

FROM MILITANT METHODISM TO SECULAR CHRISTIANITY: THE SOCIAL GOSPEL IN AMERICAN METHODIST HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

CHRISTOPHER H. EVANS

In his 1912 book, *Christianizing the Social Order*, Walter Rauschenbusch confidently predicted that American Methodists would play a key role in disseminating the social gospel in the United States:

The Methodists are likely to play a very important part in the social awakening of the American churches. . . . They have rarely backed away from a fight when the issue was clearly drawn between Jehovah and Diabolus. . . . Both North and South their leaders are fully determined to form their *battalions* on this new line of battle, and when they march, the ground will shake.¹

Rauschenbusch had reason to be optimistic. The social gospel emerged at the end of the 19th century, reflecting a liberal theology with an emphasis on social scientific analysis that moved beyond earlier evangelical Protestant emphases on personal conversion.² While later historians would judge the Methodists slow to embrace the theological and reform suppositions of the social gospel, by 1912 the Methodist Episcopal Church was on its way to institutionalizing this theological movement. Spearheaded by the Methodist Federation for Social Service (MFSS) and its leaders Frank Mason North, Harry F. Ward, and the organization's newly elected president, Francis J. McConnell, Methodists led American Protestantism in adopting a denominational social creed that was largely incorporated by the Federal Council of Churches at its founding in 1908.³ Over the next three decades the Methodist

¹Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1912), 23–24. See also William Warren Sweet, *Methodism in American History* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1933; reprint, 1953), 359–360.

²Charles Howard Hopkins's *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865–1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940), still represents one of the most cited works on the social gospel in the United States. The question of defining the social gospel remains elusive. See also Hopkins and Ronald C. White, Jr., *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976). For a review of major works on social gospel historiography, see Ralph E. Luker, "Interpreting the Social Gospel: Reflections on Two Generations of Historiography," in *Perspectives on the Social Gospel*, ed. Christopher H. Evans (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1999), 1–13.

³For scholarship on the MFSS, see Milton J. Huber, "A History of the Methodist Federation for Social Action" (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1949); Richard D. Tholin, "Prophetic Action and Denominational Unity: The Function of Unofficial Social Action Groups in the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Protestant Episcopal Church" (Th.D. dissertation, Union

social gospel legacy would be strong in American Protestantism, defining denominational and ecumenical social teachings related to economic justice, nonviolence, and anti-racism that reverberate to the present day.⁴

At the end of the 20th century, however, scholarship on the American Methodist social gospel tradition has been sporadic. At a time when scholarship on John Wesley and early American Methodism is thriving,⁵ little attention has been paid to the development of the Methodist social gospel.

How do we understand the place of the social gospel in American Methodism? Russell Richey notes that whenever Methodists have wanted to redefine their mission, they begin by rewriting their history.⁶ Picking up on Richey's theme, this essay addresses how the social gospel has been interpreted within the larger historical narrative of American Methodism. The paper analyzes four studies that accentuate distinctive placements of the social gospel within American Methodism: Halford Luccock and Paul Hutchinson's *The Story of Methodism* (originally published in 1926), William Warren Sweet's *Methodism in American History* (originally published in 1933), Walter Muelder's *Methodism and Society in the Twentieth Century* (1961), and the third and final volume of Emory Bucke's edited compilation, *The History of American Methodism* (1964).⁷

Theological Seminary, New York, 1967), and Donald K. Gorrell, "The Social Creed and Methodism through Eighty Years," *Methodist History* 26 (July 1988): 213–228.

⁴This paper extends the dating of the social gospel beyond the date that many historians see as its demise: 1918 (coinciding with the end of World War I and the deaths of the primary theological spokespersons of the movement such as Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch). As numerous studies have pointed out, however, the social gospel impulse in American Protestantism remained strong, at least up to American entry in World War II. See Paul Carter, *The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel: Social and Political Liberalism in American Protestant Churches, 1920–1940* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1954); Robert Moats Miller, *American Protestantism and Social Issues, 1919–1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), and Donald Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism* (Berkeley: University of California, 1960). The theme of continuity/discontinuity between the pre- and post–World War I American social gospel is explored by William McGuire King. See "The Emergence of Social Gospel Radicalism in American Methodism" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1978) and "The Emergence of Social Gospel Radicalism: The Methodist Case," *Church History* 50 (December 1981): 436–449.

