

THE SECULARIZATION OF THE METHODIST CHURCH:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE 1860
FREE METHODIST-METHODIST EPISCOPAL SCHISM

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In 1860, a group of discontented members of the Methodist Episcopal Church broke away from the Genesee Conference of Western New York to form the Free Methodist Church. The issues concerning the schism were slavery, the renting of church pews, members of the Church belonging to secret societies and the dispute over the theory of sanctification. These controversies resulted in the expulsion of Reverend B. T. Roberts, the leader of the dissenting group, from the Methodist Episcopal Church and the creation of a new sect of Methodism.¹

The process of growth and change needs to be examined to determine if the actions of these future Free Methodists were narrow and conservative reactions to change and growth in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Samuel Hay's article "Political Parties and the Community-Society Continuum," provides a framework for examining a continuum of human relationships. On the one hand, the community — personal, face to face, a limited geographic area. On the other hand, the society — impersonal, mass relationships covering a greater geographic location. As the community grows, emphasis is shifted from the community end of the continuum towards the society end.² In Neil Smelser's "Mechanisms of Change and Adjustment to Change," he states that the community end is a multi-functional role structure. When some stimulus appears to cause change (e.g. industrialization) the community role structure differentiates into the society which is more specialized.

The community shares a narrow spectrum of traditionally held values and beliefs, whereas the geographically larger society fosters a wide interchange of values, relationships and perspectives. Decision making in the community is at a low level, the leaders having deep roots

¹B. T. Roberts, *Why Another Sect* (Rochester: Earnest Christian Publishing House, 1879), pp. 44-50.

²Samuel Hays, "Political Parties and the Community-Society Continuum," in *The American Party System*, eds: William Cambers and Walter D. Burham (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 154.

in the community. In the society, the decision making is at the top, the leaders representing a host of constituents. The focal point of decision making and authority is taken away from the community as an area grows and spreads across a wider geographic and political range.³ The community reacts against these changes, becoming defensive, wishing to preserve the past.

As the community begins to change many "traditional instruments" must be altered to allow more "societal" structures to be set up. In religion, secularization, or as Smelser describes it, "worldly religious beliefs" may modify the traditional institution. After overriding "ascetic religious principles" by the secularization of religion, the secular church itself is later replaced by a more autonomous system of rationality, which is economic, political and scientific in nature.⁴ Secularization is important in that it provides a way for further movement from the community to the society by the breaking up of old ways. Value systems, Smelser states, that resist secularization may block the way for economic advancement and structural change. As religion is modified by secularization, it must also be integrated into the new social structure in order for it to function.

Here the altering of the community meets resistance. There is conflict arising from the breakdown of traditional values and standards. Socially, unrest results when an established religious system is challenged.

Smelser's theory would class the Free Methodists as a conservative group representing the community end of the continuum, which is reacting against the secularization of the Methodist Episcopal Church. They desired the Church to remain in principle as it was in John Wesley's time. The Free Methodists saw the Methodist Episcopal Church's "ascetic religious principles" changing through secularization, but defensively they held on to their traditional value system and refused to integrate into the new, secular church. The issue for the Free Methodists was not over ecclesiastical or organizational change but rather change in the Methodist Episcopal Church's traditional belief system; change that modified the traditional institution's interpretation and standard of faith due to the process of secularization.

The Free Methodists, in their break from the Methodist Episcopal Church, were preserving religious values and standards that if lost through the secularization process would mean the loss of important beliefs of the Christian faith. The reaction by the Free Methodists to the changing of the Methodist Episcopal Church's traditional doctrine was not necessarily wrong or backward.

³*Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁴Neil J. Smelser, "Mechanisms of Change and Adjustment to Change," in *Industrialization and Society*, eds: B. F. Hoselitz and Wilbert E. Moore (Paris: 1966), p. 39.

It is the contention of this article that the group which later formed the Free Methodist Church, in the disputes that caused the schism, were acting in a more modern way than the secularizing Methodist Episcopal Church. E. A. Wrigley, in "The Process of Modernization and Industrial Revolution in England," provides a way to test this hypothesis. Wrigley defines sets of "polar opposites," one part of which is regarded as "congruent with modernization and likely to further it, while the other is inimical to modernization and apt to prevent its development."⁵ Using these polar opposites on the issues of slavery, rented pews, and secret societies, it can be demonstrated which religious group, Free Methodist or Methodist Episcopal, was most favorable to the modern pole on these issues.

