

**“GOD BLESS THE METHODIST CHURCH”:
THE ORIGINS OF THE METHODIST-REPUBLICAN
ALLIANCE BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR**

DOUGLAS MONTAGNA

The political leaders of the Union during the Civil War clearly understood the importance of the Methodists to their cause. In May of 1864, Abraham Lincoln explicitly made the case for why that was so: “It may be fairly said, that the Methodist Episcopal Church, not less devoted than the best, is by its greatest numbers the most important of all. It is no fault of the others that the Methodist Church sends more soldiers, more nurses to the hospitals God Bless the Methodist Church.”¹ He also said in 1864 that “we never would have gotten through this crusade without the steady influence of the Methodist Church.” Salmon Chase felt likewise, as he told the Methodist Church: “I have thanked God that the Methodist Episcopal Church . . . knew only one sentiment—that of devotion to our country . . . how we have leaned upon your Bishops . . . your ministers . . . your great people.”² As Lincoln pointed out, the Methodists were so important to the war effort because they were by far the largest Protestant denomination and gave the Union cause their full support. The large denominations and their clergy had tremendous influence and prestige throughout the United States, and in the words of the historian Timothy Wesley, “the clergy was the *de facto* intelligentsia, by any standards the most educated and respected public speakers . . . because they were the point men for organized religion.” And at no other time in American history “did religion have greater influence on American public and political life.”³ While other denominations supported the war effort, often with intensity equal to the Methodists, in the critical lower Midwestern states of Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio, the Methodists were by far the largest church, so the significance of their support dwarfed those

¹ [Http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/lincoln7/1:776?](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/lincoln7/1:776?) The so-called “Lincoln Letter to the Methodist Church” has been the subject of two recent articles in *Methodist History*. The first, “Lincoln’s Response to the Methodists,” by John Leo Topolewski, appeared in the issue of April, 2006 (44:3), pp. 133-139, and tells the story of a copy of the famous letter that was found in a cupboard in the Owego United Methodist Church, Owego, New York, and the attempt to authenticate it as a genuine Lincoln autograph. The second, “‘God Bless the Methodist Church’—A. Lincoln: Finding the Lost Speech,” by Daniel W. Stowell, appeared in the issue of April, 2012 (50:3), pp. 179-184, and details the search for the original copy of the letter, which had been missing since the 1920s.

² Ralph Morrow, *Northern Methodism and Reconstruction* (East Lansing: Michigan State Press), 16-17.

³ Timothy Wesley, *The Politics of Faith During the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2013), 3.

of other denominations, as Lincoln recognized. Clearly, the reasons why the Methodists in the north gave such energetic support to the Union cause are vital to understanding the Union cause itself.

The Methodists supported the Union so strongly because they shared so many qualities and beliefs with the Republican Party, the political institution that spearheaded and embodied the Union cause. Never before or since in American history have a denomination and a political party worked so much in tandem or like a coalition. They achieved one of the most important outcomes in American history, crushing the Confederate rebellion and restoring the Union. Both institutions drew their support from similar people, the aspiring small farmers and artisans, often moving west in pursuit of opportunities. The same political issues that increasingly drew attention and involvement from Methodists—temperance, fear of Roman Catholic immigrants, and of course anti-slavery—were the same issues that the Republican Party formed around in the early to mid-1850s. Both institutions were critical of the South, Methodists in part because of the bitter schism over slavery in 1844, and Republicans because the South threatened their ideal of a society based on morality, free labor, and economic opportunity. And finally, both institutions reacted to the major sectional controversies of the 1850s in similar ways, and they found themselves closely in synch as sectional crisis turned into a war in 1861. In an era when the differentiation between religion and politics was not as distinct or clear as today, Methodists and Republicans functioned as different parts of the same giant force, with Republicans giving Methodists a sense of political and military power and Methodists giving Republicans their crusading spirit and sense of righteousness, all in the name of crushing the threat to the free, moral, Godly Republic. The striking similarities between the people attracted to Methodism and to the Republican Party help to explain this close connection.