⁵For a summary of trends in American Methodist historical scholarship, see Nathan O. Hatch, "The Puzzle of American Methodism," *Church History* 63 (June 1994): 175–189. Hatch focuses chiefly on Methodism's rise and institutional growth in the early and mid 19th century.

⁶Russell E. Richey, "History as a Bearer of Denominational Identity: Methodism as a Case Study," in *Perspectives on American Methodism: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, Jean Miller Schmidt (Nashville: Kingswood Press, 1993), 480–497.

⁷All four studies chosen for this paper reflect the liberal-Protestant suppositions that dominated many influential 20th-century histories of American Methodism. Richey identifies the books by Hutchinson/Luccock and Sweet as major statements of historical identity (Richey, 482). The latter two studies represent significant, but largely neglected, works on Methodism's historical and theological identity. Muelder's volume was the first comprehensive study of the social gospel in American Methodism. The historical contours of Bucke's compilation, as will be

Through listening to the voices from these histories, one hears a strong affirmation of the social gospel as a major factor contributing to American Methodism's 20th century institutional virility.⁸ When these texts are compared to more recent scholarship on the social gospel, however, it affirms that any retrieval of the American Methodist social gospel heritage must look beyond earlier taken-for-granted assumptions of Methodist institutional dominance.

I

In his 1949 book, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America*, Henry May argued that the Methodists were slow to embrace the social gospel in American Protestantism. He believed that Methodist social teaching was too oriented toward individual virtues like frugality and hard work to embrace emerging ideas of social salvation. Steeped in the tradition of a conservative evangelical theology, Methodists believed that individual salvation was the only means to achieve social salvation.⁹

May's suppositions, coupled with the common assertion that Methodist strength presided in rural, not urban America, dominate the conclusions regarding the Methodist role in shaping the American social gospel. May, echoing the work of historians such as James Dombrowski, Charles Hopkins, and Aaron Abell, viewed the social gospel chiefly as a response by urban northern churches to the social-economic dislocation caused by late 19th century industrialization.¹⁰

Methodist historical writing through the 1960s reflected the conclusions of Henry May's generation. These writings never claimed that Methodists produced a seminal social gospel theologian with the stature of Walter Rauschenbusch, Washington Gladden, or Shailer Mathews. Rather, these scholars emphasized how Methodists, once they embraced the social gospel,

noted later in the paper, influenced the direction taken by Frederick Norwood's *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), a work that is still used as a textbook on United Methodist history in American theological settings.

⁸Many historians have examined the issue of denominational modernization, focusing on how Methodist traditions developed more centralized denominational structures in the late 19th century. The way that the social gospel directly shaped institutional structures in American Methodism, however, remains to be fully analyzed. See William McGuire King, "Denominational Modernization and Religious Identity: The Case of the Methodist Episcopal Church," *Methodist History* 20 (January 1982): 75–89, and Richey, *The Methodist Conference in America: A History* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1996), 133–174.

⁹Henry F. May, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949; reprint, New York: Octagon Books, 1963), 188–190.

¹⁰James Dombrowski, *Early Days of Christian Socialism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936); Aaron I. Abell, *The Urban Impact on American Protestantism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1943). This theme, what Ralph Luker calls the "first generation" of social gospel scholarship, is discussed in "Interpreting the Social Gospel," 1–3.

shaped the institutional contours of that tradition in American Protestantism. *The Story of Methodism*, by Paul Hutchinson and Halford Luccock both modeled these themes and served as an exception.¹¹

The Story of Methodism was a work by two authors who personified the social gospel tradition in American Methodism. Hutchinson was managing editor of *Christian Century*, a journal dominated by the liberal theological suppositions of the social gospel, and Luccock was a well-known liberal pastor who would later become professor of preaching and chaplain at Yale University. As Richey points out, *The Story of Methodism* reflects an orientation that saw American Protestant churches as the moral caretakers of the nation.¹²