The dispute over the theory of sanctification or "holiness theme" gives evidence of the Methodist Episcopal Church secularizing. Sanctification meant that every person, after repenting of his or her sins, could live in perfect Christian love through the redemptive power of Jesus Christ. In the Free Methodist *Doctrine and Discipline* concerning sanctification, it states:

Those who are sanctified wholly are saved from all inward sin, from evil thoughts and evil tempers. No wrong temper, none contrary to love remains in the soul. All thoughts, word, deeds, and actions are governed by pure love.⁶

This theory of sanctification was one of the essential themes of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism.⁷

Sanctification also meant the avoidance of worldly ways and the storing up of riches on earth. Gold, fancy clothes, rich ways were not the sign of a sanctified soul but the way of the devil. The Free Methodists were upset with the Methodist Episcopal Church for not remaining faithful to the principle of sanctification, one of the original tenets of Methodism. In a statement against the secularization of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Free Methodist Church wrote:

As many Methodists grew strong and wealthy, pride and popularity crept in among them . . . It became obvious to the most casual observers, that there was, among many of the ministers and members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States, a very wide and growing departure from the spirit of Methodism.⁸

Obviously there was a division in the church between the conservative members (Free Methodists) and the secularizing body (Methodist Episcopal). The conservative Free Methodists wanted to

⁵E. A. Wrigley, "The Process of Modernization and the Industrial Revolution in England," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (Autumn 1972), p. 230.

⁶*Doctrine and Discipline of the Free Methodist Church, 1860*, p. 22.

⁷*Doctrine and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1820*, (New York: N. Bangs and T. Mason, 1820), p. 3.

⁸*Doctrine and Discipline of the Free Methodist Church, 1860*, p. iv.

preserve the precepts of the church as they were at its conception. The secularizing body wished to see old values altered. The Methodist Episcopal view was stated in the compilation of the Genesee Conference Minutes, which stated:

Many felt that the Church had backslidden from the spirit of essential Methodism . . . that on the subject of scriptural holiness, understood in the Wesleyan sense, many had become heterodox, and grievously derelict; and that general worldliness, extravagance, and vanity had spoiled and made desolate the once fair heritage of Zion.⁹

It went further to explain:

They seem to make no allowance whatever for any change "in the modes of thinking, customs or circumstances of society within the last fifty years" and quite overlook, "the differences between what was essential and what was merely incidental to Methodism," or to Christian experience, but seemed to regard every change as necessarily an evil and proposed to bring Methodism back to those accidental as well as essential peculiarities which marked it in its earliest years.¹⁰

There is, as Smelser proposes, a conservative faction that is in conflict with the secularization of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Wrigley's polar opposites will be used to determine who was reacting congruently with what is considered modern and who was inimical to it. The controversy over rented pews is the first issue provoking the split from the Methodist Episcopal Church. Wrigley's first polar opposite concerns the "criteria for the membership in a group." Wrigley states that "in a group, all men should be equal before the law and that the law should be for all men. All franchises, liberties, and privileges which distinguish particular groups, areas or communities are deplored. Formal equality (in a modern society) is mandatory."¹¹

Methodism from the beginning had been a religion for the lower class and the poor. The tradition of simplicity and equality was inherent in Methodism in accordance with the theory of sanctification. Since the creation of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784, there was in the Church *Discipline* the rule concerning the building of houses of worship, in which the church was to provide "plain and free seats."¹²

This is in accordance with Wrigley's idea of the modern pole for mandatory equality as applied to the tradition of free church pews. In 1852, the rule for free seats was diluted by adding to the phrase "plain and free seats," the words, "whenever possible."¹³ This led to the

⁹Francis W. Conable, *History of the Genesee Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, (New York: Nelson and Phillips, 1876), p. 629.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Wrigley, "The Process of Modernization and the Industrial Revolution in England," p. 232.

¹²*Doctrine and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1820*, p. 165.

