



DISCOVERY

edited by

Frederick E. Maser

We are very happy to present material on *Martin Boehm and the Methodists*, DISCOVERED by Dr. Kenneth E. Rowe, Methodist Librarian, Rose Memorial Library, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey. Dr. Rowe is a member of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of The United Methodist Church and holds four earned degrees. He has a B.A. and Ph.D. from Drew, a B.D. from Yale, and an M.L.S. degree from Rutgers. We express our thanks to him for his timely and informative DISCOVERY.

—FREDERICK E. MASER

MARTIN BOEHM AND THE METHODISTS

by Kenneth E. Rowe

During his later years Bishop Asbury thought it wise to record some facts about the life and labors of his early friends and fellow-missionaries among the German speaking colonials, especially Philip Otterbein and Martin Boehm, cofounders of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ. Asbury interviewed Otterbein,¹ but he asked his traveling companion Henry Boehm, now a Methodist preacher, to gather the "history" of his father, Martin Boehm.²

Henry Boehm's itinerant travels brought him to his father's farm in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania in the early days of April of 1811.³ Henry took this occasion to record some of the highlights of his father's spiritual odyssey.⁴ Since his father was in his eighty-

¹ Asbury's "conversation" with Otterbein was found among the Bishop's papers and was published by Francis Hollingsworth (1774-1826) in 1823: "Notices of the life and labours of Martin Boehm and William Otterbein; and other ministers of the Gospel among the United German Brethren," *Methodist Magazine* (New York), Vol. 6, no. 3 (July, 1823), pp. 255-256.

² Henry Boehm (1775-1875), *Reminis-*

cences historical and biographical of sixty-four years in the ministry. Edited by Joseph B. Wakeley. New York, Carlton and Porter, 1866, p. 382.

³ Henry Boehm, *MS Journal*. Vol. 3, 1810-1812, p. 89. Drew University Library.

⁴ A native Pennsylvanian who descended from Swiss Mennonite stock, Martin Boehm (1725-1812) was a man of little formal education. Following Mennon-

sixth year, Henry wrote the questions and recorded his father's answers in his own leather-bound pocket diary. He soon ran out of space, and he concluded his record of the conversation on a separate gathering of two leaves of paper, carefully using all four sides. After Henry read the text to his father for his approval, the old patriarch affixed his shaky signature.⁵ The text is dated 12 April, 1811.

The second part of the manuscript record was recently discovered among a batch of previously unidentified manuscripts in Drew University Library. A search through the manuscript journal of Boehm's son Henry for April, 1811 identified the handwriting as Henry's, placed Henry at the family farm on April 12, and produced the missing first part of the conversation. Henry evidently supplied a copy to Bishop Asbury, for the text was transcribed by Francis Hollingsworth, custodian of Asbury's papers, and was first published in *The Methodist Magazine* in 1823.⁶ However, if Hollingsworth was following the Drew manuscript, or a true copy of it, he took considerable liberties with the text. More important, he omitted two enlightening sentences. One exhibits Boehm's high regard for Methodist discipline: "[I know of] no discipline so well calculated to forward the work of God among those who are under the influence [of] grace in its several degrees." The other omission relates to Methodist-United Brethren relations 1811-style: "Moreover," said Boehm, "I rejoice that there is a prospect of a union being form[ed] in sentiment and in practice between the Methodists and the German Brethren."

The Hollingsworth text was copied by Nathan Bangs into his *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church* in 1839 with little comment.⁷ However, its publication caused a stir in United Brethren circles. Henry G. Spayth, the first historian of the United Brethren, copied the text into his *History* in 1851, though not without considerable comment.⁸ Spayth was evidently embarrassed by Boehm's bouquets to the Methodists, evident in the Hollingsworth text, for he felt

ite custom, he was chosen by lot to be pastor of the local congregation in Lancaster County, Pa. in 1756. Overwhelmed by this responsibility at first, he later achieved assurance of "new life, new thoughts, new faith, new love," and began preaching in German-speaking communities of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. After expulsion from the Mennonites for excessive zeal, he associated himself with Otterbein and other German evangelicals. He served as Bishop of the newly formed Church of the United Brethren in Christ from 1800 until his death twelve years later.

