

METHODIST EXPERIENCE IN AMERICA: AN INTRODUCTION

RUSSELL E. RICHEY, KENNETH E. ROWE, JEAN MILLER SCHMIDT

Abingdon will publish in October, 2010, the long-awaited and overdue *The Methodist Experience in America: A Narrative*, a companion volume to *The Methodist Experience in America: A Sourcebook*. To reduce the length of the *Narrative* and in recognition that historiographical explorations and perspectival discussions hold less fascination for students than for faculty, we dropped this introduction from the volume. We make it available in the pages of *Methodist History*, courtesy of GCAH, to alert researchers and teachers to the fact that the volume is forthcoming, to situate our history in relation to prior narrations of the Methodist experience and to highlight features of the volume that we think will be valuable to instructors as they use the two MEA volumes as a set.

Several characteristics of *The Methodist Experience in America: A Narrative* are worth noting at the outset. *The Methodist Experience in America: A Narrative* is

- A companion volume to *The Methodist Experience in America: A Sourcebook*, providing context and interpretation of the latter's documents, referencing documents throughout, and designed to be used as part of a two-volume set;
- A fresh reading of the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren denominational stories, from 1760 to 2000;
- A wide-angled narrative that attends to religious life at the local level, to missions and missionary societies, to camp and quarterly meetings, to Sunday schools and catechisms, to architecture and worship, to higher education, to justice struggles, to devotional practices, to hospitals and homes, to temperance, to programming for youth, to publishing, to deaconesses and to Methodist experiences in war and in peace-making;
- A volume that attends critically to Methodism's dilemmas over, initiatives with regard to, and divisions over race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and the church's relation to culture and displays the rich diversity of the Methodist experience;
- A retelling of the contests over and evolution of Methodist/EUB organization, authority, ministerial orders and ethical/doctrinal emphases;
- An extraordinarily well-documented study with elaborate notes that guide reader and scholar to recent and standard literature on the numerous topics, figures, developments and events covered;

- A volume with an elaborate table of contents (available prior to publication by email by request to Richey) that will guide teacher and student to chapter subsections which cover the array of topics covered; and consequently,
- A part of the two-volume resource that will serve well the instructional needs for United Methodist history courses as well as specialized Methodist courses and courses with a Methodist dimension covering women, the several racial-ethnic traditions (and especially African American), worship, social ethics, ethnic diversity, war and peace, polity, religious education, leadership, episcopacy, schism and ecumenism.

A first history of Methodism it certainly is not. Indeed, we American Methodists have been narrating our story almost from the beginning. So, before American Methodism was even a church, in 1780, Francis Asbury noted, “I think shortly to compose in manuscript, a short history of the introduction, rise and progress of Methodism in America, with our principles, experience and practice.”¹ From the very beginning, one might even say before their formal beginning, Methodists have thought it important to exhibit their “principles, experience and practice” by telling of their “introduction, rise and progress.”² Asbury did not turn “shortly” to this composition as he had hoped. More immediate business consumed him. Over the course of his life, however, he did attempt several ventures which he thought would provide such a history of Methodism in America.³ These included the historical preface to the 1787 *Discipline*,⁴ his own journal (**Sources 1789a**),⁵ a

¹ Frederick E. Maser, “Discovery,” *Methodist History*, 9 (January 1971), 34-43; 40. Maser reproduces statements and phrases omitted in the 1821 and 1958 editions of Asbury’s journal, but contained in that of 1802, *An Extract From the Journal of Francis Asbury, One of the Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church: From January 1st, 1779, to September 3d., 1780* (Philadelphia: Ezekiel Cooper, 1802). Compare pp. 18 of that edition and 296 of *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, ed. Elmer T. Clark, 3 vols. (London: Epworth and Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), I, hereinafter referenced to as JLFA. On Asbury, see John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009).

² See Richey, “The Role of History in *The Discipline*,” *Quarterly Review* 10 (Winter 1989), 3-20 and in *Methodist Connectionalism: Historical Perspectives*, (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2009), 17-33.

³ We employ the terms “Methodism” and “Methodist” as a shorthand for the range of Pietist movements and impulses that came to “denominate” themselves variously—United Brethren, Methodist Episcopal, Republican Methodist, African Methodist, Evangelical Association. The case for this usage is laid out further here and at great length in Chapter I.

⁴ See in Chapter I. From 1787 to the present, the *Discipline* has been prefaced with an historical account of Methodism. For the import of this, see “The Role of History in *The Discipline*.”

⁵ We reference selections from MEA II, the *Sourcebook*, here and throughout the narrative as (**Sources 17??a**). The **bolded** date or date-with-letter guides the reader to the appropriate selection. In the allusions here to MEA II, this volume provides some comment, contextualizing, interpretation, and explanation for individual documents as is appropriate to the flow of the narration.

Francis Asbury, *An Extract From the Journal of Francis Asbury, Bishop of the Methodist-Episcopal Church in America, from August 7, 1771, to December 29, 1778*, vol. I (Philadelphia, Printed by Joseph Cruikshank, no. 87, Highstreet: sold by John Dickins, no.182, in Race-street, near Sixth-Street, 1792).

