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The Settlement of North America

In Letters from an American Farmer of 1782 we have the penultimate, "Here are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a very few a very visible one; no great manufacturers employing thousands, no great refinement of luxury... Some few towns excepted, we are all tillers of the earth, from Nova Scotia to West Florida." 1 Into this ideal--albeit unreal--situation had come the Methodists. From the outset it was clear that the first Methodist witness in North America was by laypeople who, like so many arrivals from Europe, were chary of ecclesiastical power and interference. At the same time, these hardy advocates who initially promulgated Methodist doctrine--either as licensed lay preachers or as active laymen and laywomen in the Societies--had high regard for the structure of the historic, episcopally oriented Church, for Orders and observance of the Sacraments. There some noted exceptions, and these mavericks caused headaches and heartaches aplenty.

The Georgia ministry of the Wesleys, 1736-1737, becomes the backdrop for the American scene, "The first rise of Methodism was in Nov. 1729, when four of us met together at Oxford; the second was in Savannah, in April 1736, when twenty or thirty persons met at my house;" said Wesley, "the last was in London on this day, May 1 1738 when forty or fifty of us agreed to meet together every Wednesday evening, in order to free conversation, begun and ending with singing and prayer." 2 Wesley insisted the plantings in North America had ties with the Moravians; there was a gracious reference to Jonathan Edward's work, but plaudits went to George Whitefield "all men owned that God was with him, wheresoever he went; giving a general call to high and low, rich and poor, to 'repent, and believe the Gospel.' Many were not disobedient to the heavenly calling: They did repent and believe the gospel. And by his ministry a line of communication was formed, quite from Georgia to New-England." 3 Among Whitefield's converts we find Robert Walker, Jesse Hollingsworth, the James Bayards, and Edward Evans--an illustrious group. In his Sermon CXXI "Some Account of the Late Work of God in North-America," Wesley cautioned that the good endeavors begun by Whitefield did not always hold, "A vast majority had entirely 'turned back from the holy commandment delivered to them.'" And little wonder, a saying from the early church sufficed, "The soul and the body make a man; and the spirit and discipline make a Christian." Wesley put his finger on the American problem, "They had no shadow of discipline; nothing of the kind. They were formed into no societies: They had no Christian connexion with each other, nor were ever taught to watch over each other's souls. So that if any fell into lukewarmness, or even into sin, he had none to lift him up: He might fall lower and lower, yea, into hell, if he would; for who regarded it?" 4

Wesley noted the urgent, numerous communications which had come to him:

Things were in this state when, about eleven years ago, I received several letters from America, giving a melancholy account of the state of religion in most of the colonies, and earnestly entreating that some of our Preachers would come over and help them. It was believed they might confirm many that were weak or wavering, and lift up many that were fallen; nay, and that would see more fruit of their labours in America than they had done either in England or Ireland. 5

Who were these laypeople now establishing a Methodist witness in North America? Perhaps the earliest Methodist preaching in the Western Hemisphere was not actually in North America, but in the Caribbean, by Nathaniel Gilbert, a lawyer-planter of Antigua, who was converted by Wesley in 1758 at Wandsworth in England. Here Wesley baptized two slaves belonging to Gilbert, on Wednesday, November 29, 1758 (the first Africans to be baptized by Wesley). Gilbert, together with his party, returned to Antigua in 1759 (or 1760) and began preaching, aided by his brother Francis. These Methodists, white and black, are said to be responsible for "the first Methodist chapel in the Torrid Zone." In 1777 (or 1778) John Baxter, a shipwright, joined the work. By 1786 Methodists in that beautiful island numbered 1,569, only two were white. Blacks made up the membership.

Far to the north, Lawrence Coughlan began preaching at Conception Bay, Newfoundland in 1765. William Black, with his family, came to Nova Scotia in 1775, and by 1781 began preaching. In 1782 he requested assistance from the British Conference. Wesley advised, in 1784, "Does there not want a closer and more direct connexion between you of the North and the Societies under Francis Asbury? Is it not more advisable that you should have a constant correspondence with each other and act by united counsels?"

It was that remarkable, highly unconventional Irishman, Robert Strawbridge and his long suffering wife Elizabeth who immigrated to Maryland in the early 1760's and established themselves on a fifty acre farm just south of New Windsor, in Frederick County. Strawbridge--neglecting farm and family--devoted himself to preaching which bore an unprecedented harvest. Asbury commented, "This settlement of Pipe Creek is the richest in the state: here Mr. Strawbridge formed the first society in Maryland--and America." 6 A log meeting house, twenty-four feet square, located a mile from the home, became a center of Methodist preaching and outreach which resulted in remarkable conversions: Daniel Ruff, William Watters, Philip Gatch, and the illustrious Freeborn Garrettson.

