

## SCHISMS AND THEIR HEALING IN AMERICAN METHODISM

American Methodism has experienced many schisms. A primary motif of twentieth century American Methodist history, however, has been the quest for unity. Now some observers see the danger of a new schism in the United Methodist Church before the end of this century.

In the following pages I shall sketch the story of the major divisions and reunions from the days of colonial America to the present. The issues which led to schisms were: authorization to celebrate the sacraments; the rights of clergy and laity in the church's constitution; relations between races in the church, and the theology and experience of sanctification. Whether the immediate debate centered on matters pastoral, political, moral or theological, the controversy always had an ecclesiological dimension.

### THE PASTORAL/SACRAMENTAL CONTROVERSIES

Some historians would begin the history of American Methodism with the ministry of Robert Strawbridge ( ? - 1781), who came from County Sligo, Ireland to Frederick Co., Maryland. Whether or not that is the case, Strawbridge is the first American Methodist schismatic. Whatever may have been his preached doctrine or his chosen spiritual company, Robert Strawbridge was devoid of the sense of connectional covenant. Even Thomas Rankin, John Wesley's chosen champion of discipline, could not rein him in. Francis Asbury, Rankin's emissary to Strawbridge, got nowhere in his effort to convince the Irishman to cease his lay administration of the sacraments. The American Conference first dropped his name from the list of preachers, then reinstated it. Nothing worked, however, and from 1776 his name was omitted from the Conference roll. Strawbridge won more converts and sent more preachers into the itineracy than anyone else in American Methodism's first two decades. Yet when he died, Asbury's dour comment was, ". . . upon the whole, I am inclined to think the Lord took him away in judgment, because he was in a way to do hurt to his cause . . . ."

Even before Strawbridge's free lance career ended, there was another dangerous rift in the unity of the American Methodists. Owing to the conditions of war, the Conference of 1779 met in two sections. The majority, gathered at Broken Back Church, Fluvanna Co., Virginia, were without Francis Asbury. They elected a presbytery from among themselves, performed four ordinations (the first in American Methodist history), and authorized those four to ordain others for administration of the sacraments among Methodists. The Broken Back schism proved to be just that when Asbury traveled the connection once more in 1780-81, and also obtained a letter from Wesley denouncing such lay ordinations. A full reconciliation was affected on Asbury's terms.

## RIGHTS OF CLERGY AND PEOPLE

The Strawbridge and Broken Back divisions were over the same issue and they were successfully ended about the same time. A decade later two prominent preachers led almost simultaneous secessions over another issue, namely, the appointive power of the episcopacy vis-à-vis the rights of preachers and people.

The first, and less well-known, of these withdrawal movements was the one directed by William Hammett (? - 1803). Hammett was an especially powerful speaker. He won a following among the society in Charleston, South Carolina where Asbury had given him permission to remain during 1791, though another was the appointed preacher there. Hammett's supporters demanded that he be appointed as their minister. Asbury refused because he was determined that Methodist preachers would travel (Hammett had already indicated a desire to settle), and because he was determined that Methodist congregations would not choose their own preachers. Hammett left the Methodist Episcopal Church late in 1791, and established a new connection which he termed the Primitive Methodists. During the following year many Charleston Methodists joined his churches. After Hammett's death, however, his followers largely returned to the parent denomination.

The Hammett secession was both small and localized, but just eight years after the Christmas Conference the young Methodist Episcopal Church suffered a severe setback. It came because Virginia presiding elder James O'Kelly (1757-1826), yet another Irish immigrant, challenged the field marshal episcopal style of his English born commanding general superintendent, Bishop Francis Asbury. At the 1792 (the first) General Conference, O'Kelly moved that any preacher should have the right to appeal his appointment to the [Annual] Conference and, if sustained, the bishop would have to appoint him to another circuit. When his motion lost O'Kelly walked out. He was an influential man in the denomination's strongest region. His defection hurt the young church badly. Between 1793 and 1796 the M.E. Church lost 10,979, or over 16%, of its members. The heaviest losses were in the areas where the O'Kelly unrest was the strongest. Prof. Sidney Ahlstrom has observed that it was only the Second Great Awakening that renewed Methodist growth, giving the church a veritable second lease on life.

