

**THE RHETORIC OF METHODIST REFORM AND POLITICAL
DISCOURSE IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC:
THE WRITINGS OF GIDEON DAVIS, METHODIST
PROTESTANT**

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Then the Israelites said to Gideon, "Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also; for you have delivered us out of the hand of Midian." Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you."

— Judges 8:22-23 (NRSV)

Methodist historians long ago rightly divined the importance of the 1820s Methodist Reform movement's context: Jacksonian America's Rise of the Common Man. Less attention, however, has been granted to how that context influenced a crucial element of Methodist Reform — its rhetoric — and how the dramatic changes in early 19th-century American political propaganda informed and influenced the religious rhetoric of the Methodist Protestants. This study will investigate the rhetoric of the Methodist Reform movement in the context of the changing language of American electoral campaigns in the early republic, specifically through considering the writings of Gideon Davis, a key figure in the establishment of the Methodist Protestant Church.

Gideon Davis (ca.1789-1833) sits at the crucial junction of religious reform and political propaganda. Uniquely among the leading Reformers, he was both churchman and politician.¹ From at least 1823 until his untimely death a decade later, Davis was a leading wordsmith for the Methodist Reform movement while simultaneously employed by the United States Government as a clerk in the War Department. Although it is difficult from this distance to know precisely what his professional duties involved, Davis'

¹Nicholas Snethen comes closest to Davis' combination of public servant and religious rhetorician. Snethen served as chaplain to the U. S. House of Representatives in 1813 and 1814, and unsuccessfully ran for Congress as a Federalist in 1816, but his political career ended some years before he became a key figure in Methodist Reform. Davis alone worked in both national politics and Methodist Reform at the same time. For Snethen's political career, see William R. Sutton, *Journeymen for Jesus: Evangelical Artisans Confront Capitalism in Jacksonian Baltimore* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 81.

surviving papers suggest that he spent at least some of his days in the composition of political rhetoric, drafting correspondence, orations, and ceremonial pronouncements for government officials. In his work, therefore, the intersection between public and denominational speech may be glimpsed.

Davis was born in Queen Anne's County, Maryland about 1789. Although his writings suggest he benefitted from a strong classical education, his schooling is unknown. After serving briefly in the War of 1812, Davis relocated to the District of Columbia where he took up the War Department appointment. In those pre-Civil Service days, such a posting would have required a political patron; Davis' seems to have been Maryland Republican Congressman Robert Wright (1752-1826), a "political opportunist and staunch Jeffersonian."² In addition to his government job, Davis also opened a book store on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington City. When city fathers decided the town needed a library, it was located in his shop and he became the city librarian. After the death of his first wife, Ann, in 1815, he expanded his commercial operations by selling tickets for various fundraising lotteries, some of which awarded prizes of up to \$50,000.³ In 1820, Davis moved his Truly Fortunate Lottery Office and Bookstore to Bridge Street (now M Street) in Georgetown and transferred his church membership from Foundry Chapel to the Montgomery Street Methodist Episcopal Church (now Dumbarton United Methodist Church). He married Maria Rhodes, the sister-in-law of Methodist itinerant Joseph Rowan, in 1821, and served both his church and his community in a variety of leadership roles.

Members of the Montgomery Street congregation began agitating for Methodist reform as early as 1808 when Francis Asbury, writing from Georgetown, noted that "We are republicans here. If I sit down three or 4 will come in talking around. ... I have only to let you know that all the brethren appear to wish some more equal representation. ... I find it is the

²Wright served Maryland as United States Senator, Governor, Congressman, and appeals court judge. His brother, Richard Wright, was trustee of the Methodist Chapel in Centreville, the Queen Anne's County seat, and active in local Methodist affairs. The Wrights were a distinguished Eastern Shore family; their father, Solomon Wright, signed the Association of the Freemen of Maryland. Richard and Robert both fought in the American Revolution. Frank White, Jr., *The Governors of Maryland, 1777-1970* (Annapolis: The Hall of Records Commission, 1970), 55-58.