In New York, Philip Embury, that "honest, industrious" carpenter whose parents fled the Palatinate in 1709 to Ireland, and in 1752 were converted by Wesley. Embury and his cousin, the indomitable Barbara Heck, arrived on the Perry in New York in August, 1760. In 1766 the first preaching service was held in Embury's home, attended by Paul and Barbara Heck, Betty--Barbara's black servant--and John Lawrence. The winter of 1767 saw the establishing of the rigging loft on Horse and Cart Street where Captain Thomas Webb lifted his eloquent voice. Soon the stone meeting house, Wesley Chapel, was built and dedicated, October 30, 1768. Blacks were listed among the membership--Rachael and Margaret; Betty and Peter Williams.

Thomas Taylor arrived in New York on October 26, 1767 and six months later wrote Wesley, April 11, 1768, giving a precis of American Methodist history. "Mr. Whitefield's example provoked most of the ministers to a much greater degree of earnestness; and, by the multitudes of people, young and old, rich and poor, flocking to the churches, religion became an honorable profession..." Taylor concluded his lengthy, revealing epistle:

There is another point far more material, and in which I must importune your assistance, not only in my own name, but also in the name of the whole Society. We want an able and experienced preacher--one who has both gifts and graces necessary for the work. 7

Taylor respected the ministrations of Webb and Embury "but although they are both useful, and their hearts in the work, they want many qualifications necessary for such an undertaking, where they have none to direct them. And the progress of the gospel here depends

much upon the qualifications of the preachers." While not stated, ordination is obviously what Taylor had in mind.

Taylor expressed the American view: Methodists were Churchpeople at heart. They delighted in the preaching of robust laypeople, but they were clamoring for more than the preached Word. They also wanted the Sacraments. These were frontierspeople indeed, but they were also part of an ancient tradition of the Church. Their view of ministry harkened to the Anglican-Roman concept of Episcopal Ordination. They were not of the Free Church line.

Robert Williams, a Welshman who was stationed in Ireland, on his own initiative "sold his horse to pay his debts, and taking his saddlebags on his arm, set off for the ship, with a loaf of bread and a bottle of milk and no money to pay his passage." Williams induced Thomas Ashton to join him. Ashton paid Williams' debts, bought passage, and the two sailed for Philadelphia, arriving September 2, 1769. "Perhaps no one in America," remarked Asbury, "has been an instrument of awakening so many souls as God has awakened by him." Nonetheless, like Strawbridge, Williams was not altogether amenable to good order.

These extraordinary preachers had indeed made a leap of faith. It was their persistent writing to Wesley that prompted the Father of Methodism to send Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmore, who reached Philadelphia on October 22, 1769. "We left our native land," wrote Pilmore, "not with a design to make divisions among them or to promote a Schism but to gather together in one the people of God that are scattered abroad, and revive spiritual religion." 8 On October 27, 1771 Francis Asbury and Richard Wright sailed as the second pair of official missionaries. "In America there has been a work of God:.." noted Asbury, "The people God owns in England, are the Methodists. The doctrines they preach, and the discipline they enforce, are, I believe, the purest of any people now in the world." It was Good Friday, April 9, 1773 that Thomas Rankin, designated "General Assistant" sailed from England with George Shadford. "I let you loose, George, on the great continent of America," admonished Wesley. "Publish your message in the open face of the sun, and do all the good you can." Sailing with them was Joseph Yerbury (also Captain Thomas Webb and his bride Grace, and a Mr. Rowbotham). The concluding set of missionaries, James Dempster and Martin Rodda reached America in 1774.

Here they were--Methodist lay preachers. Some had come on their own instigation to settle in the New World. Others were the official missionaries sent by the British Conference. They joined with native born Americans and by 1784 there were some eighty-three (or eighty-four) licensed preachers. True to Wesley's design for all such unordained persons, their ministry was limited to preaching and visiting--and this was done with zeal. They could not, indeed--in most cases--dare not administer the Sacraments. In his Sermon on "The Ministerial Office" Wesley would warn, "I wish all of you who are vulgarly termed Methodists would seriously consider what has been said. And particularly you whom God hath commissioned to call sinners to repentance. It does by no means follow from hence, that ye are commissioned to baptize, or to administer the Lord's Supper." 9