The early Republican Party and early American Methodism appealed to nearly identical constituencies of artisans, small farmers, and workers. The lives of many members of the Midwestern Methodist clergy resemble Abraham Lincoln's life of growing up on the frontier, moving west seeking better lands for their families, and/or making the transition from working with their hands as artisans or farmers before joining the professional or entrepreneurial classes. Even the life of the British-born leader and visionary of early American Methodism, Francis Asbury, foreshadowed this pattern. Asbury was an apprentice metal worker before turning full time to a career as a Methodist clergyman. He succeeded to such an extent that John Wesley sent him to North America to oversee and minister to the few scattered Methodist congregations in the 1770s, eventually becoming the leader of a huge, influential religious movement. Many of Asbury's Midwestern successors followed similar career paths. Before becoming Methodist clergy, Jacob Gruber was a blacksmith; Alfred Brunson, a shoemaker; Jacob Young,

a carpenter; and Eli Farmer and Peter Cartwright, middling farmers.⁴ James Finley recalled that the early Methodist clergy, “like the early founders of Christianity,” were often from “the toiling classes... taken from the plow, the loom, the bench, and the anvil . . .”⁵ A revealing vignette of the relationship between Methodism and the world of small producers is a description of a late 1830s Illinois Methodist meeting by the Methodist itinerant S. R. Beggs. According to Beggs, “our only place of worship was brother Bristol’s carpenter shop, and there I preached among jack planes and chisels.” That setting did not get in the way of the meeting’s purpose, as they “had an excellent meeting, many souls being born into the kingdom.”⁶ Having tired of meeting in a carpenter’s shop, the Peoria Methodists considered erecting an actual church building. The artisanal backgrounds of so many Methodist clergy and lay people gave them the expertise and work ethic literally to build their churches with their own hands. Hard work, however, was not an end in itself for Methodists, who also wanted and appreciated the material and social benefits that came from the fruits of hard work. Similarly, the founders and polemicists of the Republican Party that sprang up in the mid-1850s believed that a general “equality of opportunity existed in the north,” and that the acquisition of wealth proved that a man had worked hard and lived a frugal, pious life, honoring “the Protestant work ethic.”⁷

Joseph Tarkington, an Indiana circuit rider who would rise to the rank of presiding elder, exemplified social mobility through hard work. His father was born in Tyrell County, North Carolina, and later moved to Nashville, Tennessee, where Joseph was born in 1800. Like many other frontiersmen at that time, Joseph’s father hoped to buy land despite being cash poor. After finally obtaining the land, clearing it, and then building a barn and a house, the Tarkingtons lost what they had, because the people who sold them their farm had themselves acquired it fraudulently.⁸ For the next two years, they worked a leased farm, while Joseph’s father tried to figure out the best way to buy land of his own. After the War of 1812 opened up more of the frontier for settlement, Joseph’s father, against the advice of his brothers, moved to Indiana instead of an area further south. According to Joseph, his father’s antipathy to slavery solidified this decision, despite warnings from relatives that at least a few slaves would be necessary for establishing a living on the

⁴ John Wigger, *Taking Heaven By Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 49.

⁵ James Finley, *Sketches of Western Methodism: A Biographical, Historical, and Miscellaneous Illustrative of Pioneer Life* (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1854), 230.

⁶ S. R. Beggs, *Pages from the Early History of the West: Embraces, Reminiscences, and Incidents of Settlement and Growth, and Sketches of the Material and Religious Progress of the States of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri, with a Special Reference to the History of Methodism* (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1868), 121, 127-128.

⁷ Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford UP, 1970), 14, 15, 23.

⁸ Joseph Tarkington, *The Autobiography of Joseph Tarkington, One of the Pioneer Preachers of Indiana*, with an Introduction by Thomas A. Goodwin (Cincinnati: Curtis and Jennings, 1899), 66-67.

frontier.⁹ After several attempts to establish a homestead on the frontier, the Tarkington family finally built a home and created a farm in Monroe County, near Bloomington, Indiana. In his *Autobiography*, Joseph describes the hard work necessary to clear farmland in the woods of Indiana:

How hard was the work, cutting the timber off to raise corn in Indiana! . . . [T]he hidden root and the threatening stump often made his [a frontiersman's] life, between the plow handles, worse than the grasshopper, a burden.¹⁰

Having experienced the back-breaking manual labor and the precariousness of trying to support a family as a small farmer, Tarkington enjoyed and embraced his own improving material circumstances as he moved up in rank in the Methodist Episcopacy from circuit rider to Presiding Elder, and as his own children married up the social order. And unlike Peter Cartwright, Tarkington became a Republican.¹¹