Hutchinson and Luccock's outlook on the social gospel closely resembled Walter Rauschenbusch's vision in *Christianizing the Social Order*. The social gospel put Methodists on the front lines in a battle to save America from social sin, fighting for temperance reform, the abolition of child labor, combating urban poverty, and championing the rights of labor.¹³ The authors declared, "The battlefield of reform on which the supreme struggle of the present generation, and doubtless of this century, is being waged is that of the struggle to make the whole social order Christian, to apply the principles of Jesus to all institutions of society."¹⁴

Hutchinson and Luccock argue that the social gospel did not originate with any one denomination or group. It is clear, however, that they viewed Methodism as the seminal force in defining the future of that tradition in American Protestantism, institutionally *and* theologically. Embracing definitions of the social gospel derived from Shailer Mathews and Rauschenbusch, Hutchinson and Luccock define the social gospel as "the application of the teaching of Jesus and the total Christian message to the economic, political, and social life of mankind. . . . The social application of Christianity is the recovery of the main emphasis of the preaching of Jesus—the kingdom of God."¹⁵

The social gospel represented for Hutchinson and Luccock the fulfillment of historical Christianity, epitomized by Jesus' teachings to address questions of personal and social salvation. They outlined how they saw the social gospel as part of a "comprehensive Christianity":

¹¹Paul Hutchinson and Halford Luccock, *The Story of Methodism* (New York & Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1926; reprint, 1949).

¹²Richey, "Denominational Identity," 492–493.

¹³Hutchinson and Luccock, 473–481.

¹⁴Hutchinson and Luccock, 473.

¹⁵Hutchinson and Luccock, 474. The authors largely adapt Shailer Mathews's definition of the social gospel, concerning the social applications of Jesus' teachings, but also emphasize the importance of the kingdom of God doctrine, consistent with the formative writings of Walter Rauschenbusch. See Mathews, "Social Gospel," *A Dictionary of Religion and Ethics*, ed. Shailer Mathews and Gerald Birney Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 416, and Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1917).

In truth, of course, there is only one Christian gospel of salvation. But its application can be both to individuals and social groups. The individual application occupied almost the entire emphasis through Christian history. The effort was largely to save individuals *out* of the world, with little idea of saving the world itself and making its institutions, its laws, its industry, government, and social agencies expressions of the principles of Jesus. A comprehensive Christianity will do both. It will lift men out of the gutter but will not stop there. It must destroy the gutter. The modern social conception of Christianity is a recognition that the gospel is for the redemption of the total life of man.¹⁶

Hutchinson and Luccock saw the social gospel as a defining moment in the history of American Methodism. It was central to the quest of Protestant churches to build a Christian social order. The social gospel theological tradition is not identified with any one individual (they do not even mention the MFSS or its principal leaders). Rather, the theology of the social gospel reflected a heritage of “militant Methodism,” where Methodists would lead America’s churches in rooting out social evils.¹⁷ In words that could have been written by an earlier generation of social gospel leaders, like Washington Gladden, they affirmed an evangelical-liberal vision of the future:

This social interest looks also to the far future, for the line of march of Christianity in this century will be on the increasing embodiment of the principles of Jesus into the fabric of civilization, into its institutions and human relationship, its whole varied life. Christ cannot be kept in any separate corner of life any more than he could be kept in the tomb on the resurrection morning. He must be Lord of all.¹⁸

Despite the moralism and, at points, jingoism of their narrative, Hutchinson and Luccock clearly saw the social gospel in continuity with an historical Wesleyan legacy of social Christianity.¹⁹ They marked the social gospel as a defining moment theologically for American Methodism. However, their effort to place the social gospel in continuity with a larger Methodist theological tradition would largely be ignored by future scholars.

II

Russell Richey noted that William Warren Sweet’s 1933 work, *Methodism and American History*, depicted Methodism as the ideal American church. “[Sweet] understood Methodism in terms of American society and American society in terms of Methodism.”²⁰ The book echoes the sentiments of Hutchinson and Luccock’s book, in that Sweet saw the history of American Methodism as a grand success narrative. While Hutchinson and Luccock saw the social gospel as defining the future theological vision for

¹⁶Hutchinson and Luccock, 475.