From the outset there was a universal cry. "Humiliating indeed was our condition," recalled Thomas Ware. "Not a man in holy orders among us." He went on, lamenting the abusive tactics of clergy of the older denominations. "Against us formidable combinations formed; not so much at first among the laity as the clergy." Laypeople heard Methodist

preachers denounced as unsound in principles and vastly illiterate, and all because "we could not administer...all the ordinances of God." 10

Again and again, there were those who attempted to break into Free Church patterns. This was the thorn in the flesh which caused incessant pain for traditional Methodists and prompted repeated caveats from Wesley. The iconoclastic John King--of stentorian voice--rendered phenomenal service to American Methodism. He arrived from England in 1770 but he had no credentials from Wesley. Pilmore forbade King to preach in Philadelphia for this very reason, whereupon King made his way to Baltimore and delivered the first Methodist sermon in that city from "a blacksmith's block at the corner of French and Broad Streets." Pilmore rushed from Philadelphia to assume command of the situation. It was not seemly for an individual to preach without proper identification and approval from London. Wesley would later give a stern admonition, "Beware of preachers coming from Great Britain or Ireland without full recommendation from me." 11

The problem was exacerbated by a handful of preachers in the southern colonies who insisted on receiving ordination, no matter who might bestow it. This highly unorthodox notion was scotched at the 1777 Conference at Deer Creek in Maryland by Rankin, and again at the Leesburg, Virginia Conference of 1778. Freeborn Garrettson saw that many were in favor of establishing an independent church, and at the 1779 Conference at Judge White's in Delaware, urged caution. A revolt was in the making: at the May, 1779 meeting at Broken Back Church, Fluvanna County, Virginia, a committee of four was chosen with power to ordain each other, and then give ordination to more who requested it. The 1780 Conference voted caution, and asked Asbury to take steps to prevent such heresy. His April 24, 1780 letter from Baltimore noted, "We disapprove of the steps our brethren have taken in Virginia, and we look upon them no longer as Methodists in connection with Mr. Wesley and us, till they come back. The only condition of our union with them shall be to suspend all their administrations for one year, and all meet in Baltimore." 12

During the entire period of the 1760's until 1784, we see a vigorous, pioneer Methodism at work in America. We likewise see American Methodists struggling with the concept of the Church: Ecclesiology/Sacraments. What did it mean to be a Methodist? John Wesley had done a superb job of training. Instilled within his American children was a basic adherence to traditional concepts of ministerial Orders--ordination came through the episcopal tradition.

On September 3, 1780 Asbury wrote Wesley, his fourth letter on the subject, "That violence for assistants introducing the ordinances is much cooled, but yet I must say our people are under great disadvantages,...I think the want of opportunity suspends the force of duty to receive the Lord's supper." 13 Again, on September 20, 1783 he wrote Wesley, "I reverence the ordinances of God; and attend them when I have opportunity; but I clearly see they have been made the tools of division and separation for these three last centuries..." 14

In defending the Methodist position, Wesley insisted he and his preachers neither "undermine nor destroy the Church." He queried, "Do we hinder any Minister from preaching the pure word of God?" Of course not! Again, "Do we, either by our example or advice, draw men away from the Lord's table?" 15 In the best sense of the term, Wesley and his

American Methodists were High Church.

Perhaps it was the outcome of the American Revolution which necessitated action. "They are now at full liberty simply to follow the Scriptures and the Primitive Church," wrote Wesley. "And we judge it best that they should stand fast in the liberty where-with God has so strangely made them free." 16 At this point Dr. Thomas Coke entered the American picture. Oxford graduate and Priest of the Church of England, possessing all the Welsh fervor--the hwyl--he found his niche in the Methodist Societies (ostensibly as Wesley's secretary). He became the instrument whereby Wesley would transmit power of ordination to the Americans.

Having exhausted every possibility for Anglican ordinations (pace letters to Robert Lowth, Bishop of London, to the Earl of Dartmouth--not to mention the earlier reading of Peter King's Enquiry into the...Primitive Church in 1746), John Wesley severed the Gordian knot with the Bristol ordinations of September 1-2, 1784. Coke, Whatcoat, and Vasey were on their way to America. The Christmas Conference at Baltimore, December 24, 1784-January 2, 1785, would see the birth of the Methodist Episcopal Church and a final settlement of Orders, Sacraments, and Church for American Methodists.