Despite generally avoiding politics during the Revolutionary and Jeffersonian eras, many individual Methodists, both lay and clergy, eventually followed the course of many other Americans and became involved and interested in the popular and intense political culture that grew out of the fight between the Democrats and the Whigs during the 1830s and 1840s. During this political era, Methodists tended to take stands as individuals or at the statewide level over issues such as patronage or the funding and establishment of denominational colleges. They did not, however, support or oppose as a denomination the hot-button issues of the time, such as national banking, the tariff, or federal funding for internal improvements.¹² When the burning national issues changed during the 1850s to temperance, nativism, and sectionalism/slavery, however, Methodists increasingly took clear-cut stands as a *denomination*, because these new issues were closely bound up with what Methodists considered their religious imperatives. Methodists had already been dealing with these issues in one way or another for nearly as long as their existence, and as part of the larger evangelical movement had helped bring them to the center of the nation's attention. These three issues destroyed the Second Two-Party System of the Whigs and Democrats and became the foundational issues of the Republican Party, which emerged out of the political chaos of the 1850s to become the standard-bearer for these three issues in the north.¹³

From a post-Civil War perspective, the issue of slavery/sectionalism dominated the slavery/sectional issue dominated the era. The temperance/prohibition and nativist issues, however, between the Compromise of 1850

⁹ Tarkington, 76.

¹⁰ Tarkington, 68.

¹¹ David Kimbrough, *Reverend Joseph Tarkington, Methodist Circuit Rider: From Frontier Evangelist to Refined Religion* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1997), 116.

¹² Richard Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993), 114-116.

¹³ William Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987). Gienapp argues that the temperance and nativist issues were vital in the early stages of the development of the Republican Party.

and the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, destroyed the Second Two-Party system slightly *before* the slavery/sectional issues reshaped American politics along sectional lines. For much of the 1830s and 1840s, the Whigs were the standard-bearers on the three issues of temperance/prohibition, nativism, and anti-slavery, at least to the extent that either of the major parties were. Through their opposition to the Compromise of 1850, however, they alienated much of their support in the south, because of their supposed opposition to the rights of slaveholders in the territories. In an attempt to shore up their support in the north, the Whigs began reaching out to Irish and German immigrants. That effort meant de-emphasizing temperance and prohibition and obviously nativism. Many northern Protestants—referred to as “rabid Protestants” by the political historian Michael Holt—felt betrayed by the Whig Party and began seeking out alternatives outside the two-party system. The so-called rabid Protestants cared most about these three morality-fused issues.¹⁴ As the largest Protestant denomination, Methodists made up the largest number of the “rabid Protestants” and therefore had a prominent role in making these three issues significant, convulsing northern politics by the mid-1850s.¹⁵

With overlapping appeals and constituencies, temperance, nativist, and anti-slavery factions formed an array of political parties in the northern states after 1850. Some of these parties supported single issues but quickly discovered they were more effective if they joined other single-issue parties. These “mergers” were often referred to as “fusion” parties. The two “fusion” parties that influenced national politics were first the nativist American Party, also known as the Know-Nothings; and then the anti-slavery Republican Party. They both emerged, however, after several years of struggling to find the ideal anti-Democratic message. In 1853, in Ohio, for example, a Methodist minister named Samuel Lewis ran for Governor under the banner of one of these fusionist parties, an anti-slavery third party that called itself the Free Democrats. The Democratic-controlled legislature in Ohio had resisted the efforts of the Maine Law advocates to implement Prohibition 1852 and 1853. The Whigs feared losing German supporters, so they did not take a decisive stand and allowed local Whig organizations to decide whether or not to support the Maine Law. Lewis ultimately ran a poor third, with only 18% of the vote, but his campaign excited and energized Methodists and other evangelicals, who left the Whig Party in droves, leading to its dissolution in Ohio.¹⁶

In Indiana, a similar fusion party emerged in 1854, spearheaded by the state’s 80,000 Methodists and calling itself the People’s Party. The People’s Party was an example of the heterogeneous nature of this political

¹⁴ Michael Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978), 122-124.

¹⁵ Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party*, 44.

¹⁶ Gienapp, 59; William Lewis, *Biography of Samuel. L. Lewis, First Superintendent of Common Schools for the State of Ohio* (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1857), 419.

movement, as it consisted of Whigs, dissident Democrats dissatisfied with the slaveholders' tightening grip on their national party, temperance advocates, and perhaps most prominently, supporters of the Know-Nothing Party. Contemporaries noted the ad-hoc nature of the new party, as one Democrat sarcastically called it "the abolition, Free-Soil, Maine-Law, Native American, Anti-Catholic, Anti-Nebraska Party of Indiana."¹⁷ Although few expected it to last, the new party did well in the 1854 elections, winning all but two of Indiana's congressional seats.¹⁸ Sensing how divisive these new issues were to the Democrats, the old Whigs hoped to control this new movement and finally take control of their state from their old rivals. The ground, however, had shifted under their feet, and the better organized and seemingly fresh Know-Nothings instead took control of their July 13 convention. The Know-Nothings spread rapidly in Indiana, claiming to have 60,000 members in July and over 80,000 by the fall. Combining many elements of anti-Democratic sentiment, in 1854 they supported a platform that included the restriction of slavery, a prohibition law, and a nativist statement.