¹³*Doctrine and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1852*, p. 170.

renting of church pews in the Methodist Episcopal Church, which is contrary to Wrigley's definition of mandatory equality. The Free Methodists opposed the renting of church pews as sanctioned in the Methodist Episcopal *Doctrine and Discipline*. In their own *Discipline*, when they established the Free Methodist Church in 1860, the rule for seating was, "let all our churches be built plain and decent with free seats."¹⁴

The opposition by the Methodist Episcopal Church of mandatory equality was seen, not only in the question of rented pews, but also in the church members belonging to secret societies. The Free Methodists felt that just as the renting of pews would give special benefits to the privileged and rich, so would the membership of Methodists in secret societies provide special considerations. This membership in an outside group such as the Masons could possibly deny others their rights, which would be contrary to the idea of mandatory equality. In the Free Methodist *Discipline*, is written:

In the Genesee Conference, this departure from the old paths was hastened by the connection of several of its prominent members with secret societies. These, bound together by a tie unknown to the rest of the body, and laying their plans in the strictest secrecy, formed a solid nucleus around which the formal and the aspiring naturally rallied.¹⁵

The Free Methodists felt that any kind of outside organization could possibly create a power group in the church that would create an unfair advantage. As one Free Methodist minister wrote:

May we not justly fear, when a score or two of the members of our conference, embracing the various intellectual grades in the ministry, shall combine under such influences as above stated, (Masons, Odd Fellows) that a *favoritism* (if nothing more) will be practiced, on account of attachments to the Order, which will create envyings and jealousies in the ministry, and very much injure all the interests of the Church?¹⁶

Rather than have the possible problem of a special interest group controlling the Church, the Free Methodists felt that without any Methodists belonging to secret societies it would eliminate the possibility altogether. They envisioned that this outside membership could result in an unfair advantage for some and would deny others their rights in the Church.

At the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1856, it was the Free Methodist opinion that the secret society members of the Methodist Episcopal Church voted as a brotherhood and not as Methodists. At the conference, the bishops who were Masons took a

¹⁴*Doctrine and Discipline of the Free Methodist Church, 1860*, p. iv.

¹⁵*Doctrine and Discipline of the Free Methodist Church, 1860*, p. v.

¹⁶C. D. Burlingham, "Masonry and Odd Fellowship," a pamphlet, 1848, quoted in B. T. Roberts, *Why Another Sect*, (Rochester: Earnest Christian Publishing House, 1879), p. 50.

stand against the enactment of a law excluding slave-holders from the church. The Free Methodists claimed that secret society members of the Conference, some of whom were radical abolitionists prior to the conference, sided with the bishops on the slavery question.¹⁷

When B. T. Roberts, the founder of Free Methodism and the Free Methodist Church's first bishop, finally revolted and preached and wrote against what he called "New School Methodism" (pew renting, secret societies, the slavery issue), he was brought to trial for "immoral and unchristian conduct."¹⁸ The trial, according to the Free Methodists, turned out to be a kangaroo court of Methodist Masons who had Roberts expelled from the church.¹⁹ Roberts later wrote:

It is but justice to say, that not withstanding our position on secret societies, some well known Masons, both in the Conference and out of it, stood by us heartily through the entire conflict. They insisted that it was a gross perversion of Masonry, to use it as a means for controlling the affairs of the church.²⁰

While there were Masons and Odd Fellows in the Methodist Episcopal Church, it is difficult to say if they did take advantage of the fellowship. The Free Methodists claimed they did, the Methodist Episcopalians denied it. However, to discourage special interest groups, the Free Methodists were against church members belonging to secret societies. This was a safeguard for mandatory equality; that no person or group have an advantage in the church which would deprive others of their rights.

The Free Methodists felt that the ultimate denial of human rights was slavery. Anti-slavery was a traditional stand in the Methodist Church. John Wesley, the founder, wrote in his journal:

Wednesday, 12-I read a very different book, published by an honest Quaker, on that execrable sum of all villanies, commonly called the Slave Trade. I read of nothing like it in the Heathen world, whether ancient or modern: and it infinitely exceeds, in every instance of barbarity, whatever Christian slaves suffer in Mohammedan countries.²¹

¹⁷*Doctrine and Discipline of the Free Methodist Church, 1860*, p. v.

¹⁸Conable, *History Genesee Conference*, p. 643.

¹⁹Dr. Ray Allen, Conference Secretary and Historian of the Genesee Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, wrote in *A History of the Genesee Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church: 1810-1910*, (Rochester: Ray Allen, 1911): "Those expelled brethren were among the best men the Conference contained, and scarce anyone thought otherwise even then. . . . Following 1859 came the darkest years in her life, and her membership steadily fell year after year until in 1865 it was at the lowest level ever reached. . . . Truly she came out of great tribulation, and it is to be hoped she washed her robes clean." It should be noted that the ordination papers of the ministers expelled in the 1860 era were later returned by the Genesee Conference in October 1910.