⁵ Henry Boehm, *Reminiscences*, op. cit., p. 383.

⁶ Francis Hollingsworth, "Notices of the life and labours of Martin Boehm . . ." op. cit., p. 210-214. Hollingsworth erroneously attributed the text to Boehm's son Jacob. P. 211.

⁷ Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*. New York, T. Mason and G. Lane, 1839, Vol. 2, pp. 365-368.

⁸ Henry G. Spayth, *History of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ*. Circleville, Ohio, Conference Office of the United Brethren in Christ, 1851, pp. 106-112.

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⁹ Ibid., p.
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obliged to disparage the document in a six-page effort to prove that "Bro. Boehm" was not soft on Methodism.

In the early years of the century the Brethren, being somewhat uncertain at this time of their separate mission, were closely drawn to their English-speaking Methodist brethren, with whom they shared the heritage of evangelical Pietism as well as Pennsylvania's farmland. But by the 1850's a sectarian spirit had come over the church. With the rise of this spirit came a new view of United Brethren history which tended to deemphasize the affinities in spirit, theology, and polity between the Methodists and the German Brethren in America. Spayth confidently assures his readers: "Bro. Boehm's relation to the Brethren Church, was unbroken from first to last."⁹

The next major historian of the United Brethren, John Lawrence, copied the Hollingsworth text plus the Spayth commentary into his history.¹⁰ Lawrence also traces the history of the Brethren to the twelfth century as followers of Peter Waldo, and claims the United Brethren Church was really neo-Waldensian!¹¹ This curious history served two purposes. Lawrence used it to suggest first that Methodism, by comparison, was a mere novelty, and second that the United Brethren church possessed a perfect and changeless orthodoxy, untainted by Romanism, which could be traced through the Waldensians to Apostolic times.

In 1866 Henry Boehm responded to what he considered not only as misreading of history but a "grave attack upon the character of [his] father and of the Methodist Episcopal Church, made by the historians of the United Brethren in Christ."¹² The younger Boehm refuted Spayth's charges one by one—that the questions were asked by Boehm's son Jacob, that the son had obviously "warped" the statement since the father knew little English, and that the elder Boehm allowed his name to be enrolled on a Methodist class book "for form's sake" only. "The gist of the matter," wrote Henry, is this: "[My father] did not consider himself a nominal, but a real member of the Methodist Church."¹³ However, in his zeal to set the record straight, Henry's reminiscences of the event convey the impression that his father's relations to the United Brethren in his later years were lightly held.

By the end of the century Daniel Berger, in a new official history of the United Brethren, set the whole matter of Martin Boehm's

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁰ John Lawrence, *History of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ*. Dayton, Ohio, United Brethren Printing Establishment, 1868, Vol. 1, pp. 380-387. First published in 1860-61. Concerning Spayth's *History*, Lawrence

says it "is indispensable to a proper understanding of the rise of the United Brethren in Christ." Vol. 1, p. vi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp., 17-37.

¹² Henry Boehm, *Reminiscences*, op. cit., pp. 377-386.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 386.

relations with the Methodists in better perspective.¹⁴ "This much is to be said truthfully of Mr. Boehm," writes Berger, "that like Otterbein and Wesley, he did not deem it an impossibility, nor even in any sense inconsistent, to hold relationship in more than a single denomination."¹⁵ Further, as the newly discovered text shows, Martin Boehm envisioned a "union . . . between the Methodists and the German Brethren."

The original text of the "conversation" between Martin Boehm and his son is given in full below. Corrections and emendations in the text are clearly noted.