1798 commentary on the *Discipline* that Asbury crafted with his colleague, Thomas Coke (**Sources, 1798**),⁶ a collection of reports on revivals,⁷ and his valedictory addresses (**Sources 1813b**).⁸

Context(s)

The context for these accounts got ever narrower until the whole narrative focused on Asbury himself, a focus which apparently disturbed neither him nor narrators who followed (and for which John Wigger has made a compelling fresh case).⁹ Many shared the view of his eulogist Ezekiel Cooper who affirmed:

It is almost, if not altogether, impossible to give a narrative of his life and character, without incorporating with it, in some degree, the history of the Methodist Episcopal church. The one, is so intimately and essentially connected with the other, that they cannot well be separated, without injustice to the subject. The *Memoirs* of his life, must necessarily contain a considerable history of the Methodist church in America. And a faithful history of the church, must, as necessarily, give a history of his life.¹⁰

The context for telling the Methodist story does matter. Should it be the shadow of a “great man,” John Wesley if not Francis Asbury, and of the inner (largely male) circles who led the movement? Should it be set in the long tradition of revitalization movements, thus positioning Methodism within the traditions of Catholic piety which the Wesleys claimed? Should it be located within the penumbra of the Reformation, thereby exhibiting the interplay of confessions (Anabaptist, Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican) that underlay United Brethren, Evangelical and Methodist movements? Should it emphasize instead the Anglican heritage which loomed large in the experience of American as well as British Wesleyans? Should it rest primarily on American shores where Puritan, African, German and Anglican experiences collided and where the relatively spontaneous efforts of women and men established religious communities?¹¹

American Methodism, in fact, had diverse roots, wore multiple identities, spoke several languages. One may isolate or single out any one in structuring the Methodist story: the rise and spread of the Wesleyan movement; the emergence of evangelical strains within British Protestantism, especially

⁶ *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, with Explanatory Notes by Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury* (Philadelphia: Henry Tuckniss, 1798; reprint: Rutland, VT: Academy Books, 1979).

⁷ *Extracts of Letters Containing Some Account of the Work of God Since the Year 1800/ Written by the Preachers and Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church to their Bishops* (New York: Ezekiel, Cooper and John Wilson, for the Methodist Connection in the United States, 1805).

⁸ See, for instance, JLFA, III, August 5, 1813, “A Valedictory Address to William McKendree,” 475-492.

⁹ Wigger, *American Saint*.

¹⁰ Ezekiel Cooper, *The Substance of a Funeral Discourse . . . on the Death of the Rev. Francis Asbury* (Philadelphia, 1819) 59-60.

¹¹ For a comparable effort to establish Methodism’s multiple contexts, see Thomas Edward Frank, *Polity, Practice, and the Mission of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 51-59, 67-91; Updated editions (2002, 2006), 55-65; 69-114.

within Anglicanism; the contagion of western Pietism; the colonial patterns of revivalism; the African hearing and speaking of the Christian message; the peculiar Revolutionary context in which Methodism prospered. With all these roots, identities, languages a full-orbed treatment must deal and all will figure in our narration. Each contributed a distinctive voice or language. Each offered an interesting nuance to Methodist identity. But with which of these should one start, given that a beginning accents the narration?¹² Does one start with the formative experiences in the Susanna and Samuel Wesley home? Or with John and Charles Wesley in Georgia in the 1730s? Or with John's Aldersgate experience? Or with George Whitefield's American tours and the First Great Awakening? Or with competitive "spontaneous" beginnings in the 1760s through Robert Strawbridge in Maryland, through William Otterbein and Martin Boehm in the Middle Colonies and through Barbara Heck, Philip Embury and Thomas Webb in New York? Or with the roots of the several evangelical movements in Pietism? We elect the latter as we note below and explore in more detail in the first chapter, by no means been the typical starting point. Accordingly, we also employ the terms "Methodism" and "Methodist" as a shorthand for the range of Pietist movements and impulses that came to "denominate" themselves variously—United Brethren, Methodist Episcopal, Republican Methodist, African Methodist, Evangelical Association.

The Several "Rises" of American Methodism

In choosing a beginning for American Methodism, historians have typically defined its story line, its narrative theme. In particular, the starting point announces how Methodism will relate thematically to its new world context.

The first major historian, Jesse Lee, noticed the creation at John Wesley's hand of Methodism's distinctive patterns for ministry—rules for holiness,

¹² We should, perhaps, acknowledge as we note in the Preface that the starting point of our Narrative and Sourcebook has something to do with the place these volumes will occupy in the overall scheme of denominational resources. In particular, we have presumed access to the prior or extended treatments on the Wesleys and on Methodist theology, certainly including the following: Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) and Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998). *Methodist Experience in America* has been shaped also with the presumption that readers will have access to the current edition of Thomas Edward Frank, *Polity, Practice, and the Mission of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002); Rex Matthews, *Timetables of History for Students of Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007); Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity*, 2 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998, 1999); Scott J. Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002); Ted A. Campbell, *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999); Walter Klaiber and Manfred Marquardt, *Living Grace: An Outline of United Methodist Theology*, translated and adapted by J. Steven O'Malley and Ulrike R. M. Guthrie (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001); and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001); W. Harrison Daniel, *Historical Atlas of the Methodist Movement* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009); and Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe and Jean Miller Schmidt, *Perspectives on American Methodism: Interpretive Essays* (Nashville: Abingdon/Kingswood Books, 1993).

extempore preaching, societies, itinerancy, conferences—and then narrated the American saga as that of the tracing of those patterns by the preachers and conferences.¹³ From Methodism's organization genius and inspired leadership stemmed revival, a sign of its providential character. Revival was his story and the American landscape provided but its stage.

