

Embodying Methodist Theology:
Diverging Conceptions of Holy Living in American Methodist Theology
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Introduction

By the 1860s, Matthew Simpson was not only the MEC's best known bishop, he was American Methodism's most famous preacher. During the Civil War, Simpson's notoriety increased due to his friendship with Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865), the sixteenth President of the United States, and his frequent preaching to rally support for the Union war effort. On January 25, 1866, Matthew Simpson summoned all of his celebrated rhetorical ability to describe the impact and significance of American Methodism's first one hundred years. He said to his audience at St. Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church in New York at the centenary meeting:

Call to your mind a little gathering a hundred years ago of six poor, obscure persons, in the lower part of the present city, meeting to sing and pray, little thinking that so great a Church would spring out of their efforts. Contrast its present condition. Look at our commodious churches, our large congregations, the wealth, the influence, the refinement, the great enterprise, and we see that a mighty work has been accomplished, and we can well exclaim, 'What hath God wrought?'¹

In 1866, Simpson celebrated Methodism's transformation from a small gathering of poor and unknown people to a church that had prospered from every vantage point. Simpson exulted in the rags to riches transformation of American Methodism. In 1766 Methodism was "poor" and "obscure." In 1866 Methodism could be described by its "wealth," "influence," and "refinement." The explosive growth of the MEC in the first half of the nineteenth century made it not only the largest denomination in the United States, but also the most significant institution in the country other than the U. S. government itself.²

¹ Matthew Simpson, "The Centenary of American Methodism," in Crooks, 507.

² Nathan O. Hatch and John H. Wigger, eds., *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture* "Introduction" (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2001), 11.

Matthew Simpson, perhaps more than anyone else, was the architect of Methodism's transformation from a rapidly growing church of people on the margins of U. S. culture to a church that could compete with any institution at the center of American culture for primary place in the halls of power and influence. Simpson himself was frequently in conversation with a variety of Presidents, particularly U. S. Grant (1822-1885), the eighteenth President.³

It was not obvious to all of Simpson's contemporaries, however, that American Methodism's transformation was cause for unqualified celebration. Many Methodists saw the very changes Simpson celebrated as signs of American Methodism's decline and drift from its core theological commitments. If Simpson was the best example of American Methodism in the halls of power, B. T. Roberts was the best example of someone resisting what he saw as putting pursuit of worldliness over faithfulness to Jesus Christ and his gospel. Roberts described the fault lines in American Methodism with particular clarity in his essay "New School Methodism."

Differing thus in their views of religion, the Old and New School Methodists necessarily differ in their measures for its promotion. The latter build stock churches, and furnish them with pews to accommodate a select congregation; and with organs, melodeons, violins, and professional singers, to execute difficult pieces of music for a fashionable audience. The former favor free churches, congregational singing, and spirituality, simplicity and fervency in worship.... In short, the Old School Methodists rely for the spread of the gospel upon the agency of the Holy Ghost, and the purity of the Church. The New School Methodists appear to depend upon the patronage of the worldly, the favor of the proud and aspiring; and the various artifices of worldly policy.⁴

That Roberts articulated this contrast between old and new Methodism, and was ultimately expelled from the MEC for it, is an indication that deep tensions and fragmentation lurked beneath the spectacular prospering of the MEC with regard to people, buildings, and general upward mobility.

³ Simpson's influence with Presidents from the 1860s until the end of his life might be most similar to that of Billy Graham in the 20th century.

⁴ B. T. Roberts, "New School Methodism," in Snyder, 393.

As the MEC became increasingly aware of its own prosperity and influence, individual Methodists increasingly articulated and promoted divergent visions for the MEC. Simpson and Roberts had differing visions for American Methodist theology. These differences impacted the way they narrated the history of American Methodism. Simpson emphasized American Methodism's inauspicious beginnings and astounding rise to become the country's foremost denomination. Roberts, on the other hand, highlighted the commitment to uncompromising holiness and entire sanctification in Wesley and the first generations of American Methodists in order to emphasize the ways American Methodism was drifting from its core commitments in the middle of the nineteenth century. These diverging understandings of Methodism's past and its present purpose led to significant differences in conviction about how best to 'raise an holy People,' which had been a fundamental commitment of Methodism.⁵ Given these differences, it is not surprising that Simpson and Roberts also differed in their hopes for the future of Methodism in America. Simpson was personally comfortable with affluence. He celebrated and sought to further the upward mobility of the MEC, shepherding his church toward economic and social advancement. Roberts lamented the increasing worldliness of the MEC, seeing self-denial and purity of heart as essential marks of a holy life. This history is essential to an adequate understanding of American Methodism because it represents a key moment of initial fragmentation in what had been a fairly stable and coherent theological tradition.

Simpson and Roberts on Methodist Doctrine

In Simpson's writing on American Methodism, doctrine typically came up in either a broader discussion of the factors that explained American Methodism's astounding success or as

⁵ *Minutes* (1784), 4.

a source of broad unity of Methodism, even across denominational lines. His description of Methodist doctrine is characteristically brief and generic. Simpson's theological commitments seem to come from his deeper commitment to positioning the MEC to continue its ascension through the ranks of church and culture in the United States. Doctrine's function was to create the minimal conditions for a church to thrive. It was a part of the foundation of a church that was growing and prospering.

Simpson's most developed summary of Methodist doctrine is in a chapter in *A Hundred Years of Methodism* titled "Doctrines, Usages, Economy." It is telling that in the twenty-seven-page chapter that just over one page is devoted to doctrine. By way of comparison, the section on the General Conference alone is more than six pages. The chapter is really a summary of Methodist, especially MEC, polity with a preamble on doctrine and usages, or practices. Simpson began his discussion of Methodist doctrine by describing its contents, "The doctrines of Methodism are contained in its 'Articles of Faith,' and its moral code and chief principles in its General Rules."⁶ Both of these documents were included as an Appendix. Simpson's relative disinterest in doctrine is revealed in his misidentification of the "Articles of Religion" as the "Articles of Faith."

The remainder of the paragraph on doctrine contained Simpson's summary of Methodist doctrine, which he characterized as "evangelical Arminian." Methodist doctrine, Simpson wrote: teaches the natural depravity of the human heart; the atonement made by the Lord Jesus Christ as a sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world; that salvation is offered to every individual on condition of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ; that a man is justified by faith alone, but that good works follow and flow from a living faith. It teaches that every believer may have the witness of the Spirit attesting his sonship, and insists upon "following after holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord." It also teaches the doctrines of future rewards and punishments, the immortality of the soul, and the resurrection of the body. Its systems of doctrines is similar to that of the

⁶ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 210.

Church of England, omitting its Calvinistic article, and putting more stress upon the work of the Spirit in the conscious purification of the heart. It differs from the Calvinistic Churches, by rejecting the doctrines of election and reprobation, and of the impossibility of falling from grace. It differs from the Unitarians, by asserting the divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ; and from the Pelagians, by holding the natural corruption of the human heart, and human inability, without divine grace, to turn from sin to holiness. It teaches, however, that a sufficient measure of that grace is given to every man to profit withal, and that through the merits of the atonement, full salvation is the privilege of every individual.⁷

In Simpson's summary of Methodist doctrine, one can find original sin, repentance, justification by faith, the witness of the Spirit, and holiness – even to “full salvation.” The summary of doctrine is centered around the “Way of Salvation,” which fits with Wesley's own emphasis. The focus on salvation is a bit one-sided when summarizing the “Articles of Religion,” however. The “Articles” have a more rounded and robust doctrinal core, discussing the Trinity, Christology, Pneumatology, doctrine of Scripture, among other things.⁸

In the preceding chapter, Simpson described Methodist theology as “broad and comprehensive.” He again emphasized that Methodist theology “proclaims free and full salvation.”⁹ “Full salvation” is as close as Simpson gets to articulating the doctrine of entire sanctification in *A Hundred Years of Methodism*. His neglect of the Holiness Movement, and especially Phoebe Palmer's influence on American Methodism, may be the most glaring omission in the book.¹⁰ Rather than attempting to identify distinctives of Methodist doctrine,

⁷ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 210-211.

⁸ For example, Simpson's contrast with Unitarianism could be more substantive. The divinity of Jesus is certainly a difference that Methodists have with Unitarians. However, as the name suggests the difference is more fundamentally that Methodists are Trinitarian and Unitarians only affirm that the first person of the Trinity is divine.

⁹ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 208.

¹⁰ On Palmer's understanding of entire sanctification see Phoebe Palmer, *The Way of Holiness: With Notes by the Way; Being a Narrative of Religious Experience Resulting from a Determination to Be a Bible Christian* (New York: Printed for the Author, 1854) and Phoebe Palmer, *Present to My Christian Friend on Entire Devotion to God* (London: Alexander Heylin, 1857). For more on her life and influence on Methodism see Harold E. Raser, *Phoebe Palmer:*

Simpson typically sought common ground, sometimes explicitly denying that Methodist doctrine was distinct from other denominations. The most surprising example of this was in the final chapter of *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, where he sought to explain Methodism's success over its first one hundred years.

After considering and setting aside several possible explanations for Methodism's spectacular success, Simpson identified doctrine as one of three key factors in American's Methodism's growth.¹¹ Of the three factors, however, Simpson gave the least attention to the role that doctrine had played in the growth of the MEC. He summarized the contribution of doctrine to Methodism's success as follows:

We have already noticed the doctrines as being evangelical and liberal, yet they are shared by other Churches which have not grown so rapidly. They lie, however, at the foundation of success, and it is only on the basis of the doctrine of a free and full atonement, preached as available to every human being, that the superstructure of the Church could have been raised.¹²

On Simpson's account, Methodist doctrine created the precondition for growth through its simultaneous zeal for spreading the gospel and intellectual openness. His description also revealed that he did not believe there was anything truly distinctive about Methodist doctrine which contributed to its rapid growth, as its doctrinal commitments were "shared by other Churches which have not grown so rapidly." In other words, churches that have not "grown so

Her Life and Thought, Studies in Women and Religion 22 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986); Charles E. White, *The Beauty of Holiness: Phoebe Palmer as Theologian, Revivalist, Feminist and Humanitarian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986); and Elaine A. Heath, *Naked Faith: The Mystical Theology of Phoebe Palmer*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 108 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009).

¹¹ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 348. Simpson's discussion of the factors that led to American Methodism's growth are discussed further below.

¹² Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 345.

rapidly” had the same doctrinal foundation. For Simpson, the passion and polity of the MEC better explained its actual growth over the preceding decades.

It is also striking that while Simpson identified doctrine as a necessary part of the “superstructure” of a church that could grow explosively, he did not offer much of a summary of what the necessary doctrines in such a superstructure would be. The only doctrine Simpson mentioned in this context was “a free and full atonement.” In other words, according to Simpson, being an Arminian and not Reformed was a precondition for rapid growth. This seems to be more of an ideological statement than a considered historical judgment, as Simpson surely must have known of the waves of revival that had occurred with deep Reformed commitments. Indeed, George Whitefield (1714 - 1770), the most prominent preacher in the so-called First Great Awakening, was Reformed *and a Methodist*.

Simpson’s general neglect of holiness, entire sanctification, and the Holiness Movement in his writing may be due to his own struggle to experience entire sanctification. As discussed in chapter two, Simpson regularly wrote in his diary in the 1850s of an awareness of a need for a deeper work of grace in his life, for further growth in holiness. He did not, however, record or profess to have ever had such an experience. Based on the available manuscript sources, Simpson’s search for further growth in holiness, particularly entire sanctification, seems to have dissipated over time. Either way, holiness and entire sanctification were not prominent emphases in Simpson’s articulation of American Methodist theology.

