



DISCOVERY

Edited by
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Theodore Roosevelt and Methodism

We probably would never have heard of the connection between Theodore Roosevelt, President of the United States (1901-1908), and Methodism if it weren't for the Rev. Dr. Clarence True Wilson (1872-1959).

Before describing Roosevelt's connection with Methodism, it's important to identify Clarence True Wilson. Few today will know of this powerful and colorful Methodist clergyman. He was for a quarter of a century the Executive Secretary of the Board of Temperance, Prohibition, and Public Morals. Wilson was an eloquent preacher, an impressive platform lecturer, and a skillful debater. He had a number of interests, including a great interest in the life and work of Bishop Matthew Simpson. The most unique and bizarre of his interests had to do with the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. Wilson was utterly committed to the belief that the assassin, who died in a burning barn in Maryland, was not John Wilkes Booth. According to Wilson's view, Booth escaped to Enid, Oklahoma and committed suicide there in 1903. When we were arranging Wilson's papers at the United Methodist Archives, we discovered Wilson's book length manuscript in which he documented his theory in great detail. The manuscript was never published. Others advanced the same theory to the point that Harpers magazine in 1924 published an examination of the evidence and declared the theory to be false. Weird as it may sound, the corpse of the supposed Booth was actually mummified and shown to the public. It is said that the corpse still exists.

Wilson is the link between President Theodore Roosevelt and his inter-

est in Methodism. When Wilson was a young preacher in Sea Cliff, New York, he declared that he frequently rode on the train with Roosevelt from New York City to Oyster Bay. At the time, Roosevelt was the Mayor of New York City, and was, as Wilson put it, leading the most desperate reform movement in the history of American municipalities. He was fighting the brewers, distillers, and saloon keepers in New York City by making them close on Sunday. He was also running gamblers out of business and cleaning up the New York City police force.

On January 12, 1919, the Sunday after Roosevelt's death, Wilson gave a memorial address in Portland, Oregon, and later gave the same speech in Washington, DC. We have the manuscript of his address in the Wilson Collection at the United Methodist Archives as well as a printed copy. The address was titled, "Theodore Roosevelt The Man's Man."

Wilson pointed out that Roosevelt was totally committed to Prohibition. In a December 12, 1917 letter to Wilson, who was a prime figure in Methodism's crusade for Prohibition, Roosevelt wrote, "Neither the men in the army nor the men engaged in doing vital work for the army in connection with railroads, factories, mines, shipyards should be allowed to waste strength and health in drink at his time. I may mention that my sons, who are now in the army in France write me most strongly, just as General Pershing has expressed his opinion most strongly, as to the harm done to the men of the army by permitting the sale of liquor to them."

To ally Roosevelt even more closely to Methodism and its social concerns of that period, Wilson in his speech spoke of the last time he conversed with the President. It was only a little more than a year before his death. Roosevelt said, "Wilson, I ought to have been a Methodist. If it were not for the misunderstanding which it would cause, for some would think there was a political significance in it, I would become a Methodist now. I would rather be a Methodist Lay preacher than anything I can think of. I like to see you fellows do things. Think of a Church organizing itself into a Board of Temperance, Prohibition, and Public Morals."

Wilson said that he answered, "Mr. Roosevelt, I would like to have you as a member of our Board, and if I had a vacancy, I would nominate you at our next meeting." Roosevelt said, "If you ever do have a vacancy, and you want me to serve, I will do it."

Apparently a Board vacancy never occurred. If it did, Roosevelt never took the position. If Clarence True Wilson's recollections are accurate, we know that T. R. was a Methodist at heart if not in fact. His vitality and commitment to critical social issues surely put him in the main stream of Methodist Episcopal Church social concerns of that time. One wonders if President Theodore Roosevelt would join ranks today with the social concerns of Methodism. He may have been "a man's man," but would he be a Methodist man?