O'Kelly, too, had established a new connection, which he called the Republican Methodist Church. Although Republican Methodism did not last much longer than Hammett's Primitive Methodism, the issues of clerical and lay rights continued to be debated. A strong party of reform worked within the M.E. Church for about a generation. They rallied around opposition to episcopacy, an elective presiding eldership, membership of local preachers in the Annual Conference, and lay representation in the Annual and General Conferences. Able men who had influence in the denomination were among the reform leaders. They included Alexander McCaine (1768-1856), native of

Dublin, Ireland, converted under the ministry of William Hammett; Asa Shinn (1781-1853), and Nicholas Snethen (1769-1845). McCaine and Snethen had, in fact, been traveling companions of Asbury.

The reform movement reached its apogee at the 1820 General Conference. There a 72% majority (65-25) adopted a resolution to make the presiding eldership elective. Bishop William McKendree, canvassing the Annual Conferences, convinced a majority of them to reject that resolution, and thus the 1824 General Conference declared it void. Following the 1828 General Conference the reformers gave up trying to work within the M.E. Church, and they formed the Methodist Protestant Church in 1830. The M.P.'s eliminated both episcopacy and the presiding eldership and admitted lay delegates to both Annual and General Conferences. Local preachers, however, were forgotten; they were not given Annual Conference membership.

Moreover, the reformers were not agreed on the larger issue of basic human rights. McCaine wrote tracts in defense of slavery, while Shinn opposed it. The M.P. Church itself was formally divided because of the slavery question from 1858-1877.

Although the M.P. Church continued for 109 years, it never achieved national prominence, having less than 250,000 members at the time of its reunion with the major episcopal Methodisms in 1939. Unlike O'Kelly's movement, the M.P. schism did not slow the galloping advance of the M.E. Church in the 1830's. As a matter of fact, by 1840 the M.E. Church was the largest religious denomination in the United States. Even after the great division of 1845, the two dominant episcopal Methodisms would be, between them, the largest American Protestant communion until 1960. It is an historical conundrum that a religious movement with a polity so at variance with the national democratic spirit should have been the major Christian institutional influence in the country for about 100 years.

#### HUMAN RIGHTS

A third series of American Methodist schisms was brought about by an even larger struggle for rights within the church, i.e., basic human and Christian fellowship rights. The focal point of the struggle was the practice of slavery. This is the only socio-theological dispute which has ever separated American Methodists into several denominations.

American Methodism was bi-racial from the beginning. There never was a time when the societies were exclusively Caucasian in membership. By the turn of the nineteenth century Black people comprised about 20% of the total M.E. membership of 63,958. But racial discrimination against Blacks was also a mark of original Methodism in America. Separate seating, separate times of worship, access to the meeting house only after all whites were accommodated, white monitoring of even the worship hour, exclusion of Black preachers from

elders' orders and Annual Conference membership, led finally to the reluctant withdrawal by some Black Methodists into denominations under their own control.

First came the African Union Church, in 1813. Today this is a merged connection of around 5,000 members, known officially as the African Union First Colored Methodist Protestant Church of America of Elsewhere. Few people are aware that the African Union Church was indeed the first separate Black Methodist denomination.

Three years later, in Philadelphia, the African Methodist Episcopal Church was organized. Its remarkable leader, Richard Allen (1760-1831), was probably the first Black bishop in the history of Protestant Christianity. Today, the A.M.E. Church is the strongest of the Black Methodist connections, with a membership of just over 1.1 million.

Similar circumstances in the New York City area resulted in the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal, Zion Church in 1821 (date disputed). The first A.M.E.Z. bishop was James Varick (dates uncertain). The claim has been made, albeit I think unsuccessfully, that the A.M.E.Z. dispute was over congregational property rights in the first instance, and only secondarily, if at all, over racial matters. The A.M.E.Z. membership today stands at about 770,000.