It is here that the contrast between the theology of Simpson and B. T. Roberts is most apparent. Holiness and entire sanctification were precisely the dominant points of emphasis in Roberts’s theology. In “New School Methodism,” Roberts pleaded with the MEC to remember that it “has a special mission to accomplish.” That mission was not “to gather into her fold the

proud and fashionable, the devotees of pleasure and ambition, but ‘to spread scriptural holiness over these lands.’”¹³ Roberts explicitly connected the mission of Methodism to spread holiness to the need for Methodism to resist worldly pursuit of wealth and affluence. This was illustrated in the concluding lines of “New School Methodism”:

Her doctrines, and her usages, her hymns, her history and her spirit, her noble achievements in the past, and her bright prospects for the future, all forbid that she should adopt an accommodating, compromising policy, pandering to the vices of the times. Let her go on, as she has done, insisting that the great, cardinal truths of the Gospel shall receive a living embodiment in the hearts and lives of her members, and Methodism will continue to be the favored of Heaven, and the joy of the earth. But let her come down from her position, and receive to her communion all those lovers of pleasure, and lovers of the world, who are willing to pay for the privilege, and it needs no prophet’s vision to foresee that Methodism will become a dead and corrupting body, endeavoring in vain to supply, by the erection of splendid churches, and the imposing performance of powerless ceremonies, the manifested glory of the Divine presence, which once shone so brightly in all her sanctuaries.¹⁴

For Roberts, the mission of Methodism to “spread scriptural holiness” required a diligent commitment to prevent the transfer of loyalty from an uncompromising pursuit of holiness to the pursuit of pleasure, comfort, and the delights of the world. And “New School” Methodists were undermining this very commitment to pursuing holiness above all else.

From the beginnings of the Free Methodist Church, holiness and entire sanctification were central foci. B. T. Roberts’s announcement of a convention for “adopting a Discipline for the Free Methodist Church” stated that its basic purpose was to “promote the prosperity and permanency of the work of holiness.” Before the group gathered, Roberts defined the doctrinal core of the new church as harkening back to “primitive Methodism” and containing at least “the Witness of the Spirit, Entire Sanctification as a state of grace distinct from justification,

¹³ Roberts, “New School Methodism,” in Snyder, 395.

¹⁴ Roberts, “New School Methodism,” in Snyder, 395.

attainable instantaneously by faith.”¹⁵ In his analysis of Roberts’s role in the beginnings of Free Methodism, Snyder argued that Roberts’s call for a convention was particularly significant because, “it clearly shows which issues Roberts felt were most crucial, and also that Roberts put doctrinal issues first among the several issues cited.” Though there were a variety of disagreements that led to the formation of a new denomination, and a variety of contextual factors beyond the church as well, Snyder argued that Roberts believed that “everything else was secondary to, and flowed from, the doctrinal foundation of the church. For all the emphasis he put on Christian experience, the central anchor was theological and doctrinal.”¹⁶

When the convention met, it largely adopted the MEC “Articles of Religion” as its formal statement of its doctrine. The delegates expressed their commitment to entire sanctification by adding an article on specifically on entire sanctification to the “Articles” so that the statement was part of their formal doctrinal core. The article read:

Merely justified persons, while they do not outwardly commit sin, are nevertheless conscious of sin still remaining in the heart. They feel a natural tendency to evil, a proneness to depart from God, and cleave to the things of earth. Those that are sanctified wholly are saved from all inward sin – from evil thoughts, and evil tempers. No wrong temper, none contrary to love remains in the soul. All the thoughts, words and actions are governed by pure love.

Entire sanctification takes place subsequently to justification, and is the work of God wrought instantaneously upon the consecrated, believing soul. After a soul is cleansed from all sin, it is then fully prepared to grow in grace.¹⁷

The addition of this article was a tangible expression of Roberts’s commitment to entire sanctification and structuring the FMC around Methodism’s original mission to “spread

¹⁵ [B. T. Roberts], “Notice for Camp Meeting and Convention,” *EC* 1, no. 8 (Aug. 1860): 260.

¹⁶ Snyder, 520.

¹⁷ *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Free Methodist Church, Adopted August 23, 1860* (Buffalo: B. T. Roberts, 1860), 22. The convention also added an article on “Future Reward and Punishment” which replaced the statement on purgatory and, according to Snyder, “was added to guard against the growing threat of universalism.” Snyder, 523.

scriptural holiness.” The Article also put the FMC on record in affirming that entire sanctification is something that should be earnestly sought in this life as a distinct second work. It also put them squarely on the crisis side of entire sanctification, where entire sanctification came as a breakthrough in an instant, as opposed to a gradual experience one grew in over an entire lifetime.

The commitment to raising up a holy people was also expressed in membership requirements that were more stringent than those of the MEC. In order to become a member, the following questions had to be answered in the affirmative:

1. Have you the witness of THE SPIRIT that you are a child of God?
2. Have you that perfect love which casteth out fear? If not will you diligently seek until you obtain it?
3. Is it your purpose to devote yourself the remainder of your life wholly to the service of God, doing good to your fellow men and working out your own salvation with fear and trembling?
4. Will you forever lay aside all superfluous ornaments, and adorn yourself in modest apparel, with shame-facedness and sobriety, not with broidered hair, or gold or pearls, or costly array, but which becometh those professing godliness with good works?
5. Will you abstain from connection with all secret societies, keeping yourself free to follow the will of the Lord in all things?
6. Do you subscribe to our articles of religion, our general rules, and our Discipline, and are you willing to be governed by the same?
7. Have you Christian fellowship and love for the members of this society, and will you assist them as God shall give you ability in carrying on the work of the Lord?¹⁸

Thus, from the beginning of membership in the FMC, one had to minimally affirm a willingness to “diligently seek” entire sanctification until they “obtained it.” The commitment to pursue entire sanctification was immediately connected to ways of living that would facilitate a commitment to pursuing holiness, or avoiding the primary obstacles to holiness.

The theological differences between Simpson and Roberts were subtle but significant. Simpson did not deny the importance of holiness or entire sanctification. In fact, there were

¹⁸ *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Free Methodist Church, Adopted August 23, 1860*, 32-33.

places in his writing where he affirmed the importance of holiness. In an 1870 sermon, he lamented that “we are not, either in ministry or membership, as holy as we ought to be.”¹⁹ Holiness, however, was not a major point of emphasis for Simpson. His discussion of doctrine was generally broad and focused on the core beliefs that Methodists (and usually people beyond Methodism) would have in common. Roberts, on the other hand, focused specifically on holiness and entire sanctification and centered the very purpose of Free Methodist existence around this doctrine.

Interpreting Methodism’s History: Rise and Progress or Compromise and Decline?

As a result their varying degrees of emphasis on holiness and entire sanctification and the mission of Methodism, Simpson and Roberts told the story of American Methodism in quite different ways. Was the history of American Methodism a story of the rise and progress of God’s chosen instrument for God’s chosen country? Or, was it a story of the rise and fall of God’s chosen instrument as it increasingly traded faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ for worldliness and respectability? For Simpson, the story of American Methodism was the former.

In narrating the beginnings of Methodism in America, Simpson highlighted the unspectacular beginnings of Methodism in order to further heighten the contrast of American Methodism’s present success and prosperity. He concluded the chapter on the beginnings of American Methodism with a description of the embarrassing lack of buildings the church owned as late as 1775.

In the United States the only church edifice which it then had, and which still remains, is the St. George’s, in Philadelphia, but which at that time was without a gallery, unplastered, unseated, and but half floored. In New York and Baltimore there were plain,

¹⁹ Matthew Simpson, Address to British Conference, July 29, 1870 [?], Scrapbook D; Box 23, Matthew Simpson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

unfinished buildings, which long since have been superseded by others. Besides these, only a few unimportant and exceedingly plain buildings were scattered through the country. Who could anticipate from such a commencement the present results?²⁰

The growth of Methodism in people, buildings, and property value was Matthew Simpson's preferred argument in favor of Methodism's rise and progress. In describing "improvements" in the mid-1850s, the very period when the Genesee Conference was entering into turmoil and profound division, Simpson highlighted the "most notable feature of improvement" being "the erection of a better class of church buildings."²¹ Simpson lamented that "little attention had been paid to tasteful architecture" and that many churches in Methodism's first decades "had been unwisely located in the suburbs of towns and villages, and the edifices were exceedingly plain." In surveying the most attractive churches in Methodism at the time, Simpson had to turn to a building that had been purchased from Unitarians to find "the most tasteful building at that time owned by the Church." Around the 1850s, Simpson's account began to have a much more positive, energetic, and optimistic tone. Rather than looking back at the plain, ugly, embarrassing buildings the Methodists used to have, Simpson turned to the more recent buildings of upwardly mobile Methodism. Simpson highlighted "neat and beautiful churches in Baltimore and Philadelphia and the "first church erected of Gothic architecture" in Pittsburgh. This was a turning point for Simpson. "From that time forward, in all the principal cities, movements were made for the erection of handsome and commodious churches." Once

²⁰ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 46.

²¹ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 164. Simpson also described this period of time as a time when "general peace and harmony prevailed in the Church," an odd description of the time between the MEC splitting into Northern and Southern branches over slavery and the beginning of the Civil War.

the church began to build attractive and spacious churches, they “simultaneously” improved the quality of life of the clergy, giving “its ministers a better support.”²²

When Simpson surveyed the 1870s, he again highlighted the continued rapid growth of the MEC. Highlighting a membership increase of 169,236 from 1871 to 1875, for example, Simpson exulted, “Never in the history of the Church has there been such prosperity as in the last ten years.”²³ Towards the end of the book, Simpson summarized American Methodism’s success. “A review of the events connected with the Churches of the last century shows that, when compared with other Church organizations, Methodism has been pre-eminently successful.”²⁴ From its beginnings in 1775, when it was not even a denomination, Methodism has risen to rank “first among all the religious bodies in the number of its communicants, in the number and capacity of its church buildings, and in the value of its Church property.”²⁵ Simpson then presented denominational statistics from the U. S. census of 1870, summarizing the data as follows: “More than one third of the Church organizations and buildings belonged (1870) to the Methodist Churches, nearly one third of the sittings, and not quite one fifth in value of the property.”²⁶ Though the most rapid growth in the MEC had been in church property value, the 1870 census showed how far behind other denominations the Methodists had been. Simpson seemed to assume that Methodism’s fantastic growth was evidence of its faithfulness.

Simpson also acknowledged that Methodism’s rapid growth led to challenges. Adding nearly forty percent of Methodism’s membership in a decade meant that there “exists within the Church a vast amount of undisciplined and untrained membership.” There was inconsistency in

²² Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 164-165.

²³ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 204.

²⁴ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 339.

²⁵ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 339.

²⁶ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 340.

Methodist formation due to people being “educated under different forms, and with different prejudices” resulting in the near impossibility of “molding them speedily into a compact and homogenous body.” As a result, Simpson acknowledged that many Methodists “do not understand thoroughly Methodist discipline or usages, and cannot be expected to have that affection for them which prevails among the older members.”²⁷ In writing this, however, Simpson was not as much calling for greater attention to the basics of Methodist belief and practice. Rather, he was calling “Old School” Methodists to recognize the inevitability of change that came with the greater good of explosive growth and material prosperity.

Simpson attributed the number of “undisciplined and untrained” members to many of the tensions in contemporary Methodism. He described “a number of mooted questions in church economy” that had come back to life.²⁸ Questions that had been “thoroughly discussed half a century since, and upon which the Church then expressed its decided opinion,” were reopened. When these questions came back to the forefront of Methodist concern, Simpson actually encouraged modifications to Methodist polity, especially regarding church buildings. He wrote, “It is a matter, however, of no little satisfaction, to know that the discussions and propositions in our Church looking toward changes, are not the result of declension or decay, or even of a lack of prosperity. On the contrary, they are the outgrowth of unprecedented progress.”²⁹

Another challenge Simpson addressed in his discussion of American Methodism’s first century was the challenge of maintaining unity and the reality of the multiple divisions that had occurred during the MEC’s first century. It is not surprising, coming from a bishop of the MEC,

²⁷ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 204-205.

²⁸ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 205.