Despite the heterogeneity of the convention, most members agreed on a few general principles: they opposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Catholicism, and liquor.¹⁹ The strongest supporters of this new party were Protestant clergy, especially Methodists. According to the Methodist preacher and writer T. A. Goodwin, "the preachers of all denominations were a unit, with probably less than a dozen exceptions"²⁰ To him, slavery and intemperance were closely related issues, and as an editor, he turned his batteries on what he called "the twin iniquities—the saloon and slavery."²¹ Indiana governor Joseph Wright, a Methodist Democrat, said that two-thirds of the state's clergy had joined the Know-Nothing Party. He wrote in a letter to Matthew Simpson that at least one hundred Methodist ministers attended the People's Party convention. The Democrats disgustingly noted the strong Methodist influence; the president of the Democratic convention, John Robinson, referred to them as "non-taxpaying itinerant vagabonds." The newspaper of the People's Party, the *Indiana State Journal*, attributed their victory to hostility to "the subservience of foreigners." The fusionists did well throughout the Midwest in 1854. In Ohio, they received 63.1% and in Indiana 56.4 % in the state-wide elections that year.²² And a Democratic newspaper agreed, but in critical terms: "We had to fight the influence of the church, the flesh, and the devil: the church in the temperance question; the flesh in the Old Whigs; and the Devil in the Know-Nothings."²³

The Know-Nothings anticipated the Republican Party's thunder by

¹⁷ Gienapp, 110.

¹⁸ Gienapp, *The Origins*, 111.

¹⁹ Emma Lou Thornbrough, *Indiana in the Civil War Years* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1965), 74-75; Gienapp, 109-110.

²⁰ Thomas A. Goodwin, *Seventy-Six Years Tussle With the Traffic* (Indianapolis, 1883), 12.

²¹ Goodwin, *Introduction, The Autobiography of Joseph Tarkington*, 62.

²² Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor*, 239.

²³ Gienapp, 112-113; Goodwin, 14.

evoking traditional republican ideals and arguing that Roman Catholicism was an even greater threat than “slave power,” accusing the Catholic Church of being a “despotic faith . . . diametrically opposed to the genius of American Republicanism,” with its “crafty priesthood” teaching anti-republican sentiments.²⁴ By making the restriction of Catholic immigration their cornerstone issue, they appealed to the overall northern dissatisfaction with the current two parties.

Slavery was another issue important to the early Republican Party that Methodists had a long history of addressing. The Methodist Episcopal Church had already split along north-south lines over slavery in 1844, so to a certain extent their denominational history was a dress rehearsal for the Civil War. Peter Cartwright, James Finley, and many other Midwestern Methodist clergymen had long opposed slavery in the abstract, an opposition that motivated some of them to move to free territories and states. They inherited an early Methodist opposition to slavery that went back to John Wesley and at least briefly challenged slaveholding in the late eighteenth century. However, most of these clergymen also inherited the Methodist willingness to compromise with slavery.

In the late eighteenth century, American Methodists retreated from their strong early anti-slavery stance, once they realized just how controversial and dangerous it was, after several cases of mob action against Methodist preachers.²⁵ Sadly, Southern Methodists ultimately reversed their position and joined many other southern clergy in defending the morality of slavery.²⁶ Northern Methodism continued opposing slavery, although weakly and passively, tolerating it in the southern and border conferences in the interests of keeping their denomination unified *and* in opposition to abolitionism. The leading Northern Methodist periodicals, *The Western Christian Advocate*, *Christian Advocate and Journal*, and *The Methodist Magazine*, all opposed abolition and supported colonization; that is, the effort to settle free African-Americans in Africa.²⁷ They could support colonization because it was constitutional and voluntary, and it offered financial compensation for the slave owners. Colonization had the added benefit of at least some southern support so the church could remain unified. No other religious denomination gave colonization more support both materially and rhetorically.