¹⁷Hutchinson and Luccock, 463 ff.

¹⁸Hutchinson and Luccock, 481.

¹⁹Hutchinson and Luccock, 480.

²⁰Richey, “Denominational Identity,” 495.

American Methodists, however, Sweet viewed the social gospel more as a component of Methodism's virility in American culture. He identified the social gospel as another historical signpost of how Methodists adapted to changing historical circumstances in America.

Devoting only a small amount of his work to a specific examination of the social gospel, Sweet sees this tradition interwoven into his larger meta-narrative of how Methodism emerged as a powerful denominational force in the early 20th century. Acknowledging that the formative theological influences for the Methodist social gospel emerged outside of Methodist theological sources (residing with non-Methodists like Richard Ely, Washington Gladden, Josiah Strong, and Walter Rauschenbusch), Sweet praised the skill in which Methodists synthesized these theological sources, symbolized by the emergence of the MFSS and the social creed.²¹

For Sweet, the social gospel illustrated how Methodists adapted to the standards of the American middle class. He acknowledged that middle-class prosperity made it difficult for late 19th century Methodists "to lay up treasures in heaven." At the same time, he viewed Methodism's entry into "the great middle class" as a time of unprecedented opportunity for American Methodism. The building of colleges, universities, and denominational missionary boards all served as illustrations of how Methodists were adapting successfully to the challenges of 20th century American life.²²

Sweet saw the social gospel analogous with the rising stature of Methodism's importance in American society. The Methodist social creeds of the early 20th century were barometers measuring Methodism's institutional successes. While noting that the adoption of social creeds were not met with uniform acceptance among rank-and-file Methodists, this opposition "did not deter [Methodists] from going forward along the path indicated in 1908, and at every General Conference since that time other courageous declarations and appeals have been issued."²³

The progressive impulse embodied by the social gospel became evident in a concluding chapter Sweet appended for a revised edition to *Methodism in American History*, published in 1953. At a time when Methodist leaders were riding the enthusiasm associated with the post–World War II Protestant establishment, Sweet believed that Methodist unity was the key to the church's future influence in the atomic age. For Sweet the forces propelling Methodists into the 20th century revolved around what he saw as a shared "historical mindedness," where all Methodists displayed "the willingness to consider all sides of all the historic issues which caused division."²⁴

Specifically, Sweet saw denominational unity stemming through the triumph of liberal-social gospel theology, over conservative/neo-orthodox

²¹Sweet, 356–358.

²²Sweet, 335–336.

²³Sweet, 361.

²⁴Sweet, 401.

thought. He highlights the work of Harris Franklin Rall and L. Harold DeWolf, two theologians deeply committed to the social gospel heritage, who “published important books defending the historic Methodist ‘common sense’ theology, that to make a better world as well as a better life God and man must work together.” In contrast, Sweet castigates the neo-orthodox view of George Croft Cell, whose book, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley*, Sweet dismissed as an attempt “to make John Wesley a Calvinist without much success.”²⁵

Hutchinson and Luccock attempted to link the social gospel with the theological legacy of Wesley. Sweet, however, interpreted the social gospel’s connection to Wesleyan theology largely through what he saw as Wesley’s irenic posture on doctrinal matters, concluding that “Methodists have never been a heresy-hunting people.”²⁶ Ultimately, Methodism’s future prospects in post–World War II America looked promising for Sweet. Within the tapestry of American history, the social gospel emerges as a major force of Methodism’s institutional identity, symbolized by the twin triumphs of denominational and ecumenical unity. He concludes the 1953 edition by noting that “American Methodists need to bear constantly in mind that mere bigness is not an end in itself, but a potential opportunity for greater service in a confused and groping world.”²⁷ For Sweet, the social gospel did not symbolize a transformed social order as it did for Hutchinson and Luccock, but a movement of idealism that showed American Methodists the possibilities for endless growth in the 20th century.