²⁹ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 205. The contrast between Simpson’s advocacy for refined and “commodious” churches and the current MEC *Doctrines and Discipline* is discussed further below.

that Simpson's perspective was dominated by MEC concerns. In narrating the beginnings of the Methodist Protestant Church, for example, Simpson focused almost entirely on the "secession" itself. Once the leaders of what would become the MPC became convinced that they were not going to succeed in the reforms that they had been working toward, "they prepared for a secession."³⁰ Simpson stated that "they had claimed in their publications, that if not a majority, at least a very large minority, embracing the intelligence and wealth of the Church, was in sympathy with them."³¹ When the division actually occurred, Simpson exulted, "Contrary to their expectation, the convention was attended by comparatively few" and the new church that was formed was smaller than hoped.³² Simpson's explanation for why the MPC was not immediately larger was telling: "Many, who had sympathized with them as to some of the modifications advocated, preferred the peace and quiet of the Church to uncertain agitations."³³ According to Simpson, the decision was not made based on a commitment to key aspects of Methodist doctrine or discipline. Rather, many Methodists valued stability and comfort above all else.

The MEC was vindicated in the MPC secession, on Simpson's telling, because the MEC continued to grow. He concluded the section "Methodist Protestant Secession" by triumphantly outlining the numerical growth the MEC experienced immediately before and after the MPC was formed in 1830. 1828-1832 was, Simpson wrote, "by far the largest increase the Church had ever realized in the same period, so that the secession, so far as numbers were concerned, scarcely occasioned a ripple on the surface."³⁴

³⁰ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 122.

³¹ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 122.

³² Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 122-123.

³³ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 123.

³⁴ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 125.

Simpson's discussion of the beginnings of the MPC (which preceded the FMC by three decades) mostly lacked theological reflection on the causes of the division itself. Simpson seemed to see the Methodist Protestants as dead weight that constrained MEC growth. He wrote, "The Church, united, compact, and powerful, was prepared for greater triumphs in the future." Simpson drew an explicit lesson from the history of the MPC split at the end of his description of it, "Thus history teaches us, that the greatest misfortune that can befall any organization is to be divided within itself. Secessions, however large, are far less dangerous than contention and strife within."³⁵ Ironically, B. T. Roberts would have agreed with this statement. The same logic was at the heart of Roberts's repeated plea for people to realize that the Genesee Conference "*is divided*",³⁶ as well as the subsequent formation of the FMC.

When Simpson spoke to audiences outside of the MEC, he would occasionally allude to the challenge of maintaining the unity of Methodism, across denominational lines. One example was a sermon, "Christ's Words the Life of Methodism," which Simpson preached to the Methodist Ecumenical Conference at City Road Chapel, London in 1881. After discussing the factors that contributed to Methodism's explosive growth, he recognized that there were those "who disparage Methodism because it has had divisions, and they predict its early disintegration." He responded to this charge in two ways. First, he confessed that he was "not sure that these divisions are an unmixed evil." The divisions in Methodism protected it from thinking "its form and usages were in themselves sacred." It also kept the church from becoming

³⁵ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 125.

³⁶ In a manuscript defending himself after his 1857 trial and before his 1858 trial, Roberts wrote that in order to understand his trial "it is necessary to glance at the parties into which the Conference is divided." B. T. Roberts, "Personal Matters," Box 8, Benjamin Titus Roberts Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. The phrase cited above is underlined twice in the original.

“narrow and bigoted.” The divisions had the virtue, according to Simpson, of helping Methodists be more flexible so “we may learn from one another something that may help us in conquering the world for Christ.”³⁷

The second way that Simpson responded to the charge that Methodism was particularly divided was by arguing that the differences between the various branches of Methodism were superficial and insignificant. “As to the divisions in the Methodist family, there is little to mar the family likeness.” Simpson maintained that “there has been among the Wesleyan ranks no division on the ground of doctrine.” He boldly declared, “All over the world Methodist theology is a unity.”³⁸ Simpson made similar moves regarding Methodist practice and sought to apply Wesley’s “Catholic Spirit” to differences among Methodists, as well as how Methodists should relate to other Christians.³⁹ Given Simpson’s audience, he was likely seeking to inspire and highlight the broad areas of agreement that British Methodists had with the variety of expressions of American Methodism rather than narrate a version of history that would hold up to critical scrutiny. Regardless, it is surprising that Simpson could credibly assert that there had been “no division on the ground of doctrine” within Methodism, especially given Roberts’s

³⁷ Matthew Simpson, “Christ’s Words the Life of Methodism,” in *Sermons by Bishop Matthew Simpson*, 134-135.

³⁸ Matthew Simpson, “Christ’s Words the Life of Methodism,” in *Sermons by Bishop Matthew Simpson*, 135.

³⁹ Simpson, “Christ’s Words the Life of Methodism,” in *Sermons by Bishop Matthew Simpson*, 136. I believe that this is a misreading of Wesley. “Catholic Spirit” was written to plead for openness, generosity, and charity across denominational lines. Wesley wanted Methodists to cooperate with those with whom they could not formally join for reasons of doctrine and discipline. And, perhaps more importantly for Wesley’s social and political context, he wanted others to extend the same generosity and permission to Methodists. However, Wesley consistently expressed the need for a much stronger agreement and unity around the doctrines and discipline of the Methodists. Simpson’s use of “Catholic Spirit” is one that would become the dominant application of the sermon in the MEC and its predecessor bodies from his time up to the present.

critiques of MEC doctrinal drift and the rise of the Holiness Movement, which were both precisely centered around doctrinal disagreement.⁴⁰

Methodism's preeminence in American religion and the MEC's excellence among the Methodist denominations required explanation. Simpson spent quite a bit of energy trying to explain "why the Methodist Churches have... exceeded all other denominations, and have grown from an insignificant body to the first in rank."⁴¹ After considering a handful of possible explanations and laying them aside⁴² Simpson revealed what he considered to be the core of the MEC's success in America:

We may then safely attribute the growth of the Methodist Episcopal Church, first, to her doctrines; secondly, to the piety and zeal of her ministers and members; and, thirdly, to her form of Church government, which unites and unifies the different parts of the country; especially is this seen in her missionary fields.⁴³

Simpson's description here is fascinating for a variety of reasons. First, his explanation for the exponential growth of American Methodism is removed from his passion for improving the quality of the institution of the MEC through better buildings, parsonages, and educational institutions. Second, the first two items on the list (doctrine and zeal) were things for which B. T. Roberts passionately argued, insisting that they were essential to Methodist vitality. Third, Simpson himself seems relatively unenthusiastic about either of these and most passionate about the third.

⁴⁰ For more on the Holiness Movement see Dieter, *The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century* and Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004).

⁴¹ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 341.

⁴² Simpson rejects government aid, immigration, and superior educational facilities as possible explanations. *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 341-345.

⁴³ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 348.

Simpson's understanding of Methodist doctrine has already been discussed. Compared to doctrine, he found a more substantial factor in the actual growth of the MEC. "No doubt a large proportion of its success, if not the principal part, has been through the deep piety of its members, and the earnestness and activity manifested in their religious assemblies."⁴⁴ Though Simpson recognized piety as an important factor in Methodist growth, his description of it did not exactly read as an endorsement:

Whatever may be said contemptuously of enthusiasm, and however men may deride religious feeling as fanatical, one fact remains incontrovertible – men seek the Churches because they need religious comfort. They will go where they believe God manifests himself by imparting his Spirit most fully to his followers; and the earnestness in worship, the zeal which follows from a lively faith, the conviction of the unseen, which nerved the early Methodists for their work and strengthened them to endure reproach and scorn, draw the hearts of men when, forgetting earthly distinctions and earthly motives, they seek alone the pardon of sin and communion with God. This deep religious interest, manifested in revival scenes, in quarterly, protracted, and camp meetings, has been eminently powerful in drawing large numbers to the Methodist communion.⁴⁵

Simpson recognized the criticism that Methodists were fanatical and overzealous. He defended Methodism by arguing that people naturally seek communion with God. Methodism's highly emotional worship and large revivalistic meetings effectively helped people encounter God. It is ironic that in *A Hundred Years of Methodism* Simpson made the case for the same zeal and passion of American Methodists that was critiqued in the article "Free Methodists" in his *Cyclopaedia*.

Finally, Simpson's included the particular form of government of the MEC as an explanation for American Methodism's growth. This move effectively privileged the MEC above all of the American Methodist denominations that rejected the episcopacy when they formed new denominations. Simpson specifically wrote, "As compared with the other evangelical Churches,

⁴⁴ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 345.

⁴⁵ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 345-346.

and especially with the other branches of Methodism, much must be ascribed to the form of government of the Methodist Episcopal Church.”⁴⁶ Simpson directly correlated “activity and prosperity” in all the Methodist denominations that preserved a form of the episcopacy. He wrote, “Wherever the episcopacy and the presiding eldership have been abandoned, the connectional bond has been loosened, and sooner or later difficulties and serious losses have occurred. Wherever these have been preserved, in the midst of difficulties, the Churches have gone forward.”⁴⁷ Simpson’s account, then, sought to explain not only the key to American Methodism’s rise, but also why the MEC in particular was the most successful denomination in American Methodism.

Perhaps the most striking difference between Matthew Simpson’s account of the rise and progress of Methodism from the way that B. T. Roberts narrated the same history in “New School Methodism” and elsewhere was in the use of theological reflection in the two narratives. Simpson’s accounts almost entirely lack theological reflection. He seemed to assume the MEC’s growth and affluence was evidence of God’s favor and delight. Roberts’s controversial writings before and after his expulsion from the MEC front-loaded theological concerns, particularly the Methodist mission to spread scriptural holiness. Roberts did the same when he narrated the history of Methodism in general.

When B. T. Roberts told the story of Methodism, he began by identifying the distinct core beliefs and practices of early Methodism that contributed to its fantastic growth over its first decades. For Roberts, these doctrines and disciplines were essential to American Methodism’s success. And as he looked at the MEC in the recent past, he saw compromise on these essentials.

⁴⁶ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 346.

⁴⁷ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 348.

American Methodism's biggest and most successful branch was succumbing to the temptation of worldliness, especially wealth and influence. It was trading its mission to spread scriptural holiness in for comfortable living. In this respect, Roberts was sounding the same alarm about the “danger of riches” that John Wesley himself sounded throughout the last decade of his life.⁴⁸

Roberts's persistent emphasis on holiness and especially the doctrine of entire sanctification has been previously noted. Where Simpson's understanding of Methodist doctrine was typically general and vague, Roberts's focused on the particulars that made Methodist doctrine distinct. Where Simpson narrated the history of American Methodism as a miraculous rags to riches transformation, Roberts believed that these very riches were a sign not of God's blessing, but of Methodism turning its back on God and God's very purpose for raising up the Methodists.

Where Simpson saw big wealthy, refined churches as a sign of God's blessing, B. T. Roberts saw them as a sign of worldly compromise that would necessarily lead to spiritual decline, if not outright death. In fact, Roberts explicitly critiqued the very things Simpson advocated for and embraced. Roberts wrote that when “New School” Methodists:

desire to raise money for the benefit of the Church, they have recourse to the selling of pews to the highest bidder; to parties of pleasure, oyster suppers, fairs, grab-bags, festivals and lotteries; the others [i.e. “Old School” Methodists] for this purpose, appeal to the love the people bear to Christ.⁴⁹

Roberts's accusation was not fair to Simpson, as Simpson did appeal to the love people had for Christ, he did so in service to the goal of building bigger and nicer churches.

⁴⁸ Wesley wrote a sermon with that title, among others. Wesley repeatedly warned Methodists against the dangers of riches, which would inevitably lead Methodism to compromise on its core commitments, which also explained Methodism having the “form and power of godliness.” John Wesley, “The Danger of Riches,” in *Works*, 3: 228-246.

⁴⁹ B. T. Roberts, “New School Methodism,” in Snyder, 393.