Nathan Bangs, architect of Methodist accommodation to society, told a story about providence as well, the providential fit of church and nation. He began not with a vignette of Wesley but with Columbus and wrote of discovery, Methodist discovery of American liberties and American discovery of Methodist evangelical institutions which would protect those liberties. Methodism needed what genuine churches afforded: church buildings, stable pastorates, parsonages, educational institutions, print media, organizations for mission, in short infrastructure. For such a cause Bangs himself labored hard and effectively. As historian, he portrayed Methodism's discovery of its ecclesial self and its building itself structurally into American life.

Conquest, not discovery, defined the story line for Abel Stevens. To begin his narrative he imagined a chance meeting in 1757 in Glasgow of John Wesley, "inventer" of Methodism, and James Watt, inventor of the steam engine. "Watts and Wesley might well then have struck hands and bid each other Godspeed at Glasgow in 1757: they were co-workers for the destinies of the new world."¹⁴ Watts had produced the engine for the conquest of the new world physically, Wesley that for the conquest of the new world morally. In his *Religious Movement*, Stevens gave only incidental attention to American developments and so did not utilize this vignette. He achieved the same point there with different staging and by assertion and also dwelt on the providential fit of Methodism and America. He noted:

[W]hile the moral revolution of Methodism was going on in the Old World, the most important political revolution of modern times was in process in the New; and when we contemplate the new modes of religious activity which were evolved

¹³ The historians and historical works in order of citation and publication are Jesse Lee, *A Short History of the Methodists* (Baltimore: Magill and Clime, 1810; Facsimile edition, Rutland, VT: Academy Books, 1974); Nathan Bangs, *A History of The Methodist Episcopal Church*, 4 vols., 6th edition (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1860; 1st ed. 1838-1841); Abel Stevens, *A History of The Methodist Episcopal Church*, 4 vols. (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1864-1867) and *A Compendious History of American Methodism* (New York: Eaton & Mains, n.d. but 1868/1867); Matthew Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism* (New York: Nelson & Phillips, 1876); J. M. Buckley, *A History of Methodists in the United States*, 4th ed., American Church History Series (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900; first published in 1896); Halford E. Luccock and Paul Hutchinson, *The Story of Methodism* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1926); William Warren Sweet, *Methodism in American History*, (New York, Cincinnati, Chicago: The Methodist Book Concern, 1933; rev. ed., New York: Abingdon, 1953); Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974). For a more elaborate discussion of these perspectives, see Russell E. Richey, "History as a Bearer of Denominational Identity: Methodism as a Case Study," in *Perspectives*, 480-497 and in *Doctrine in Experience: A Methodist Theology of Church and Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon/Kingswood Books, 2009), 21-41.

¹⁴ *Compendious History*, 19. Stevens's four-volume *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 4 vols. (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1864-1867), begins with the same scene but lacks the chapter title.

by the former, we cannot resist the conviction that there was a providential relation between the two events—that they were not only coincident in time, but also in purpose. While Wesley and his co-laborers were reviving Christianity in England, Washington and his compatriots were reviving popular government in America. It was the American Revolution that led to the development of the resources of the continent, and rendered it the assembling place of the nations; and Methodism commenced its operations sufficiently early to be in effective vigor by the time that the great movement of the civilized world toward the West had fully begun. In how many respects was it adapted to this emergency of the country! If we judge from the result, it was raised up by Providence more in reference to the New than to the Old World. Its peculiar measures were especially suited to the circumstances of the former, while those of nearly every other contemporary sect lacked the necessary adaptation.¹⁵

There followed a succinct, three page outline of Methodism as providentially and mechanistically suited to America.

The Union conquest over Southern rebellion, the patriotic fervor of the Civil War and centennial civic pieties inspired Bishop Matthew Simpson, understandably so given his active championing of the northern cause and close association with President Lincoln. Simpson began his history with a survey of national accomplishments, the contributions of America to the world. Then he flashed back to Wesley and British Methodism. It was American influences, however, not these “foreign” ones that stamped American Methodism. “The rise of Methodism,” he insisted, “was coeval with the Revolutionary spirit.”¹⁶ Methodism succeeded, he argued, by overcoming its British origins and embracing distinctively, dynamic, democratic American ways. So Simpson wedded Methodism to the American state and gave Methodism a civil religious mission.

By the end of the century, some Americans had revised their estimation of things British. One such “conserver,” James M. Buckley, worried that too much American democracy ill suited the church and championed instead the shared trans-Atlantic legacy—free-enterprise, Victorian society, Anglo-Saxon culture. He started the Methodist story so as to accent such cultural principles and make resistance to change—not dynamism—the moral of Methodist history. He began the Methodist saga with Henry VIII and the English Reformation. So Buckley would conserve and protect a church which had its own culture and which had distinct places and roles for men and for women.

In the twentieth century, Halford E. Luccock and Paul Hutchinson made pragmatism the story of Methodism and drew nation and church into parallel rather than providential relation. In an early chapter, entitled “A Tale of Two Villages,” they examined the two English towns “which gave to the English-speaking world the most transforming spiritual forces of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.” Scrooby launched the Pilgrims; Epworth was home to Wesley. “From the first, in truth if not in actual chronicle, the Mayflower set

¹⁵ Abel Stevens, *The History of the Religious Movement of the Eighteenth Century, Called Methodism*, 3 vols. (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1858-1861), II: 434.