³Davis gave up the lottery business soon after moving to Georgetown, when the Corporation of Washington sued him on behalf of a disgruntled ticket holder for alleged irregularities in the administration of a public lottery. The ticket holder – represented by attorney Francis Scott Key – believed himself the winner of a \$30,000 grand prize and asked for a \$10,000 judgment against Davis. Davis won in U. S. Circuit Court, but the plaintiff appealed the case to the United States Supreme Court. Chief Justice John Marshall's opinion, delivered March 17, 1825, ruled in favor of the plaintiff but did not hold Davis liable for the \$10,000 because the plaintiff's pleadings were defective. The case was remanded back to Circuit Court where it was dismissed. Jane Donovan, "A Separation Forthwith," in *Many Witnesses: A History of Dumbarton United Methodist Church, 1772-1990* (Interlaken, NY: Heart of the Lakes, 1998), 128.

wish of many of the members.”⁴ By 1823, Davis was beginning to articulate the group’s longings, contributing articles to *Wesleyan Repository* and growing increasingly involved in Methodist Reform. After they attended the third Reform convention, in Baltimore, in November 1828, Davis, William King, and William C. Lipscomb (the brother of two Methodist preachers who sided with the pro-episcopacy party) were brought up on charges by the Montgomery Street Quarterly Conference and removed from their offices in the congregation in a bitter confrontation that escalated into a public pamphleteering war between Davis and his accuser, Samuel McKenney. McKenney charged the three with “speaking evil of Ministers,”⁵ a charge Davis readily acknowledged was true. “This is an old story,” wrote Davis. He acknowledged arguing, in an essay for *Mutual Rights*, that, “the government of the Methodist Episcopal Church is dangerous to the civil and political liberty of our country. There can be but little if any doubt of the correctness of the proposition,” but was astonished that McKenney would hold others in the congregation responsible for an essay that Davis had written more than three years earlier. At the time the essay had originally appeared, it was “not considered then sufficient reason to refuse us the right hand of fellowship.”⁶

On December 2, 1828, thirty-seven members of the congregation signed a letter written by Davis, resigning their memberships, and founded what became the Congress Street Methodist Protestant Church.⁷ The church they built, dedicated in 1830 by Nicholas Snethen, was the first house of worship erected specifically for Methodist Protestant services. A later historian asserted that, “The most bitter opposition that the reform movement encountered anywhere was Congress Street, Georgetown, D.C.”⁸ Davis continued writing for Methodist Protestant publications and serving his denomination in many capacities until his untimely death, at the age of forty-three, in February 1833, likely a casualty of the 1832-1833 cholera epidemic.⁹

Davis’ contributions to Methodist Reform have gone largely uncelebrated. His colleagues, the Reverends Nicholas Snethen, Asa Shinn, and Alexander McCaine, remain identified as the “founding fathers” of

⁴Francis Asbury to Ezekiel Cooper, March 6, 1808, in Elmer T. Clark, et al, eds., *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury* (Nashville, TN.: Abingdon Press, 1958), 3:385.

⁵Montgomery Street Methodist Episcopal Church, “Minutes of the Quarterly Conference,” November 28, 1828, Archives of Dumbarton United Methodist Church, City Museum of Washington, DC.

⁶Gideon Davis to William W. Wallace, October 12, 1831, published in *Methodist Protestant* 1:42 (October 21, 1831), 334. Emphases are in the original.

⁷In 1945, Congress Street merged with two other Georgetown congregations to form what is now St. Luke’s United Methodist Church. The 1830 church building now houses a Christian Science congregation.

⁸I. A. Barnes, “Some of the Oldest Churches,” *The Methodist Protestant*, May 16, 1928, 20, 63.

⁹Donovan, 110-135.

Methodist Protestantism, and so they should be, but Davis' contributions to the movement were certainly significant. Methodist Protestant historian Edward J. Drinkhouse argued that, "no man of the laity did more for Reform as it culminated in the Methodist Protestant Church" than Gideon Davis.¹⁰ Davis wrote for *Wesleyan Repository* and then *Mutual Rights*. He represented the District of Columbia reformers at the 1824, 1826, and 1828 Reform conventions in Baltimore; he was among the founders of *Mutual Rights* and served on its editorial committee. He was secretary of the 1829 committee that drafted a constitution and discipline for the Associated Methodist Churches. In 1830, he served as secretary of the convention that established the Methodist Protestant Church, chaired a session of that convention, led the committee that wrote its *Constitution* and *Discipline*, and worked on the committee that compiled its hymnal.¹¹ Perhaps his contributions have received less attention because he was laity, not clergy; perhaps his early death, just as Methodist Protestantism was getting on its feet, removed him from the reaches of later church historians.

Davis' writings, composed at the crossroads of politics and religion, illustrate a particular phase in the development of American rhetoric and its transition from classical to hortatorical discourse. In order to consider his work in its proper context, it is necessary to gain some understanding of the state of American rhetoric in the early republic.