Roberts most frequently told the story of American Methodism in connection with the events that led to the necessity of forming the Free Methodist Church. His story was, in large part, a justification of the existence of “another sect.” As noted in the previous chapter, Roberts explicitly made the case that the FMC was already “exerting a salutary influence” on the MEC through its clear emphasis on entire sanctification in *Why Another Sect.*⁵⁰ For Roberts, the MEC’s abdication of the “grand depositum” of entire sanctification largely provided the warrant and rationale for the existence of the FMC.

When Roberts discussed the history of American Methodism, he typically did so in order to highlight the ways that it had fallen away from its distinct beliefs and practices, things which he had worked to restore while an elder in the MEC and did restore in the FMC. For example, in *Why Another Sect* (1879), Roberts discussed the MEC’s historic commitment to “vital religion, fervor, simplicity and plainness” which were preserved in the *Discipline* as late as 1848 through the following instructions regarding building churches:

Let all our churches be built plain and decent, and with free seats; but not more expensive than is absolutely unavoidable; otherwise the necessity of raising money will make rich men necessary to us. But if so, we must be dependent on them, yea, and governed by them. And then, farewell to Methodist discipline if not doctrine too.⁵¹

In “New School Methodism” Roberts’s noted that this rule, as well as the rules concerning dress in the MEC *Doctrines and Discipline* were both being changed in subtle ways that entailed serious compromise to Methodism’s mission to “spread scriptural holiness.” Roberts’s

⁵⁰ Roberts, *Why Another Sect*, vii.

⁵¹ Qtd in Roberts, *Why Another Sect*, 44-45. Original in *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Lane & Scott, 1848), 170. In the 1852 MEC *Doctrines and Discipline* and subsequent *Disciplines* the language requiring free seats was qualified by “wherever practicable” so that it essentially became a recommendation. *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Cincinnati: Swormstedt & Poe, 1855), 170.

evaluation of the impact of prosperity on Methodism and the impact of these particular changes could hardly have been in sharper contrast to Simpson. Roberts wrote:

Unmistakable indications show that prosperity is producing upon us, as a denomination, the same intoxicating effect, that it too often does upon individuals and societies. The change, by the General Conference of 1852, in the rule of Discipline, requiring that all our houses of worship should be built plain, and with free seats; and that of the last General Conference in the section respecting dress, show that there are already too many among us, who would take down the barriers that have hitherto separated us from the world. The fact that the removal is gradual, so as not to excite too much attention and commotion, renders it none the less alarming.⁵²

B. T. Roberts agreed with Matthew Simpson that American Methodism was undergoing a transition. He disagreed with him about almost everything else. For Roberts, prosperity was not a sign of the faithfulness of Methodism to God's plan for the denomination. Rather, Roberts's version was a declension narrative where prosperity led to compromise with the world. He wrote in *Why Another Sect*, of the transition that Methodism was going through around the time of his trial and expulsion. Roberts believed that "a change had already commenced" but was "accelerated when the census of the United States disclosed the fact that the M. E. Church was the largest, Protestant denomination in this country, and had the greatest amount of church property." Roberts noted that this "gratifying intelligence" was featured prominently in "church periodicals, and in addresses at Conferences, and at other large gatherings." For Roberts, the self-conscious awareness by Methodists of their arrival as the biggest denomination in the country led to an unwelcomed result: "conformity to the world increased rapidly."⁵³ In other words, Methodists were becoming more vain and less concerned about whether they were holy. There were some who resisted these changes because of their fidelity to the Bible, and the doctrines of holiness and entire sanctification. Ultimately, Matthew Simpson and B. T. Roberts's

⁵² Roberts, "New School Methodism," in Snyder, 394.

⁵³ Roberts, *Why Another Sect*, 45-46.

understandings of the connection between wealth and affluence and the construction of refined and “commodious” churches were irreconcilable, again, due to the divergent missions to which they believed American Methodism was called by God.

Raising up a Holy People: Simpson and Roberts on Practical Holiness

The differences between Simpson and Roberts in emphasis on entire sanctification led to differing interpretations of what faithfulness looked like for the people called Methodists over time and in the present. These differences were significant. And yet the place where it was most clear that the two men envisioned increasingly diverging and incompatible Methodisms was in the concrete and practical differences that they had about holy living. There were stark differences between them regarding the compatibility of wealth and affluence with the Christian life. These differences were most sharply expressed in disagreements about church edifices and personal dress. They also differed regarding secret societies and slavery, among other things. In short, during a period of unprecedented growth and prosperity, Simpson sought to continue Methodism’s growth and influence in American culture and beyond. Roberts looked at this same growth and prosperity and sought to bring Methodism back to the roots that had nourished this growth.

Church Buildings

As has already been seen in a variety of places, Matthew Simpson was passionate about Methodist buildings, especially churches. Simpson would regularly compare the Methodist churches in a particular community with those of other denominations. Typically, Simpson found that the Methodist church had room for improvement in the style that it was built in, the size, and

its ability to appeal to the leading men of the city. Simpson never expressed concern that a church was too expensive, elaborately adorned, or large. His celebration of “handsome and commodious churches” actually went well beyond the current polity of the MEC, which had itself undergone gradual revision since the initial statement on church buildings from the 1784 Christmas Conference. The initial statement read:

Q. 74. Is any Thing advisable with regard to Building?

A. Let all our Chapels be built plain and decent; but not more expensively than is absolutely unavoidable: Otherwise the Necessity of raising Money will make Rich Men necessary to us. But if so, we must be dependent upon them, yea, and governed by them. And then farewell to the Methodist-Discipline, if not Doctrine too.⁵⁴

By 1824, the statement had been revised so that “and with free seats” was added immediately after “plain and decent.” This requirement was added because the denominations that had the nicest buildings often paid for them through the pew rental system, where families rented individual pews. The system had been resisted by Methodists because of the way it created a clear social hierarchy within the church based on economic status. The best seats, those closest to the front of the church, were the most expensive. The clarification was added because there were some Methodists who wanted to keep up with the nicer Presbyterian and Congregational churches in their communities.

By 1852, the demand for more elaborate and expensive buildings had increased so that a loop-hole was introduced into the *Doctrines and Discipline*. The requirement that all MEC churches have free seats was qualified so that all churches were to be “built plain and decent and with free seats *wherever practicable*.”⁵⁵ The previous language that churches be built as

⁵⁴ *Minutes* (1784), 32.

⁵⁵ *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1852* (Cincinnati: Swormstedt & Poe, 1855), 169 -170 (emphasis mine). For Simpson’s interpretation of this change, see *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 164.

economically as possible so they were “not more expensive than is absolutely unavoidable” was retained as well as the concern about losing Methodist doctrine and discipline if Methodists handed over the keys to their churches to the wealthy. The addition of “wherever practicable” was interpreted by Methodists who wanted to build more ornate churches as permission to use the pew rental system as the practical necessity for paying for these churches. By the 1876 *Doctrines and Discipline*, the statement about building churches had been abbreviated so that it read, “Let all our churches be built plain and decent, and with free seats wherever practicable; but not more expensive than is absolutely unavoidable.”⁵⁶ The warning about expensive churches making “rich men necessary” and leading to the loss of Methodist doctrine and discipline was removed. Methodism was largely governed by wealthy men by 1876. And Matthew Simpson, for one, did not see this as cause for concern.

As we have seen, Simpson was aware that his passion for nicer churches and willingness to compromise on pew rental churches was the main reason the Ohio and North Ohio delegations opposed his election to the episcopacy.⁵⁷ For those committed to Methodism’s standards for building churches that were “plain and decent,” opposition to Simpson as a bishop was shrewd, as he did everything he could to loosen those standards that he could. His celebration of “handsome and commodious churches” in *A Hundred Years of Methodism* itself went well beyond the 1876 *Doctrines and Discipline*, which still required “plain” churches that were “not more expensive than is absolutely unavoidable.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1876* (New York: Nelson & Philipps, 1876), 213.

⁵⁷ Matthew Simpson, “Journal,” April [May] 25, 1852. Box 1, Matthew Simpson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. That the opposition to Simpson’s election came from North Ohio is also an important indication that the fragmentation within the MEC was not only regional and limited to the Genesee Conference.

⁵⁸ *Doctrines and Discipline, 1876*, 213.

After reading what contemporary MEC polity said about building churches, it is stunning to read how comfortable Simpson was with celebrating churches that violated these standards on any common sense reading. The best example from *A Hundred Years of Methodism* contrasts Methodism from 1775 to the MEC in 1875. The change over this century “is a wonderful one.” Simpson was most exultant at the changes in church property:

Then we had a few small churches, not one of which was finished in its interior. Now we have 15,633. The value of the church edifices was then insignificant; now the value is estimated at \$71,353,234. At that time there was not a single parsonage; now we have 5,917, valued at \$9,731,628.⁵⁹

After outlining the growth the church experienced in a variety of other ways in its first century, Simpson returned again to the dramatic increases in church property. The value of property in 1857, which was the first time the MEC tracked the number of churches and the value of the buildings, was 8,335 churches valued at \$15,781,310. In 1865 the value of church buildings had increased to \$26,750,502 and in 1875 it had grown again to \$71,353,234. Simpson himself highlighted this growth, noting “the value of church property has much more than doubled in the last ten years.”⁶⁰ At the end of the book, Simpson gives statistics for the number of people in the MEC in 1865 (929,259) and in 1875 (1,580,559).⁶¹ While the growth is certainly dramatic, the MEC grew more rapidly in the value of church property than it did in membership during this period of time by a wide margin. Simpson offered no qualification or reflection on the increase in church property. His presentation of the data suggested that an increase in property value is an unqualified good.

⁵⁹ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 206.

⁶⁰ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 206-207.

⁶¹ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 347.

In an address that Simpson gave at St. Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church in New York to mark the first one hundred years of Methodism in America, Simpson contrasted Methodism's first years in America with its present state. He reminded his audience of "a little gathering a hundred years ago of six poor, obscure persons, in the lower part of the present city, meeting to sing and pray." These six people would not have dared to hope that "so great a Church would spring out of their efforts." Simpson then jumped forward to the "present condition" of the MEC: "Look at our commodious churches, our large congregations, the wealth, the influence, the refinement, the great enterprise, and we see that a mighty work has been accomplished, and we can well exclaim, 'What hath God wrought!'"⁶²

Simpson's contrast of "six poor, obscure persons" with "commodious churches," "large congregations," "wealth," influence," and "refinement" is a stark and intentional one. Simpson's simple assertion that the wealth and refinement is all a work that God has done is in tension with Wesley's urging of Methodists to avoid the danger of riches, as well as the contemporary *Doctrines and Discipline* continued to warn against the danger of "rich men" becoming "necessary to us." Expensive churches would require rich people to pay for them. They would then expect to have a significant say in running the church. If this happened, the *Discipline* predicted you could say "farewell" to "Methodist discipline, if not doctrine too."⁶³

Roberts viewed churches differently than Simpson in significant ways. He was adamant that all seats in a church be free and not only some. Pew rentals created class divisions within the church and made the poor feel unwelcomed. Roberts expressed this commitment early in his ministry when he was appointed to the Niagara Street MEC in Buffalo, NY in the 1852-1853

⁶² Matthew Simpson, "The Centenary of American Methodism" in Crooks, 507.

⁶³ *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1868* (Cincinnati: Hitchcock & Walden, 1870), 278.