¹⁶ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 41.

sail to plant a new world. From the second, John Wesley went out to save an old one."¹⁷

Once they had Methodism firmly planted on American shores, they drew numerous parallels of church and nation. In "Methodism in the New Republic," for instance, they implicitly compared Asbury and Washington and explicitly compared James O'Kelly and Patrick Henry.¹⁸ Methodism's popular, even democratic, character reflected that of the nation. The counterpart to the nation's pioneer and frontier spirit they found in Methodism's spirit of adventure, its willingness to experiment, its pragmatism, its "irregularity."¹⁹ The camp meeting reflected the irregularity in Methodism's style, missions its spirit of adventure. For the late nineteenth century, they paralleled nation and church on seven particulars: the application of polity, spirit and organization to new conditions; elaboration of national organization; extensive building; the closing of the frontier; an increase in democracy; foreign affairs; and Negro education.²⁰ They also dwelt on the causes that riveted the church's attention on the nation: the civil war, reconstruction, temperance, the social gospel and world war.

The relation of Methodism to American society also consumed William Warren Sweet. Fittingly, he began his narrative on American shores, in the mid-eighteenth century, as revivals unraveled the colonial establishments. Revival would be his theme as it had been Lee's. However, he found the relation to hinge not on Providence but on Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis.

The greatest accomplishment of America has been the conquest of the continent. . . . [T]he most significant single factor in the history of the United States has been the Western movement of population, and the churches which devised the best methods for following the population as it pushed westward were the ones destined to become the great American churches.²¹

A series of chapter titles charted that destiny as Methodism:

Organizes for a Great Task
 Invades New England
 Crosses the Alleghenies
 The Circuit Rider Keeps Pace with the Westward March
 Shares in the Missionary Enterprise
 Begins Her Educational Task.

Conquest defined destiny. Methodism defined its destiny in the nineteenth century in conquest of the frontier, the conquest really of America, the mis-

¹⁷ Luccock and Hutchinson, *Story of Methodism*, 28, 34.

¹⁸ Luccock and Hutchinson, 213-217.

¹⁹ Luccock and Hutchinson, 217-300, 333-334, 494-495. Their invocation of the frontier evidenced parallelism with the substance of American history and its then reigning interpretive paradigm, the frontier thesis, championed by Frederick Jackson Turner.

²⁰ Luccock and Hutchinson, 264, 440-442.

²¹ Sweet, *Methodism*, 143.

sionary impulse to take the continent.

Stewardship of its missionary calling constituted the reason for Methodism's success, its rapid growth to become the largest Protestant denomination. Why did Methodism succeed? Sweet insisted that the Methodist Episcopal Church "possessed, or developed, the best technique for following and ministering to a moving and restless population." What factored in that technique? Itinerancy, a centralized appointive power, circuits, short appointments, few preached sermons, "zealous, energetic ministry", lay leadership, Arminian theology, a populist episcopacy, ample religious literature, and an "emphasis upon singing." That style made Methodism the prototypical American church. Sweet understood Methodism in terms of American society and American society in terms of Methodism.²²

Frederick A. Norwood devoted the first four chapters of *The Story of American Methodism* to the Wesleys but prefaced the first with the acknowledgment of other founders, notably Philip William Otterbein and Jacob Albright and of the several "springs" of the Methodist movements: the primitive church, the Reformation, Anglicanism, Puritanism, Pietism and the Enlightenment.²³ The first historian of "United Methodism," Norwood fitted United Brethren and Evangelical Association into a largely Methodist framework defined by Wesleyan synthesis of "Catholic tradition, Reformation message, Anglican ecclesiology, Puritan discipline, and Pietist feeling" and into a narrative of "Americanization." Writing in the midst of the Civil Rights crisis, Norwood saw nuances and dimensions of Americanizing that his predecessors had slighted, in particular Methodism's compromises with racism, slavery and segregation. He wrote of both the Americanizing of Methodism and the Methodizing of America, of its inherent authoritarianism and its accommodation of the democratic spirit.²⁴

Pietism²⁵

Historians write out of their own times and with their own concerns, even when not endeavoring to be presentistic. Certainly our effort will be so characterized. We do, however, wish to claim a page from each of our historian forebears. With Norwood, we share the challenge of knitting EUB and Methodist stories and the conviction that race needs to figure large. We concur with Sweet, Luccock and Hutchinson, and Stevens in taking seriously the conquering spirit in Methodism and devote substantial attention to Methodism's missionary self-understanding, impulse and machinery. We agree with Buckley and Bangs that the infrastructure, culture and polity of the church deserves attention. Simpson is correct, we think, in recognizing

²² Sweet, 143-153. Sweet employed this theme, in a more generalized form, as his organizing principle in *Religion in the Development of American Culture* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952).

²³ Norwood, *Story*, 23.

²⁴ Norwood, *Story*, 17-18.

²⁵ Portions of this section will appear in Chapter I.

Methodism's embrace of the nation, though we read the internalization of a civil religion to be more problematic than does he. Although Lee does not employ the rubric "pietism," we think his trumpeting of Methodism's revivalism most helpful in locating Methodism aright in relation to the larger western panorama of evangelicalism or pietism.

The story of United Methodism requires such a wide perspective. Pietism, because it underlay or affected the several Methodist movements, provides that canvas and William Otterbein (1726-1813) will first claim our attention, as he does in MEA I (**Sources 1760**). Pietism was a trans-Atlantic, trans-confessional, diffuse religious reform impulse which sought to sustain the authentic witness of the faith but which in so doing defined itself initially over against Orthodoxy and later over against aspects of the Enlightenment. The faith so "preserved" differed. Pietist or pietist-like assumptions, beliefs, mores, and communal structures typified the patterns of life and thought espoused by its Lutheran pioneers, Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705) and August Hermann Francke (1663-1727), by the Moravians, by Roman Catholic Jansenists, by the Hasidic Jews, by late Puritanism, by British Evangelicalism (Anglican and Presbyterian), and by the panoply of colonial revivalism.²⁶ Diversely expressed, the movement named itself diversely. In the North American context it bore the identity of evangelicalism or revivalism.

