral wealth in the West are going to provide nearly infinite wealth for the Union, and eventually the reunited nation. His optimism was apparently bottomless, as bottomless as the mines he envisions in the West in this speech, as bottomless as the providence that is holding up his nation:

\textsuperscript{11}Clarence True Wilson is the person responsible for compiling the material in the Matthew Simpson Papers, UMC Archives, and published two books and several articles on the Bishop. Wilson's pre-publication transcription of "The Lost Speech" is in the Simpson Papers. The speech is published in \textit{Patriot, Preacher, Prophet} (see footnote 25).

\textsuperscript{12}I will be quoting throughout from the draft of the transcription of "The Lost Speech." This quote comes from page 8.
If necessary to the welfare of this country I believe God will uncover rocks of Gold and Silver. There is enough wealth in these mines of ours to pay off all the debts, give every soldier a silver musket, plate their iron clads with beds of gold and silver, and have enough left to give a fortune to every man, woman, and child . . . Out in the mines of Nevada the deeper they go the richer are the diggings; and they hope if they can to get down far enough to find the solid rock of gold and silver. We don't know when they will get down to that, but if it is necessary for the salvation of this nation, I believe this rock shall be found, for God has taken care of us.\textsuperscript{13}

Simpson uses the images of “solid rocks” of precious metals to build a vision of a land that God prepared in the beginning of time for a chosen nation to uncover at an appointed time. The chosen nation is, of course, the United States, and that nation is not just a specific geographical location, but also a form of government. He says later in the speech:

God in his infinite mercy touches every heart. He has written a lesson that the ages must read, that great wrongs will ultimately terminate in great catastrophes, and the people have resolved that no matter how great the sacrifice, the system of society which cannot live within the Constitution must die beyond it [inset in text says here “whole audience arose, shouted, cheered, wept”].\textsuperscript{14}

The Constitution is God’s way of governing, and if those who have the opportunity to serve under the Constitution choose not to, then the people of the Constitution may destroy that “system” and those people. The preservation of government is the primary motivation and justification for the war, even, as I mentioned earlier, more important than the abolition of slavery:

\ldots but this war ought not to be carried on for the purpose of destroying slavery or for any other purpose but for the simple purpose of restoring the authority of our Government. This is the only object for which this war should be waged.\textsuperscript{15}

For Simpson, restoring the God-ordained system of government embodied in the Constitution will take care of all other problems confronting the nation and its people.

Though Simpson was strongly against slavery, ex-slaves did not fit into his vision of the God-ordained reunited nation, even though he expected the rebellious ex-Confederates to return to a united nation easily. He wonders what “shall be done” with the estimated 3,000,000 ex-slaves once the war is over, and suggests that they might best be left to themselves:

The hopes for the regeneration of Africa and raising it to civilization and liberty lies in this race, or if they must stay in this country, as Texas declared slavery should never be abolished, it would be just judgement for them [the ex-slaves] to have Texas, and if it must be so that Maximillian shall sit on the throne of Mexico, I want our French cousins to have the African for their near neighbors!\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{13}“Lost Speech,” 8.
\textsuperscript{14}“Lost Speech,” 14.
\textsuperscript{15}“Lost Speech,” 16.
\textsuperscript{16}“The Lost Speech,” 16.
Franz Simpson’s vision for the people of the new nation is that they be a pure and superior European “race,” unspoiled by the presence of an inferior African “race.” But as for the rebellious Confederates, he expects that they will return to the United States to make the nation stronger than ever. Simpson does not doubt that the South will lose the war, because their loss will be God’s will; their loss will not be due to any fault in their ability or character. Simpson says he has “no disposition to underrate southern men—they are brave men and our brothers—and when we are again united woe to the nation that dares to attack us.”

Simpson relishes these visions of power and he seems to be taunting other nations to try the power of the United States. He uses the images of the “iron clads” several times in the speech as examples of the technological superiority of the United States and as signs of God’s favor for the nation. At one point he tells the story of the battle between the Monitor and the Merrimac, and uses the story to argue that the United States is fit to withstand any intervention by European powers. He raises the challenge: “Let them send their wooden vessels over here, and we will batter them to pieces with our iron clad vessels.” To Simpson the United States is superior in every way to every other nation, and he sees the signs everywhere.