Conference year. During that year, Roberts was exposed to the center of power and wealth in the Genesee Conference. Nevertheless, while pastor of a church in that city, Roberts became increasingly convinced that the pew rental system was a major threat to the future of the MEC and its mission. During the year he served Niagara Street, Roberts began explicitly critiquing the pew rental system in print, which was one of the first steps that led to his drawing the attention of the “Regency” in the Conference.⁶⁴ The final article in a three part series on the Genesee Conference was especially critical of the pew rental system and the way that led to the poor being “virtually shut out of our churches.”⁶⁵ He also took it upon himself to make the case for building a free Methodist Church in Buffalo. He came close to accomplishing the goal, but was ultimately unsuccessful. Despite the setback, he continued advocating for free churches. In fact, the very first difference in practice he named in “New School Methodism” was a difference over the pew rental system. Roberts wrote:

Differing thus in their views of religion, the Old and New School Methodists necessarily differ in their measures for its promotion. The latter build stock churches, and furnish them with pews to accommodate a select congregation; and with organs, melodeons, violins, and professional singers, to execute difficult pieces of music for a fashionable audience. The former favor free churches, congregational singing, and spirituality, simplicity and fervency in worship.⁶⁶

Once Roberts was expelled from the MEC, he followed through in promoting not only free churches, but also congregational singing and fervent worship. The 1872 edition of *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Free Methodist Church* contained a statement “On Church Property.” The statement began by stipulating that “no steps be taken involving pecuniary liability, in erecting houses of worship, parsonages, or purchasing church property of any kind;

⁶⁴ This is discussed at length in chapter three.

⁶⁵ B. T. Roberts, “Causes of Religious Declension,” *NCA*, 13 no. 14 (April 6, 1853): 1. Quoted in Snyder, 249.

⁶⁶ Roberts, “New School Methodism,” in Snyder, 393.

until two-thirds of the amount necessary to meet the estimated cost thereof is secured on good reliable subscriptions.”⁶⁷ The statement did not contain the warning against rich people becoming necessary to Free Methodists that had been found in the MEC *Discipline*, presumably because the FMC was so much more outspoken on the danger of riches that this was not a challenge for them in the same way. In 1872, the threshold for raising two-thirds of the cost of any building in subscriptions, made it nearly impossible to even conceive of building elaborate and ornate churches with organs in them.

The concern about Free Methodists avoiding wealth was not simply taken for granted by Roberts, however. He continued to warn against the danger that material wealth posed to Christian discipleship in his writing, particularly in the main publication of the FMC, the *Earnest Christian*. In an 1870 article, for example, Roberts critiqued the shift to the pew rental system as a strategy to build a nicer church after a congregation has been established:

Where the object is to *introduce* the Gospel, no one thinks of selling *the right* to join in the public worship of God. But it is too often the case, that when a church has been built up and become financially strong under the free-seat system, a new and elegant house of worship must be erected, and the table of the changers of money introduced, and the seats sold, and God’s poor shut out.⁶⁸

Roberts called this approach “dishonest.” Roberts took for granted that “a Church must preach the Gospel to the poor to gain God’s blessing.” This led Roberts to a significant difference from Simpson. Preaching the gospel to the poor was not necessary only for an initial blessing that a church could then move on from in order to minister to the rich. Rather, “it must continue to do the same work to keep God’s blessing.” In 1870, Simpson was infatuated with the possibilities of a refined upwardly mobile Methodism. Roberts, on the other hand, continued to see ministry

⁶⁷ *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Free Methodist Church, 1872* (Rochester, NY: General Conference of the Free Methodist Church, 1872), 105.

⁶⁸ B. T. Roberts, “Free Churches,” *Earnest Christian* 20, no. 4 (October 1870): 128.

with the poor as essential and fundamental to Methodism's mission, which meant that the church buildings had to be open and hospitable to the poor. Roberts warned, "Turn the poor out of a church, and you turn Christ out."⁶⁹

For Roberts, the concern to build "plain, free churches" was for the sake of the salvation of the both the rich and the poor. Like Wesley, Roberts thought that it was actually most difficult for rich people to be saved. He wrote, "There is no class of society in such imminent danger of eternal damnation as the rich. If any of them are saved, it will be like Lot coming out of Sodom – the exception, and not the rule." In case people sought a loop-hole, Roberts pressed further, "It is not merely *trust* in riches, that renders it so difficult to enter the kingdom of God, but *their possession*." Roberts was certain that the New Testament simply forbid storing up significant amounts of money. On his reading of the Gospels, "Jesus forbids his disciples to amass wealth. His language is plain. It requires a great deal of ingenuity to pervert it."⁷⁰ As Roberts continued, the connection between the danger of riches and the danger of expensive churches was made. For Roberts, a decision must be made between "laying up treasures on earth or treasures in heaven," because doing both "is impossible." And one must choose which course they will take, as not choosing "inevitably" leads to "drift into the current of worldliness." To those who would resolve to "lay up treasures in Heaven," Roberts recommended that they "adopt the motto of Wesley, *Gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can.*" Roberts continued:

In the light of these truths, we see the utter criminality of the course taken by the popular churches to secure the patronage of the rich. The very vices which ensure their damnation are encouraged. – Their love of distinction is gratified by being able to buy the exclusive right to the occupancy of the best pews in the house; and their pride is strengthened and encouraged by the splendor that surrounds them, and the deference that is paid to them in

⁶⁹ Roberts, "Free Churches," 128-129.

⁷⁰ B. T. Roberts, "The Rich," *Earnest Christian* 19, no. 1 (January 1870): 30 (emphasis original).

the house of God. Plain, free churches, are everywhere needed, quite as much to save the rich as to reach the masses and carry the Gospel to the poor.⁷¹

The earliest Free Methodist *Disciplines* connected the need for all seats in every church to be free to the mission of the FMC. The FMC's mission was identified as "two-fold – to maintain the Bible standard of Christianity, and to preach the Gospel to the poor."⁷² If the gospel were going to be preached to the poor effectively, "it follows, as a necessary consequence, that all the arrangements for preaching the gospel should be so made as to secure this object." It was more important that the poor feel comfortable in Free Methodist churches than the rich. Anticipating the argument that Simpson and others made that churches had free seats available for those who could not pay for them, attention was turned back to the first priority of the poor feeling welcomed. "Few are willing, so long as they are able to appear at church, to be publicly treated as paupers."⁷³

Matthew Simpson and B. T. Roberts had significant differences in both emphasis and priority about something as basic as church buildings. Simpson saw bigger and nicer churches as a key sign of Methodism's progress and future success. Roberts looked at Simpson's agenda for American Methodism and did not see it as merely a slightly different flavor of Methodism. He saw as the church intentionally strengthening the vices of the people who were most in danger of eternal damnation.

Dress and Personal Wealth

⁷¹ Roberts, "The Rich," 30-31 (emphasis original).

⁷² *Doctrines and Discipline of the Free Methodist Church, 1872*, ix.

⁷³ *Doctrines and Discipline of the Free Methodist Church, 1872*, xi.

Simpson's own story, especially his own increased affluence, is important for understanding his energetic pursuit of an upwardly mobile and increasingly sophisticated Methodism. As Simpson's influence in the MEC and in the United States more broadly increased, his wealth did too. Robert D. Clark's 1956 biography highlighted Simpson's increased wealth as a prominent bishop who frequently received patronage from the wealthiest laity in the MEC. Clark listed a \$1,000 sum when Simpson was ill, another \$1,000 gift a year later. Successful and savvy businessmen "looked after his investments and saw that he made a good return on his land and stocks." When he moved to Philadelphia, laity there bought him a home and Methodists from New York provided furnishings. Clark summarized Simpson's life in Philadelphia:

"Never before had the Simpsons lived so well. Their two-storied brick home with its marble-faced fireplaces, ornate furnishings, and book-lined study, was a social center for Philadelphia Methodists. General and Mrs. Grant were entertained there and, a decade later, President and Mrs. Rutherford B. Hayes."⁷⁴

Simply put, Matthew Simpson lived in a home that was worthy of entertaining United States Presidents. It would be impossible to overstate the radical change this represented in MEC bishops compared to Francis Asbury who did not own a home during his entire time as a bishop in the MEC.⁷⁵ By the end of his career, Simpson's salary was \$4,500. Housing and travel were also covered by the MEC. In addition, he received fees for lectures and honoraria for sermons. With the combination of investments and income, his estate was worth one hundred thousand dollars upon his death.⁷⁶ By any contemporary standard, Matthew Simpson died a rich man.

⁷⁴ Clark, *The Life of Matthew Simpson*, 276.

⁷⁵ For more on Francis Asbury see John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁷⁶ Clark, 293.

The Simpsons' wealth and comfort with affluence could surprise their contemporaries and contradict prevailing stereotypes about Methodists. At times, the Simpsons delighted in being featured as representatives of Methodism's rise from backwoods uncultured nobodies, to people who could rub elbows with the most wealthy and sophisticated Americans and make Methodists proud. One story in particular was repeatedly told during Matthew Simpson's lifetime as a prime example of American Methodism's rise in prominence. The story featured Ellen Simpson, who overturned stereotypes of Methodists as an uncultured and plain people. The earliest account in print is a story in a newspaper that reproduces a correspondent's memory of Ellen Simpson vindicating Methodism's reputation in the face of Presbyterian affluence:

I never see Bishop Simpson but I recall an incident concerning his wife. Mrs. Simpson is very elegant in appearance and dress, accomplished and stylish, as well as religious. A number of years ago there was a reunion of the four Methodist conferences of Illinois, in Bloomington. It chanced that a Presbyterian banker who lived near the Methodist church offered to maintain the bishop at his elegant home. It was necessary for the transaction of business that the bishop's lodging should be near the place of meeting, and no Methodists living very near the church, the banker threw open his doors. The hostess had a very sneering way of speaking of Methodists. She thought them illiterate, plain people, and the higher their place in the church the more holy and consequently ignorant they were. She expected to meet a woman in a well worn bombazine, a linen collar, pinned by a common brass pin, hair twisted in a pig-tail on the back of the head, a scoop bonnet, and cotton gloves. The hostess was a kind-hearted little creature. She did not wish to overawe her plain guests. Being busy when they arrived, she sent a servant to show them their room. When the dinner, simply served to meet their guest's old-fashioned ways, was ready, she twisted up her hair in a tight knot, took off her rings, wore a big-flowered tycoon-wrapper and a white apron, and thus appareled took her stand in her parlor. A rustling of silk was heard, and a tall, stately woman in black silk ruffled to the waist after the fashion of that time, with expensive laces and jewelry, and with hair done in the very latest style, swept down the stairs and into the parlor. While the hostess was faltering "Good day, Sister Simpson," the bishop's wife was making her hostess an elaborate bow, but was unable to conceal her surprise at the strange dining-dress of the lady of the house. "I was simply overwhelmed," said the lady, telling me about it afterward, "I concluded a Methodist Bishop's wife was somebody. I knew she thought I had not half sense. I couldn't talk to her. Everything I said was wrong. In the evening I put on a silk as fine as hers, and got out my diamonds and my best china, but I felt mean and little. I never recovered my self-possession while she was there. She was the most splendid talker I ever heard. She was visited by the rich people of different denominations. She charmed everybody, while I sat like a ninny in the corner. The Methodists of these days are up

with the times. Now that the Bishops' wives wear silks and diamonds, have been in Europe, and can play, sing, paint, speak in ever so many different languages, know about art and literature, you can't give them a boiled dinner, nor receive them in a slouchy morning wrapper without feeling belittled.”⁷⁷

The editor of the article added several comments to the correspondent's story, interpreting Ellen Simpson's refinement for the audience. “Mrs. Simpson is not a woman devoted to fashion or frivolity. Her good deeds are unnumbered except by the recording angel of our lives; her benevolence is constant, her piety sincere. She uses the good and beautiful things God gives; her tastes are refined, her mind cultured.” In case the audience missed the moral of the story, the editor stated it plainly at the end, “The day has passed when one must be a scarecrow in order to pass muster at the gate of heaven.” The account concluded “Mrs. Bishop Simpson is a Pittsburgh lady.”⁷⁸

Ellen Simpson's ability to impress others by wearing the latest fashions and styles showed that Methodists could dress with refinement and charm. And Ellen's expensive jewelry and clothing, as well as her social presence, were all described as a kind of triumph of Methodism over Presbyterian economic and social status. The Simpsons were evidently unselfconscious about such demonstrations of expensive clothes, jewelry, and pursuing prevailing fashions and styles. Matthew Simpson teased his wife, Ellen, about her taste for fashionable clothing: “Did you buy that new bonnet Charlie spoke of when he wrote, and does it please you? Are the ribbons ‘greenish blue’, or ‘bluish green’? Is it the new ‘coal scuttle’ pattern,

⁷⁷ “A Bishop's Wife” anonymous. Newspaper clipping, no date or publication information. Box 22, Matthew Simpson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. A similar version of this account is found in Clark, 276.