Pietist and pietist-like movements characteristically put emphasis on:

- experimental religion, locating the religious impulse in the heart (will and affections);
- both consciousness and expression of the heart's commitments (conversion and testimony);
- an obedient life, strict moral codes, and corporate discipline as appropriate expressions thereof;
- the accessibility of the Biblical word and rule to the awakened lay spirit;
- growth in the faith through active devotions but also through education, educational programs and literature, all adjusted to suit age, culture, and circumstance;
- the importance of a witness communally shared through prayer, Bible-reading, hymns and preaching;
- everyday life as a sacrament to be shaped and enlivened by a vibrant faith and expressed in holy living; and
- Biblical doctrine or doctrines as the light by which all this activism

²⁶ In *The Religion of the Heart: A Study of European Religious Life in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1991), Ted A. Campbell establishes the coherence of the pietist world and enumerates major characteristics treated below. A very different approach, that by W. Reginald Ward, in *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) and in *Early Evangelicalism: A Global Intellectual History, 1670-1789* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge UP, 2006), also traces the inter-connections between and among the international pietist movements and the several awakenings.

stays on course [For expressions of such experimental religion in early Methodist movements, see **Sources 1760, 1773, 1775a, 1780b, 1785a, 1785b, 1785c, 1787, 1789a, 1791b, 1791c, 1798 on class-meetings, and 1800b**].

Themes

In selecting a starting point, Methodism's historians, as we have seen, have typically discerned aspects of the movement's character, role and motif. Among the many, one dominant thread has been Methodism's Americanization, two sides of which indeed have been accented. Sometimes the stress fell on Methodism's adaptation to the American scene, its accommodation of American culture, style, folkways, mores, even its compromise of its own basic principles (in adjusting to slavery, amusements, finery, tobacco, drink, segregation). Sometimes interpreters accented Methodism's shaping and transforming of American society and its critical role in the nation's crises (anti-slavery, freedmen's aid, temperance, women's rights, peace, labor justice, civil rights). Sometimes historians insisted both on its accommodation to American society and its role in social transformation.²⁷

The two-sidedness of the overall story has much to do with:

- how Methodism negotiated its way into colonial and national experience;
- its superb sense of timing, arriving as it did in the latter phases of the Great Awakening and during the unsettled pre-Revolutionary days), under Anglican auspices and/or the tolerant policies of the middle colonies but just when Anglicanism went into disarray and out of favor;²⁸
- its rapid indigenization, an unusual experience for colonial movements often locked under the authority and power of the colonizing church long into their post-colonial phase; its consequent openness to politico-cultural currents in the Revolutionary ethos, including that complex impulse known as Republicanism;²⁹ its courage in preaching an anti-slavery gospel, welcoming Blacks into its membership, denouncing the values of the genteel life, and encouraging the expression and leadership of women in a society dominated by the slave-holding gentry;³⁰
- its spread nevertheless precisely in areas where slavery persisted and where its anti-slavery and anti-genteel gospel made it a powerful pro-

²⁷ Norwood, *Story*, 17-18.

²⁸ See Dee E. Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800: The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000).

²⁹ See A. Gregory Schneider, *The Way of the Cross Leads Home: The Domestication of American Methodism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993), especially 1-27.

³⁰ Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind, 1770-1810* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), and William H. Williams, *The Garden of American Methodism: The Delmarva Peninsula, 1769-1820* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc., for the Peninsula Conference of The United Methodist Church, 1984).

- phetic force;³¹
- its eagerness as well to welcome in persons of various confessional and confessional-ethnic background, a transcendence of confessionalism unusual at that time;
- its functioning consequently as a popular and popularizing force in American life;³²
- its curious missionary spirit which made it withdraw from or indifferent to certain aspects of colonial and early national experience, as for instance the Revolutionary War, but highly invested in other aspects of American experience;³³
- its behavior, in short, in both sectarian and churchly fashion; and
- its complex transformation as its evangelistic successes gave it church-like responsibilities and quandaries over how to sustain its sect-like witness.

Such ambivalences, tensions, impulses, coincidences, and transformations earlier interpreters and the Methodist actors themselves found to be “providential.”³⁴ The claim registered both the timeliness/appropriateness of Methodism to American circumstances and divine agency in Methodist efforts. Historians today are less willing to make such explicit discernments of the movement of the Holy Spirit. We can, however, recognize that Methodist actors in this drama lived and worked confident in the Spirit’s guidance and can, therefore, see something more than context and timing in the story. We may, with Asbury, suggest that history unfolds and experience displays Methodist principles and practice.

We exhibit Methodist “principles, experience and practice” by telling of their “introduction, rise and progress.” So the peculiarities of Methodism’s entry into and spread across American society have to do with tensions and paradoxes inherent in the movement itself. It held together and lived between:

- a vital piety confident of God’s providential and governing care and of grace-enabled free will and moral agency (Arminianism);
- law, discipline, human responsibility and self-control and self-direction and liberty, through prevenient and free grace in conversion and in living the Christian life;
- the letter (rules, works, fruits) and the Spirit (testimony);
- authority vested in bishop, presiding elder and preacher-in-charge and lay empowerment and lay offices (formal and informal);
- centralized decision-making in conference and license to improvise, ex-

³¹ On these points see Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Knopf, 1997), and Richey, *Early American Methodism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991), 47-64.