I

Rhetoric is the language of persuasion. "The discipline of rhetoric," writes Edwin Black, "is concerned with the ways that minds are changed, and with the circumstances – especially the discursive ones – that generate such changes."¹²

Early discussions of rhetoric appear in the writings of Aristotle, who classified two modes of rhetoric: deliberative discourse and demonstrative (or epideictic) discourse. Deliberative discourse is addressed to "the few" (the leaders of a society), is debate-oriented, focuses on the future, and asks its audience to deliberate about policy formation. Demonstrative discourse is addressed to "the many" (a mass audience), is result-oriented, focused on the present, and asks its audience to render a judgment or decision. By the late

¹⁰Edward J. Drinkhouse, *History of Methodist Protestant Reform* (Norwood, MA.: Board of Publication of the Methodist Protestant Church, 1899), 2:62.

¹¹*Methodist Protestant* 1:1, January 7, 1831, 1:2, January 14, 1831, and 1:7, February 18, 1831; T. H. Colhouer, *Sketches of the Founders of the Methodist Protestant Church* (Pittsburgh: Methodist Protestant Book Concern, 1880), 347-348. Drafts of the December 1829 committee minutes and articles of the 1830 Methodist Protestant *Constitution*, in Davis' hand, are among the Gideon Davis Papers in the collection of Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, DC.

¹²Edwin Black, "The Aesthetics of Rhetoric, American Style," in Thomas W. Benson, ed., *Rhetoric and Political Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1997), 2.

18th century, the distinctions between deliberative and demonstrative discourse (at least in western Europe and North America) began to crumble in response to the challenges of democratization. No longer were the functions of “the few” clearly delineated from those of “the many.” Demonstrative speech combined with deliberative intent in a vastly-widened public policy debate. Andrew Robertson argues that, “Rhetoric, acting as a mobilizing instrument, played an indispensable role in the development of a participatory political culture.”¹³

This new, participatory rhetoric was further developed in the United States under the influence of the violent invective of the French Revolution and the rise of a national news media.¹⁴ Classical rhetoric, in both its deliberative and demonstrative forms, was laudatory in style, delivered by oral performance, received by passive participants, and expressed somewhat ritualistically. It avoided reference to the future, argued for the nobility and usefulness of past actions, assumed a level of trust from the audience, and focused on generalities. Moral character was the principal qualification for election to public office and a certain distinction between those who ruled and those who were ruled was assumed. The Reverend John Lathrop, pastor of Boston’s Old South Church, articulated the classical rhetorician’s perspective, “To determine whether a man is worthy of our suffrages, we must enquire, whether he is a man of ability and information, of virtue, stability and firmness.”¹⁵ From the time of Oliver Cromwell, however, British – and, later, American – discourse began to include hortatorial rhetoric.

Hortatory focuses on the contrast between two well-defined polar opposites, such as Christianity versus atheism or monarchy versus republicanism, and sometimes relies on the use of sarcasm and condemnatory argument. This discourse was primarily delivered in the form of oral protest, received by active, enthusiastic respondents, and expressed spontaneously. Protestant denominational resistance, the political proclamations of Thomas Paine and Patrick Henry, and rising Anglo-American journalism such as that produced by James Callender, Matthew Carey, William Cobbett, John Fenno, and Benjamin Franklin Bache all featured hortatorial rhetoric. The violent passions of the French Revolution guillotined political decorum and ignited the development of political invective. The rise of the newspaper – the emergence of a mass-circulation press focused on selling its product – led to the addition of emphatic punctuation and typography in an effort to mimic oral speech. Political rhetoric took on the language and symbolism of commercial advertising as well as the cadence and emphasis of the spoken word. Demonstrative and deliberative discourses became forever coagulated as a dominant hortatorial style emerged.¹⁶ By the end of the 19th century, the

¹³Andrew W. Robertson, *The Language of Democracy: Political Rhetoric in the United States and Britain, 1790-1900* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 7.

¹⁴Robertson, 1-11, 36.

¹⁵As quoted in Robertson, 26.

¹⁶Robertson, 11-14, 36-37, 69-70.

inarguable purpose of political speech was to rouse voters to cast their ballots on policy questions. The enfranchised had become part of the political process, were consulted on the facts, and functioned as arbiters of policy.