⁷⁸ “A Bishop's Wife” anonymous. Newspaper clipping, no date or publication information. Box 22, Matthew Simpson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

or is it of the old ‘kiss-me-quick shape’? I think the last is my preference. It certainly must be most popular with gentlemen.”⁷⁹

Simpson’s own upward mobility marked another significant shift from John Wesley’s understanding of Christian stewardship, which called for Methodists to give everything away after they had provided for basic food, clothing, and shelter for themselves and their families.⁸⁰ Simpson’s personal comfort with affluence was also a significant departure from the MEC *Discipline*, which as late as 1876 warned: “This is not time to encourage superfluity in dress” and further called for Methodists to “be exhorted to conform to the spirit of the apostolic precept, not to adorn themselves ‘with gold, or pearls, or costly array,’” citing 1 Timothy 2:9.⁸¹ The Simpsons themselves embodied the significant socio-economic changes that were more broadly underway in the MEC. They also exemplified the increasing gap between the way holy living was articulated in the polity of the MEC and examples of the denomination’s most prominent leaders. Matthew Simpson’s own affluence explains in part the ways in which he pushed for shifts in understandings of wealth and affluence in Methodism.⁸²

As a rising young minister in the Genesee Conference, B. T. Roberts had an opportunity to experience a degree of upward mobility himself, especially when he was appointed to the Niagara Street MEC in Buffalo. In contrast to Simpson, Roberts expressed deep concern over the

⁷⁹ Matthew Simpson, letter to Ellen Simpson, April 7, 1860; 2127-5-4:210, Ellen (Mrs. Simpson) 1848-1884, Matthew Simpson Collection, Drew University Methodist Collection, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey, emphasis original.

⁸⁰ See John Wesley, “The Danger of Riches,” *Works* 3: 228-246; and John Wesley, “The Use of Money,” *Works* 2: 266-280.

⁸¹ *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1876 (New York: Nelson and Phillips), 36.

⁸² Simpson’s biographer, Robert D. Clark, described Simpson’s understanding of wealth and affluence as follows, “A man might rightly accumulate great riches if he became the steward of the Lord, a nation might with righteousness enlarge its borders and extend its powers if it protected the people’s spiritual heritage of freedom.” Clark, 297.

“commodious churches”, “wealth”, “influence”, and “refinement” that Simpson celebrated in his 1866 address. At the heart of Roberts’s dispute with “New School” Methodism was its compromise on its commitment to holiness of heart and life. He believed that one part of Methodism, the “Old School,” remained committed to denying self and pursuing holiness with singular focus. The other part of Methodism, the “New School,” mocked these very commitments while pursuing wealth, affluence, and comfort and becoming more and more conformed to the ways of the world.⁸³ Roberts wrote:

Preachers of the old stamp urge upon all who would gain heaven, the necessity of self-denial – non-conformity to the world; purity of heart and holiness of life; while the others ridicule singularity, encourage by their silence, and in some cases by their own example, and that of their wives and daughters, “the putting on of gold and costly apparel,” and treat with distrust all professions of deep Christian experience.⁸⁴

Roberts’s concern about “New School” Methodists encouraging displays of affluence by their own silence when they observed Methodists wearing fashionable and expensive clothing and jewelry and, even more damaging, when their families themselves wore them could have applied directly to Matthew and Ellen Simpson. Indeed, much of his writing on riches and the need to choose between friendship with the world and friendship with God would have been a call to conviction not only to the Simpsons, but to many Methodists.

Roberts was just as concerned about the MEC’s compromise on its rules on dress as he was about compromise on church buildings. The first MEC *Doctrines and Discipline* warned against “any Encouragement to Superfluity of Apparel.” One could not become a Methodist until they had “left off Superfluous Ornaments.” Methodists were also prohibited from wearing other expensive expressions of class status and fashion, such as “High-Heads, enormous Bonnets,

⁸³ Roberts, “New School Methodism,” in Snyder, 393.

⁸⁴ Roberts, “New School Methodism,” in Snyder, 393.

Ruffles or Rings.”⁸⁵ Roberts noted that despite these rules being carried forward through 1846, conformity to the world increased rapidly” nevertheless. By 1868, the section “Rules concerning Dress” had been revised so that its meaning was more open to a range of interpretations:

Quest. Should we insist on the rules concerning dress?

Answ. By all means. This is no time to encourage superfluity in dress. Therefore, let all our people be exhorted to conform to the spirit of the apostolic precept, not to adorn themselves “with gold, or pearls, or costly array.” 1 Tim. ii, 9.⁸⁶

The statement in the 1872 FMC *Doctrines and Discipline* was essentially a reproduction of the version from the earliest *Disciplines*, with the exception that the part that listed items that one could not wear was removed. Perhaps most important for forming Free Methodist understanding of embodying holiness through one’s attire, was the reintroduction of the rule that Wesley’s “Thoughts upon dress” be read “at least once a year in every society.”⁸⁷

Methodism’s rules on dress became one of the points where upwardly mobile Methodists pushed for change in Methodist polity and practice. Simpson was either silent or in favor of moderating Methodism’s stringent dress code. This was another place where Roberts took issue with the article “Free Methodists” in Simpson’s *Cyclopaedia*. The article said that Free Methodists required “their members to be exceedingly plain in their dress.”⁸⁸ Roberts responded to this statement by countering that the FMC standards were no more stringent than “the *discipline* of the M. E. Church requires its members.”⁸⁹ Roberts’s response served to remind his audience that Simpson’s rhetoric distanced the MEC from its own historic commitments to

⁸⁵ *Minutes*, (1784), 10.

⁸⁶ *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1868 (Cincinnati: Hitchcock & Walden, 1870), 36-37.

⁸⁷ *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Free Methodist Church*, 1872 (Rochester, NY: General Conference of the Free Methodist Church, 1872), 88.

⁸⁸ *Cyclopaedia*, 379-380.

⁸⁹ Roberts, *Why Another Sect*, 306.

“plain dress.” Where Simpson viewed Free Methodist standards on dress as radical, Roberts believed they were the ones who were being consistent with historic Methodist commitments. These commitments were being ignored by wealthy Methodists due to the increased tendency and toleration of compromise with the world.

For Roberts, purchasing and wearing clothes was informed by one’s understanding of holiness and one’s pursuit of entire sanctification. The clothes that Methodists wore was a kind of fleece for whether someone was willing to contend for holiness, even when it was difficult. He highlighted this in telling the story of William Kendall, one of the most respected “Old School” Methodist preachers in the Genesee Conference. Roberts recounted Kendall being warned in 1854 “against preaching here as he had done elsewhere on the subject of dress.” But, Roberts, revealed, Kendall “did not ‘shun to declare the whole counsel of God.’” He then immediately relayed the results: “Notwithstanding the most violent opposition of several of his official board, he had one of the most powerful and extensive revivals the place has ever known. Hundreds were converted and sanctified, and over a hundred added to the church.”⁹⁰ Roberts used Kendall as a type for what should happen in contemporary Methodism. When confronted with worldliness and pressed to compromise on the teaching of the Bible and the pursuit of holiness, rather than compromising one should double-down. One could expect resistance when one took such a stand, as Roberts own life illustrated all too well. However, it was in taking such a stand that one often experienced “powerful and extensive revival.”

As with their differences regarding church buildings, Simpson and Roberts’s varied understandings of refinement and upwardly mobile Methodism reflected diverging understandings of the mission of Methodism. Simpson increasingly articulated a call for

⁹⁰ Roberts, *Why Another Sect*, 73.

Methodism to become a church worthy of leading a great nation. Roberts believed the mission of Methodism was to continue preaching holiness and “to preach the Gospel to the poor.”⁹¹ Roberts himself believed that ministry to the poor was an essential aspect of the ministry of the church. Roberts was not poor, but his own life was consistent with his message, as in many respects one could say Simpson’s was as well.

Secret Societies

There were a variety of practical issues that revealed the initial fragmentation of American Methodism. The one that first expressed itself in the Genesee Conference of the MEC, even before Roberts was at the center of controversy, was whether a Methodist could participate in a secret society. This issue was the most contentious issue of the 1848 Genesee Conference. Once Roberts did speak up, he was consistently opposed to secret societies by Methodists. Of the practical issues highlighted here, this is the one on which Simpson was the least outspoken.

Secret societies were on the rise in the 1840s and 1850s, especially in the region of New York that constituted the Genesee Conference. The growth of Masonic lodges and Odd Fellows grew nationally throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century.⁹² Roberts consistently opposed secret societies and was even involved in formal attempts to oppose them, joining the

⁹¹ *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Free Methodist Church* (Rochester, NY: General Conference, 1870), pp. ix-x. Roberts’s most recent biographer, Howard A. Snyder, has identified “constant revival” and ministry among the poor as Roberts’s ideal vision for the church. Snyder, 531. For more on the mission of the FMC under Roberts, see Synder, 668-671.

⁹² Snyder dedicated a lengthy section to Roberts work opposing secret societies. See Snyder, 727-737. For more on secret societies see Peter Ross, *A Standard History of Freemasonry in the State of New York Including Lodge, Chapter, Council, Commandery and Scottish Rite Bodies* 2 vols. (New York and Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1899); Mark C. Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Albert C. Stevens, ed., *The Cyclopaedia of Fraternities*, 2nd ed. (New York: E. B. Treat, 1907); and Lynn Dumenil, *Freemasonry and American Culture, 1880-1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

antilodge National Christian Association. He spoke at the national meeting in 1874 and was subsequently elected to a one-year term as president. Roberts explicitly stated in the *Earnest Christian* that practicing “the religious rites of Free Masonry is idolatry.” His opposition came from the conviction that “The god of the lodge is not the God of the Bible.”⁹³

In both the article on Free Methodism in the *Cyclopaedia* and in *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, Simpson noted Free Methodist opposition to secret societies. He refrained, however, from commenting on whether secret societies were a problem or were permissible for a Methodist to join. Darius L. Salter, Matthew Simpson’s most recent biographer, has noted that Simpson’s uncle did “rebuke” him in the 1830s for being a part of a Masonic funeral, which Uncle Matthew feared would be taken as having “given your countenance to the fraternity and their foolish funeral parade.”⁹⁴ Salter noted that “The nephew did not inherit his Uncle’s contempt for the ‘Masonic Order,’ in that some of his future rich friends were ‘Masons’... and when Simpson laid the cornerstone for Metropolitan Church, Washington, DC, October 23, 1854, the public event was overrun with Masons.”⁹⁵

As Salter’s account of the dedication of Metropolitan suggests, the prevalence of secret societies in the second half of the nineteenth-century and Simpson’s stance on similar issues makes it likely that Simpson either did not oppose secret societies, or did not think it was prudent to take a public stand against them and risk offending the wealthy and well-connected Methodists who were connected with secret societies. As the new church in the nation’s capital

⁹³ B. T. Roberts, “Idolatry,” *Earnest Christian* 45, no. 5 (May 1883): 134.

⁹⁴ Matthew Simpson [Uncle], Letter to Matthew Simpson, July 3, 1835; Box 3, Matthew Simpson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁹⁵ Salter, “*God Cannot Do Without America*” *Matthew Simpson and the Apotheosis of Protestant Nationalism*, 87.

demonstrated, it was often members of secret societies who gave the most to fund the “commodious churches” and new theological schools that Simpson so actively promoted.