³² See John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), and Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989).

³³ See David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2005).

³⁴ Hempton, *Methodism*.

- experiment and appoint on the circuit, in missions and on frontiers;
- an ordered, even communal Christian life (class) and openness to emotional expression and innovations in praxis (love feast);
- community (conference) and individual expression (free will);³⁵
- love of God and love of neighbor, individual and social holiness;
- expectations of holiness and perfection that pressed towards spiritual elitism and preaching of a universal atonement that embraced the human family;
- white male domination of office and decision-making and a gospel of universalism that transcended lines drawn by race, language, gender, culture and ethnicity;
- the war against sin within and against the world and Calvinism without;
- rules and practices against worldliness and a transformative impulse;
- a commitment to conform (to Large Minutes, Wesleyanism, the *Discipline*) and an independence, Americanizing streak, a license to poach and borrow; and
- an evangelical catholic spirit and a highly competitive denominational Methodist triumphalism.

Other tensions the Methodist movements brought with them, as for instance, holding together word and sacrament, they failed to sustain and rediscovered much later. The Methodists negotiated their ways into colonial and American experience largely as movements of the word—the word in preaching, singing, praying, printing, testifying, even shouting.³⁶

Interpretive Viewpoint

Histories have a point of view, one that comes to expression often in attitudes towards change. Here we would give a summary statement of what we attempt to show and with what assumptions we have worked.

(1) *Change as Natural*. Much Methodist development unfolds, we suggest, in an evolutionary and natural fashion. Living with and between the aforementioned tensions, growing numerically, expanding geographically, appealing to various sectors, classes, races and language groups in American society and coping with such successes elicited coping mechanisms, governance adjustments, even shifts in denominational self-understanding. Methodism proved to be remarkably responsive to the rapid expansion of American society. And growth produced change. The preservation of a pure, primitive, unsoiled Methodism proved quite impossible—John Wesley's

³⁵ On several of these tensions, see Fred Hood, "Community and Rhetoric of 'Freedom': Early American Methodist Worship," *Methodist History*, 9 (October 1970), 13-25 as well as Hemp-ton.

³⁶ Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm* and Donald G. Mathews, "United Methodism and American Culture: Testimony, Voice, and the Public Sphere," *The People(s) Called Methodist*, United Methodism and American Culture, II, ed. William B. Lawrence, Dennis M. Campbell and Russell E. Richey (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 279-304.

wishes and Francis Asbury's efforts notwithstanding. And we give Nathan Bangs a more charitable treatment than has been the custom of late.

We offer as much as we can, then, neither a primitivist nor a progressive account, neither the measuring of subsequent Methodism by some Wesleyan standard nor the judging of the past by more recent or contemporary expectations (e.g. notions of pluralism or advocacy of confessionalism).³⁷ To speak normatively, the Methodism of each successive period can be viewed, we think, as quite distinct in important ways, yet possessing theological, constitutional and ethical integrity apt for its day and age, and unfolding from a prior phase and yielding to another in a natural pattern of evolution. That said, we also concede that Methodism has not always been as self-conscious and articulate about such "natural" change as one might wish or suppose. And an essential but only partially opened question is how the church understood itself, its past and its future at any given point, how well it voiced such a self-understanding, and how fully the rank and file embraced any such self-conception.³⁸

(2) *Change experienced as Crisis.* Although change may have come naturally, Methodists sometimes experienced it as violation, defeat, and crisis. They did so notwithstanding the fact that many of the most critical and vexing changes in ethos, practice, structure and ministry yielded the successes and sustained the aspirations that the movement itself sought, i.e., self-preservation over time, geographical expansion, incorporation of ethnically diverse peoples, numerical growth. The experience of change had, then, an ironic and sometimes tragic character. It came naturally and came out of efforts Methodists made in good faith; it came ironically from Methodism's efforts to transmit itself unchanged; it came tragically as the unintended consequence of Methodism's being itself. So some of the movement's activists, folks like Peter Cartwright, could also complain loudest about changes in which they had a hand. Critics focused on the supposed decline in several distinctive practices, itinerancy, class meetings, camp meetings. Here, too, we endeavor to take seriously the change that warranted the charge of "declension" and the concerns of those who levy the charge. At the same time, we recognize, as some of those who grieved or prophesied doom over the erosion of the class meeting did not, that Sunday schools and missionary societies supplanted class meetings by serving many of the latter's functions and doing so with greater purposiveness and sense of urgency.

(3) *Conflict and Change.* Methodists called each other names and broke with one another over various vital issues, slavery especially, issues often touching in one way or another on governance. Those personal and social dynamics and the rationales the various parties presented for positions taken were, of course, important and have deservedly received attention. We en-

³⁷ Nor the even more mischievous tact of pressing some present agenda by locating it in Wesley or early American Methodism.