Until the 1790s, American political discourse mostly featured classical rhetoric, although the Revolutionary generation occasionally engaged in elements of hortatory. The rise of hortatorical rhetoric may be traced to the presidency of John Adams (1797-1801), and the concurrent development of political parties in the post-George Washington republic. The Federalist Adams accused partisan Republican editors of treasonous behavior, shutting down the most influential Republican newspapers with prosecutions under the Sedition Act. When that legislation expired in 1801, President Thomas Jefferson manipulated the media for his political purposes as well, directing federal subsidies to Republican editors who supported him.¹⁷ Political speech became increasingly invested in party rather than candidate, in slogans and symbolism, propagated by a press still licking wounds incurred during its entrapment in the Adams-Jefferson partisan conflict.

This new style of political language came to full fruition in the rise of Andrew Jackson and can be articulated best by the careers of two of America's most famous newsmen of that era: James Gordon Bennett of the *New York Herald* and Horace Greeley of the *New York Tribune*. Bennett's "penny paper" was written in a titillating style that treated readers as autonomous political insiders and Greeley "used sensational language in new ways for political persuasion," Andrew Robertson argued, helping raze any remaining divisions between demonstrative and deliberative discourse. By the 1820s, American political rhetoric was developing an unprecedented tone of intimacy and accessibility, what Robertson calls "the democratic vernacular."¹⁸

In addition to these general elements of rhetorical evolution, Stephen H. Browne points out that the development of political parties in the early republic created "vocabularies of identity," two distinct, partisan expressions of the appropriate location of political authority. Federalists, in general, lodged political authority in inheritance and tradition, "by which commitments were secured, values transmitted, and precedents respected." They viewed experience as the guide to America's future. Republicans, on the other hand, posited a contractual theory of government. Authority, they argued, rests in the contract between the governed and the governing; breaking the social contract invalidates the right of the governor to exercise political authority.¹⁹

¹⁷Between 1801 and 1831, the number of newspapers published in the United States more than quintupled, in large part because of the Jeffersonian subsidies and other policies that promoted and shaped the media. Robertson, 37-38.

¹⁸Robertson, 69-71.

¹⁹Stephen H. Browne, "Webster's Eulogy and the Tropes of Public Memory," in Benson, 40.

Key developments in American political language by the early 19th century, then, included: a dissolution of the boundaries between deliberative and demonstrative discourse; the transition from classical to hortatorical rhetoric; the growing use of an intimate, accessible vernacular, and the development of “vocabularies of identity” to express partisan positions on the appropriate location and role of governmental authority. The writings of Gideon Davis, Methodist Protestant, show signs of all these contextual influences. A close examination of five of Davis’ most important works provides clear examples of this period of transition in American political rhetoric and how Davis’ familiarity with political speech informed his writings on Methodist reform. The five writings in question are:

- “Some Objections Against Reform Obviated,” an essay published in two parts, in the February and March 1823 issues of *Wesleyan Repository*;
- “Essays on Methodist Church Polity, by a Layman,” a five-part series that appeared in *Mutual Rights* between August 1825 and July 1826;
- “Draft commentary on guest preachers in Methodist Episcopal Pulpits,” an undated essay (probably January 1827) found in Gideon Davis’ unpublished papers;
- “Letter Addressed to a Member of the Corresponding Committee,” April 25, 1827, published in the May 1827 issue of *Mutual Rights*; and
- *To the Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Georgetown*, a December 1828 pamphlet.

II

Davis’ writings were deliberative in that he was focused on the future and deeply interested in engaging Methodists in a debate about the appropriate exercise of power and authority. His work was demonstrative in that it was addressed to a mass audience, encouraged them to participate in the reform debate, and repeatedly asked his readers to make judgments about the issues at hand. Indeed, the boundaries between demonstrative discourse and deliberative discourse collapse in his work, as they also were doing in the political speech of his contemporaries.

In this category of analysis, Davis clearly shows his Jacksonian colors: he had a high view of human potential. As a demonstrative rhetorician, he asserted that human society was becoming increasingly enlightened, that the common person had risen from ignorance and subservience, and was capable of serious, thoughtful, and just participation in church and society because of “the advancement of intellect in the church and the nation.”

