

Growth or Declension: Methodist Historians' Treatment of the Relationship Between the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Culture of the United States

by Mark R. Teasdale

The history of American Methodism,¹ and especially of the Methodist Episcopal Church, is a rich trove for researchers seeking to better understand not only the story of evangelical Protestantism in the United States, but the ways that evangelical Protestants both reflected and constructed the culture of the United States. As the American Methodist Project states on its opening webpage:

American Methodism is especially well-documented and can provide significant insights into the debates and developments of local communities, regions, and the nation. Once established, Methodism grew with the United States so that it included more than 34 percent of all American church members by 1850. Nathan Hatch and others have noted how American Methodism uniquely parallels the development of the United States and its culture over time.²

In recognizing the broader cultural context that American Methodist history can elucidate, it is important to note that the authors of these histories were very much aware of the interaction between Methodism and the culture in the United States. Often, they addressed the issue specifically and provided strong opinions about whether the relationship was positive or negative, even linking the possible ascendancy or decline of Methodism to this relationship. Recognizing the perspective an author holds on this issue is necessary for the researcher using these texts, as it frequently sets the context for the author's historiographical trajectory.

In this essay, several histories of the Methodist Episcopal Church written after the Civil War are reviewed in chronological order. Particular emphasis will be given to how each of the authors approached the question of the relationship of the Methodist Episcopal Church to the culture in the United States through how the denomination understood and practiced evangelism. Essentially, the authors' depiction of how the Methodist Episcopal Church engaged in evangelism will serve as the hermeneutic for discerning the ways that the denomination related to the culture. In turn, this exploration will provide insight into whether the particular authors deemed that the relationship between the Methodist Episcopal Church and the culture of the United States set the stage for the growth or declension of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Methodists during the late nineteenth century already perceived the close relationship between the Methodist Episcopal Church and the United States, tying in the denomination's understanding and practice of evangelism to their observations about this relationship. While they did not have the benefit of the historical perspective that later historians did, and they often employed clear apologetics to argue for the supremacy of Methodism over the other Protestant denominations in the United States,³ they nonetheless made some illuminating observations concerning

¹ Here and elsewhere in the article the term "American Methodism" is employed according to the convention most common in the study of Methodist history and doctrine, *viz.* referring to Methodism as it specifically related to the United States.

² <http://www.archive.org/details/americanmethodism>

³ Leland Scott wrote, "Part of the task of Methodism in America was that of continually presenting—to listener and reader alike—orderly accounts of the rise of Methodism, its appearance on the American scene, its providential relevance, and its concerns both for personal salvation and for vital social holiness . . . One of the reasons Jesse Lee gives for writing his *Short History of the Methodists in the United States of America* is 'that every one may understand what the principles, doctrines, and discipline of the Methodists are, and what is the economy and government of their Church and Society.'" Leland Scott, "The Message of Early American Methodism," in *The History of American Methodism*, vol. 1, ed. Emory Stevens Bucke (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1964), 328.

Mark R. Teasdale is the E. Stanley Jones Assistant Professor of Evangelism at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois.

how Methodist evangelistic work was uniquely suited to the United States. From these observations one common theme is clear in the writings of the Methodist historians from this era: that the close relationship between the Methodist Episcopal Church and the culture of the United States offered a trajectory for denominational growth. In his *Compendious History of American Methodism* (New York: Eaton & Mains; Cincinnati: Jennings & Graham, 1868) Abel Stevens, an early Methodist missionary to the territory of Texas and, for a time, the editor of the Methodist Episcopal periodicals *Zion's Herald*, *The Methodist*, and *The National Magazine*, illustrates the point by setting forth an argument that became common among Methodist historians: that the plan of Methodism in the United States was essentially evangelistic.⁴ Taking this as a given, Stevens provided numerous details on how this evangelistic plan was perfectly suited to the American setting, leading to substantial denominational growth. He culminated this discussion by engaging in a favorite pastime of Methodist historians of this era: seeking to answer the question of why Methodism had achieved such remarkable success in the United States. Ultimately, he offered a supernatural explanation: "It has been inquired what has been the one chief force in the success of Methodism, and what is the one chief power for its success, I reply, it is this 'power from on high,' this 'unction from the Holy One.'"⁵ According to Stevens this power came in the form of Methodism being established in the United States precisely at the time necessary for God to raise up a pure nation that could withstand the dangerous European forces of Catholicism and Rationalism. The success of God's work, as evident in the growth of both the Methodist Episcopal Church and the cultural, political, and economic progress of the United States, led Stevens to be highly optimistic about the evangelistic endeavors of American Methodists in the future:

American, like British, Methodism, has become thoroughly imbued with the apostolic idea of foreign and universal evangelization. With both bodies it is no longer an incidental or secondary attribute, but is inwrought into their organic ecclesiastical systems. It has deepened and widened till it has become the great characteristic of modern Methodism, raising it from a revival of vital Protestantism, chiefly among the Anglo-Saxon race, to a world-wide system of Christianization, which has reacted on all the great interests of its Anglo-Saxon field has energized and ennobled most of its other characteristics, and would seem to pledge to it a universal and perpetual sway in the earth. Taken in connection with [British mission societies with Methodist origins] it is not too much to say that it has been transforming the character of English Protestantism and the moral prospects of the world. Its missionary development has preserved its primitive energy. According to the usual history of religious bodies, if not indeed by a law of the human mind, its early heroic character would have passed away by its domestic success, and the cessation of the novelty and trials of its early periods; but by throwing itself out upon all the world, and especially upon the strongest citadels of Paganism, it has perpetuated its original militant spirit, and opened for itself a heroic career, which need end only with the universal triumph of Christianity.⁶

Published only a few years after Stevens was *A Hundred Years of Methodism* (New York: Nelson & Phillips; Cincinnati: Hitchcock & Waldon, 1876) by Matthew Simpson, a bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

⁴ Stevens wrote, "Methodism was essentially a missionary movement, domestic and foreign." Abel Stevens, *Compendious History of American Methodism* (New York: Eaton & Mains; Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1868), 541. Simpson used almost the exact same wording: "In America the whole plan of the Methodistic work was essentially missionary." Matthew Simpson, *A Hundred Years of Methodism* (New York, NY: Nelson & Phillips, Cincinnati, OH: Hitchcock & Walden, 1876), 277.

⁵ Stevens, 581.

⁶ Stevens, 551.

Celebrating the hundredth anniversary of Methodist missions in the United States, Simpson was even less subtle in his assessment of how successfully American Methodism intermixed with American culture. Simpson nearly crowed that it was the evangelistic zeal of American Methodism that could be thanked for the successes of American culture. Simpson, known as one of the princes of the pulpit of his day, wrote with a flourishing style typical of the best late Victorian orations.⁷ In doing this, he is less reflective than Stevens. Whereas Stevens makes his case for the connection between the Methodist Episcopal Church and the culture of the United States through a careful exposition of historical events that brings him to the conclusion of God's providence being carried out uniquely through the interaction of American Methodism and the United States, Simpson enthusiastically rewrote the history of the United States to show that the presence of Methodists in the colonies and the Revolution laid the moral foundation necessary for the nation to achieve the greatness that it had by the late nineteenth century.

Simpson began his history by noting all of the grand successes that America had helped the rest of the world to realize, emphasizing particularly the scientific developments, industrial goods, and republican forms of governance that he believed were improving peoples' quality of life around the world.⁸ He then noted, "But the material rests upon the immaterial—the seen issues from the unseen . . . civil freedom must rest on moral purity. True morality receives its inspiration and strength from spiritual religion."⁹ With this argument firmly in place, that true religion is the only possible foundation for a materially successful culture, and with the demonstration of the United States' culture as being the most successful in the world, Simpson was ready to reveal what the true religion was that led the United States to such a height: American Methodism. He made this point most explicitly in his conclusion:

Who can tell what would have been the condition of western society, as it poured its streams of population over mountains and valleys, if the itinerant preacher had not accompanied or soon followed them? Had no minister preached until the towns and cities were built, and until congregations were formed and called, who can describe the moral desolation? Ministers may stand to-day in the pulpits of fine city churches, and declaim about apostolic succession; they may deny the validity of the ministerial orders of the heroic itinerant preachers, and consign them and their congregations to the uncovenanted mercies of God; but the thousands of happy and useful Christians on earth, and the thousands of the redeemed in heaven, who, but for them, had not heard the name of Jesus, will rise up and call them blessed. The blooming fields once a wilderness; the towns and cities of yesterday, which rival in population the old cities of Europe; the masses of an industrious, thriving, well-ordered, and happy population; the beautiful and thronged school-houses, the numerous and tasteful churches; and the multitudes of devout worshipers, all attest to the power of the Gospel which was proclaimed in their midst. To them it was a gospel of humanity, in strengthening them for their labors, and comforting them in their sorrows; it was a gospel of peace, in revealing a Saviour full of compassion and ready to forgive; it was a gospel of holy triumph for the dying inmate of the lonely cabin to enter the mansions prepared by the Son of God.¹⁰

⁷ A preliminary glance at the sermons of Simpson compared to the speeches of William Jennings Bryan, who began speaking publicly in the 1880s, shows a significant amount of similarity, particularly in the allusions and themes both deployed. An interesting study would be a rigorous comparison of the styles of both men, especially given Simpson's opposition to Bryan's candidacy for the presidency in 1896.

⁸ Simpson, 8-9.

⁹ Simpson, 9-10.

¹⁰ Simpson, 351-352.

Similar to Stevens, Simpson was optimistic, believing there to be a great synergy between Methodist evangelism and American culture. He saw the evangelistic work of the Methodist Episcopal Church as only becoming more effective as the reach of the American culture spread throughout the world and carried with it the blessings that the Methodist evangelists had and would continue to convey to it.