* * * * *

A conversation between Father Boehm and his son Henry—Q.—Father how long since you are in the Ministry—about year 1756—and about 3 years after I received full Pastoral orders—in the Menonist [i.e., Mennonite] society—by nomination [sic.] & lott [sic.]. Q.—F how were the excersises [sic.], of your mind—at that time? A. I strove to live & Preach, agreeably [sic.] to the light I had—at this time I was a servent [sic.]—and knew of no person who professed [sic.] experimetal [sic.] religion except my Mothers sister—Nancy Keagy—who was a woman of great devotion, and Piety—Father how did you come to a clearer discovery [sic.] relative to the necessity of a real change of heart & [c]? by preaching the doctrine of the fall: & feeling the [want?] of my Christ. A. about the year 1761 hearing of a great work among the New lights in New Va—[I] Resolved to find the Truth more fully [.] accordingly [sic.] [I] visited those parts—and found many gracious souls who could give rashional [sic.], and scripturel [sic.] account of their experience—and acceptence [sic.] with God. now I was much encouraged to seek the same blessing—in a greater degree—on my return—very large congregations colected [sic.] not only on the sabath [sic.], but also on weekdays—which was very displeasing to some of my Brethren in the Ministry—my heart was now enlarged [sic.]—so that I could not confine my labors to Jew only—but also to greek as fer [sic.] as my situation & [end of first part] ability would admit [.] about this time I set up reguler [sic.] Family worship in my house in which (through grace) I have persevered to the present. Qs. Father were your labors owned of God to the awakening and convection [sic.] of souls [?] A. yes many were brought to the knoledge [sic.] of the Truth—now some of the Meeting houses were shut against me—but many doors opened in different directions—about twelve years after I began to preach the

¹⁴ Daniel Berger, *History of the United Brethren in Christ*. Dayton, Ohio, United Brethren Publishing House, 1897, pp. 197-201.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 198. Berger modestly traces

the denomination's origins to "the revival movement which prevailed in America during the latter half of the eighteenth and the earlier years of the nineteenth century." p. 17.

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gospel spiritully [sic.]—and with power. I was excommunicated from the Menist [sic.] society¹⁶—for keeping felloship [sic.] with people of other denomenations [sic.]—and tongue—viz. the Methodists—whom I had received into my house—who soon formd [sic.] a class which has continued and still continues—my companion in life—and some of my Children were of the first that united themselves to the Methodist conection [sic.] in this neighborhood—now I felt my heart enlarged to all religious persons of every denomination [.] Posibly [sic.] between twenty and thirty years ago I became [sic.] acquainted [sic.] with my much beloved Friend and Brother Willhelm [sic.] Otterbein also with several other Ministers who were cast out by their Brethren with my self—we now had frequently social and large meetings—which generaly [sic.] lasted three days—these meetings were held extensivly [sic.] through Pennsylvania West of Maryland and New Virginia hundreds were made the subjects of grace in their Penitence and Pardon, being contious [sic.] of the propriety and usefulness of a well ordered discipline—and not feeling any disposition of forming a separate body—and knowing of no discipline so well calculated to forward the work of God among those who are under the influence [of] grace in its several degrees—as that among the Methodist I generaly [sic.] advised Serious persons to imbrace [sic.] the priviledge [sic.] of uniting themselves with the methodists—however several ministers met in conference anually [sic.]—but still we felt our difficulties for want of a well ordered discipline—age comming [sic.] on with its usual infirmities I found it not practical to travel so extensively as formerly—so that in the year 1802 I had my name inroled [sic.] on the Methodist class book at my house, and have found my mind much comforted in that blessed means of grace viz. Christians often speaking one to another so that I may truly say my last days have been my best days—while my Partner in life is also striving for Glory—My Children and Gran Childrene [sic.] are made the happy partakers of grace and those who are yet out of the way will I trust be brought in—more over I rejoyce that there is a prospect of a union being form[ed] in sentiment and in practice—between the Methodist and the German Brethren. I am now in the 86th year of my age since last November. Through boundless goodness—I am still able to visited [sic.] the sick—and Preach through the neighborhood—occasionaly [sic.]—
canostoga [sic.] township

Martin Böhm [signed]

Lancaster County

Pennsylvania

12 April 1811

¹⁶ The lengthy document setting forth the reasons for Boehm's excommunication is given in John F. Funk, *The Mennon-*

ite Church and her accusers. Elkhart, Ind., Mennonite Pub. Co., 1878, pp. 42-56.