It is because, by the advancement of knowledge, men have been enabled to perceive and expose those errors which a superstitious veneration for existing establishments had hitherto prevented less improved intellects from discovering; and these inquiries have invariably resulted in a better understanding of the rights of man, and the extension of the right of suffrage. ... But no government can be legitimate except the rights

of the people, civil or religious, be founded upon intellect. It is that which constitutes the man, and wherever a matured intellectual being is found, no privileged order of men, ecclesiastical or civil, have a right to assume to themselves the power of making laws for him without his voice and concurrence.²⁰

In deliberative mode, Davis invited debate on the question of what the appropriate relationship should be between the Methodist itineracy and lay members of the church. He saw in the writings of the pro-episcopacy party an insistence that the laity were duty-bound to, “‘obey those that have the rule over us;’ by which is meant, that we are not to express our views against the government under which we live, nor question the correctness of its principles, let our private opinions be what they may, but we must yield our judgments to those who are in authority.” Such a position was deeply contrary to the sensibilities of a writer trying to encourage both laity and clergy to join the debate on the great questions facing the church. “What ‘obedience’ is required to the authorities which be, merely on the grounds of the existence of that authority, and goes to prevent a free investigation of the character of the government?”²¹ In keeping with the purposes of demonstrative rhetoric, he repeatedly encouraged his readers to go beyond deliberative debate and make their own judgments. For example:

It is for you to decide. It is now in your power to redeem the clerical character from the charge of ambition and the love of power. It is for you to say [whether you support] liberal principles, or favor clerical domination.²²

But, brethren, let us appeal to your candor; would you, if it were in your power to prevent it, permit [a form of church government] in opposition to what you believe to be correct in principle? And would you consider it inexpedient to use exertions under such circumstances, to remove the error, and to establish the truth? When you have furnished your answers to these enquiries, accompany them with your views upon ‘do unto others as you would wish they should do unto you.’²³

In this same essay, in keeping with the purposes of deliberative rhetoric, he kept them focused on the future: “The day will come, it must come, when truth will triumph over error, and liberal principles over those of a contrary character.”²⁴

²⁰Gideon Davis, “Essays on Methodist Church Polity, by a Layman, No. III,” *Mutual Rights* 2:3 (October 1825), 55-56.

²¹Gideon Davis, “Essays on Methodist Church Policy, by a Layman, No. I,” *Mutual Rights* 1:12 (July 1825), 442-443.

²²Gideon Davis, “Essays . . . by a Layman, No. III,” 61.

²³Gideon Davis, “Essays on Methodist Church Polity, by a Layman, No. 4,” *Mutual Rights* 2:4 (February 1826), 154.

²⁴Gideon Davis, “Essays . . . by a Layman, No. III,” 61.

III

It is in this transition of early republican discourse that Davis' work is most clearly and fascinatingly lodged. He was deeply influenced by classical discursive traditions, yet also engulfed in the emerging hortatory of the political world. He engaged in many of the rhetorical elements that distinguished classical writing: referring to the past, claiming tradition as a source of authority, and sometimes arguing in a ritualistic fashion. But even at his most classical, Davis used those customs for hortatorical purposes, to exhort his readers to action, to participate in and decide the issues under debate.

Although nearly all of Davis' writings feature elements of classical rhetoric, one essay most clearly illustrates his use of it. Perhaps his most intellectual work, a letter to an unknown recipient published in the May 1827 issue of *Mutual Rights*, is also the best example of his use of classical rhetoric for hortatorical purposes. This letter reveals the depth of Davis' knowledge and appeals to Protestant tradition to articulate a powerful, ritualistic argument for Methodist Reform. It was written in the wake of the Dennis Dorsey case. Dorsey, a self-educated Methodist itinerant from western Virginia, was, as William Sutton puts it, "singled out for ecclesiastical martyrdom" by the 1827 Baltimore Conference. As usual, Conference began with examinations of the preachers. Dorsey was judged guilty of refusing to submit to church authority and denied appointment for the coming year for the crime of actively circulating *Mutual Rights*, the Reformers' newspaper. The action left him without any way to support himself and his family, which included his widowed mother and three sisters. Reformers were outraged. Dorsey was not well off, either physically or financially, and his defenders regarded the attack on him as indicative of growing classism among the Methodist power brokers. A number of Union Societies sent letters of moral support to Dorsey, along with financial contributions to sustain him while he looked for work.²⁵ Davis' letter accompanied a twenty dollar collection from Georgetown's Union Society.

"When we look at the past," Davis began, "and reflect upon passing events, although we have in some respects great cause for gratitude for the moral and intellectual improvement of the world, yet it must be acknowledged ... that bigotry still sits like an Incubus upon the understanding of many – to stifle free inquiry, and to prevent the reception and advancement of truth."²⁶ He then set up a litany of Christian reformers who were persecuted and punished by the institutional church for, as Davis would have it, speaking the truth to clerical authority. He led readers through a ritualistic telling of ecclesiastical history, comparing Dennis Dorsey to a series of

²⁵Sutton, 96-100.