The Indiana circuit rider, Joseph Tarkington, for example, served on several committees within the Indiana Conference that attempted to colonize slaves.²⁸ Midwestern preachers such as Cartwright echoed the

²⁴ Holt, 162. David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1976), 250-251.

²⁵ Donald Mathews, *Methodism and Slavery: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1965), 20-22.

²⁶ Mitchel Snay, *The Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1993).

²⁷ “American Colonization Society, “*Methodist Magazine*, Nov. 1829; “Colonization,” *Christian Advocate and Journal*, Sept. 1826.

²⁸ Kimbrough, 128.

denominational press in both their opposition to abolitionism and their support for colonization. Like other northerners with anti-slavery bents who could not bring themselves to abolitionism—like Lincoln—Methodists supported the impractical and racist scheme of colonization. Peter Cartwright denounced the “run-mad spirit of abolitionism” and lamented that it would only “rivet the chains of slavery tighter.” Despite their seemingly feckless compromising with slavery, however, northern Methodist clergy never totally abandoned their anti-slavery views; when the southerners pushed them beyond a certain point, they finally took a stand that broke up the church and then contributed to the breakup of the nation.

Because of the denomination’s conservative position on slavery, hundreds of clergy and thousands of members, primarily New Englanders, left the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) to join the Wesleyan Methodists, an abolitionist schism. Northern Methodists faced the prospect of losing more members to the Wesleyans unless they took a stronger stand against slavery. At the 1844 General Conference, the northern Methodist delegates got just that opportunity with the case of James Andrews, an MEC Bishop who inherited slaves through marriage.

There had never before been a slave-holding Bishop in the Methodist Episcopal Church. At that time, Bishops presided over the whole church, not just one specific region. Northerners considered serving under a slaveholding bishop intolerable, and southerners were just as determined to force the General Conference to accept Andrew as a bishop. Northern moderates such as Finley and Cartwright held the balance. James Finley offered a compromise: Andrew could keep his position but not carry out any of his duties until he settled his slavery problem. Finley’s proposal was more conciliatory to the south than the other popular northern position: that Andrew needed to resign. Even so, the southerners rejected and denounced Finley’s proposal. The unyielding position of those southerners exasperated and angered northern moderates, provoking Finley to denounce slavery in terms that would not have embarrassed William Lloyd Garrison: “How any man can say it is right for him to hold his fellow man in bondage and buy and sell him at pleasure, put him under an overseer, and drive, whip, and half starve him, and that this is connived by the Methodist Church, I cannot comprehend.”²⁹

The actual splitting of the church into two denominations did not go smoothly. Border conferences fought with each other over membership and church property, with even a few cases of violence breaking out; other disputes over denominational assets were litigated for years with cases ending up in the Supreme Court.³⁰ A decade before the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the perception of slave power outraged and alarmed much of the north in the mid-1850s, northern Methodists were already embittered by what they

²⁹ As quoted in Charles C. Cole, *Lion of the Forest: James B. Finley, Frontier Reformer* (Lexington: Kentucky UP, 1994), 153. John McKivigan, *The War Against Pro-Slavery Religion: Abolitionism and the Northern Churches, 1830-1865* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1984), 170-172.

³⁰ Carwardine, *Evangelicals, and Politics*, 162-166.

considered to be an unjust and extreme southern position.

The Republican Party began as another of the fusion parties hoping to consolidate the large but disparate opposition to the Democrats in the wake of the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, this time in Michigan. Free Soilers, Nativists, and Whigs, who mistrusted each other, nevertheless understood the importance of uniting to oppose “slave power”—that is, an epithet used by northerners to describe what they considered to be the growing “arrogance and aggressiveness” of the slave-owners in national politics to spread the institution of slavery not only into territories that should have been free of slavery, but even to spread it into northern states.³¹ After repeated defeats and now the humiliation of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Whigs were asked to give up their party in favor of a new anti-slavery one. Finally, at a mass convention held in Jackson, Michigan on July 6, 1854, former Whigs and Free-Soilers agreed “to take such measure as shall be thought best to concentrate the popular sentiment of this state against the aggression of the slave power.” Even prior to the Jackson convention, some supporters of the anti-Democratic, anti-Kansas movement had been suggesting the term “Republican.” The Know-Nothings tried to organize in Michigan during that summer but decided instead to join the fusionist/Republican party. Former Whigs, who were more conservative and reluctant to emphasize slavery, also decided that backing the Republicans was their best move. In a state that had previously been largely Democratic, the newly-born Republican Party won most state elections in the fall of 1854.³²