Although both of the African Episcopal Methodisms were destined to become strong, they did not grow much until the Civil War gave them access to the region where most Black Americans lived. The slave states suppressed them because of freedom leaders such as A.M.E. Denmark Vesey, as well as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglas, all of whom were members of or associated with the A.M.E.Z. Church.

Still, the great majority of Black Methodists remained in the church that they had helped to found, and today their spiritual descendants number close to 400,000 in the United Methodist Church. Mainline Methodism remained attractive to Black people. Methodists were a singing people; their emotional preaching stressed heart religion and personal Christian experience, and their free style of worship allowed for spontaneous congregational response. Above all, the M.E. Church began as a freedom church with a rule prohibiting its members from owning slaves. To be sure, hardly half a year had passed before the two bishops, Thomas Coke and his dominant junior, Asbury, began to soften their anti-slavery rhetoric--in part out of consideration for their personal safety. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the General Conferences gradually retreated from the Christmas Conference ideal. Nevertheless, the conscience of Methodism was never quiet over slavery, and even the pro-slavery sections of the church kept up an evangelistic outreach to Blacks.

If some Black Methodists withdrew to form their own connections, some whites also decided to leave a denomination which tolerated slavery. In 1843 Orange Scott (1800-1847) and Luther Lee (1800-1889) led in the establishment of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection (from 1947 the Wesleyan Methodist Church). Lee returned to the M.E. Church in 1867, but the new connection survived. In 1968 it merged with the Pilgrim Holiness Church to form the Wesleyan Church, and now has approximately 166,000 members. This schism also had elements of anti-episcopal motivation, thereby sharing somewhat in the spirit of the M.P. movement.

Scott's abolitionist secession put resolve into the northern anti-slavery Methodists to take positive action at the 1844 General Conference. Their opportunity came in the form of two cases relating to slave owning clergy which were scheduled to come before that body. First, came Francis A. Harding's appeal of his expulsion from the Baltimore Annual Conference for owning slaves through his wife. Far more dramatic was the case of Bishop James O. Andrew of Georgia. He had inherited two slaves from the estate of his first wife. His second wife also owned slaves, but the bishop had taken legal action to renounce any rights he had in their regard.

The case of Harding, a mere itinerant, was dealt with first. His appeal was denied by a 67.6% majority (117-56). But what was tantamount to the trial of a bishop led to the longest General Conference in Methodist history (1 May-10 June). The delegates did not debate slavery, though there were abolitionist delegates as well as men like William Winans, the planter-preacher from Mississippi, who viewed himself as a "slave owner for conscience sake." The speeches on the conference floor were over the issue of the rights of a bishop on the one hand and the authority of the General Conference over the episcopacy on the other. Moreover, Bishop Andrew's efforts in relation to his inherited slaves showed that he was not technically in violation of the Discipline. Still, the real issue was slave owning by Methodist clergy, and when the final vote came the southerners, who needed to change the minds of some 18% of their colleagues, fell far short of that minimum goal. A nearly 62% majority (110-68) adopted the motion to request Bishop Andrew "to desist from the exercise of his office so long as this impediment remains." He was neither deposed nor asked to resign; listed and paid as a bishop, he bore the mark of Cain. He could not travel the connection and be accepted generally as a superintendent.

After that, pacification of the southern delegates was impossible. A Plan of Separation was adopted. The Methodist Episcopal Church, South was organized at the Louisville Convention (Kentucky) in May, 1845, and the first M.E.C.S. General Conference met in 1846.

Both of the predominately white episcopal Methodisms retained their Black members. The southern church, indeed, gave emphasis to the evangelization of the slaves. M.E.C.S. Black membership grew impressively in the 1850's. During

the Civil War, however, the southern church's Black membership dropped from 207,000 to 78,000. Black Methodists were joining churches where they enjoyed more freedom--one of the African Methodist denominations or the mother church herself. M.E.C.S. leaders of both races agreed that if southern Methodism was to retain any Black members at all, they would have to be in a connection under Black control. Thus in 1870 the M.E.C.S. assisted in the establishment of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (since 1956 the Christian M.E. Church). The C.M.E. division was the last of the racial divisions in American Methodism. Owing to the attitude of those who founded it, it cannot be called a schism. C.M.E. membership today is around 444,000.