²⁶Gideon Davis, "Letter Addressed to a Member of the Corresponding Committee," *Mutual Rights* 2:11 (May 1827), 268.

Christian heroes. First was Acacias, the 5th-century Bishop of Constantinople expelled from the church for refuting the authority of the Bishop of Rome. Dorsey was punished for circulating the newspaper, "which denies the supremacy of the clergy to make laws for the laity, without their concurrence." Davis then compared Dorsey to John Huss who, for refusing to "plead guilty, against the dictates of his conscience" was condemned by the Council of Constance. Dorsey, in like manner, refused to "answer questions to convict himself" and "promise against his judgment and conscience" to stop circulating a newspaper that "advocated the cause of truth and just principles." Davis put Dorsey in the company of Martin Luther, censored by a Baltimore Conference that he compared to the Diet of Worms. Next, he moved to the Council of Trent:

The council of Trent voted, 'that the holy scriptures were not composed for the use of the multitude, but only for that of their spiritual teachers – and ordered, that these divine records be taken from the *people*.' The Baltimore conference voted that brother Dorsey be reprimanded by the chair for having advised *the people* to read Mutual Rights, and inform themselves upon the subject of church government – although many who voted for the resolution read the work themselves. By which it may be fairly inferred that they wish to keep the *people* in ignorance of their rights and privileges as christians.²⁷

The ritual continued with "the pious Waldenses," who, like the Methodist reformers, were persecuted by the institutional church. Davis argued that Methodism's pro-episcopacy party treated the itinerant preachers as a sort of Calvinist elect who alone may legislate for the church; they were the Supralapsarians and Sublapsarians who condemned Methodism's antecedent Arminians at the Council of Dort for teaching that God's grace was not limited to the elect but available to all. Finally, the Conference's refusal to grant Dorsey an appointment was compared to the Council of Chalcedon's banishment of "the eloquent [John] Chrysostom."²⁸

Davis used this elegant classical composition to exhort the Reformers to action. He encouraged his readers to make certain the details of Dorsey's case were widely circulated, "for I have discovered already a disposition in some to cast a mist over this transaction, and thus to keep out of view the prominent fact in the case."²⁹ He also urged his colleagues to behave carefully, to "watch and pray, lest we enter into temptation and thereby give evidence, that reformers want reforming themselves."³⁰

Yet even as Davis used classical rhetoric for hortatorical purposes, he also engaged in elements of hortatorical rhetoric as well. He frequently

²⁷Davis, *Letter Addressed ...*, 268-269. Emphases are in the original.

²⁸Davis, *Letter Addressed ...*, 269.

²⁹Davis, *Letter Addressed ...*, 269..

³⁰Davis, *Letter Addressed ...*, 270.

painted the pro-episcopacy and reform positions as contrasting polar opposites (usually as monarchists versus republicans or as papists versus Protestants), exhorted his readers to action, focused on the reform party rather than individual personalities within that party (with the notable exception of the Dorsey case), and occasionally resorted to sarcasm and condemnatory speech, although less so as he matured. Sometimes he grew so exasperated with the episcopal party's obstinance that he could not restrain himself. In 1823, for example, he sarcastically suggested that, "until it can be proved that the preachers have all the religion as well as all the intelligence of the church, and consequently, a greater concern for the salvation of souls than the private members have," there was no reason to believe, as some itinerants were arguing, that lay participation would lead to the end of the itineracy.³¹ By the end of that essay, he had gone even further, poking fun at the more pompous of the preachers. One of the disciplinary questions for candidates for the itineracy was, "Will you endeavor not to speak too long or too loud?" Davis mused, "Suppose a preacher should worry us by his prolixity and deafen us by his Stentorian voice, who is to be judge of this matter? Himself, of course. ... We would not, however, be considered as even insinuating that any of *our* preachers do either."³² In 1826, he sarcastically referred to Baltimore as "the head quarters of Methodist intelligence and correct principles,"³³ but he seems mostly to have controlled himself thereafter.

