

BOOK REVIEW

Smith, Tash, *Capture These Indians for the Lord: Indians, Methodists, and Oklahomans, 1844-1939*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014, viii + 247 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index, \$55.00 (Electronic edition available).

This is an important book. Critical studies of Methodist missionary efforts among Native Americans are in short supply—and mostly outdated in light of significant research on Christianity and American Indians. With the notable exceptions of missionary efforts among the Wyandots of Ohio and to the tribes of the Southeast, the Methodist commitment on the frontier was directed at settlers, not Natives, to prevent whites from sinking into the barbarism, violence, and disorder the Church believed that frontier conditions encouraged.

In 1844, the Methodist Episcopal Church created the Indian Mission Conference, which was concentrated in the Indian Territory, with the single exception of the Kansas River District in Kansas, which accommodated several remnant tribal groups including Wyandots, Shawnees, and Delawares. This was the first time the General Conference created a conference directed especially at Indians, although some other conferences provided limited support to American Indian missions.

Unfortunately, the creation of the Indian Mission Conference coincided with the division of the Methodist Church over slavery. The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, did not “secede” from the Methodist Episcopal Church in a formal sense, so that the status of the Indian Mission Conference was open. Practically, though, the Methodist Church South dominated missions to the Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles in the Indian Territory by virtue of the previous location of those tribes in the Southeast and the head start Southern Methodists had among them. Even in the Kansas District, located at the border of Missouri and Kansas, both Northern and Southern ministers competed in service to the tribes.

Smith’s book focuses on the Indian Mission Conference in the Indian Territory, tracing its history from its creation in 1844, through the Civil War, to its restructuring during the war’s aftermath, past the creation of Oklahoma Territory and subsequent statehood, until the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, were reunited in 1939.

The chronology of the Indian Methodist Conference is within itself valuable, but Smith goes far beyond a recounting of facts or even shifts in policy over time. The conference maintained white leadership throughout, promoting policies directed at assimilation as well as conversion. However the majority of congregational ministers within the conference were Native. As

a result, Indian Methodists, while accepting the forms and even the doctrines of the Church under the largely white leadership, were able to reconcile the new Christian faith with traditional cultural ways and values.

The Civil War seriously disrupted the Conference and even many of the congregations, and Reconstruction treaties with the Five Tribes increased white influence in the Indian Territory. Greater emphasis on railroads and economic developed, welcomed by the Methodist Church, South, posed a threat to the autonomy that Native churches had enjoyed. The Conference was subject to oversight, and over time the “Indian-centric” mission was viewed as outdated and misdirected. Smith explores how the Indian communities responded to this change of focus, in order to sustain the connection between Methodism and traditional cultures.

In 1887, the Conference determined to extend its outreach to other tribes, especially in the western part of the Territory. Locked into a generic view of “Indians,” the Conference began mission work among the Kiowas and Comanches, who lacked the practiced forms of acculturation that marked the so-called “Civilized Tribes” previously served. The most important figure in the effort to convert the Kiowas and Comanches was J. J. Methvin. Smith notes that “Methvin’s story reveals why most missionaries failed and how white eventually dominated what was supposedly an ‘Indian Mission.’”

Nevertheless, Methvin’s efforts provide important insights into the cultural challenges of Indian missions. In fact, Methvin proved wise enough to see the need for the Indians to spread the gospel within their own communities, and he worked hard to cultivate relationships with Kiowa leaders. Christ, he said, “becomes all things to all men. He becomes an Indian to save Indians. . . .” He realized that as long as he preached from a strictly white perspective, he would have little success. Methvin’s struggles provide the means for reviewing the Church’s struggles and for demonstrating the power of Native people to maintain traditional ways within the new forms of the Church.

The experience of the Indian Mission Conference, Smith writes “reveals the ways in which Native communities created their own religious space, even as ethnocentric pressures of assimilation marginalized Indians in American society.” It was a fascinating process, and exploring it is the primary reason that this book is important. This is not a theological discussion, but it offers insights that should be welcomed in any dialogue about missions and indigenous peoples.

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