At the beginning of 1861, Thomas Carlton wrote a letter to Simpson that suggests the connection of wealth and affluence to secret society connections and the way that Simpson personally benefited from both. Carlton opened the letter, “Enclosed you will find your Policy paid in full for one year, together with permission without limit of time or charge to travel when or where you please.”⁹⁶ The next line of the letter is of particular significance for this study, as it suggests that Simpson received financial support from people he knew were in a secret society: “The following persons who belong to the Independent Order of Good fellows, who claim to do about as they please with their money paid the bill.”⁹⁷ It is likely that by “Order of Good fellows”, Carlton was making an intentional nod to the Order of Odd Fellows, one of the largest secret societies of the time. The connection was likely included to be sure that Simpson realized the kind of support he would stand to lose if he were to take a public stand against secret societies as Roberts had done. Either way, the letter leaves the impression that Simpson will be in debt to the “Independent Order of Good Fellows.” Carlton said that he and the others listed were looking for “an opportunity to express their friendship and thought they might do it in this way without offence.” Carlton also let Simpson know that “the string is not known beyond the

⁹⁶ Thomas Carlton, Letter to Matthew Simpson, January 30, 1861; Box 7, Matthew Simpson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁹⁷ Thomas Carlton, Letter to Matthew Simpson, January 30, 1861; Box 7, Matthew Simpson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. The letter then lists the following as contributors: A. B. Stout, E. L. Fancher, W. H. Stiles, Oliver Hoyt, Thos. L. Rushmore, James Bishop, J. T. Martin, Daniel Drew, M. F. Odell, W H. Stiles [listed twice] and “your humble servant.”

circle, nor will it be.”⁹⁸ This letter indicates that at times Simpson received financial favors from others, which may have come with the expectation that they would repay in other ways.

Roberts discussed the “revival of Masonry in this country” at length in *Why another Sect.* On Roberts’s account, “the leading preachers became connected with one or both of these secret societies [the Masons or Odd Fellows]” in the Genesee Conference.⁹⁹ Due to their connection to secret societies, Roberts felt that these leaders would have divided loyalties. As a result, those involved in secret societies compromised with the world. They also undermined Methodist governance by making behind the scenes agreements outside of the working of Methodist polity. Roberts attributed the effort and success in expelling him from the MEC to be due almost entirely to secret meetings outside of the normal meeting of the Genesee Conference where decisions were made ahead of time. According to Roberts, the secret society influence even impacted the appointment process, as “the chief places of the Conference” were filled “with those who, at least were not opposed to the workings of the lodge.”¹⁰⁰ Opposition to secret societies was further named by Roberts as one of the concerns that justified the founding of the Free Methodist Church. When Roberts announced the convention where the Free Methodist Church would be formed, for example, “no connection with secret oath bound societies” was listed as one of the basic commitments of the new denomination.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ “String,” again, is a suggestive word choice. In contemporary colloquialism, you would expect someone to say “no strings attached” when giving a gift like this. Carlton’s use of string in this letter seems to imply that there is in fact an expectation that Simpson will remember this support in the future. This inference is further supported by the fact that Carlton names all of the donors to the policy, rather than it being an anonymous donation.

⁹⁹ Roberts, *Why Another Sect.*, 48.

¹⁰⁰ Roberts, *Why Another Sect.*, 50.

¹⁰¹ [B. T. Roberts], “Notice for Camp Meeting and Convention,” *EC* 1, no. 8 (Aug. 1860): 260.

The 1872 *Discipline* of the FMC fleshed out the rationale for opposing secret society membership in more depth. The statement began with the general principle that “secrecy is always a ground of suspicion.” This is because “evil works instinctively incline to darkness.” And “good works grow up in light.” After expanding on the preference of straightforward and public communication, FMC members are exhorted to “eschew” any secret society “both good and bad.” Lest there be any ambiguity, the *Discipline* defined a secret society as “any society requiring an oath, affirmation, or promise of secrecy, as a condition of membership.” Anyone who joined such a group was held to “violate his covenant obligations, and shall in due form be excluded from the Church; and the preacher shall report that he is excluded, not for immorality, but for infraction of our rules and regulations.”¹⁰²

In *Why Another Sect*, Roberts directly connected the fracturing of Methodist theology to disagreements about practice. In describing the divisions in the Genesee Conference in the late 1840s and into the 1850s, Roberts wrote: “Thus there was an issue in the Conference which gradually became more and more clearly defined, on Scriptural holiness, slavery, and secret societies.”¹⁰³ For Roberts, a willingness to compromise on holiness would inevitably lead to compromise on aspects of holy living, such as toleration of displays of wealth and ostentation, indifference to the suffering and plight of the poor, and those held in bondage through the evils of American slavery. Simpson’s commitment to building the influence and power of American

¹⁰² *Doctrines and Discipline of the Free Methodist Church*, 1872, 90-91. Snyder notes that the ban on affiliation with secret societies was added in 1866, though “pretty much assumed already.” Snyder, 671. The stipulation that removal be reported as “not for immorality, but for infraction of our rules and regulations” seems to have intentionally echoed the rules on class meetings in the first several decades of the MEC. As late as the 1852 *Discipline*, for example, stated that if someone was “laid aside” by the church that the preacher should “show that they are excluded for a breach of our rules, and not for immoral conduct.” *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1852 (Cincinnati: Swormstedt & Poe, 1855), 81.

¹⁰³ Roberts, *Why Another Sect*, 50.

Methodism, on the other hand, led to him adopting a moderate or middle ground position on each of these issues. He advocated for lessening the restrictions on church buildings and personal dress, declined to speak out against secret societies, and adopted an anti-slavery position that was willing to compromise rather than a clear abolitionist stance.

Slavery

As we have seen, Matthew Simpson's sharpest disagreement with his uncle, who was the main father-figure in his life, was over slavery. Simpson's uncle was an uncompromising and passionate abolitionist. Matthew Simpson disagreed with his uncle strongly enough that the two of them exchanged a series of uncharacteristically heated letters over the issue. After the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution formally ended slavery, Simpson often downplayed the extent to which the MEC had compromised with slavery. In his discussion of the division of the MEC into Northern and Southern branches, Simpson portrayed the division as an expression of the MEC's willingness to suffer for its antislavery commitments. After describing the membership loss from the 1844 division, Simpson wrote:

Such a fearful price did the Church pay for its antislavery sentiments, and such a loss it firmly resolved to bear rather than yield what it believed to be its true loyalty to the great Head of the Church. Other Christian bodies had frequently called in question the real antislavery sentiment of the Church, and ministers, assuming great boldness, had denounced it as time-serving and compromising. There is, however, no record in the history of our country of any Church having made such sacrifices for its stern devotion to principle, and no other Church so greatly influenced the public sentiment on this great question.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 155. C. C. Goen has a much less celebratory view of the MEC's role in *Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the Civil War* (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 1985), especially 78-90.

The MEC did pay a price in some sense because of the way in which slavery became more and more enmeshed in its life. However, American Methodism's "antislavery sentiments" were rightly called into question by others because the MEC had increasingly compromised with slavery. Members, then, preachers, and finally a bishop became slave owners. Even once the MEC split in 1844 into Northern and Southern branches, the Northern branch still refused to take a firm and uncompromising stance against slavery.

Simpson's least credible description of the MEC and its relation to slavery is found in the final chapter of *A Hundred Years of Methodism*. Simpson surveyed the broad history of Methodism and zeroed in on the MEC as the most successful and effective branch of Methodism. According to "one of the leading minds of Wesleyan Methodism," in contemporary Methodism, "we must look to American Methodism for the expression of Mr. Wesley's mind."¹⁰⁵ Immediately after affirming the priority of place of American Methodism as being the most Wesleyan of current options, Simpson proactively defended the MEC against the anticipated criticism that the MEC had experienced such spectacular growth because it had lowered the bar on previously high standards for its members. Simpson asserted that the success of the MEC "has not been owing to any lowering of the moral standard, or catering to the tastes or prejudices of society." In fact, rather than deserving criticism for compromise, the MEC deserved praise because, "the voice of the Church has been clearly heard in the denunciation of vice in every form." Simpson knew that the main moral issue on which American Methodists were criticized for compromising was slavery. He addressed that criticism directly:

In its earliest period, when it stood almost alone, it proclaimed unwavering and unalterable hostility to slavery. It sacrificed in many instances the favor of wealth and influence rather than to forbear its testimony. It suffered the loss of more than a third of its ministers and members rather than relax its discipline. It stood by the Union in its

¹⁰⁵ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 349.

darkest hours, though in some localities it suffered thereby the loss of influential members, who sought, in some other Churches, a pulpit that attacked no vice and encouraged no patriotism.¹⁰⁶

Contrary to Simpson's account, the MEC's "unwavering... hostility to slavery" was in fact "effaced by compromise."¹⁰⁷ One wonders how Simpson could have expected anyone to find credible his assertion that Methodism lost "favor of wealth and influence" because of its position on slavery. Rather, the MEC consistently moderated its opposition of slavery in order to gain influence and continue to grow.¹⁰⁸ Simpson was correct that the MEC was a crucial supporter of the Union throughout the Civil War, with Simpson himself playing a key role in rallying Methodists for the Union cause.¹⁰⁹

Simpson gave a speech in favor of the Union war effort some sixty times throughout the course of the war. This speech was given throughout the North under a variety of titles. Though Simpson spoke from a rough outline, Clarence True Wilson collected all of the transcriptions of the speech that he could find with other material from Simpson's papers and compiled a draft of the speech, which he titled "The Future of Our Country: The Lost Speech by Bishop Matthew Simpson."¹¹⁰ The key theme of this popular speech was that the United States had "a great

¹⁰⁶ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 349.

¹⁰⁷ Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), 4-5.

¹⁰⁸ Mathews outlines this in depth in *Slavery and Methodism*, especially 3-87. He also outlines the changes in the polity of the MEC in the Appendix, 293-303.

¹⁰⁹ Simpson was willing to slavery as a sin once the Civil War started. See Donald G. Jones, *The Sectional Crisis and Northern Methodism: A Study in Piety, Political Ethics and Civil Religion* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1979), 72 and 88 especially.

¹¹⁰ Matthew Simpson, "The Future of Our Country" transcribed by Clarence True Wilson, Drew University, https://depts.drew.edu/lib/methodist/Simpson_TheFutureofOurCountry.pdf accessed February 20, 2018. For more on this speech see, Morris L. Davis, Jr., "From the Gospel Circuit to the War Circuit: Bishop Matthew Simpson and Upwardly Mobile Methodism" *Methodist History* 38:3 (April, 2000), 202-203.

mission” and that “God cannot afford to do without America.”¹¹¹ Towards the end of the speech, Simpson did address slavery. He expressed his conviction that “if the war lasts much longer slavery will be considerably damaged” as well as his hope that “it may pass away quickly and let us see the last of it.” And yet, even here, with less than six months left in the Civil War, Simpson clarified that he did not believe the War should “be carried on for the purpose of destroying slavery or for any other purpose but for the simple purpose of restoring the authority of our government.”¹¹²

B. T. Roberts was quick to point to the hypocrisy of the MEC from 1844 until the Emancipation Proclamation. From Roberts’s perspective, this period of time was not one that should be celebrated as a time when Methodists heroically resisted slavery and suffered for their convictions. Rather, it was a time when Methodism continually compromised with sin and worldliness in order to gain wider appeal and popularity. Equally problematic from Roberts’s perspective was that the denomination’s toleration of slavery in any form led to different standards of holiness for clergy and laity, as clergy were not allowed to own slaves in the north, but the discipline was not enforced on members during these decades:

At this period slavery was the all-absorbing question in the M. E. Church, as in the nation. The M. E. Church had been divided on the slavery issue, but it was on the question of the right of ministers to hold slaves. The right of members to hold slaves was granted. There was then, on the slavery question as there is now in some Conferences on the tobacco question, one standard of morality for the preachers and another for the laymen. Up to the day that slavery was abolished by the sword, there were thousands of slave holders in good standing in the M. E. Church. The M. E. Discipline tolerated slavery to the last.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Matthew Simpson, “The Future of Our Country,” 3.

¹¹² Matthew Simpson, “The Future of Our Country,” 8.

¹¹³ Roberts, *Why Another Sect*, 46.