Finally, he winds up his speech (reported normally to be two hours long) holding up a tattered Union battle-flag amid the shouts and cheers and weeping of his enthusiastic audience:

Long may these stars shine! We came by them honestly. It seems like a small patch of azure filled with stars that an angel had snatched from the heavenly canopy, with its field of blue set in stripes of blood... Now the stars are out again and others are joining them; and they grow brighter and brighter, and so may they shine till the last star in the heavens shall fall, and the great angel stands with one foot on the sea and the other on the land, and swears by Him that liveth forever that time shall be no longer.

III

Simpson preached that the United States would stand until “the end of time,” and so would the memory of Lincoln. In his oration at Lincoln’s graveside, Simpson begins to construct that legacy by asserting Lincoln’s place in history not only with great “secular” historical figures, but alongside great biblical leaders as well. Early in the oration he reflects on the long procession that had accompanied Lincoln’s body some sixteen-hundred miles over thirteen days from Washington to Springfield, where the president was buried. Simpson recalls that Protestants and Catholics had “walked side by side in the sad procession,” and that a “Jewish rabbi performed a part

1"Lost Speech,” 16.
2"Lost Speech,” 11.
Simpson claims that Lincoln's procession was greater than that of even Moses or Jacob.

Beyond the significance of the outward displays of "the people's" affection and devotion for Lincoln, Simpson makes direct comparisons between Lincoln and Moses. He says that though we must revere Moses for his accomplishments in preserving the law and delivering the people of Israel out of bondage, "we may assert that Abraham Lincoln, by his proclamation, liberated more enslaved people than ever Moses set free, and those not of his kindred or of his own race. Such a power or such an opportunity God has seldom given to man." Then again he looks to the future and sees the lasting legacy of Lincoln in "secular" history:

When other events shall have been forgotten, when this world shall have become a network of republics, when every throne shall be swept from the face of the earth, when literature shall enlighten all minds, when the claims of humanity shall be recognized everywhere, this act shall still be conspicuous on the pages of history; and we are thankful that God gave to Abraham Lincoln the decision, wisdom, and grace to issue that proclamation, which stands high above all other papers which have been penned by uninspired men.

The final character to which Simpson makes comparisons with Lincoln is Christ himself. Simpson recounts that Lincoln uttered words of forgiveness to those around him in reference to two men accused of being accomplices in the assassination. Simpson makes the comparison to Christ's words from the cross: "thus in his expiring acts he is saying, 'Father, forgive them; they know not what they do.'"

In the oration he reflects not only on Lincoln himself but on the war, and compares it to past great wars in Europe. The soldiers of the two armies in America are braver than European soldiers, and the war is more just. Obviously, he says, the wars in Europe have been for unjust causes and armies have been assembled for reasons of personal gain by those who could afford to wage war. "Theories of dynasties" have been the reasons that kingdoms have waged wars in Europe, but the war in America is being fought for "liberty, for the Union, and for the right of self-government." Simpson speaks for the soldiers, and says that many feel as if they are fighting for "humanity everywhere and for all time." Simpson builds a legacy for Lincoln in this oration as the man who led the most righteous army the world has ever seen, for the most righteous and God-ordained cause—the rule by the people through the preservation of the Republic:

... I believe that God has not suffered this terrible rebellion to come upon our land merely for a chastisement to us or a lesson to our age. There are moments which involve in themselves eternities. There are instants which seem to contain germs which shall develop and bloom forever. Such a moment comes in the tide of time to our land when a

"I am throughout using a reprint of the oration in The Christian Advocate, Vol. LXXIX, No. 6 (Feb. 11, 1904), 222–224.
to our land when a question must be settled. The contest was for human freedom; not for the republic merely, not for the Union simply, but to decide whether the people, as a people, in their entire majesty, were to govern, or whether they were to be subject to tyrants or autocrats or to class rule of any kind.

Simpson looks into the future, and sees a world where one day “republics will spread, in spite of monarchism, all over this earth.” This victory is not just for the preservation of the Union, but for “the people” all over the earth, for all time.