Notes

- 1 from Everyman's Library, p. 40.
- 2 see Wesley, Journal I:198, note 1, from Ecclesiastical History IV:175.
- 3 Wesley, Works VII:410.
- 4 Ibid., VII:411.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Asbury, Journal II:294; also see Frank Baker, From Wesley to Asbury, pp. 33-40.
- 7 thanks to the scholarly work of Frank Baker; also quoted in Barclay, Early American Methodism 1769-1844, Missionary Motivation and Expansion I:15-17.
- 8 Pilmore, Journal, p. 29.
- 9 Wesley, Works VII:279.
- 10 The Christmas Conference, p. 97.
- 11 Wesley, Letters VII:190-191.
- 12 Asbury, Letters III:22.
- 13 Ibid., III:24-25.
- 14 Ibid., III:31.
- 15 from "An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion" in Works VIII:31-32.
- 16 Wesley, Letters VII:239.

Addendum

The Christmas Conference

Thomas Coke arrived in New York, November 3, 1784, armed with Wesley's letter to "Our Brethren in America" dated Bristol, September 10, 1784 (which carefully outlined the steps taken in the ordinations); The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America (Wesley's abridgment of the Book of Common Prayer); ordination certificates for himself, Whatcoat, and Vasey; and a curious document--the Little Sketch--which seems to have been lost (we are not sure what it was, perhaps a sheaf of instructions or interpretations of the ordinations and an explanation of The Sunday Service).

In New York, Coke "opened Mr. Wesley's plan"¹ to John Dickens, who insisted Coke make public Wesley's intentions. This Coke refused to do. In Philadelphia, Coke did make an announcement to the Methodists, but carefully eschewed saying anything to Drs. Magaw and White, of the Anglican Church who called on Coke. It was at Barratt's Chapel--a few miles from Dover, Delaware--Sunday, November 14th that Coke's sermon was interrupted by "a plain, robust man"² who came to the pulpit and kissed the little Doctor. Thus Coke and Asbury met. Asbury insisted, "I was shocked when first informed" of Wesley's plans, and concurred only "if the preachers unanimously choose me."³ It was thus "agreed to call a general conference, to meet at Baltimore the ensuing Christmas." American Methodists made it clear: they would elect their own Superintendents. Beloved John Wesley's fiat was replaced by--the motions, at least of--a democratic process. George Croft Cell summed it up, "The government of the Methodist Episcopal Church...is founded not upon a principle of legitimacy, namely the pure transmission of authority, but upon a revolutionary principle, namely the consent of the governed."⁴

After an extensive preaching mission, Coke joined Asbury, Whatcoat, Vasey, and William Black, where they spent the week of December 17-24 at Perry Hall (home of the wealthy Henry Dorsey Goughs) planning the Conference, using Wesley's Large Minutes as guide. Some sixty Methodist preachers (out of the eighty-three/eighty-four) journeyed to Lovely Lane Chapel in Baltimore, Maryland, where from December 24, 1784-January 2, 1785 the Christmas Conference was in session, Coke presiding. Wesley's Letter was read, and Coke and Asbury "cordially approved"--elected--Superintendents. John Dickens proposed a name: the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. Asbury was ordained deacon on Christmas Day; elder on the 26th; and on December 27th was set apart for the office of Superintendent by Coke, assisted by Whatcoat, Vasey, and at Asbury's invitation, Philip William Otterbein of the German Church. Coke preached at each service, and presented an impressive ordination certificate. In his sermon, Coke gave the "character of a Christian Bishop." Wesley had said Superintendent; Coke said Bishop. To Wesley's dismay, Bishop it remained. Three preachers were elected deacon; thirteen were elected elder.

In adopting The Sunday Service, ritual became part of American Methodism (but was not observed by all frontier preachers). Doctrine came through Wesley's reduction of the Thirty-nine Articles to Twenty-four with an additional Twenty-fifth. The Conference adopted a Discipline, a thirty-five page book to be written by Coke and Asbury in 1785, assiduously following Wesley's Large Minutes of 1780.

Issues raised at the Conference included: rejection of slavery; establishing Cokesbury College; the reading of good books; the life of piety; form of worship. It was a preacher's assembly. Laypeople apparently had no voice in the business sessions. Women were in attendance--at worship services. Two blacks, Harry Hosier and Richard Allen are said to have been present. A major question, raised in the 1785 Discipline: "What may we reasonably believe to be God's Design in raising up the Preachers called Methodists?" The answer: "To reform the Continent, and to spread scriptural Holiness over these Lands."

1 Coke, Journal, p. 13.

2 Ibid., pp. 15-16.

3 Asbury, Journal I:471-472.

4 see Richard M. Cameron, Methodism and Society in Historical Perspective, p. 113, note 25.