

The Methodist Age in America

by Winthrop S. Hudson

In 1857, after ten years as pastor of Brooklyn's Plymouth Congregational Church, Henry Ward Beecher lamented the decline in congregational singing. "How I long for the good old Methodist thunder. One good burst of old-fashioned music would have blown this modern singing out of the window like wadding from a gun."¹

Beecher was looking back, back to those exciting times when he had been a young Presbyterian pastor in Indiana and had traveled about the state preaching up revivals. He spoke of the singing he had known as "Methodist thunder." But Beecher was not a Methodist, and the singing to which he referred was not confined to Methodist churches. It was common to all the revivals in which he participated. Still it was a type of singing which in the public mind was most commonly associated with the Methodists.

Beecher's comment helps us understand in part what historians have had in mind when they have referred to the triumph of Methodism in the United States. They did not mean that everyone became a Methodist, although many did become Methodists and became Methodists in astonishing numbers. As early as 1843 Robert Baird, the Presbyterian author of *Religion in America*, stressed Methodism as "one of the most powerful elements" in the shaping of American religion. Eleven years later, in 1854, Philip Schaff spoke of the Methodist "epoch" in America, and asserted that Methodism was of comparable importance to Puritanism in any assessment of the influence which gave religious life in the United States its distinctive character.² Both Baird and Schaff make it clear that they did not use "Methodist" in its strict sense as the name of a denomination. They used the word "Methodist" as shorthand for a type of religious enthusiasm and theological point of view which was characteristic of but not restricted to Methodists. They used it as a symbol for a type of popular religion which burst through all lines of denominational division and penetrated Protestant church life in general—in upstate New York and backcountry New England as well as in Kentucky and Tennessee; in Pennsylvania, Virginia, and the Carolinas as well as in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Indeed, it was not a Methodist but an erstwhile Presbyterian, Charles G. Finney, who became the most

¹ *The History of American Methodism*, ed. E. S. Bucke (N.Y., 1964), II, 341.

² Robert Baird, *Religion in America*, ed. H. W. Bowden (N.Y., 1970), 241. Philip Schaff, *America: A Sketch of Its Political, Social and Religious Character*, ed. Perry Miller (Cambridge, 1961), 135, 137.

prominent and influential representative of this religion of the common man.³ It was the pervasiveness of this popular enthusiastic religion which has made it commonplace for historians to speak of "the Methodist age" in America.

I.

Despite its familiar usage, neither the specifics of what is implied by "the Methodist age" nor the chronological period to which it properly may be applied have been defined with sufficient precision.⁴ The phrase was coined by Robert Thompson in 1895 when he wrote his *History of the Presbyterian Churches in the United States*. As part of analysis of the forces shaping American Presbyterianism, he remarked that the Great Awakening "terminated the Puritan [age] and inaugurated the Pietist or Methodist age of American church history." Two years later Leonard W. Bacon, the eminent Congregational historian, echoed Thompson's opinion that Methodist emphases were predominant in most American denominations during the century which began with the colonial awakenings of the 1740's and ended in 1847 with the publication of Horace Bushnell's *Christian Nurture*.⁵

The time-span assigned to "the Methodist age" by Thompson and Bacon pin-points the problem of definition. To suggest that it began with the Great Awakening and ended in 1847 with the publication of Horace Bushnell's *Christian Nurture* introduces confusion at both ends of the chronological spectrum.

Bushnell's *Christian Nurture* was significant more as a foretaste of what was to come than as evidence that an epoch had been terminated. To date the end of "the Methodist age" prior to the

³ Finney early adopted Methodist techniques and by the time he published his *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* in 1835 he had embraced Methodist doctrine (including the Wesleyan doctrine of Christian perfection) as well. Although many other revivalist preachers were involved and although the revivalist tide had long been gathering strength in various parts of the country before Finney burst upon the scene in 1824, Finney rivaled Methodism as a chief symbol of the new evangelicalism. It was Finney, moving from a succession of triumphs in up-state New York to Wilmington, Philadelphia, Boston and New York City, who gave his name to the "new measures" he used and to the spreading revivals he left in his wake. In the minds of many, "Methodist" and "Finneyite" enthusiasm were parallel phenomena and to all intents and purposes synonymous forms of religious expression. For the Methodist label applied to Finney's "new measures," see Schaff, *America*, 142-44.