The toleration of slavery in the MEC ended up playing an important role in Roberts's final appeal of his expulsion from the MEC failing. The Genesee Conference delegation was committed to ensuring that Roberts's expulsion was not overturned at General Conference. Needing to secure votes to prevent Roberts's appeal from succeeding, they formed an unlikely alliance with the southernmost Conferences in the MEC. These conferences were most concerned that the MEC not adopt more stringent policies on slavery, as they worried that the adoption of uncompromising abolition views would result in conferences bordering on the MECS abandoning the MEC and joining the MECS. Though the Genesee Conference delegation had been in favor of abolition, they formed a partnership with the southern Conferences. This partnership succeeded in tabling Roberts's appeal to the 1860 MEC General Conference. It also prevented abolitionists from passing more clear prohibitions against slavery in the denomination.

In his explanation of the failure of his appeal at the 1860 General Conference, Roberts described the partnership of the Genesee Conference delegates with members of the Baltimore Conference, which was "champion of the slave-holders in the M. E. Church."¹¹⁴ When issues related to slavery or the "Nazarites" came up, the Baltimore and Genesee Conference delegations "talked and voted lovingly together. Herod and Pilate became friends." The impact was that the Baltimore delegation "helped Genesee to dispose of the 'Nazarites'" and the Genesee delegation "helped Baltimore to substitute for the *rule* against slaveholding, some good, but powerless advice."¹¹⁵ Roberts conceded that he had no proof that there was a formal partnership between them, but noted that these two conferences historically disagreed on slavery and the centrality of holiness.

¹¹⁴ Roberts, *Why Another Sect*, 300.

¹¹⁵ Roberts, *Why Another Sect*, 300 (emphasis original).

Roberts saw the Civil War as an expression of God's judgment on the United States for the sin of slavery. He wrote in his diary, for example, at the beginning of the Civil War, "I do not know but the time has come when God is about to visit us a return for the great sin of slavery. Church and state have compromised so much and so long that I do not know as any thing can save us from division, distraction, and civil war. Lord be merciful to us."¹¹⁶ When Roberts addressed the Union cause, he connected it to the injustice of slavery, reminding his audience that "we must 'let the oppressed go free' before we can expect God to bless our arms."¹¹⁷ In another editorial, he argued that the war was being fought, from the union perspective, to "restore the Union as it was." However, the Union "as it was defended and upheld slavery." The compromise with and toleration of slavery meant that the Union itself "was put to too bad a use for God to permit it to stand." For Roberts, slavery was "the cause of the war." If people wanted the war to end, slavery must be ended. He wrote, "Emancipate the slaves, and tell them to fight for their freedom and we will help them, and the war would soon be ended."¹¹⁸ Six months later, Roberts argued that supporters of slavery in the North was "conclusive proof of the doctrine of total depravity."¹¹⁹

As we have seen, B. T. Roberts was a committed abolitionist before he was a committed Christian.¹²⁰ Matthew Simpson was not an abolitionist and even argued against abolitionism with his uncle. Ironically, had the FMC existed in the 1830s and 1840s, Uncle Matthew Simpson would likely have had more in common with B. T. Roberts and the Free Methodist Church than

¹¹⁶ B. T Roberts, Diary, April 11, 1861; Box 4, Benjamin Titus Roberts Family Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

¹¹⁷ B. T. Roberts, "Ogle Camp Meeting," *Earnest Christian* 2, no. 11 (November, 1861): 354.

¹¹⁸ B. T. Roberts, "Our Country," *Earnest Christian* 2, no. 11 (November, 1861): 352.

¹¹⁹ B. T. Roberts, "Human Depravity," *Earnest Christian* 3, no. 4 (April, 1862): 129.

¹²⁰ Snyder, 27-28.

with his nephew and the MEC. The disagreement between Simpson and Roberts on abolitionism was part of a series of practical disagreements that came from the different emphases Simpson and Roberts put on holiness, entire sanctification, and Methodist doctrinal distinctives. As a result, these two men, and the churches they led, were moving in different directions and envisioning significantly different futures for Methodism in America.

Diverging Paths: Simpson and Roberts on the Future of American Methodism

Whereas Simpson's attention was largely focused on continuing the leaps the MEC had taken in institution building, Roberts continued to press a sustained argument about a universal, free, and complete salvation. All of the practical issues discussed above for Roberts were related to his understanding of salvation. This is seen with particular clarity in the beginning of the 1872 *Doctrines and Discipline of the Free Methodist Church*, which gives a history of Methodism and Free Methodism's beginning. After another statement of the importance of free pews, the *Discipline* stated the deeper theological concerns that were at stake in the FMC opposition to pew rentals:

Free Churches are essential to reach the masses. The provisions of the Gospel are for all. The “glad tidings” must be proclaimed to every individual of the human race. God sends the true light to illuminate and melt every heart. To civilized and savage, bond and free, black and white, the ignorant and the learned, is freely offered the great salvation.¹²¹

Roberts was committed to opposing wealth and affluence in the church and in the lives of its members because he believed it endangered their salvation. Wearing gold and costly apparel was as clear and empirical of evidence in Roberts mind as anything that one was not earnestly pursuing complete salvation, the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

¹²¹ *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Free Methodist Church, 1872* (Rochester, NY: General Conference, 1872), x.

Simpson, on the other hand, was most energetic when talking about institution-building. When, for example, he discussed the challenge of a lack of consistent standards and enforcement of Methodist doctrine and discipline, he turned to the need for more institutions, especially the need for Methodists to start new theological schools for the education of its ministers. For Simpson, the chief weakness of American Methodism at the beginning of its second century was inadequate theological education. With his typical optimism, however, Simpson believed that if Methodism put its full weight in support of theological education, this weakness would be turned into strength and the future would be almost blindingly bright. Simpson proclaimed in a sermon celebrating the first one hundred years of Methodism:

If at this time, standing at this point of our history, we put forth our energies in behalf of Christian education, the world will recognize the fact that Methodism, spiritual religion, that religion which touches hearts, the affections, and the emotions, does not pass by the intellect, but, calling fire from heaven, kindles in the intellect the highest thoughts, and exalts its power. I look into the Methodism of the future and I recognize all this. I see a people vast in number – a people whose hearts swell with gratitude to God – a people with intellects educated, with tastes refined, artistic, lovely, energetic, and expressive – going forth preaching the Gospel in all languages, and conquering the world unto God.¹²²

On Simpson's account, God had already turned Methodism from a group of poor and insignificant people into a multitude of the rich, influential, and refined. If Methodists would address the glaring weakness of a lack of concern for intellectual formation, God would use American Methodists to usher in the millennium, “conquering the world unto God” in preparation for the return of Christ.

It is also significant that Simpson seemed to be determined to steer the MEC away from its beginnings where it was not in ministry to poor people, but was a group of poor people. Engagement with the poor is perhaps the best way of illustrating how divergent Simpson and

¹²² Crooks, 512.

Roberts's visions for the future of American Methodism were. Simpson was trying to continue the work of building the best church for the most powerful nation in the world, the nation so significant that Simpson once said God could not do without it.¹²³ He was moving Methodism into the halls of power. Roberts was trying to do almost exactly the opposite. He was trying to steer Methodism back to not just charity to the poor, but being a church that was *for* the poor. Roberts was convinced that "the world will never be converted to Christ, so long as Churches are conducted upon the exclusive system" of pew rentals.¹²⁴ Though the pew rental system "generally prevails among all denominations," Free Methodists were adamant that it was "wrong in principle, and bad in tendency."¹²⁵ Rather than arguing that God cannot do without America, as Simpson had, Roberts would have been more likely to argue that Methodism cannot do without the poor.

As Roberts looked to the future, he continued to envision a movement that clung tenaciously to what made it distinct, especially the firm commitment to raise up a holy people who pursued entire sanctification. Simpson increasingly articulated a future that was freed from sectarian distinctions in favor of as broad of a unity as possible. When he reached the present in his summary of the first one hundred years of Methodism he concluded by sharing his thoughts on what would come next. His first move was to emphasize Methodism's openness and tolerance of others:

Its theology is broad and comprehensive; it proclaims free and full salvation; it assumes no exclusive divine right either in discipline or usages; it recognizes the right of each denomination to adopt for itself such plans as are in harmony with the Holy Scriptures, and are best adapted for the accomplishment of its great work. It reaches out a hand of

¹²³ Darius Salter's recent biography of Simpson gives particular focus to this emphasis theme. See especially, Salter, 359-380.

¹²⁴ *Doctrines and Discipline of the Free Methodist Church, 1872*, ix.

¹²⁵ *Doctrines and Discipline of the Free Methodist Church, 1872*, x.

fraternal greeting to the disciples of Christ every-where, and is at all times ready to join in any plan for the conversion of the world.¹²⁶

From this posture of cooperation with all Christians in order to convert the world to Christianity, Simpson looked to the future. As he did, he encouraged Methodists to keep “the wisdom and devotion of their fathers” and maintain their “spirit of piety and loyalty to the great Head of the Church.” If Methodists did this, Simpson predicted that “in the coming century, its prayers will ascend, and its songs resound in every land and in all languages, and it will join, with the other branches of Christ’s Church, in the song of millennial triumph over a redeemed world.”¹²⁷

Of the two men, Simpson’s vision was more bold and all-encompassing. However, it was also hard to pin down and fairly generic. Matthew Simpson had ridden the wave of Methodist growth and progress for decades. He had seen the MEC’s tide continue rising, despite schisms and controversies that threatened to cause the tide to ebb. By the end of the 1860s and into the 1870s, Simpson increasingly became a champion of the MEC leading the charge in conquering the world for Christ. As historian Scott Kisker has aptly put it, “As a representative leader of American Methodism in the mid-nineteenth century, he was unaware that he had adapted the assumptions of his own imperialist age.”¹²⁸

Conclusion

When the beginnings of the Free Methodist Church are considered from the perspective of social, economic, and theological concerns, a significant fragmentation in American Methodism begins to come more clearly into focus. B. T. Roberts was adamant that Methodists

¹²⁶ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 208-209.

¹²⁷ Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism*, 209.

¹²⁸ Scott Kisker, “Methodist Abroad: Matthew Simpson and the Emergence of American Methodism as a World Church” *Methodist History* 53:1 (October, 2014), 20.

must embody the doctrine of entire sanctification not merely through the words that they spoke, but through concrete actions. Free pews were essential, not as an expression of an over-warmed mind, but as an expression of God's free grace, which sought to include every single person, especially the poor.

As the dramatic growth of American Methodism led to upwardly mobile Methodists and a rise in respectability of the denomination itself, some Methodists celebrated the building of increasingly ornate churches and were unabashed in the pursuit of middle class respectability. Other Methodists worried that these pursuits led to inevitable compromise and corruption of key aspects of American Methodist identity such as a lessened emphasis on sanctification and the direct experience of God's presence. The fragmentation of American Methodism was most visible through changing practices and the particular ways that Methodists embodied their theology. Changes within American Methodism, such as the clothes and jewelry Methodists wore or whether churches adopted the pew rental system to pay for more elaborate churches, indicated that deep theological shifts were underway. The result was the emergence of competing theological visions for Methodism.

B. T. Roberts stated as much in "New School Methodism" when he wrote, "Two distinct parties exist... This difference is fundamental. It does not relate to things indifferent, but to those of the most vital importance. It involves nothing less than the nature itself of Christianity."¹²⁹ American Methodist historiography has not yet adequately considered the seriousness of Roberts's concerns. Big-tent visions of American Methodism as one coherent theological tradition privilege Matthew Simpson's understanding of the American Methodist theological tradition. They simultaneously, if unintentionally, silence B. T. Roberts's understanding of the

¹²⁹ Roberts, "New School Methodism," in Snyder, 389-390.

American Methodist theological tradition. Roberts and other Methodists like him would have been adamant not only that “Old School” Methodism had at least as valid of a claim to represent the Methodist theological tradition, they would also have argued that they were the rightful preservers of the core of this tradition.