If questions of rights--clerical, lay, and human--produced three major types of schism in American Methodism, then the debate over the theology and experience of sanctification gave rise to a fourth.

#### THE HOLINESS MOVEMENT

An 1860 Methodist schism shared the motivation of both the earlier anti-slavery divisions and the later holiness rifts. In western New York state, B.T. Roberts led in the formation of the Free Methodist Church. This church emphasized "scriptural holiness," strict discipline in personal life style, freedom for slaves, opposition to secret societies, and free pews in all of their churches. So, the Free Methodist schism was something of a transition movement between phases of American Methodist ecclesiological struggle; much as Scott's Wesleyan Methodist movement partook of both anti-episcopal and anti-slavery concerns in the first half of the nineteenth century. Free Methodists today number about 130,000 on four continents.

Like the camp meeting movement, the holiness revival did not originate among the Methodists. But also like the Second Great Awakening, the holiness movement became largely identified with the Methodists. Appropriately enough, we might say, since Wesley felt that the doctrine of Christian perfection was the grand depositum what God had given to the Great Church through the agency of Methodism.

This movement became a powerful influence after the Civil War, under the leadership of persons like Phoebe Palmer (1807-1874), John S. Inskip (1816-1884), William McDonald (1820-1901), and Beverly Carradine (1848-1919). It reached its high point in American Methodism in the 1870's and 1880's. In 1872 the M.E. Church elected eight bishops, four of whom were identified with the holiness movement.

Hardly had the movement's influence peaked, however, when it began rapidly to decline. The belief in sanctification as a second, instantaneous work of grace had always had its opponents. The emergence of groups insisting upon certain experiential and expressive phenomena as being normative, or even essential, to true Christianity, gave the whole movement a negative image among

most Methodists. Indifference turned to hostility. To the "come-outism" of John P. Brooks (fl. 1880's & 1890's) was added ample measures of "freeze-outism" and "push-outism." The episcopal address at the M.E.C.S. 1894 General Conference contained a strong warning against the excesses of holiness teaching and expression.

The 1880's witnessed the beginning of the last phase of the holiness movement in nineteenth century American Methodism--the establishment of separate holiness denominations. During that decade the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana), the Church of God (Holiness), and the Holiness Church came into existence. Others such as the Pentecostal Holiness and the Pilgrim Holiness (since 1968 part of the Wesleyan Church) came out in the 1890's. By the time of the organization of the Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene in 1907 the come out era was over, and the holiness movement in mainline American Methodism at large would be rather quiet for the next 60 years. California presiding elder Phineas F. Bresee (1838-1915) secured the foundations of this largest of America's holiness denominations. Since 1919 known simply as the Church of the Nazarene, this connection has a world membership of around 500,000.

In view of the merger in 1968 of the Methodist Church with the Evangelical United Brethren Church, it is in order to mention the nineteenth century schisms which occurred among United Brethren and Evangelicals. An 1889 split in the Church of the United Brethren was caused by a dispute over adopting a new constitution for the church. That rupture was never mended. From 1894 until 1922 the Evangelicals were divided also. The trouble points had been whether to use German or English in the denomination, the authority of bishops, theological conservatism, sectionalism, and old versus new immigrants. The disagreements were made intolerable by bitter personal conflict among the leading representatives of opposing viewpoints.

#### ECUMENISM BEGINS WITH THE FAMILY

The impulse of American Methodism in the twentieth century has been toward the healing of the nineteenth century divisions. Altogether there have been five major reunions of churches in the Wesleyan heritage so far this century. The first such reconciliation came in 1922 when the rival groups of Evangelicals reunited and adopted the name of the Evangelical Church.

In 1939 there occurred what most American Methodists refer to simply as Unification. The M.E., M.E.C.S., and M.P. Churches came together to create The [sic] Methodist Church. Union negotiations began in 1908 and went through active phases, interrupted twice by several years of stalled progress, owing largely to the misgivings of the M.E.C.S. about entering a national church.