⁴ C. C. Goen, "The 'Methodist Age' in American Church History," *Religion in Life*, XXXIV (1964-65), 562-72, is the major exception to the lack of attempts at definition. Goen's discussion of the term is informed, incisive, and suggestive, but he does not deal with the issue of periodization. His focus is on the consequences of the theological erosion that occurred.

⁵ Robert E. Thompson, *A History of the Presbyterian Churches in the United States* (N.Y., 1895), 34. Leonard W. Bacon, *History of American Christianity* (N.Y., 1897), 176.

prayer-meeting or businessmen's revival of 1858, a revival greeted with a general approbation which included even the warm approval of many Unitarians, certainly obscures the cresting thrust of the popular religion commonly associated with Methodism. It was a thrust which did not begin to subside prior to the Civil War, and the lingering influence of an emasculated Methodism adapted to the requirements of a burgeoning middle-class culture continued throughout the remainder of the century. As for Bushnell himself, the year 1847 was equally significant as the date of publication of his *Barbarism, the First Danger*. This was the tract in which he announced his willingness to put aside his distaste for the "rude" demonstrations and "violent" spirit of rivalry of the Methodists and to count them as allies, instead of foes, in the task of combatting the encroachments of "barbarism" in the vast empire of the West.

Much more to the point, however, is the confusion introduced by suggesting that the Great Awakening terminated the Puritan age and inaugurated the Methodist age in America. Even discounting the problems involved in the concept of a Puritan age, the transition to a Methodist age was not that abrupt. The Great Awakening, to be sure, was a great watershed. In spite of much opposition and dissent, the Great Awakening did produce a new broadly-based consensus within American Protestantism. What is at issue is whether or not this consensus can be meaningfully labeled Methodist and whether or not it persisted into the nineteenth century. What appears to have occurred is that this consensus began to disintegrate toward the close of the eighteenth century and was gradually replaced by another broadly-based consensus in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Thus when the Methodist age is extended backward to include the Great Awakening, it ceases to be a useful concept for purposes of historical interpretation. It ceases to be useful for two reasons. It reduces to insignificance the tensions and conflicts and divisions of the decades which bridged the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and it obscures rather than clarifies the distinctive features of the popular religion associated with the name Methodist.

For the concept of a Methodist age to be a useful tool of historical analysis, it is necessary to recognize that a distinction exists between the Puritan evangelicalism of the eighteenth century and the romantic, perfectionist, or Methodist evangelicalism of the nineteenth century. While there were continuities between the two forms of evangelicalism, there also were marked discontinuities.

II.

The early dynamism of Puritanism, as Alan Simpson pointed out, can best be understood when viewed within the category of a re-

ligious revival.⁶ Puritanism was a strongly evangelistic crusade impelled by the vision of a people in covenant with God, a new Israel, a holy nation, a godly commonwealth framed and governed in accordance with the laws of God. To this end, Puritan preaching was designed to prick the conscience, convict people of sin, summon them to repentance, and lead them through the miracle of a conversion experience to an awareness of God's mercy and an assurance of his forgiveness. The gift they received was the gift of a new life in Christ. Yet, since they remained sinners, the new life was a life of continuing self-examination, self-discipline, and self-denial as those who had received the miracle of grace struggled from day to day to render to God the obedience demanded of them.

The Great Awakening was viewed by those who participated in it as a renewal of the "experimental" piety of seventeenth-century Puritanism and its attendant vision of a holy commonwealth in full covenant with God. Theologically the effort was to defend rather than to deviate from what was regarded as established Calvinist doctrine. Arminian tendencies were viewed with equal alarm by Jonathan Edwards, Gilbert Tennant, and George Whitefield. Nor was the revival regarded as in any sense contrived—the product of human calculation. It was a divine dispensation, a consequence of the mysterious operation of God's Spirit. While there were subtle differences of emphasis and adjustments to a differing context, it should be clear that the revivalism of the Great Awakening had strong affinities with the revivalism of early Puritanism.