²⁰Roberts, *Why Another Sect*, p. ix.

²¹John Wesley, *John Wesley's Journal*, (New York: Carlton & Lanahan, 1820), vol. iv, p. 366.

Slavery is not congruent with modernization in either of Wrigley's polar opposites. First of all slavery denies people equality before the law, therefore mandatory equality is refused. Wrigley writes that the second polar opposite is the "way in which people are recruited to discharge roles within society. Selection is to consider only the fitness of the candidate to carry out the tasks associated with the role regardless of his parentage, kin, status, achievement, age, nationality, religion, race, or sex."²² This is the modern end of the pole. In an anti-modern understanding of selection for a role within society "recruitment to a particular role is confined to a restricted group within the population."²³ Slavery certainly denies the individual mandatory equality as well as prohibits freedom in the choice of roles. In America, the slave's role was confined to a "restricted group within the population." Therefore, using Wrigley's polar opposites, slavery is inimical to what is considered modern.

The Free Methodists believed in the traditional Methodist stand against slavery. They also felt that according to the theory of sanctification, that slavery was evil. Sanctification provided the Christian with the potential for perfect love for all people. How could love be shown to others if they were kept as slaves? Sanctification also sharpened the person's sense of good and evil and when the Free Methodists examined slavery they found it terribly wrong.

At the founding conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States in 1784, it was decided that all Methodists must release their slaves in twelve months. The church was very strong in slave holding areas at that time resulting in an extension of five months to the time limit. When the five months were up nothing more on the subject was said. In 1789, the General Conference stated in the Discipline:

Avoid evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced such as: the buying and selling of men, women and children, with the intention to enslave them.²⁴

The Free Methodists argued that in the Discipline it made no mention of forbidding the holding of slaves, only the buying or selling of slaves.

At the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1836 it was resolved by the delegates:

That they are decidedly opposed to Modern Abolitionism and wholly disdain any right, wish or intention to interfere in the civil and political relation between master and slave as it exists in the slave-holding states of the Union.²⁵

The Wesleyan Methodist Church was created in Utica, New York in

²²Wrigley, "The Process of Modernization and the Industrial Revolution in England," p. 231.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 232.

²⁴*Doctrine and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1820*, p. 30.

²⁵*Conference Journal of the Genesee Conference of the Methodist Church, 1836*, quoted in B. T. Roberts, *Why Another Sect*, pp. 19-20.

1843, by a group of Methodist Episcopalals when the church failed to act against slavery. This new church forbade the members to hold or sell slaves or claim it was right to do so.²⁶

In 1845, the Methodist Episcopal Church divided into two churches; one church representing the North and the other the South — basically a division between the slave-holding and non slave-holding states. The reason for the division however, was not on the slavery question itself, but whether ministers had the right to hold slaves.

The Free Methodists continued to urge an end to slavery after they left the Methodist Episcopal Church. When the Free Methodist Church was created, the discipline concerning slavery read: "It is forbidden: the buying, selling, or holding of a human being as a slave."²⁷

The Methodist Episcopal Church never made as strong a commitment against slavery as did the Free Methodist Church. As the Free Methodists were in real opposition to slavery and the Methodist Episcopalals took a luke-warm stand, the Free Methodists on this issue were acting in a more modern way.

Thus on the three issues, the renting of pews, membership in secret societies, and the question of slavery the Free Methodists were acting in an attitude congruent with what has been defined as modern. Compared to the Methodist Episcopal Church, the future Free Methodists were far more modern in their values and beliefs. This is the case even though the Methodist Episcopal Church is the secular body and the Free Methodist the conservative body. The theory of sanctification, which the Methodist Episcopalals declared as one of "the accidental as well as essential peculiarities which marked it (Methodism) in its earliest years," provided the Free Methodists with their modern outlook.²⁸

²⁶Charles Ferguson, *Organizing to Beat the Devil* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971), p. 210.

²⁷*Doctrine and Discipline of the Free Methodist Church, 1860*, p. 29.

²⁸Conable, *History Genesee Conference*, p. 112.