Although the M.P.'s had to accept both episcopacy and the presiding eldership once more, those were not the greatest issues in the unification

negotiations. The greatest controversy was created by the question of the relationship between Blacks and whites in the new church. The whites arrived at a solution which was unsatisfactory to the Blacks, namely, the creation of what was virtually a Black church under the umbrella of the general church. The segregated Black connection was called the Central Jurisdiction. Only on the general level was The Methodist Church racially inclusive.

In addition to that concession to southern social patterns, the new church also granted protection to southern regionalism by creating a level of judicatory previously unknown in Methodism. Between the Annual Conferences and the General Conference the planners erected the Jurisdictional Conferences: five regional and one racial. The Jurisdictional Conference was further designated as the body which would elect the bishops of that region. Jurisdictionally elected bishops would be recognized as general superintendents, but for the first time in American Methodism bishops would be selected at a level below the General Conference. All in all, Unification permitted the southern church to join a national connection with its identity intact in the two areas most dear to it: separation of the races and selection of episcopal leadership.

The Blacks of the M.E. Church did not leave their denomination, even though they were deeply hurt by M.E. acceptance of the Central Jurisdiction "church within the church" scheme. They tried to take advantage of the guaranteed memberships on general boards and agencies and guaranteed seats on the episcopal bench to make Black influence felt in the church at large. And they began at once to press The Methodist Church for the elimination of its racial jurisdiction. It should also be remembered that even in the M.E. Church the Blacks were in separate Annual Conferences.

The Central Jurisdiction was done away in 1968. While the other five jurisdictions continue they are not very effective outside the home states of the old M.E.C.S. The jurisdictional system is a latent issue in the United Methodist Church.

The logic of closer ties between Evangelicals and United Brethren became compelling to members of both groups. In 1946 they united to become the Evangelical United Brethren Church, with 705,102 members in 4,702 local churches.

During the 1950's The Methodist Church pursued union discussions with the Protestant Episcopal Church. The Journal of the 1952 General Conference even carried a comparative columnar printing of the P.E. Book of Common Prayer and the Methodist Book of Worship. The 1960 General Conference, however, dropped those discussions, to concentrate upon a possible merger with the people whom they still liked to refer to as "the German Methodists." Formal discussions with the EUB's had begun in 1956 and were showing signs of bearing

fruit quickly. Indeed Methodists, Evangelicals, and United Brethren had a tradition of union discussions from 1809-1814, 1829, 1867-1871, 1903-1917, 1946, and 1949. It seemed that at last the vision of United Brethren Bishop Christian Newcomer (1749-1830) for a united church of these three constituent bodies might become reality.

In 1968 the EUB/Methodist merger took place. The new church, The United Methodist Church, began with a combined membership of 11,027,000. Once more a Methodist denomination was the largest Protestant church in America. The United Methodist Church, however, has declined in membership every year of its life. Today it has approximately 9,460,000 members. Never before in its history has mainline American Methodism experienced so many consecutive years of membership decline.

Some of the issues which had divided Methodists in the nineteenth century presented themselves in the EUB/Methodist merger talks as well. Episcopacy was one. The EUB bishop was elected to a four year term, with the opportunity of unlimited terms. The Methodists had lifetime episcopacy. Also, EUB district superintendents were elected by the Annual Conference; Methodist D.S.'s were appointed by the bishop. The EUB's yielded on both of those points.

On the matter of human rights, however, EUB insistence joined with the flow of sentiment already running in the Methodist Church. The Central Jurisdiction was not brought into the new church, and a goal year of 1972 was set as the time when all segregated structures within the church would be abolished.

There were also some theological differences between EUB's and Methodists. The EUB's were more conservative, and the Evangelicals, especially, gave more emphasis to sanctification, than the Methodists did. But theology did not elicit much discussion in the merger talks, except for the ecclesiological theme of the imperative for practical unity among members of the body of Christ.

There was another merger in 1968. The Wesleyan Methodist Church and the Pilgrim Holiness Church united to become the Wesleyan Church, having something over 100,000 members. It has grown to approximately 166,000.

