

**AMERICAN METHODISM: A COMPACT HISTORY,
DENOMINATIONAL HISTORY, AND
AN AUTHOR'S RESPONSE**

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I want to address two substantive critiques that are offered in Benjamin Hartley's review of our *American Methodism: A Compact History*, as well as the other two volumes in this project (*Methodist History* 51.4 [July 2013]: 292-294). These revolve around the title that Abingdon gave the book, both reflective of the approach we have taken in our three volumes, and both quite legitimate issues. My coauthors endorse this reply to the review.

Hartley offers the critiques that we chose to focus on North American rather than world-wide Methodism (requiring, of course, attention to Methodism's missionary spread) and that we treat African American Methodist and holiness churches only through their founding and not in their subsequent development. He is certainly correct that our volume concerns "North American/U.S. United Methodism and its Predecessor Denominations." Could we have fit the history of global Methodism and the array of Methodist-Wesleyan bodies into 250 pages? Perhaps. It took Emory S. Bucke's collaborators three 700 page volumes (*The History of American Methodism*) a half century ago and they gave slight treatment to the smaller Methodist churches. And the Methodist/United Methodist missionary history series runs to eleven volumes, each lengthy.

The synthetic Wesleyan/Methodist project that Dr. Hartley calls for is certainly a worthy one and Susan White and Kenneth Cracknell have shown the way with their quite manageable *An Introduction to World Methodism*. I certainly hope he and others will take up that challenge—the world of Methodism across the globe or even world-wide United Methodism.

Here I want to make the case for country- or society-specific denominational history, with length not a particular constraint or consideration. Again such an argument does not rule out more broad gauged histories but simply posits that treatments of religious bodies within a social-cultural milieu also make sense; and indeed, volumes with such a focus should be a staple of ministerial formation in the U.S.

In my mind, this argument rests on ecclesiological foundations and specifically on the importance in North America of the denominational form of the church. To denominationalism I have returned again and again over my whole career—editing two books, authoring a third, and contributing some

additional ten essays to the topic.¹ In the course of so doing, I have insisted that American denominations and denominationalism function with and exhibit a distinctive model of being the church, indeed an implicit theology of the church. I have termed the American churches voluntaristic ecclesial bodies, explicating each of these terms for its ecclesial meaning.² I begin attention to the second in this fashion:

It is ecclesial, a movement or body understanding itself to be a legitimate and self-sufficient, proper “church” (or religious movement.) It is a voluntary church, a body that concedes the authenticity of other churches even as it claims its own. It need not, however, concede that authenticity indiscriminately, it need not and typically did not regard all other denominations as orthodox.

In addition to arguing for denominationalism’s theological dimension, I have suggested that it needs to be seen as malleable and changing, looking very different in one period from a prior or following time. So in several places I have traced the evolution of the denominational system from its English Puritan origins to the late twentieth century, insisting that denominations in a specific period tended to resemble one another. Today’s Presbyterian should feel more at home in a Disciple, Lutheran or Methodist congregation than in a Presbyterian congregation of an earlier day.

Methodists contributed quite substantively to the creation of this new form of the church, not so much in elaborating its theory or theology—the Presbyterians and Congregationalists provided that—but in implementing and exemplifying its purposive, missionary, expansive continent-ambitious connectional and ministerial systems. In living into their mission statement—“To reform the Continent, and spread scripture Holiness over these Lands”—Methodists were the first body to implement the mature, nineteenth century voluntaristic missionary expression of the American denomination. Indeed, it is not far-fetched to credit Methodists with creation of this form or at least to have shared in its creation with the Baptists. On this point John Wigger comments persuasively in his book on Francis Asbury. I have also advanced such a claim in several places.³

Further, the Methodist Episcopal-Methodist-United Methodist trajectory exemplifies the dynamics (and certainly the weaknesses) of the denominational form of the church and the evolution of denominationalism as an overall construct.