What of evangelicalism? Evangelicalism is usually defined as a protest against reducing Christianity to mere intellectual assent to doctrinal propositions and to mere outward observance of formal ceremonies. Evangelicalism's concern was with the heart, with personal conversion, with a new birth, with what Puritans referred to as "the root of the matter." To the extent that Puritanism did not become preoccupied with biblical legalism, the Puritan movement may be regarded as an early manifestation of evangelicalism; and to the extent that leaders of the Great Awakening kept the stress upon heart religion within the structures of Puritan thought, they may be regarded as representatives of a Puritan evangelicalism.

To jump from the pervasive Puritan evangelicalism of the Great Awakening in its formative period to the equally pervasive popular evangelicalism of nineteenth-century America is to by-pass a long period of transition. Still to make such a jump is the easiest way

⁶ Alan Simpson, *Puritanism in Old and New England* (Chicago, 1955), 1-18, 103.

to indicate the marked differences that distinguished the earlier from the later evangelicalism, keeping in mind, of course, that most of the distinguishing characteristics of the latter were present as incipient tendencies in the evangelicalism of the earlier period.

The major points of contrast are familiar and have been repeatedly rehearsed by interpreters of American religious life.

The first and most familiar contrast is at the point of human agency in promoting revivals of religion. The outpouring of God's Spirit in the initial phases of the Great Awakening was regarded as no more than a by-product of the faithful preaching of God's Word. Christians "waited" for the earlier revivals, Calvin Colton remarked, "as men are wont to wait for showers of rain, without imagining that any duty was incumbent upon them as instruments."⁷ An entirely different mood was reflected when it was affirmed that a revival "is not a miracle or dependent on a miracle" but is the result of "the right use of appropriate means," means explicitly designed to "produce" a revival.⁸

A second contrast closely related to the calculated use of "means" to promote revivals was the blunt rejection of any notion of human inability, the rejection of what was called the "cannot-ism" of Calvinism, the rejection of the idea that the only hope of sinners is that God "in his own good time" will save them. Here the movement was from the moderate Arminianism of John Wesley to a growing stress on the importance of a decision of the individual will and then to the seemingly frank Pelagianism of Charles G. Finney's sermon, "Sinners Bound to Change their Own Hearts."⁹

The third contrast was the movement from a relatively restrained recognition of the role of emotion in religious experience to an uninhibited emotionalism, an emotionalism deliberately heightened by preaching techniques, by the use of "spiritual songs" (simplified texts with repetitive refrains set to popular tunes), and by a variety of other "new measures" designed to elicit a highly emotional response.

The fourth contrast was the anti-intellectual thrust of nineteenth-century evangelicalism. This thrust was partly the result of the emphasis on emotion, the consequence of a preoccupation with the condition of the heart that took precedence over practically all other considerations. This anti-intellectualism was also the product of the pragmatic concern of revivalist preachers to secure "results,"

⁷ Calvin Colton, *History and Character of American Revivals of Religion* (London, 1832), 2-6.

⁸ Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, ed., Wm. G. McLoughlin (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), 13, 19-20.

⁹ This was the first of Finney's *Sermons on Various Subjects* (N.Y., 1835).

a concern which placed them under compulsion to reduce complex issues to a simple choice between clearcut alternatives and to cast their appeal for a decision in the emotion-laden language of common people. What preachers needed was not so much formal education as "gifts of the Spirit," i.e., powers of persuasion that were part of their native endowment and were developed and perfected through practice instead of being stultified by a period of theological study in institutions which were sometimes contemptuously referred to as "priest factories." Even when education was fostered, it was often a response to the need to train effective revivalists, and intellectual content was subordinated to an apologetic task.

