

## WHY DID PRESIDENT THOMSON LEAVE OHIO WESLEYAN?

FREDERICK A. NORWOOD

Why did this handsome educational leader, the first president of Ohio Wesleyan University, after fourteen years of able administration which guided the fledgling college through the early struggling years, overcame financial perils, gathered a small but sterling faculty, enrolled a growing student body, built a library, and presented to the world passing along Sandusky Street the classic "Doric front" of the campus, resign and go to New York City for another career?

The answer has a broader significance than the effects on the little college situated along the banks of the Olentangy River. It has nothing to do with his affection for the small town which actively supported the enterprise, nor with his educational leadership. When he died after a long and distinguished career, he came home to be buried in Oak Grove Cemetery just a mile south of the campus. But in 1860 he resigned his post. The answer is interesting in terms of American social history and a credit to the integrity and commitment of Edward Thomson. It is an illustration of the theme developed by Gilbert Hobbs Barnes in his classic book, *The Anti-slavery Impulse, 1830-1844*.<sup>1</sup> Barnes pointed out the strong anti-slavery sentiment in the states west of the mountains in contrast to both the somewhat erratic abolitionism in New England and the prevailing conservatism along the eastern seaboard. Thomson is a case in point.

The producers of the New York edition of the *Christian Advocate* were able men well known in Methodism, especially Abel Stevens, its editor and eminent historian of the church. He and other influential leaders in New York City were exceedingly sensitive to the controversial issue of slavery, and strove to keep it from the pages of the magazine. Now, at its quadrennial meeting in May, 1860, the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church decided to open the pages of this influential paper to a more forthright anti-slavery voice. It elected as editor Edward Thomson. He had not asked for the job. Nor had Stevens sought to be relieved of it. One doubts, however, if Thomson resisted this opportunity to bring his message to a much wider audience. And without a doubt the erstwhile occupant of that position resented being moved aside for an upstart enthusiast from "Indian country" beyond the mountains. Regional rivalries were already playing a part in conflict between Ohio and New York.

---

<sup>1</sup>Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964.

Hence, when Thomson took up his duties, he was well aware of the potential for controversy. General Conference had provided a vigorous opponent of slavery with a desire to see it eradicated from the institutions of the church and the nation. The new editor was not disappointed. The conservative leaders of the eastern establishment were not ready quietly to submit to direction of "our paper" by an upstart from the west.

The outbreak of the Civil War, of course, brought together both conservatives and radicals in the struggle to preserve the Union. But there were obvious differences. So incensed were the eastern leaders over the "usurpation" of their editorial office that in a short time they started a rival magazine of their own, *The Methodist*. This publication survived the war and continued as a vehicle for the campaign for lay representation, defined rather narrowly as an expression of laymen's conventions.<sup>2</sup>

Into this unstable environment strode Edward Thomson, hoping to guide the *Advocate* through troublesome years without undue conflict. He began with irenic moves and opened the pages to correspondents who argued a biblical basis for slavery.<sup>3</sup> Both sides in this domestic quarrel tried to pretend the other did not exist. As time went on, however, nerves were rubbed raw. Supporters of the official *Advocate* were understandably piqued by the appearance of a rival independent magazine designed to defend the conservative ideas of the eastern establishment. The editors were G. R. Crooks and, as European correspondent, John McClintock, who resided in France. Lemuel Bangs was publisher. Although Abel Stevens had been displaced from his editorship by the action of General Conference, he remained an influential figure. Moreover, the long shadow of aged Nathan Bangs, another revered Methodist historian, haunted the background until he died during the war.

In self defense *The Methodist* cited the precedents in denominational history for independent publication. It claimed the right to express viewpoints at variance with the official line. Private funds and an aggressive circulation campaign enabled it not only to survive, but even to offer strong competition to *The Christian Advocate and Journal*, at least in the New York area.

Everybody waved the flag. Both of the publications based in New York defended the cause of the Union and reported extensively on military activities. They joined a lively debating society in which all of the regional *Advocates* participated. Nothing exceeded the vehemence of patriotic rhetoric expressed in the *Western Christian Advocate* and its nearby southern rival in Nashville. Calvin Kingsley and Holland McTyeire clashed

---

<sup>2</sup>This independent publication is not readily available. A complete run may be found in the library of the General Commission on Archives and History in Madison, New Jersey.

<sup>3</sup>An admirable history of Methodist publishing may be found in James P. Pilkington, *The Methodist Publishing House* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, Vol. I, 1968). Chapter 7 has some material on the New York *Advocate* during the war years. For the early policy see p. 407.

repeatedly as the war ran its long and frustrating course in the West. Thomson tried to maintain a more moderate tone, but his commitment to the cause of the Union was complete. In an introductory editorial on June 7, 1860 he wrote with regard to the "vexed question," that he had firm and fearless views, but "he has no wish to enter into the arena of controversy; and if he must he hopes to do so with that charity which 'thinketh no evil.'"<sup>4</sup>

By 1861, however, *The Methodist* was getting under his skin. It was trying, he claimed, to win support of the preachers without avowal of its real aims. "Will they abandon the *Advocate*, their own denominational paper, to which they stand pledged, and introduce a competing paper, which the denomination does not recognize, and in which it has no editorial authority or financial interest?"<sup>5</sup>

Thomson sparred with Stevens over the issue of lay representation, claimed there was no real difference over this issue, only over the method. He was skeptical and suspicious about the lay "conventions" which he thought were being dominated by powerful conservative interests.