Our three volumes—the two entitled *Methodist Experience in America* and this *American Methodism: A Compact History*, whose interrelation Hart-

¹ Among the latter are “Denominations,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Religion in America*, Philip Goff, ed., (Oxford & Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 90-104; “United Methodism: Its Identity as Denomination” in *Denomination: Assessing An Ecclesiological Category*, Paul Collins and Barry Ensign-George, eds. (London & New York: T & T Clark, 2011), 67-85; and “Religious Organization in the New Nation,” in *The Cambridge History of Religions in America*, Stephen J. Stein general editor, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 2: 93-116.

² See the exposition in *Denominationalism Illustrated and Explained* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 2-3.

³ *Denominationalism Illustrated and Explained*, chapters 8-11.

ley nicely describes—do not take on the task of elaborating Methodism's ecclesiological contributions or say much about Methodism's part in creating and illustrating the American denominational form of the church (but see *American Methodism: A Compact History*, 36-37). I do that elsewhere. But our volumes do rest on the conviction that it remains very important to treat Methodism in its American context and to explicate the denominational dynamics in its life. That we did not deal sufficiently with twentieth century debates around missions—as Hartley observes—is a fair critique. We should have done more with that since we saw it as our task to treat North American United Methodism and its Predecessor Denominations.

Our three volumes should prove especially important now as a resource for comment upon and critique of United Methodism's neo-colonial worldwide pretensions. I presume that the American bishops find their international conclaves (the Council) to be an important expression of their vocation as itinerant general superintendents and are pleased to claim African growth statistics as those in North America continue to plummet. And I assume that the central conference bishops, as well, find the Council vital to their United Methodist identity. It is less clear to me, however, that all the boards and agencies should construe their mandate as global. I would rather think that the various Central conferences should be about creating (and supporting) their own administrative/programmatic infrastructure. And I find it disappointing that the last General Conference did not find a way of establishing authoritative-general conference-like structures for the U.S. as also for other regions of United Methodism and changing the current General Conference from a legislative into a consultative body.

Frankly, I am of the opinion that Methodism in its various locales across the globe should be tied and should have been tied into dependency relations only for the earliest phases of plantation. It should very soon become self-governing and self-supporting. Affiliation or covenanting relations should certainly obtain and be strengthened. But I have a hard time seeing why robust Methodisms in Africa or the Philippines should be tethered to North American United Methodism. Nor do I understand why we relate ourselves more closely to those parts of United Methodism than to daughter churches in Central and South America. I also favor, incidentally, the authorization of language conferences—Korean and Spanish, for instance—within the U.S., if requested by those communities, a return to a tried and true policy of a century ago.

On the point of such policies and patterns of indigenization our *Methodist Experience* comments by terming American Methodism a post-colonial church. Because of the Revolution, John Wesley released the Americans, sent them Thomas Coke and few documents and wished them well. "They are," said Wesley, "now at full liberty, simply to follow the Scriptures and the Primitive Church. And we judge it best that they should stand fast in that Liberty, wherewith God has so strangely made them free." Aside from Coke, the new church had no theologically trained leadership and Coke soon split. American Methodism prospered to no small degree because it was on

its own, freed from the authority of Wesley and the tentacles of the English Conference.

Positing that United Methodism is a world-wide church does not solve the problems of being a denomination in North American society. Indeed, it functions to disguise them and make them insoluble. The tragedies in the present quasi-international General Conference are (1) certainly that the dominant north Americans make policy and adopt program which do not always readily translate helpfully and appropriately into central conference operations and (2) that its trans-national composition and efforts to orient proceedings onto a world-wide plane make it difficult for North America United Methodism to deal with its own problems and issues. The central conferences need connectional structures within which to tailor received Wesleyan/Methodist traditions into socially-culturally specific policy and program. The North American sectors of United Methodism deserve the same.

Our three volumes—*American Methodism: A Compact History* and the two on which it depends, both entitled *The Methodist Experience in America*—do a fair job of explaining how North American United Methodism got into its present dilemmas. We thought that to be our task and a sufficient one.