The anti-Democratic coalition, which by the mid-1850s consisted of Know-Nothings, former Whigs, Republicans, and other types of fusionists, suddenly and decisively shifted gears to focus their energy on opposing the “slave power.” To the people involved, however, the transition was not so abrupt. Methodists and other evangelicals saw their various enemies—Catholics, slave owners, and supporters of drinking—not as separate entities, but as a “single satanic influence.” Even though Catholic immigrants voted Democratic for reasons different from why most slave owners voted for them, the evangelicals did not see it that way. The Catholic hierarchy’s reaction only exacerbated the fears of northern evangelicals. They took an ambivalent stand toward slavery, treating it as necessary to the social and economic order. They believed that all manner of anti-slavery forces, from abolitionism to free soil, were the crazy beliefs of radical Protestants and atheistic Republicans. Protestants responded by comparing how the papacy controlled what people read, to how the slave owner prevented his slaves from reading, especially the Bible. The fate of abolitionists in the south was compared to that of victims of the Inquisition. They also compared the effects of drinking to that of being enslaved. In the minds of northern evangelicals, the evil forces at their doorsteps—slave power, Catholic political activism,

³¹ David Donald, Jean H. Baker, and Michael Holt, *The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 90-91.

³² Gienapp, 104-105.

and drink—were consolidated.³³

The Kansas-Nebraska Act outraged northern Methodists, especially those in the Midwest. Methodist preachers, along with their brethren from other evangelical denominations, used their pulpits to denounce Stephen Douglas and his plan potentially to extend slavery into Kansas and north of the latitudinal line specified in the Missouri Compromise. Methodist editorials condemned the Act, and in 1854 the Illinois Annual Conference supported a resolution calling the Fugitive Slave Act “immoral.” The Rock River Annual Conference, which is in the northern part of the state, passed a resolution denouncing “the late aggressive movements of slave power, instance the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, the Nebraska Bill . . .” It goes on to call for Methodists to “put forth combined and persevering effort for this blighter of the Lord’s heritage and most ruthless foe of human rights.” However, the next few sentences qualified this implication of drastic and perhaps even extra-legal action against slavery by reminding the reader that slavery was still the law of the land and should be dealt with and opposed as such.³⁴ Midwestern and Northern Methodists, however, along with the rest of their section, remained divided over exactly what actions to take against the growing threat of the “slave power.”

Between the General Conference of 1856 and the next one that met in May of 1860, the sectional crisis continued to heat up, pushing Methodists further into greater opposition to slavery and the “slave power.” The Dred Scott decision only added to the fears of the “slave power,” as the southern-dominated Supreme Court ruled that no branch of the Federal Government had the authority to keep slaveholding out of the territories, rendering the Free Soil platform of the Republican Party a dead letter. A Methodist Ohio Supreme Court Justice, John McClean, dissented against the majority decision.³⁵ The Rock River Conference in Illinois opined that the Dred Scott decision reversed previous “decisions for freedom as the national birthright” and “has excited in our hearts inexpressible sorrow . . . disgracing us before the nations of the earth . . . and convinces us that the great battles for freedom have yet to be fought.”³⁶ While the Rock River Conference would have denied that they were advocating war at that time, their rhetoric was certainly laying the groundwork for an understanding that war might be necessary to

³³ Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics*, 250-251.

³⁴ Marie White, “The Methodist Antislavery Struggle in the Land of Lincoln,” *Methodist History* 10.4 (July, 1972).

³⁵ Potter, 284-285.

³⁶ White, “The Methodist Antislavery struggle,” 47, 48. The Dred Scott decision was litigated by a slave named Dred Scott in order to obtain his freedom, arguing that since he had been taken into free territories by his owner, he should be free. The case eventually made its way to the United States Supreme Court in 1857, with the Court making two decisions, both against Dred Scott. The first was that African-Americans were not citizens and therefore not entitled to use the federal courts; the second ruled the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional, because it violated property rights by denying slave-holders the right to bring their property—in this case, slaves—into the territories. In effect, this decision ruled that the main position of the Republican Party—that slavery should not be allowed to expand into the territories—unconstitutional.

resolve the sectional/slavery issue.