Thus far all efforts to unite the three Black episcopal Methodisms have failed. A.M.E. and A.M.E.Z. union attempts were made in 1868, 1885, and 1892. Around 1908 a Tri-Federation Council of the bishops from all three churches devised the Birmingham Plan. It was rejected by the C.M.E. Annual Conferences in 1918. For about a generation merger was not discussed much. The Tri-Council was revived in 1965, with enthusiastic calls for union being issued both that year and in 1967 and 1969, albeit without any visible practical results.

In 1978 and 1980 respectively, the C.M.E. and A.M.E.Z. General Conferences approved a resolution to "immediately begin the process and organization for

organic union" with a view to merging by 1988. The first step toward that goal was taken in September, 1981. Such a united church would have almost 1,250,000 members. Should the A.M.E. Church also participate in that type of unification the membership would be about 3,300,000.

There have also been hopes, though hardly more than that, for the three Black churches and the Methodism represented by the United Methodist Church to get back together. In March, 1979 the bishops of all four of these churches held a joint meeting--the first such gathering in history. Their statement to their combined constituencies urged their people to grow toward one another by joining in shared ministry. There is also a Pan-Methodist aspect of the celebration of the bicentennial of the 1784 Christmas Conference. Finally, it should be noted that all four of these churches are members of the ten denomination Consultation on Church Union.

#### WHAT FUTURE FOR A UNITED AMERICAN METHODISM?

The twentieth century, then, has been a time of ecumenism among American Methodists, rather than a continuation of the nineteenth century propensity for schism. Such new connections as have been formed have usually been splinter groups who refused to go into a wider fellowship (e.g., in 1939 the Southern Methodists, with a membership today of around 4,000). At the present, except for the contacts between the Black churches and the UMC, and their joint participation in COCU, there seem to be no active impulses toward reunion within the Wesleyan family of denominations. Negotiations between the Wesleyan Methodists and the Free Methodists failed in 1955 and in the 1970's.

On the other hand, there does seem to be some potential for renewed schism in American Methodism. I speak only of the UMC, my own connection. The UMC is experiencing a serious strain in the relationships between its official leadership and its self-styled evangelical wing. There appear to be four major points of trouble.

On the basis of their theology of "scriptural holiness" many evangelicals have felt that the General Board of Global Ministries has virtually abandoned the work of world evangelism to become a multi-national benevolent enterprises corporation. Secondly, there seems to be a growing disenchantment with UM support for the World Council of Churches, which is perceived as growing increasingly anti-democratic, anti-capitalist, and anti-Western. On these two issues the tensions are concentrated between caucus groups and general board officers.

In the third place, UM evangelicals in what is known as the charismatic movement often feel isolated in the spiritual environment of the denomination at large. They are the closest expression in the UMC today of the holiness revival of 100 years ago, and they feel something of the same impatience with and rejection by the more traditional majority that the holiness advocates experienced. The national leadership of the UM charismatics, however, is

positive in its approach to the larger connection. The 1976 General Conference adopted a paper on guidelines for charismatics and non-charismatics in the UMC. The paper is irenic in tone, and practical in its suggestions, and has been well received by those UM's who know of its existence.

The fourth issue is far and away the most emotional one, and thus the most explosive. It is the issue of whether or not practicing homosexuals shall be accepted into the professional ministry of the UMC. In 1980 the General Conference turned down both anti-homosexual and pro-homosexual resolutions. Since then certain bishops have either appointed, or stated that they approve the appointment of, practicing homosexuals to pastoral work. This year one of them was formally charged under the Discipline for such action. The committee of investigation, named to look into the charge, concluded that at present the Discipline is not specific in point of law on this issue. Thus, they found no grounds on which to bring the case to a trial.

The 1984 General Conference will not be able to sidestep this issue again. The delegates who go to Baltimore to celebrate the bicentennial of the world's first Methodist denomination, may have to set the stage for opening their third century with a grave threat to the hard won pluralistic fellowship of the United Methodist Church.

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