III

One of the most significant, and neglected, studies on the development of American Methodism, was the four-volume *Methodism and Society* series published in the early 1960s. Sponsored by the Board of Social and Economic Relations of The Methodist Church, the series attempted to flesh out the meaning of the American Methodist social witness in historical and theological context. Walter Muelder’s *Methodism and Society in the Twentieth Century*, the second volume published in the series in 1961, remains an important historical treatment of 20th century American Methodism.²⁸ For Muelder, the development of the social gospel is inseparable from the larger narrative of Methodist history. “It is very difficult, if not im-

²⁵Sweet, 389.

²⁶Sweet, 409.

²⁷Sweet, 431.

²⁸Walter George Muelder, *Methodism and Society in the Twentieth Century* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1961). The other works in the series are Richard M. Cameron, *Methodism and Society in Historical Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1961), S. Paul Schilling, *Methodism and Society in Theological Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), and Herbert E. Stotts and Paul Deats, Jr., *Methodism and Society: Guidelines for Strategy* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962).

possible, to demonstrate concrete ways in which Methodism apart from social Christianity generally has influenced American social life in a major way.”²⁹

Muelder’s analysis represents the most systematic and thorough discussion of the social gospel’s impact upon American Methodism written up to that time. Following the path undertaken by historians like Charles Hopkins and Henry May, Muelder saw the emergence of the social gospel largely as a response to the rise of industrialization in the late 19th century, with his book serving as a chronicle of the Methodist response to major social crises of the 20th century.

Muelder details some of the finest moments in the American Methodist social gospel heritage: the foundation of the MFSS and the original social creed; the leadership of Methodists, like Francis McConnell, in the aftermath of the 1919 U.S. Steel Strike, influencing public opinion leading to the abolishment of the twelve-hour work day;³⁰ Methodism’s struggles to develop an awareness of racial justice issues, and the evolution of the Methodist ethic of nonviolence through the world wars and Cold War era.³¹ Echoing the work of Paul Carter and Robert Miller, Muelder agrees that the formative growth of the social gospel in American Methodism emerged in the period after World War I, especially developing a more critical posture against capitalism, militarism, and racism in the aftermath of the Great Depression.

Muelder is not ready to pronounce Methodism’s social gospel heritage an unqualified success, however. “Methodists have been pioneers for social justice and witnesses at the trial of civil liberties, and they have been captives of regional mores and industrial indifference.”³² Specifically, Muelder laments the widening chasm between denominational social teachings and local churches. Unlike Sweet, who saw resistance to social Christianity only as a minor obstacle to the propagation of the church’s mission, Muelder sees the division between denominational hierarchies and local churches as one of the critical questions facing Methodism if it was to be relevant to future generations.³³

Muelder also saw Methodism’s middle-class prosperity not as a reflection of historical adaptability like Sweet, but as an indication that the social gospel was not radical enough. He hoped that local churches could become conduits for the social teachings of Methodism emerging from General Con-

²⁹Muelder, 386.

³⁰The role of the Methodist social gospel legacy related to raising public sentiment on this issue has been acknowledged by secular historians. See Phillip C. Ensley, “The Interchurch World Movement and the Steel Strike of 1919,” *Labor History* 13 (Spring 1972): 217–230.

³¹In particular, Muelder emphasizes the Methodist stance in support of conscientious objectors. See Muelder, 180–186.

³²Muelder, 37.

³³Muelder, see especially, 404–415.

ferences and official boards. "The laity are then not mere fragments of the church scattered about the world who come together for worship, instruction, and specified acts of fellowship on Sundays. . . . The clergy are there to encourage, motivate, council [sic], guide, exhort, admonish, and instruct the laity, though as fellow Christians and not as a separated and self-contained guild."³⁴

