



# DISCOVERY

Edited by  
FREDERICK E. MASER

## Flesh and Blood History

History is not merely a matter of dates and events. These are only the bones of history. The flesh and blood of history is in persons: their moral fiber, how they reacted to particular situations, what they said and did that may have influenced the course of history, what segment of society they represented. These and other similar questions need to be understood and answered to secure a true picture of history.

This is especially true of Methodist history. More important than the fact that the Christmas Conference was held in Baltimore in 1784, is the question of how the preachers reacted to Wesley's plan for American Methodism, how Asbury handled himself during this critical period, and the role of Thomas Coke in the formation of the new church, but above all, the reaction of the ordinary Methodist once he or she heard what happened in Baltimore that Christmas week. In short, I have often wondered if historians have ever gathered sufficient accurate anecdotes that might *explain* church history rather than merely *outline* it.

For example, to what extent were the Methodists influenced by Welch (a prominent lay Methodist) to use grape juice instead of wine in the communion service? Why did the church wait till 1916 to make this practice mandatory? What personal elements were involved in this decision? What was the reaction of the ordinary Methodist?

Again, by the 20th century the Methodist Book of Discipline had grown to almost unnatural proportions when compared to the first Discipline issued by the Methodists in the 18th century. Some preachers made a point of mastering every paragraph in the Discipline. They enjoyed showing their erudi-

tion by interrupting the order of business of the conference to raise a fine point about the Discipline in relation to the current debate or action of the conference. At times their points were well taken; at other times they succeeded only in delaying the work of the body. How did the bishops handle these men, keep the business of the conference going, and yet uphold the Discipline?

In addition, the conferences generally followed their own rules of order or that of the General Conference which, in turn, often looked to Robert's Rules of Order for guidance. Some 20th century bishops have been notably unfamiliar with either the Discipline or Robert's Rules. Some have been masters of both. Each has had his or her own way of handling difficult situations.

It is said that one bishop was not a particularly good parliamentarian, although a splendid leader in other ways. Once when he was in what might be termed a parliamentarian knot, a man arose to make a substitution motion. The bishop was aghast, not knowing how to handle the motion. Finally, he said, calling the man by name, "You wouldn't do that to your old bishop now would you?" The man thought for a moment and then withdrew his motion, and the work of the conference moved on.

On one occasion Bishop Gerald Kennedy was presiding over a session of what is now the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference. The conference was in the midst of a critical debate when Leon Moore, a very astute District Superintendent, rose to a point of order and read a very long section of the Discipline which none of the members could follow unless they had a Discipline in their hands. When Moore finished his lengthy reading, the Bishop looked up and said without the quiver of an eyelash, "I hope all you men got that—I was just about to say it myself." The conference roared with laughter and returned to the debate.

Another bishop, Fred Pierce Corson, was a master parliamentarian, and had a way of moving the conference ahead in the face of trivial speeches and motions. Once a man arose to give a lengthy speech followed by a motion. Naturally, a man in the conference who understood the Rules, leaped to his feet and shouted, "Point of order. He can't make a motion following a speech!"

Bishop Corson smiled and said, "You are right, of course, but I have been listening to the good brother, and I don't believe he really said anything. So we can discount his speech and, if he can get a second, place his motion before the conference." There was much laughter. No one would second the motion after that remark, and the motion fell of its own weight.

Or, again, what is the story behind the strange circumstance that, when the World Methodist Conference was meeting in Norway, a printed Order of Service for the inauguration of the new World Council President was completely discarded the night before it was to be used?

On several occasions I have known people to destroy letters and documents telling the personal story involved in decisions on the ground that these documents might cast a reflection on someone still living. A valuable commentary is thus lost forever. It would have been better to have impounded the documents with the Commission on Archives and History to be released at a future date for the use of historians. I recall how disappointed I was when I

found at Old St. George's Church in Philadelphia an ancient document in which the writer stated that he could comment on the cause of the split in St. George's Church that led to the formation of a second Methodist Church in Philadelphia. However, he felt it was better to say nothing, and to this day no one has discovered the real cause of the problem. Some think it had to do with a division between the wealthier and the poorer members. Others think the division was based in politics.

Personal anecdotes, furthermore, sometimes reveal character, and may make a person seem more human than he or she might otherwise appear. On various occasions people have said to me, "My great grandfather was a circuit rider." I have immediately said, "Did he leave a journal or any letters?" and more often than not the person has replied, "Yes, but I don't really know who in the family has them." These could be a treasure trove for historians.

At any rate, historians should be and are becoming more and more interested in the persons of history especially that vast body that makes up the core of any movement or development. Any reader with accurate anecdotes to share is invited to write me.