³⁸ See Langford's *Practical Divinity* for another case for an evolutionary account of Methodist development.

deavor to do so in our narrative. We also exhibit the historical prefaces that have since 1787 been a feature of Methodist disciplines and which especially in the case of Methodist Protestants and the MECS set forth their perspective on the church dividing issues. We had hoped to include prefaces for the Republicans, AME, AMEZ, Wesleyans, Free Methodists, CME and Nazarenes from their first *Disciplines* but have had to sacrifice those because of space constraints. It is our intention to make those available on a website, perhaps the GCAH website. In these prefaces and in apologetic treatment of the conflicts more generally, the warring parties often appealed to and insisted on their adherence to key aspects of a primitive Methodism. The conflict and rhetoric obscured to participants and to later observers how much the Methodism had changed and how much the conflict itself and attendant stridency furthered more change

(4) *Celebrated Change*. If some natural processes of change have been obscured, others have been celebrated. One such is Americanization, as we noted above. Methodism has boasted of its ascendancy to the status of largest Protestant church, its becoming ‘the national church’, its emergence as a broadly represented and broadly representative movement. From the middle decades of the nineteenth century to the present, Methodists, particularly northern Methodists have waxed eloquent over the church’s place in American society. Certainly indigenization was appropriate and to be expected. However, the set of developments by and through which it occurred wrought profound changes in Methodism, changes that may appear more ambiguous in the twenty-first century when the so-called mainline denominations are discovering the fruit Americanization yielded. For Methodism, even in the nineteenth century, Americanization meant the appropriation of a Reformed or Puritan conception of the civil order and the church’s place therein, consequent acceptance of a role in the Christianizing of American society and the world, a higher premium on education and more active recruitment of genteel classes. With Americanization also went the muting of anti-slavery rhetoric, the decline of discipline, abandonment of holiness and a series of other adjustments to Victorian society. Methodist historians generally applaud Americanization but bemoan this latter set of developments. We endeavor to hold these together.

(5) *Two Paradigms*. In so doing, we put into tension the Reformed, Puritan or Calvinist paradigm for interpreting religious developments and a more Methodist alternative thereto. Our historians (and perhaps the movement itself) have tended either to accept the Puritan paradigm and fit the Methodist story into it or to reject the Puritan paradigm entirely in favor of a more Methodist explanatory model. We have passed through the period in which the Puritan paradigm ruled supreme.³⁹ Now, some American

³⁹ Its crowning expression was Sydney Ahlstrom’s *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1972). Others in Ahlstrom’s generation (i.e. Martin E. Marty, Robert Handy) shared this perspective, one deeply indebted to Perry Miller. The viewpoint has been adopted by, transmuted and become staple to the argument of the evangelical historians whose work also privileges a Reformed perspective and now sets much of the church historical agenda (George Marsden, Harry Stout, Mark Noll, Grant Wacker, Joel Carpenter).

historians, church historians and students of Methodism pursue non-Puritan paradigms. We draw upon these non-Reformed readings of American social history,⁴⁰ of American religious patterns,⁴¹ and of Methodist experience.⁴² But, as the prior point suggests, we shall also concede that Methodists found themselves embracing and embraced by—perhaps one could even say seducing and seduced by—the missionary ideal of a Christianized society. This ideal captured something Methodists knew as deeply their own and so they insisted that missions was not an extra, that their church itself was missionary. But ironically when they came to enunciate this ideal, Methodists were creating missionary societies so making mission something to be done and done for others rather than something they ‘were’ (on which point see “A Quick Overview” below).

(6) *A Retelling but a Fresh One.* To some extent, our historiographical re-direction picks up an old trail, that of William Warren Sweet, who envisioned American religion as following the Methodists west and as fundamentally Methodist in style and shape.⁴³ However, the new paradigm is and needs to be less triumphal, more nuanced, more attentive to the diversity and texture of Methodist experience, more sensitive to the moral flaws in our story. If the story remains one of a people moving west and “reforming” the continent, it needs to carry all the people west. It also needs to start that movement properly, and that means from the world of the Chesapeake and with sensitivity to the social realities of the upper south. Understood as moving west from the south west (rather than west from Plymouth Rock), the Methodist story does require a Methodist paradigm. In moving west and north, Methodists discovered Plymouth Rock and so the story will demand the Puritan paradigm. With both, not only the diversity but the agony of it emerge. Methodists knew that the gospel was for all and so they preached it; they did not know what to do when all responded. And so race and also region come into play when the two paradigms are held together.

(7) *Shaper of and Shaped by Culture.* As the points above indicate, our analysis does not settle for a single-direction analysis, either ‘Methodism as the shaper of culture’ or ‘Methodism as shaped by culture’.⁴⁴ Both surely have been true. Methodism has profoundly affected the nature and character of American society. However, in and through efforts to effect that, Methodism has been profoundly changed. Those dialectics emerge most clearly in efforts at reform and restructure—anti-slavery in the early Republic, bureaucratization on behalf of the social gospel, and the politics of

⁴⁰ See Jack P. Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness. The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988).

⁴¹ See especially Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity* but also the now significant cohort itemized in footnotes above.

⁴² Those concerned to press this position include the late Timothy L. Smith, but also Melvin E. Dieter and Donald W. Dayton.

⁴³ This is a posture and argument which the late Timothy Smith forcefully advocated.

⁴⁴ For this reason, rubrics like ‘secularization’ or its more Methodist counterpart ‘society to church’ need to be used with caution and, if employed, certainly balanced with categories that develop the contrary church shaping culture motif.

caucus in our own day.

The Narrative Line⁴⁵

This volume follows central developments in the Methodist Episcopal, Methodist and United Methodist experience. We attend as appropriate to the UB, EA, MP, and MECS; to movements now distinct denominations—AME, AMEZ, CME, and the several holiness churches—; and to missions and other aspects of the larger Wesleyan story. We have endeavored to incorporate women’s and minorities’ (especially African Americans’ experience) as much as possible into the narrative, rather than separating such into sub-plots. This has proved tricky, especially when we reach the complexities of the twentieth century, and we need to concede here that we do not have a single conceptual maneuver in terms of which to achieve integration and inclusion. We have endeavored, nevertheless, to tell a Methodist story, recognizing its complexities, conflicts, richness, texture.