Muelder's volume shares many of Sweet's suppositions equating Methodist prominence to denominational size. He is not shy, however, about expressing his ambivalence about the church's future in America, especially in terms of how he questions the ability of middle-class churches to engage in radical social action. At the same time, he shares Hutchinson and Luccock's concern that the church's social witness not be cut off from its Methodist theological heritage. "Methodism in the twentieth century has developed an impressive social witness," Muelder concluded. "It has made a significant transition from the individualistic evangelism of the nineteenth century to the inclusive personal and social evangelism of the present. . . . In a broader and perhaps deeper sense than John Wesley knew, its message today through conferences, boards, agencies, and local churches reflects the historic mark of Methodist preaching: 'The gospel of Christ knows no religion but social, no holiness but social holiness.'"³⁵

Avoiding the moralism of Hutchinson and Luccock, Muelder stressed how Methodism's social gospel theological legacy could be relevant to the church's future mission in American culture. When Emory Bucke's edited three-volume history was published in 1964, Muelder's emphasis on theology was overshadowed by a concern for cultural relevancy.

IV

The publication of *The History of American Methodism*³⁶ represented a strong reformulation of the progressive historical vision of William Sweet. The series's third volume, containing essays written by historians, theologians, and denominational church leaders, provides an optimistic assessment of American Methodism at the very moment when Protestant church growth in post-World War II America was about to come grinding to a halt.

The History of American Methodism was a work that influenced the historical contours of Frederick Norwood's one-volume *Story of American Methodism* published in 1974.³⁷ Like Sweet's book thirty years earlier, the

³⁴Muelder, 414.

³⁵Muelder, 383.

³⁶Emory Stevens Bucke, ed., *The History of American Methodism*, 3 vols. (New York & Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964).

³⁷Norwood's study discussed how Methodism became "the most American of the churches." His analysis of American Methodism looked at the interrelated developments of "Americanizing and Methodizing," and how these two goals were able to co-exist. See Norwood, *The Story*

essays on 20th century Methodism in the final volume chronicle Methodism's efforts to shape American culture, emphasizing the themes of institutional growth and denominational unity. Robert Moats Miller's chapter, "Methodism and American Society,"³⁸ restates the classic position concerning the lateness of the Methodists to embrace the social gospel, yet highlights how Methodism led in developing that tradition within institutional Protestantism. William McCutcheon's chapter, "American Methodist Thought and Theology,"³⁹ emphasizes Methodism's liberal theological identity, as a sign of Methodism's ability to adapt to 20th century modernization. The tone of the volume corroborates Sweet's view that the goal of American Methodism was not so much to convert the nation (as Hutchinson and Luccock had hoped), but to construct incantations of the gospel that were relevant to the lives of modern Americans.

This central theme is reflected in Bishop F. Gerald Ensley's summary chapter entitled, "American Methodism: an Experiment in Secular Christianity."⁴⁰ Ensley highlights that Methodism, especially in the 19th century, brought order and stability to the American frontier, creating moral discipline essential to a democratic society. "Methodism has undergirded democracy by offering 'the high law' and thus lifting men's eyes to standards above the purely expedient. Methodism has sought a perfection like God's—a perfection, be it noted, that consists in treating all men, the unjust as well as the just, impartially, a democratic virtue."⁴¹

As Ensley extends his vision into the 20th century, he laments the breakdown in the Methodist ideal of secular Christianity, epitomized by what he sees as the failure of the Methodist social gospel. While noting the impact of a few Methodist social prophets (such as Francis McConnell, Ernest Fremont Tittle, and Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam), Methodism "became so involved in society that it found prophetic judgment difficult."⁴² Ensley conceded that such a movement toward worldliness was unavoidable. At the same time, Methodism's historical engagement with culture offered Americans a denomination that avoided the narrow theological visions of conservative evangelicalism. He saw great hope that Methodism's social vision would be able to offer a prophetic witness and at the same time be relevant to the secular world.

of American Methodism, 15–21. These themes are expressed in Jaroslav Pelikan's essay in Bucke, "Methodism's Contribution to America," in *The History of American Methodism*, volume 3, 596–614.

³⁸Robert Moats Miller, "Methodism and American Society, 1900–1939," in *The History of American Methodism*, volume 3, 328–406.

³⁹William J. McCutcheon, "American Methodist Thought and Theology, 1919–1960," in *The History of American Methodism*, volume 3, 261–327.