The 1860 General Conference debated slavery more vigorously than had any previous conference. Even though the General Conference was held before Lincoln’s election, most people in the country understood that a watershed election was coming up. While not officially endorsing the Republican Party, the General Conference agreed with much of the Republicans’ outlook on slavery. Just as the Republican Party condemned John Brown’s raid, so the General Conference had “no sympathy with, but on the other hand strongly condemn the mad projects of reckless and desperate men, who, in defiance of the law, seek by violent means . . . to destroy slavery.” The General Conference did take credit for helping to implement the Republicans’ most distinct stand, the prevention of slavery’s extension into the western territories. Answering the question of what good their long-standing but compromised anti-slavery position had been, the Conference boasted that our church had “done much toward the formation of a correct public opinion. Under its influence many thousands of slaves have been set free . . .” and had it not been for “this testimony, a number of Western states now free, would probably be today Slave States.”³⁷ Like Republicans, Methodists had taken a moderate anti-slavery position. While stopping well short of advocating slavery’s violent or even legally enforced overthrow, or even making ownership of slaves an automatic disqualification for membership, Methodists condemned it unequivocally and favored confining it to where it already existed. Not until the 1864 General Conference did the Methodist Episcopal Church take an essentially abolitionist position, at least concerning membership by declaring that slave-owning had become automatic grounds for expulsion.³⁸ Arguably, the Republicans only fully endorsed abolition in early 1865 when they pushed for the thirteenth amendment.

Both Methodists and Republicans used the contrasting qualities of nostalgia and progressiveness in how they presented themselves to the outside world. In his 1857 autobiography, Peter Cartwright recalled the Methodism of his youth as approaching almost apostolic simplicity: “We had no pewed churches, no choirs, no organs; in a word, we had no instrumental music of any kind. The Methodists in that early day dressed plain; attended their meetings faithful” He also praised the intensity of the worship of the earlier day.³⁹ In yet another paean to pioneer Methodism, J. V. Watson contrasted it favorably with modern Methodism, as the old timers had “none of the starch, the stiffness, the formalities, the conventionalities of a fashionable sanctuary to interpose between the worshipper and the throne of the heavenly grace.” Instead, the pioneer days of Methodism “are spots green and sunny in the retrospect of memory. Primitive pioneering Methodism

³⁷ William Harris, ed., *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Held in Buffalo, NY, 1860* (New York: Carlton and Manahan, 1860), 421.

³⁸ James May, “The War Years,” 210, from Emory Bucke, ed. *The History of American Methodism, in Three Volumes, Volume 2* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964).

³⁹ Cartwright, *Autobiography*, 74-74.

will long be fragrant in the memory of the church.”⁴⁰ Eli Farmer, another Indiana circuit rider, was motivated to write his unpublished autobiography in 1871 because of his “grave apprehension” about the decline of Christianity and blames it on the “traditions, customs, and fashions of men which have been molded and shaped, as to accommodate the prejudices of the world.”⁴¹ The writings of these and other Midwestern Methodist circuit riders are full of such concerns about the decadence and extravagance of mid-nineteenth century Methodism, and indirectly of America.

Republicans also looked to the past for effective symbols, finding it in a past era when true “republicanism” was the governing principle. The 1856 Republican Platform called for “. . . restoring the action of the Federal Government to the principles of Washington and Jefferson” and “the maintenance of the principles promulgated in the Declaration of Independence and embodied in the Federal Constitution.”⁴² Hoping to appeal to farmers and workers and small businessmen throughout the North, the Lincoln campaign emphasized his frontier origins, despite Lincoln’s own quest to escape his frontier childhood. The log cabin and Lincoln as a rail-splitter became the common images of his campaign. A Philadelphia newspaper described Lincoln’s frontier appeal: “[Lincoln was] a representative of that energetic . . . and Progressive people, who have, by their own strong arms . . . cleared the forests, plowed the prairies, constructed the railroads, and carried the churches and schoolhouse into the wilderness.”⁴³ That is certainly a description Methodists would have proudly embraced. It is interesting that relatively sophisticated, wealthy reformers such as Peter Cartwright and James Finley would create backwoods images for themselves in the mid-1850s, very much as Republicans would portray Lincoln in the 1860 election.

Despite some sincere misgivings and even fear over the direction their mid-nineteenth century society and religion had taken, the Methodists also expressed some pride in what they had helped to build. This put them more in line with the Republican view of the world. Tarkington gushed over how “churches in every neighborhood, colleges and even universities here and there” had replaced the “unbroken forests.” He attributed the development to the “energy and . . . faith of the people . . .” and he found it “wonderful for one man to see in his lifetime.”⁴⁴ Finley saw “a divine hand overruling and conducting the whole.” Taking the traditionalists to task, he wrote: “If we despise anybody, it is the croaker⁴⁵ who is ceaselessly howling about the

⁴⁰ J. V. Watson, *Tales and Takings, Sketches and Incidents from the Itinerant and Editorial Budget* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1857), 246.