IV

Because Davis continued to be deeply influenced by classical rhetoric, his work is less vernacular than that of his colleague in Methodist Reform, Alexander McCaine, but he did occasionally engage in a more intimate, accessible, and even colloquial tone. His "Draft Commentary on Guest Preachers in Methodist Episcopal Pulpits," perhaps because it was intended for circulation only among his own local congregation was, at times, quite conversational, "It is unnecessary to press this point. – It is so plain that every candid mind must come to the same . . . conclusion, but If, upon the principles of fair construction a more natural view of this point can be given I will most cheerfully yield my opinion. The exertions of my feeble efforts have directed me irresistibly."³⁴

Some of his published essays occasionally veered into the conversational, calling hierarchical polity, "this strange, and we had like to have said,

³¹Gideon Davis, "Some Objections Against Reform Obviated, [Part One]" *Wesleyan Repository* 2:10 (February 1823), 390.

³²Davis, *Some Objections ...*, 392.

³³Gideon Davis, "Draft Commentary on Guest Preachers in Methodist Episcopal Pulpits," n.d. [January 1827], Papers of Gideon Davis, Archives of St. Luke's United Methodist Church, Wesley Theological Seminary Library, Washington, D. C.

³⁴Davis, "Draft Commentary...."

absurd doctrine,”³⁵ for example, and arguing that the love of authority “has a greater share in raising these mole hills into mountains.”³⁶ In general, though, despite his occasional resort to sarcasm, as discussed as an element of hortatory, Davis only occasionally lapsed into the vernacular.

V

Davis was most effective in his use of the vocabulary of identity. Although at times he used a Federalist-style vocabulary of tradition, he did so to make the case for a Republican (and Reform) position: the social contract between the governed and the governing. He was deeply concerned about the location and exercise of authority, he rejected inheritance or status as a legitimate source of authority, and he explicitly connected ecclesiastical liberty with civil liberty.

It is no accident that the pseudonym under which Davis’s articles appeared in *Mutual Rights* was “Zuingle,” – that is, Swiss theologian Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531).³⁷ Zwingli – like the Gideon of the Old Testament – emphasized God’s total and absolute sovereignty over the affairs of humankind. God, he argued, not the human construction of religious polity, is the only authentic repository of power and authority. No humans may exercise authority in ways that exploit the people. Zwingli railed against the unjust use of power by church leaders; looked positively on the possibilities of human reason; and installed in Zurich a general public education system free from class distinctions.³⁸

When Zwingli’s ideas about just and unjust uses of ecclesiastical power merge with Republican contractual theories of government, Davis’ arguments about an ecclesiastical social contract begin to take shape:

In our civil government we find every thing in its natural and legitimate order. The people [are] the source of all power – possessed of, and enjoying those inalienable rights which are given by nature, and which it is usurpation to take away. ... If any abuses occur which are not immediately corrected, the indignation of a virtuous peo-

³⁵Gideon Davis, “Essays . . . by a Layman,” 1:443.

³⁶Gideon Davis, “Essays . . . by a Layman,” 3:60.

³⁷When Davis first wrote for *Wesleyan Repository*, in 1823, he signed himself as “Waters,” apparently to remind his audience of the highly admired William Watters (1751-1827) – the first American-born Methodist itinerant – who, when forced to locate in 1806 due to health and family concerns, forfeited the legislative privileges of itineracy. From 1824 onwards, however, Davis adopted Zuingle as his penname. Davis’ identity behind the pseudonyms of Waters and Zuingle was identified by Methodist Protestant historian E. J. Drinkhouse. Drinkhouse’s mother-in-law was an eyewitness to the events that led to schism in the Montgomery Street congregation. Edward J. Drinkhouse, *History of Methodist Protestant Reform* (Norwood, MA: Board of Publication of the Methodist Protestant Church, 1899), 2:41, 76.

³⁸Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: The Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: Harper Collins, 1982), 2:48-52; Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 280-281.

ple can in a constitutional manner soon remove all impediments to a proper administration. These checks are constant admonitions to our rulers to steer their course according to justice and equity. In this, there is beauty and order, and every power legitimate.

In contrast to the above, we will present one of a different character. We will suppose it to be composed of one hundred men, who had assumed to themselves the right to govern, with the power of filling up all vacancies; which would of course make it interminable. That in the first place they shall make a constitution, against which, the people shall be debarred under the penalty of excommunication, from expressing their sentiments. ... The members of this body shall only be responsible for their conduct to their associates in power. Is there an American who would not pronounce such a system of civil government as arbitrary and despotic? And why not equally so, an ecclesiastical one? We can see no real difference. ... It is therefore interesting to this community at large, as well as the Methodist Society, that our discipline should be more liberal in its character, for we believe it is highly important that republican principles should be cherished in every branch of society, religious as well as civil and social, else the day will too soon arrive when those who having been accustomed to ecclesiastical power shall forget those high notions of civil liberty which are now so eminently felt by almost every American, and which is so necessary to the stability and strength of a popular government.³⁹

In other words, the church is not exempt from the social contract. An ecclesiastical polity in which the laity are excluded from the decision-making process and in which a self-perpetuating class of rulers has no real check upon their exercise of power is contrary to the God-created natural order. There are no grounds for installing an authority in the church that does not respect the civil social contract, for the church must live in the world and, as Zwingli would well have testified, the unjust exercise of ecclesiastical power can profoundly impact civil order.