After the war, as the newly reunited nation was beginning to feel the weight of the difficulties of the task of reconstruction, Simpson continued to press his vision of the United States as God’s chosen nation, and of the very specificity of the time and place in which Americans found themselves. In an article in *The Methodist* in 1869, Simpson encourages his readers to continue faithfully to make their “impression” on the age, and to do so in the comforting knowledge that “not only in this age of the world has our lot been chosen, but on this special part of the earth’s surface.” He reminds his readers that they have not attained all they have, and are not who they are, by any merit of their own, but rather they are American citizens because “God has chosen it for us. Our ‘times are in his hand.’” He continues:

Why came we not to see the light in India, or in China, or in the islands of the sea, or in some place of darkness or desolation? Why in this land of liberty, this land of science, this land of plenty, this land of glory? Why? . . . we are Americans, we are in this nineteenth century, because God so willed it; we are in this age of civilization, with all these vast instrumentalities and agencies thrown around us, not of our choice, not of our merit, not because we are better or wiser than, [sic] but simply because our times, in this sense, are in God’s hand.20

IV

In his later years, Simpson conceived and carried out a huge project, a project for which he is probably best known to contemporary Methodists: the *Cyclopaedia of Methodism*. First published in 1878, the *Cyclopaedia* was intended to be a description of Methodism all over the world, but, as Donald Marti has pointed out, the final product concentrated heavily on individuals and institutions in the northern United States.21 Marti argues that the people included in the work provide a perfect illustration of Simpson’s vision of what made a successful Methodist. By Marti’s count, the vast majority of the laymen who merited entries were listed “because of their achievements in medicine, law, politics, education, or some kind of business . . . Simpson’s lay elite was professional and commercial.” This emphasis on material success and elite cultural, social, and professional status reinforces our understanding that Simpson was indeed one of a growing number

of Christian leaders in the United States in the nineteenth century who considered these things as significant signs of God's providence. This understanding of individual success carried over directly to their understanding of what it meant to be a successful nation, and in what way God shined his providence on a nation. For Simpson, God chose those who would lead, and this was signified, in both individual lives as well as the life of the nation, in material wealth, in political power, and in elite social standing.

Simpson's influence is well illustrated in the biographies that appeared shortly after his death, the first one only six years later, in 1890. George R. Crooks, a professor at Drew Seminary who knew Simpson personally, was the author, and he included in the book large sections from Simpson's diaries and letters, which has provided easy access to some of the primary materials of Simpson's life that might otherwise be more difficult to gain access to.

As in the other two biographies that appeared within 45 years of Simpson's death, Crooks plays down the details of Simpson's early life in rugged, frontier Ohio, and instead includes only details that give a picture of a life of gentility amidst other settlers' ruggedness. Crooks begins his description of Simpson's birthplace in this way: "The town has been, in former days, and no doubt is still, noted for the brilliant talents of the members of its bar." He then goes on to list all the professional citizens of the town, make a generous description of the educational opportunities, and yet say very little of the main business of the region but that "the soil is fertile, and the farms are rich in wool and grain, their chief products." At the end of his introduction Crooks summarizes Simpson's biographical outline in this way:

Born and reared under these conditions, Bishop Simpson, laying hold of such helps as he could find, acquired as much knowledge of the Latin and Greek classics as was attainable in Ohio in that generation, studied and practised [sic] medicine, became a college professor and then a college president, administered the office of a bishop for thirty-two years, was, during the civil war, a recognized power in national affairs, and left a fame for pulpit eloquence throughout the English-speaking world.

This description of a Methodist Bishop is a far cry from the descriptions of Francis Asbury and other early leaders of the Methodists. In Crooks' short description of Simpson's life, exposure to Latin and Greek classics is mentioned while his conversion, ordination, and years as a circuit preacher are completely ignored. This is a perfect illustration of what importance some Methodists had come to place on "respectability," and it is doubtful that Bishop Simpson would have minded this description.

The second biography, The Peerless Orator, was written by E. M. Woods, one of Simpson's assistants on the Cyclopaedia project. In Woods'
biographical scheme, Simpson’s spiritual life, his preaching, and his church work are not mentioned until chapter nine, after Woods has written chapters entitled, “Scholar and Educator,” “Letter Writer and Editor,” “Literary Works,” “Graduate Physician,” “College Associates,” and “Political Friends.” The third biographer, Clarence True Wilson, spends more time discussing the Bishop’s religious life and early circuit preaching career, but his year on a difficult circuit is relegated to six pages, and the general tenor of the chapter is that he was being prepared for better and higher stations.

These biographies offer a hero of urbanity, gentility, power, influence, and eloquence, and they expand Simpson’s religion into a religion of the American nation, a religion that sees God working not only in the lives of successful individuals, but in the ultimate victory and success of the divinely chosen nation.

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