⁴⁰F. Gerald Ensley, "American Methodism: An Experiment in Secular Christianity," in *The History of American Methodism*, volume 3, 615–627.

⁴¹F. Gerald Ensley, 623.

⁴²Ensley, 624–625.

The secular piety of Methodism, it is hoped, will keep the church faced toward the world. Granted . . . Methodism's encounter with the world has not been an unbroken success, still, it has not retreated into an irrelevant pietism. Its conscience has been troubled by the problems of world peace, economic justice, racial fair play, even though its achievements have fallen below its pronouncements.⁴³

Ensley's conclusion stressed a central theme emphasized by Sweet, mainly, the 20th century represented a time of denominational and theological unity. "By the providence of God the church is moving toward unity. In that one body, of which Christ is the head, perhaps the Methodists will help to supply the bone and sinew, which the church perforce must have if it would stand erect and grapple victoriously with the powers of the world."⁴⁴ For Ensley, the social gospel legacy was not just centered on social action; it embodied a hope that the church would permanently shape the future of American culture.

Each of the four studies reviewed in this paper differ in how they nuance the social gospel's impact upon Methodist history. However, they converge around a sentiment that the social gospel was critical to forging Methodism's 20th century institutional identity. In an effort to show how the social gospel was in continuity with John Wesley's desire "to reform the continent and spread scriptural holiness," the social gospel was consumed into a larger narrative of denominational virility. These studies attempted to show how the social gospel contributed to the growth of Methodism's denominational identity in American Protestantism and American culture. The question they largely failed to answer, however, was whether or not the social gospel left behind any lasting theological legacy that future generations would care to uncover.

V

Since Frederick Norwood's history was published in 1974, studies on the American Methodist social gospel have been sporadic, but significant. They honor the Methodist historical legacy manifested through the various traditions associated with American Methodism. Significantly, however, writings on the Methodist social gospel over the last 25 years have abandoned the desire to defend Methodism as part of a quasi-sacred Protestant establishment.

This has been especially evident in the social gospel scholarship that is beginning to be done on the role of influential Methodist women and African Americans, whose authority often emerged outside of white-male denominational parameters.⁴⁵ These works show how traditional "women's orga-

⁴³Ensley, 627.

⁴⁴Ensley, 627.

⁴⁵For samples of scholarship on women and the social gospel in American Methodism, see Janet Fishburn, "The Methodist Social Gospel and Woman Suffrage," *The Drew Gateway* 54 (Winter/

nizations" like the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and the northern and southern Methodist home missionary movements, displayed an incisive theological synthesis between traditional 19th century Protestant evangelicalism and emerging themes of theological liberalism.⁴⁶ Scholarship on women and African Americans may also bring to light fundamental questions concerning how the social gospel should be defined, how the movement matured after World War I, and how it disseminated in American culture long after most mainline Protestant pontiffs pronounced it dead.⁴⁷

These emerging questions are fundamental for what I see as a major task in Methodist social gospel historical studies: a recovery of a theological tradition *within* Methodism itself. Ralph Luker asserts that future historians of the social gospel need to focus on ways in which theology informs historical praxis.⁴⁸ Luker's assertion challenges scholars to look at the formative theological voices of the Methodist social gospel not only among leaders in northern Methodism, but in the south; not only among men, but women; not only white, but black; not only American, but in nations like

Spring 1984): 85–104; Rosemary Skinner Keller, *Georgia Harkness: For Such a Time as This* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992); Jean Miller Schmidt, "Reexamining the Public/Private Split: Reforming the Continent and Spreading Scriptural Holiness," in *Perspectives on American Methodism*, 228–247; Mary Agnes Dougherty, "The Social Gospel According to Phoebe: Methodist Deaconesses in the Metropolis, 1885–1918," in *Perspectives on American Methodism*, 356–368; Emile M. Townes, "Because God Gave Her Vision: The Religious Impulse of Ida B. Wells-Barnett," in *Spirituality and Social Responsibility: Vocational Vision of Women in The United Methodist Church*, ed. Rosemary Skinner Keller (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 139–163; Alice G. Knotts, "Thelma Stevens, Crusader for Racial Justice," in *Spirituality and Social Responsibility*, 231–247. For an overview of women and the social gospel in American Protestantism, see Susan Hill Lindley, "*You Have Stept Out of Your Place*": A *History of Women and Religion in America* (Louisville: Westminster–John Knox Press, 1996), 135–147.