Davis returned to this contractual theory of government repeatedly, and argued that if Methodists insisted on hierarchical polity it would compromise their ability to proclaim the Gospel. For example, in 1825, he wrote, "It is not, in our opinion, consistent with sound policy, to establish any kind of government, whether social, civil, or ecclesiastical, in opposition to this generally received doctrine, the correctness of which, we presume, no American will question. ... Viewing, therefore, the present polity of our church ... we cannot think it so well calculated to promote the interests of the cause of religion in this country."⁴⁰ He also argued that Americans were more patriotic than citizens of other nations because "each individual considers himself as a component part of the community which constitutes the sovereign authority, and his patriotism being thereby mixed with self-interest, is of a more tangible kind than that disinterested love of system which exists only in the imagination, but which never yet possessed the affections."⁴¹

³⁹Gideon Davis, "Objections Against Reform Obviated. – No. II," *Wesleyan Repository* 2:11 (March 1823), 436-437.

⁴⁰Gideon Davis, "Essays . . . by a Layman," 1: 444-5.

⁴¹Gideon Davis, "Essays . . . by a Layman," 3:58-59.

He appealed to Methodist tradition, particularly John Wesley, well-known to Americans as no supporter of American democracy in either church or civic venue, for support. Davis compared Adam Clarke's commentary on Acts 15 with those of John Wesley and Joseph Benson to make his point. According to Davis, Clarke argued that only the apostles held decision-making authority at the Council of Jerusalem, while Wesley and Benson argued that:

the whole church at Jerusalem 'had a part' in deciding . . . the apostles and all the brethren. . . Are not [Wesley and Benson] equally qualified to decide a question of this nature ... as Dr. Clarke ... taking into consideration the situation which these distinguished men held in a society governed entirely by the ministry? ... Their views go to discountenance anything like a divine right, according to apostolic usage, being vested exclusively in the ministry, to govern the church.⁴²

Clarke digressed from his commentary on Romans 13 to praise British sovereign George III for his conscientious solicitude for "the sacred constitution committed to his care." Davis predictably snorted at such a notion, taking it as further proof that Clarke's commentary was sadly mistaken.⁴³

Finally, in Davis' pamphlet recounting the causes of schism in the Montgomery Street Church, he was most explicit on ecclesiastical social contract. Those who worked for several years to convince the Methodist General Conference to accept lay delegates:

believe this right of representation to be founded in nature, sustained by the Scriptures, and in entire accordance with the dictates of common sense and the clearest ideas of religious and civil liberty. ... We have the consolation to know [that our new Methodist Protestant church] possesses all the spiritual advantages of the old, with principles of government more consonant to the word of God, common justice and religious liberty; and consequently, better calculated to promote union, brotherly love, and holiness of heart and life.⁴⁴

VI

The passionate, committed, articulate writing of Gideon Davis finds its home not only in the context of Methodist Reform, but also in the post-Revolution transitional political rhetoric of the early American republic. Although he was deeply influenced by the traditions of classical rhetoric, he used its format as a tool of the emerging hortatorical discourse. His writings

⁴²Gideon Davis, "Essays on Methodist Church Polity by a Layman, No. II," *Mutual Rights* 2:1 (August 1825), 14.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 14-15.

⁴⁴William King, William C. Lipscomb, and Gideon Davis, *TO THE MEMBERS of the Methodist Episcopal Church IN GEORGETOWN* (Georgetown, DC.: by the authors, December 1828). Although this was signed by all three men, it was written by Davis. A draft of this pamphlet, in Davis's hand, is included among his papers at Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, DC.

show evidences of both deliberative and demonstrative speech as they collapsed into an indivisible union. He occasionally wrote in the conversational vernacular and clearly expressed the Republican and Reform vocabulary of identity, that of a social contract which extends to both civil and ecclesiastical spheres of human endeavor. In rediscovering Gideon Davis, the zealous, fervent, eloquent layman of Methodist Reform, so, too, light is shed upon the genealogy of modern American political – and religious – discourse.