⁴¹ Eli Farmer, “The Autobiography of Eli Farmer,” 1, unpublished manuscript.

⁴² “Republican Platform of 1856,” accessed online, January 20, 2016.

⁴³ As quoted in William Gienapp, “Who Voted for Lincoln?” in John L. Thomas, ed. *Abraham Lincoln and the American Political Tradition* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1986), 55.

⁴⁴ Tarkington, 84.

⁴⁵ “Croaker” refers to a church member critical of what were considered innovations in the Methodist Church at the time, such as more ornate churches, choirs, clergy with formal education, pews that were paid for, and an overall reorientation toward appealing to elite members of their communities.

Church having lost her primitive simplicity and power, and influence We believe this day, under God, she is doing more for the conversion of the world than she ever did.” While no other Methodist writer romanticized (or participated in) the early years of Methodism more than Finley, here he explicitly says the church was a more effective institution by the mid-nineteenth century.⁴⁶ And Cartwright wrote, “I have lived to see this vast Western wilderness rise and improve, and become wealthy without a parallel in history.”⁴⁷ He contrasted the oppression of British rule with the freedom enjoyed by Americans in the middle of the nineteenth century: “He [that is, God] has blessed us with good and wholesome laws He has blessed us with a land of plenty, a fertile soil, an agreeable climate.”

Northern Methodism finally found in the Republican Party not only a political party they could support, but also an ideology that in so many ways reflected and reinforced their own views of the world. There was plenty of overlap as many northerners were both Republicans and Methodists.⁴⁸ Their shared appreciation for the ability for individuals and families to move west to free soil; a disdain and even fear of slavery and slave power; and a similar view of the virtue of hard work, are some more reasons Methodists took the important stand of supporting Lincoln in the Election of 1860 and the Union cause throughout the Civil War.

Understanding the strong appeal of religion to the American people gave Abraham Lincoln an advantage in his quest for political power, allowing him to capitalize on the essential appeal Republicanism held for Methodists. While he was only nominally a Presbyterian and not an official church member, religious and evangelical sensibilities were part of Lincoln’s make up, including his anti-slavery views. By contrast, Lincoln’s Democratic opponents, such as Stephen Douglas, John Breckinridge, and James Buchanan, cast slavery as a political issue involving states’ rights. By casting anti-slavery into a religious crusade, Lincoln persuaded many northerners affected by the Second Great Awakening to vote for him and, by extension, his repugnance for slavery. In the presidential election of 1860, Lincoln and his handlers based his campaign rallies on the camp meetings that Methodists had perfected, especially the ones organized in Illinois by John Wesley Redfield, one of the founders of Free Methodism.⁴⁹ Methodist ministers often supported Lincoln, and in Indiana, the Methodist preacher T. A. Goodwin claimed that a local newspaper he wrote for, argued in favor of Republican principles throughout the 1850s, and “that three fourths of the Methodist preachers, and many other preachers became ardent supporters.” Perhaps blowing his own horn, Goodwin claimed “that it [his newspaper]

⁴⁶ Finley, *Sketches*, 115-116.

⁴⁷ Cartwright, 524.

⁴⁸ Gienapp, “Who Voted for Lincoln?” Gienapp argues that the Methodists supported the Republicans less than other evangelical groups although still voted for them more in 1860 than they did in 1856, especially in the critical southern Indiana and Illinois counties.

⁴⁹ Bruce Chadwick, *Lincoln for President: An Unlikely Candidate, an Audacious Strategy, and the Victory No one Saw Coming* (Naperville: Source books, 2009), 18, 19, 151.

had more to do in carrying Indiana for Lincoln than any other agency.”⁵⁰

Methodists followed the logic of their prewar position and supported Lincoln, the Union, and the Republicans, even as the war became longer and bloodier than most people expected. Other denominations, both in the north and the south, did likewise and gave their sides the legitimacy that only the churches could in nineteenth-century America. Of all the support for the Civil War given by the various churches, however, the northern and especially Midwestern support of Methodists was especially natural and organic, and was also indispensable to the union victory, as both Abraham Lincoln and Salmon Chase recognized.

⁵⁰ T. A. Goodwin, “Introduction,” *Autobiography of Joseph Tarkington, with introduction by T. A. Goodwin* (Cincinnati: Curtsy and Jennings, 1899), 62.