The fifth contrast is provided by what Ralph Gabriel called the "popular romanticism" of nineteenth-century evangelicalism.¹⁰ Romanticism was implicit in the exuberant individualism and millennialism of the early republic. A self-governing people were widely regarded as capable of perfecting themselves and thus perfecting society. The democratic version of the endemic optimism was rooted in the belief that as people were freed from bondage to ignorance and superstition their natural virtue would be recovered and a natural harmony would prevail among them. As a consequence, the need for man-made laws would disappear and society would automatically be perfected. The evangelical version was closely parallel to the democratic version. Minimizing the staying power of the old Adam, nineteenth-century evangelicals replaced the diffusion of knowledge as a means of liberation from bondage to ignorance and superstition with the conversion experience as the means of liberation from bondage to sin. In the evangelical version, society was reformed, blessed, and perfected by the automatic harmony existing among converted individuals. Thus to convert the nation was to reform and perfect the nation.

More often than not in the popular mind, these two versions of individual and corporate perfection were intermingled and blended together. No one better illustrates the blending of the two motifs than Andrew Johnson when as a young man he summarized his faith as one of Andrew Jackson's most ardent adherents.

I believe man can be elevated; man can become more and more endowed with divinity; and as he does he becomes more God-like in his character and capable of governing himself. Let us go on elevating our people, perfecting our institutions, until democracy shall reach such a point of perfection that we can acclaim with truth that the voice of the people is the voice of God.

¹⁰ Ralph H. Gabriel, "Evangelical Religion and Popular Romanticism in Early Nineteenth-Century America," *Church History*, XIX (1950), 34-47. See also Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought* (N.Y., 1940), 32-38.

A dual process was at work in elevating and perfecting the people. The democratic thrust throughout the whole world and especially in the United States, Johnson asserted,

. . . has undertaken the *political redemption of man*, and sooner or later the great work will be accomplished. In the political world it corresponds to that of Christianity in the moral. They are going along, not in divergents nor in parallels, but in converging lines—the one purifying and elevating man religiously, the other politically. . . . At what period of time they will have finished the work of progress and elevation is not now for me to determine, but when finished these two lines will have approximated each other—man being perfected both in a religious and a political point of view.

As he continued, Johnson became lyrical in his vision of the future, noting that as the lines converge then can

. . . proclamation be made that the millennial morning has dawned and that the time has come when the lion and the lamb shall lie down together, when the “voice of the turtle” shall be “heard in our land,” when . . . the glad tidings shall be proclaimed . . . of man’s political and religious redemption, and that there is “on earth, peace, good will toward men.”¹¹

These five points—an instrumental revivalism, a stress on human ability and free will, a strong emphasis on emotionalism and heart religion, an anti-intellectual thrust, and a romantic perfectionism—are the basic characteristics of the evangelicalism by which the Methodist age may be defined.

III.

To have a Methodist age one must have Methodists, and the story of the Methodists in America is both fascinating and illuminating. Although the Methodist label is used in a symbolic sense when speaking of the Methodist age, this stress on something more inclusive and far-reaching than denominational affiliation should not obscure the almost unprecedented surge in the growth of the Methodist denomination in the decades following the American Revolution. This surge of growth was an important aspect of the Methodist age, and its significance as part of the whole thrust of popular enthusiastic religion should not be lost within the larger perspective

¹¹ Dixon Wector, *The Saga of American Society* (N.Y., 1937), 100. *The Papers of Andrew Johnson*, ed. L. P. Graf and R. W. Haskins (Knoxville, 1970), II, 176-77. For a more extended discussion of the intermingling of evangelical Christianity and “the democratic faith,” see Johnson’s circular “To The Freedmen of the First Congressional District of Tennessee,” *ibid.*, I, 220-72.

of American religious life as a whole. The phenomenon of Methodist growth deserves attention if for no other reason than to provide a different perspective from which to view the first years of American independence.

The religious situation following the winning of independence is usually depicted by quoting laments of a prevailing impiety, infidelity, and irreligion. Typical is Lyman Beecher's lament in 1804 that "irreligion hath become in all parts of our land alarmingly prevalent," with "the name of God blasphemed, the Bible denounced, the Sabbath profaned, the public worship of God neglected."¹² Apart from such laments by Congregational, Presbyterian, and Episcopal clergymen, there is scant evidence of any sweeping tide of irreligion during the decades which bridged the turn of the century. Much more impressive is evidence of a mounting tide of new religious vitality that swept people in phenomenal numbers into the membership of Baptist and Methodist churches. What was upsetting and disturbing to leaders of churches that had long enjoyed pre-eminence was not so much the irreligion of which they publicly complained but the radical realignment of religious affiliation which was taking place. The balance of power among denominations was being drastically altered. The hitherto numerically insignificant denominations were being exalted at the expense of those denominations which previously had enjoyed a near monopoly of prestige and influence.