In attending to the changes in Methodism’s complexities, conflicts, richness, and texture, we have produced quite a long and large volume. It will doubtless exceed what some instructors feel comfortable in assigning. However, we anticipate that the very detailed Table of Contents and equally fine-grained Index will guide teachers to those sections that fit best in their courses or best complement their lectures. The Table of Contents will, as already noted, also permit those offering specialized courses on Methodist women, on race, on the church’s social witness, on war, on orders and ordination, and on the church and culture to isolate sections that serve those emphases.

A Quick Overview

Three “snapshot” chapters treat local Methodism—Baltimore in 1816, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, in 1884 and Denver in 1968. These snapshots also capture important transitional points in the Methodist movement. They invite glimpses into three distinct Methodist phases which this volume depicts: a Pietist, a nurturing, and an advocating phase. Methodism features/featured all three—piety, nurture and advocacy—in every period but, we think, has tended to accent one.

We depict early Methodism—in both its United Brethren/Evangelical Association and Wesleyan expressions—as mediating distinctive practices of the international Pietist movement. Featuring itinerant evangelizing, revivalistic preaching, dramatic conversions, and lively testimony, early Methodism vocalized its religious seriousness, its piety. To be sure it made provision for nurture in classes and it showed unusual courage in anti-slavery advocacy but grounded both in its convictions about the universality of grace and the imperative to save all from the wrath to come. Iconic for this phase of Methodism were emotional love feasts, revivalistic quarterly con-

⁴⁵ The following two sections appear also in the Preface.

ferences, and promoted camp meetings.

A century later, Methodism was consumed by various nurturing tasks. In age-graded Sunday schools, through its widely read *Advocates*, *Berean* lessons, magazines and books, in its numerous colleges, on the mission field, and in Freedmen's Aid, post-Civil War Methodism (particularly northern Methodism) cared for the enculturation of Christians, the cultivation of family religion, and the suffusing of society with Christian values. In the interest of home and family protection, Methodism advocated temperance, sabbath observance and an increasing host of other social reforms. It presumed that society could be Christianized and that culture could accommodate Methodist piety and practice. Iconic for this phase of Methodism were the international lesson, the Akron Plan Sunday school facility along with auditorium style sanctuaries, station appointments, and increasingly formalized religious life centered on the sabbath.

By its third century, United Methodism put a premium on advocacy. Its icons were the caucus, convention-center annual conferences and eventually digital/web exhibition of commitment, cause and concern. The church gathered but also fragmented itself by ethnic identity, sexual orientation and ideological concern. Conceiving of itself as global, United Methodism launched short-term missions in every direction. Northerners went south, southerners went north, U.S. groups went to Latin America, local churches worked near and far on Habitat Houses. Piety and nurture could be had in retreats, modules or packages—*Disciple* Bible study, Emmaus Walk.

Methodism defined its mission in these three epochs in interesting fashion. In its first *Discipline*, the MEC Americanized the answer to Wesley's query, "What may we reasonably believe to be God's Design in raising up the Preachers called Methodists?" to read: "To reform the Continent, and to spread scriptural Holiness over these Lands" (**Sources 1785a**). Looking back from the vantage of the 1866 Centenary, Abel Stevens, whom we treated above, nicely captured the import of the 1785 ambitions to evangelize and reform the entire continent:

Though American Methodism was many years without a distinct missionary organization, it was owing to the fact that its whole organization was essentially a missionary scheme. It was, in fine, the great Home Mission enterprise of the north American continent, and its domestic work demanded all its resources of men and money.⁴⁶

By the 1880s, Methodism in its various denominational expressions reshaped mission into connectionally-ordered, well-led and amply-financed foreign and home missionary societies. And Methodist women mounted, staffed,

⁴⁶ Abel Stevens, *The Centenary of American Methodism: A Sketch of its History, Theology, Practical System, and Success*. With a statement of the plan of the Centenary Celebration of 1866 by John M'Clintock, D.D., (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1865), 180, 185-187. Stevens prefaced his statement about American Methodist missions with the insistence that Methodism was, from the beginning, intrinsically missionary: "Methodism was essentially a missionary movement, domestic and foreign. It initiated not only the spirit, but the practical plans of modern English missions. . . ." Stevens and, indeed the whole church, endeavored to make and keep missions central.

and resourced their own. If mission had been initially what Methodism was by the late nineteenth century, mission was what Methodism did, and did robustly and organizationally. By the end of the twentieth century, many United Methodists collapsed mission to the first statement made in the *Discipline* under Part V, "Organization and Administration: The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ." Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs.⁴⁷ Mission, initially Methodism's very being, became its order and eventually a point of advocacy.

Piety, nurture and advocacy belong together and the three Methodist moments put the emphasis differently. Early Methodism, a preaching movement, preached its nurture and preached its commitments. Late nineteenth century Methodism, a teaching church taught its piety and its social concerns. Late twentieth century Methodism, increasingly a worshiping or sacramental church ritualized and packaged spirituality and formation. We suppose that the challenge for the church, in any period is to hold the three together effectively. Piety, nurture and advocacy; word, order and sacrament; the prophetic, royal and priestly offices—they do belong together. But affirming that unity proves easier than structuring our life, polity and activity accordingly. So our volume endeavors to show.

⁴⁷ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* 1996, 114. Compare the 2008 version, "The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs" (*Discipline* 2008, 87).