As the war ground on a change took place in the coverage of military events. Both papers felt a responsibility for bringing important secular news with moral aspects to readers and both moaned over the catastrophes and carnage. By the time of Gettysburg, however, concern with details of battle had waned. More and more debates over religious and denominational matters were sustained. Lay representation was a favorite, though both sides professed to favor it. A series of articles in the *Advocate* in 1864 examined and criticized proposals for lay conventions.<sup>6</sup> Thomson thought those who supported them were the same persons who earlier had tried to suppress debate over slavery. Thomson wanted representation of *all* the laity.

Meanwhile, *The Methodist* persisted in its role as an independent voice in the affairs of the church. An early editorial expressed the need for a "larger more comprehensive organ" than the "stereotyped" official papers. A couple of weeks later it identified itself as an "exponent of conservative principles" as expressed by the bishops. "It will resist controversy and be open to the idea of lay representation."<sup>7</sup> Thus, from the beginning *The Methodist* promoted its version of lay representation. On July 27, appeared a rare reference to the *Advocate and Journal* as the official organ of the church.

---

<sup>4</sup>*New York Christian Advocate*, June 7, 1860, 90, hereafter cited as *NYCA*.

<sup>5</sup>*NYCA*, July 18, 1861, 232.

<sup>6</sup>*NYCA*, January 14, 1864, 12; January 21, 20; January 28, 28; February 18, 52; February 25, 60; March 3, 68; March 31, 100.

<sup>7</sup>July 14, 1860; July 28, 1860, 7; June 1, 1861, 164; June 8, 1864, 172.

The Battle of Bull Run brought a comment that this war was against rebellion, not slavery.<sup>8</sup> But, the editorial carefully continued, the defeat will also be the defeat of slavery.

After a year of publication *The Methodist* took pride in its success as “the largest and best paper in the denomination. . . . Its course has been such as to win the entire approbation of the church.” A few weeks later it approved of Lincoln’s approach to emancipation.<sup>9</sup> Under the Constitution states must themselves free the slaves. Emancipation must be gradual. Lincoln was seen as “between the fires,” a moderate man in the middle—where he ought to be.

Again, tempers were aroused. In September *The Methodist* complained that the editor of the official paper “fills nearly three columns of his paper with his spleen and ill-will.” It is “wretched stuff.”<sup>10</sup> Thomson had been upset by a subscription campaign.

When the Emancipation Proclamation was formally promulgated, *The Methodist* was carefully measured in its judgment. “Not being of the number of those who clamored for a proclamation of freedom, we have not shouted over its promulgation; we have accepted it as perhaps a military necessity.”<sup>11</sup>

By 1863 *The Methodist* had relatively little to say about progress of the war. It devoted itself increasingly to the campaign for lay representation through lay conventions. It was more interested in Daniel Whedon than in Gettysburg. Whedon, editor of the *Methodist Quarterly Review*, had taken aim at the conservative direction of *The Methodist* on lay affairs.<sup>12</sup> Editorial debate with Whedon continued for some time, and was then replaced by interchanges with the *Advocate and Journal* on the same subject.<sup>13</sup> In the same issue of April 2, 1864 appeared the first part of another series on “The Laity and the Church.”

*The Methodist*, having lost its original theme of the method and timing of emancipation of the slaves, continued vigorously to promote a conservative agenda for lay representation. At the beginning of January in 1864 the editors quoted at length from a letter they had received from the Rev. Dr. [Charles] True of the New York Conference. He had spoken with appreciation of the service provided by *The Methodist*, then suggested that the paper had served its purpose and ought now to be ended. With this the editors could not agree.

We have not sought ‘to keep up a party spirit’. . . . An independent paper, free from official trammels, is an outgrowth of Methodism which any sagacious man would

<sup>8</sup>September 7, 1861, 270.

<sup>9</sup>March 29, 1862, 92; August 9, 1862, 244.

<sup>10</sup>September 27, 1862, 300; cf., October 18, 1862, 324.

<sup>11</sup>January 1, 1863, 412.

<sup>12</sup>July 25, 1863, 228; January 30, 1864, 28.

<sup>13</sup>January 30, 1864, 28; February 13, 44, *et. seq.*

naturally anticipate. The occasion of its appearance might be one or another event in the history of the church; but the tendency to independent journalism is so strong in American society, that the appearance of an unofficial organ of Methodism might well be accepted as only a question of time. . . . In these facts we find the sufficient reason for the continuance of *The Methodist*.<sup>14</sup>

Thus *The Methodist* survived for some years on the higher ground of an independent voice.

Edward Thomson also survived. After a quadrennium of editorial turmoil in New York, the General Conference of 1864, whose predecessor had brought him to this conflict, rescued him by electing him bishop. Perhaps the perturbations of oceanic voyages as he pursued his episcopal duties may have seemed less tumultuous than the editorial storms he had endured in New York.

---

<sup>14</sup>January 9, 1864, 4.