From the beginning America had been a land of many different religious groups, but most were small, almost negligible in number. The big three denominations at the time of the Declaration of Independence were the Congregationalists, the Presbyterians, and the Anglicans or Episcopalians. There also were many Quakers scattered throughout the colonies.

Following the Revolution a drastic shift in numerical ranking occurred with Baptists and Methodists becoming the two largest denominations. Episcopalians, because of their former attachment to the British crown, and Quakers, because of their pacifism, were casualties of the Revolution. Congregationalists and Presbyterians, on the other hand, were simply outpaced by Baptists and Methodists. What pushed Baptists and Methodists to the fore was their success in capitalizing upon the tide of evangelical religion which had gained initial momentum in the eighteenth-century Great Awakening.

While a Congregationalist—Jonathan Edwards, and a Presbyterian—Gilbert Tennant, and an Anglican—George Whitefield were

¹² Lyman Beecher, *The Practicality of Suppressing Vice by Means of Societies for That Purpose* (New London, 1804), 19.

at center-stage in the Awakening, Baptists off-stage began to reap the greatest harvest as the Revolution approached. This Baptist growth continued unimpeded throughout the war and in the decades that followed. Methodists had a later start, not being constituted as a church until the Christmas Conference of 1784. Thereafter, Methodism spread like wildfire both along the seaboard and in the backcountry of the frontier. By 1820 Methodists had pulled abreast Baptists in membership, and little more than two decades later Methodists had continued to multiply so rapidly that they out-numbered Baptists by a ratio of ten to six. Even more striking was the fact that by this time Methodists exceeded in number by a similar ratio the combined membership of Presbyterian, Congregational, Episcopal, Lutheran, and Reformed churches.

IV.

Equally as significant as the burgeoning number of Methodists was the pervasive influence of "Methodist-type" enthusiasm in other denominations. At first the existing denominations were unable to adjust to and contain the burst of enthusiastic religion. As a result, during the early decades of independence, defections to Methodist views and techniques produced a cluster of new ecclesiastical bodies such as the United Brethren, the Evangelical Association, and the Winebrennerians of the Middle Atlantic States; the Free-Will Baptists of the Northeast, the General Baptists of the lower Ohio valley, the Cumberland Presbyterians of the old Southwest, and a variety of "Christian" groups (including the Disciples of Christ) in various parts of the country who combined a predominantly Presbyterian heritage with Methodist doctrines and Baptist polity. Under pressure of these defections, the older denominations began to accommodate themselves to the new spirit to such an extent that their lingering Calvinism became so diluted as to be unrecognizable.

By the 1830's Baptists, Congregationalists, and New School Presbyterians, all traditionally Calvinist in theology, had followed the lead of revivalist preachers in so stressing the ability of the sinner to acquire conversion as in effect to transform what remained of their Calvinism into an operational Wesleyan "Arminianism." Nor were German Reformed and German Lutheran churches immune to the contagion of this popular religion, as J. W. Nevin noted with dismay in his tract for the times, *The Anxious Bench*. Even Quakers were caught up in the general ferment. At midcentury Robert Baird testified that it had become necessary in all progressive churches "to preach to sinners as if they believed them to be possessed of all the powers of moral agency, capable of turning to God,