⁴⁶See John Patrick McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South: The Woman's Home Mission Movement in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1886–1939* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981). McDowell's work is significant in revising the common view that the social gospel was primarily a product of the urban-American north. The issue of the social gospel's connection to 19th-century evangelicalism is explored by Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957). Ralph E. Luker follows the path taken by Smith, in examining how white and African American church leaders addressed issues of racial justice at the turn of the last century. See Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White: American Racial Reform, 1885–1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

⁴⁷Relatively little attention has been paid to the role of Grace Scribner and Winifred Chappell, two Methodist deaconesses who were active leaders in the MFSS from its early years through the 1930s. The issue of the MFSS's radicalism has largely focused on Harry F. Ward, the Federation's controversial executive secretary. However, evidence suggests that Scribner and Chappell may have been just as instrumental in the organization's anti-capitalist turn in the 1920s and 1930s as was Ward. See Miriam J. Crist, "Winifred L. Chappell," in *Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on Women in the Wesleyan Tradition*, volume one, ed. Rosemary Skinner Keller and Hilah F. Thomas (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 362–378.

⁴⁸Luker, "Interpreting the Social Gospel," 7–9.

Great Britain and Canada that also claim indigenous Methodist social gospel heritages.⁴⁹

Fleshing out the theological commitments of influential social-gospel Methodists may enable scholars to affirm that the theological tradition has a distinctive identity that perhaps is not as contrary to Wesleyan theology as some recent scholars have argued.⁵⁰ William McGuire King noted that the commonly accepted wisdom that the social gospel only emphasized liberal-Protestant visions of social salvation, at the expense of any theology of sin, is simply false. For many social gospel exponents, including many Methodists, “reform activity sprang not from a sense of moral obligation alone but primarily from a belief in the social nature of religious experience itself. Social struggle was thus a way of being religious, of serving God, and experiencing communion with God. In this respect, the social gospel represented a new form of personal religion, not its negation.”⁵¹ As contemporary scholars debate the meaning of the terms “personal” and “social” religion, future historical scholarship on the social gospel may uncover theologies that are holistic in their visions of justice, incisive in their critiques of injustice, and persuasive in their claims to be included within a Wesleyan theological heritage.

What does this essay suggest about the future study of the American Methodist social gospel? On one hand, the corpus of American history has defined the social gospel as a movement that transformed the character of 20th century American Methodism. At the same time, the question of how scholars will reinterpret the theological significance of the Methodist social gospel legacy remains open ended. In the future, historians may discover a social gospel theological legacy that is uninhibited by many of the failed dreams that previous scholars had of Methodism’s institutional prowess in American culture.

⁴⁹See Phyllis D. Airhart, *Serving the Present Age: Revivalism, Progressivism, and the Methodist Tradition in Canada* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992); Paul T. Phillips, *A Kingdom on Earth: Anglo-American Social Christianity, 1880–1940* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), and Tim Macquiban, “Day-Dreams or Essential Christianity: The Emergence of the Social Gospel in British Methodism,” in *Perspectives on the Social Gospel*, 183–196.

⁵⁰One recent argument is that Methodist social gospel liberalism, associated chiefly with the theology of personalism, was influenced more by a desire for institutional respectability than a desire to uphold Wesleyan doctrinal standards. See, for example, Randy L. Maddox, “Respected Founder/Neglected Guide: The Role of Wesley in American Methodist Theology,” *Methodist History* 37 (January 1999): 71–88.

⁵¹William McGuire King, “‘History as Revelation’ in the Theology of the Social Gospel,” *Harvard Theological Review* 76:1 (1983): 113. Among the Methodist leaders King cites as instructive of an incisive theological direction for the social gospel are Francis J. McConnell and Harris F. Rall.