and on this account, and no other, inexcusable for not doing so.”¹³

Baird's comment appeared in—of all places—the *Princeton Review*. This was astonishing for Princeton was a bastion of Presbyterian orthodoxy. Old School Presbyterians, with Princeton theologians providing much of the leadership, had been greatly distressed by the infiltration of Arminian views and Methodist techniques into their denominational life. But after the disruption of 1837 and the division of the church into two separate New School and Old School ecclesiastical bodies, the Old School Presbyterians displayed amazing alacrity in climbing on the bandwagon and turning again to revivalism as “the only effective weapon in the church's arsenal for turning back the tide of uncouthness, materialism, and moral disintegration.”¹⁴ Ultimately such New School luminaries as Albert Barnes and Lyman Beecher, and even the arch-foe Charles G. Finney, were defended in the pages of the *Princeton Review*. James W. Alexander referred with equal approval to the Calvinist and Arminian revivals of the past with the comment: “Accidents may vary but the essence is the same.”¹⁵ And it was Charles Hodge himself who devised the rationale which permitted the Old School capitulation.¹⁶

The “prayer meeting” or “businessmen's” revival of 1857-58 illustrates how thoroughly Methodist piety had become domesticated and normative within American Protestantism. Timothy L. Smith has detailed the rising tide of revivalist sentiment among all denominations during the 1850's.¹⁷ College and university presidents joined with prominent pastors and editors of religious periodicals in calling for a return to the soul-winning enthusiasm of early Christians. But the revival when it came was pre-eminently a layman's revival. Phoebe Palmer and her physician husband, through her “Tuesday meetings” and writings and through their joint travels, had much to do with creating the favorable climate of opinion. But the revival itself had its immediate origin in concerts of prayer of Sunday school workers for the “descent of the Spirit” and then sprang to life in noonday prayer meetings sponsored by the Y.M.C.A. in New York City and elsewhere. Given wings by newspaper publicity spearheaded by Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* and James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald*,

¹³ *Princeton Review*, XXII (1850), 204.

¹⁴ Elwyn A. Smith, *The Presbyterian Ministry in American Culture* (Phila., 1962), 214.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 215.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 220-24.

¹⁷ Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (N.Y., 1957), 45-62.

the revival spread quickly throughout the land during the climactic months from February to June 1858.

The major feature of the revival was its thorough respectability. Unlike earlier revivals, it evoked almost no opposition. A contemporary report noted that "there was remarkable unanimity of approval among religious and secular observers alike, with scarcely a critical voice heard anywhere."¹⁸

Even Unitarians joined forces with their old antagonists.¹⁹ Dexter Clapp, at an ordination service in 1856, noted that "the days of theological difference and separation" are drawing to a close, and called for a "new and vital faith" in which "love of heart" outranks intellectual belief. In the same year Harvard established a "professorship of the heart, not the head," appointed Frederick D. Huntington to the post, and built Appleton Chapel for his use. In 1858, on Wednesday evenings, Huntington introduced into the Chapel the noonday prayer meeting pattern of interspersing speaking between the singing of hymns and tunes that had been sung from childhood. Other Unitarian churches duplicated this pattern in "densely crowded" weekly meetings of testimony and prayer.²⁰ Even more startling than the welcome to Boston that had been extended to Charles G. Finney by Lyman Beecher a quarter century before was the welcome Finney received from Unitarian clergymen when he preached at the Park Street Church in 1858.²¹ Theodore Parker was the rare exception in withholding approbation of the revival, grumpily suggesting that "the revival machinery" set in motion in 1857-58 was "as well known as McCormick's reaper" and was used about as mechanically.²²

At least six fundamental changes in American Protestantism stood starkly revealed in the revival of 1857-58. First, at almost every point Arminian views had crowded out any lingering Calvinism. Pessimistic assessments of human potential had yielded to a romantic belief in human perfectibility. Second, a stress on the saving simplicities of the gospel pushed aside intellectual concern with the subtleties and ambiguities of the Christian faith and the human condition. Third, the warmhearted spirit of interdenominational fellowship, symbolized most vividly by John Wesley's outstretched hand, blossomed to a greater degree than ever before. Fourth, clerical leadership was much less prominent, being paralleled, supplemented, and occasionally displaced by the initiative

¹⁸ J. E. Orr, *The Second Evangelical Awakening* (London, 1949), 21.

¹⁹ Smith, *Revivalism and Reform*, 95-102.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

²² Quoted by Sidney E. Mead in H. R. Niebuhr and D. D. Williams, *The Ministry in Historical Perspectives* (N.Y., 1956), 228.

and eager soul-winning enthusiasm of the laity. Fifth, ordered worship gave way in many instances to the informality which had become characteristic of the prayer meetings and Sunday school rallies. Sixth, while emotion was more subdued than in the earlier revivalism, it was no less central. It was expressed in the widening pursuit of "holiness" or, as it was sometimes called, "the higher Christian life"—the gift of the Holy Spirit in a second "blessing" or sanctifying visitation.

What is the period which may properly be called "the Methodist age" in America?

Several dates suggest themselves as possibilities to mark the beginning of the period when Methodist emphases became predominant in American Protestantism. One thinks immediately of the Kentucky Revival at the beginning of the nineteenth century, for this was a typically Methodist revival which involved most of the churches and which spilled over the borders of Kentucky into Indiana, Ohio, Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. But this is too early. The Kentucky revival was a foretaste of what was to come, but the more widespread triumph of Methodism in the churches came later.

Thinking in terms of the more widespread Methodist penetration of Protestant church life, the year 1823 is perhaps a significant date. This is the year Lyman Beecher preached and published his sermon, *The Faith Once Delivered to the Saints*. The Unitarians promptly noted the "decidedly anti-Calvinist bearing" of the sermon and by careful analysis demonstrated that Beecher had become to all intents and purposes a Methodist.²³ The following year, 1824, would be a second possibility, for this was the year Charles G. Finney began his sweep of upstate New York that popularized, as "new measures," the use of old Methodist techniques. A third possible date would be 1828 when Beecher and Finney met in Philadelphia, resolved their differences, and effected a working alliance. The latter date is perhaps the most appropriate. It coincides with Andrew Jackson's electoral triumph and the beginning of what has been called "the era of the common man." It is an appropriate date for in many ways Jacksonianism in politics was the analogue of Methodism in religion.

Several dates also can be put forward as marking the end of "the Methodist age." It is clear that the Methodist tide crested in the revival of 1857-58, but it is equally clear that the Methodist tide retained much of its momentum and only slowly ebbed away. The revival campaigns of lay evangelist Dwight L. Moody and the soul-

²³ See Sidney E. Mead, *Nathaniel W. Taylor* (Chicago, 1942), 196-98.

winning enthusiasm of the mass Sunday school rallies at the end of the century both indicate that the force of the Methodist thrust had not been spent in the post-Civil War years. This also was made evident by Moody's work with students which resulted in the formation of the Student Volunteer Movement in 1888, a movement which within a single year recruited more than two thousand students for "the evangelization of the world in this generation." And the Laymen's Missionary Movement, organized by a Presbyterian in 1911 to match the dedicated lives of students with dedicated dollars for their support, was no less Methodist in spirit.

What then was "the Methodist age" in America? It was roughly the period from 1825 to the eve of World War I. Countervailing forces, to be sure, had set in much earlier and the Methodist Church itself was undergoing change. Nevertheless the eager, optimistic, romantic, perfectionist spirit of Methodism was still in 1912 being expressed from the pulpit of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn. The voice from the pulpit was the voice of Newell Dwight Hillis, successor to Henry Ward Beecher and Lyman Abbott, and both tune and words were sung with the old-time Methodist "assurance" that had characterized his predecessors.

Better times are coming. Good will is taking the place of hate. Even labor and capital are becoming better friends. Peace is going to succeed war. Wealth is becoming the almoner of universal bounty. . . . Literature is sharpening arrows against injustice. Eloquence is redoubling its power. . . . Never were the libraries filled with wiser books; the press is sowing the land with the good seed of wisdom and knowledge. God is abroad, and like his sun, his love shines on the evil and the good, on the just and the unjust. For centuries the democracy of Jesus has slowly leavened the people, but the time is not far off when with one accord every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.²⁴

This was the end of "the Methodist age." By the time World War I was over, it was evident beyond cavil that the churches in general and American Protestantism in particular had entered a new age.

²⁴ Newell Dwight Hillis, *All the Year Round* (N.Y., 1912), 162-63.