Two decades later, when the Methodist Episcopal Church was at the cusp of major transitions in organization and missionary emphasis, especially as it grappled with the difficulties of engaging in evangelistic ministry in the newly developing industrial cities in the United States, a new Methodist history was published. *A History of Methodism in the United States* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1898) was a two-volume history written by James Buckley. Buckley was a prominent agitator in favor of missions in the Methodist Episcopal Church during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. In contrast with Stevens and Simpson, he was more reserved in his observations about the connection between the Methodist Episcopal Church and American culture. Moreover, the way he approached the question of the relationship between denomination and culture was different. Whereas Stevens and Simpson viewed the relationship from the perspective of those who believed that the Methodists primarily impacted the culture of the nation, Buckley explored the issue from the other direction, assuming that the culture had been impacting the denomination. For example, he acknowledged that there were certain traits American Methodism developed in the early nineteenth century, such as austerity, frugality, a strong work ethic, and an emphasis on salvation.¹¹ In fact, though, this list could just as easily describe the average American yeoman of the Jeffersonian era who was seeking to make use of the new opportunity to advance his social and economic status in the newly formed republic. Likewise, Buckley's description of American Methodism at the end of the nineteenth century, that it had "grown in wealth" and that "its educational enterprises have modified the views and refined the tastes and manners of its people," squares well with the growing wealth and respectability of the American middle class during this era.¹²

Perhaps because of this reorientation of how to view the relationship between the Methodist Episcopal Church and the culture of the United States, it led Buckley to consider an issue that would never have occurred to Stevens and Simpson. Buckley took up the question of whether declension was endemic in the Methodist Episcopal Church as a result of its growth in size and wealth alongside of the culture of the United States. His answer was no, but he still added a word of caution:

There is always a place for self-examination of the individual and devout consideration of state of the church. The history of Christianity shows that the time when such heart-searchings should be made is when the distinction between the world and the church is faintly marked, and transitions are so easy and frequent as not to attract attention, and when luxury waits upon liberality. The founders of Methodism had no enterprises that were not distinctly subordinate to the conversion of men and their spiritual training. Now its enterprises are many and complex, often pervaded by a distinctly secular element, which contends constantly with the spiritual.¹³

As evidently proud of the social and economic attainments as Buckley was of the American Methodists, he realized that danger lurked if such successes became an end in themselves. Thus, at the close of the nineteenth century, the highly triumphalistic perspective set forth by the earlier Methodist historians immediately following the Civil War

¹¹ James M. Buckley, *A History of Methodism in the United States*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1898), 438.

¹² Buckley, vol. 2, 440.

¹³ Buckley, vol. 2, 441.

waned, and sharper questions about the possible negative effects of a close alliance between Methodist evangelism and American culture came into focus.

The work of these nineteenth-century historians of Methodism set a precedent for assuming a relationship between the American culture and the Methodist Episcopal Church. As a result, numerous historians in the twentieth century and twenty-first century have dealt with this relationship. Moreover, these later historians have nuanced the question of whether it was primarily the culture of the United States that influenced the Methodist Episcopal Church or whether it was the denomination that influenced the culture. Some of these historians also took some time to consider evangelism in discussing American Methodism.

In making the shift from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century, there is an important difference in publication and audience to note. Specifically, all the histories of American Methodism published in the nineteenth century were published by popular presses that were sympathetic to the Methodist Episcopal Church. Indeed, of the presses used by Simpson, both Nelson & Phillips in New York and Hitchcock & Walden in Cincinnati were often employed by the denomination for publishing official denominational documents at the behest of the Methodist Book Concern. The Methodist Book Concern itself was one of the largest-volume publishers in the United States during the nineteenth century, putting out not only denominational documents but curricula for Sunday schools, periodicals for various audiences, and a wide variety of books. At issue here is not only the pro-Methodist bias of the publisher, but also the assumption that these histories would be popular reading. This assumption would soon change. In the twentieth century Methodist history began to be published more and more for a niche market of historians interested in American church history, Methodist history specifically, or American cultural history. These more recent histories also tended to treat Methodism in a more detached way. Whereas Stevens, Simpson, and Buckley were all participant observers in the Methodist Episcopal Church, the historians who followed them strove for a more objective and hence more critical approach to their subject.

One of the first critical histories of Methodism after the turn of the twentieth century was William Warren Sweet's *Methodism In American History* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1933). The title alone suggests that Sweet continued the ongoing theme of relating American Methodism to the culture of the United States. He did not disappoint on this score, noting that "The Methodist Episcopal Church is one of the two largest Protestant Churches in the United States to-day largely because it possessed, or developed, the best technique of following and ministering to a moving and restless population."¹⁴ Sweet then named several specific aspects of this technique that the Methodists deployed during the nineteenth century. In terms of organization and practices of ministry, there were the flexible and expandable circuits in which traveling preachers, classes, and societies nurtured Methodists in the faith.¹⁵ These were accompanied by the Methodist exuberance that made their message accessible especially through singing and through camp meetings.¹⁶ Permeating all of this was the Methodist emphasis on personal morality and Arminianism, which was especially meaningful to the republican yeoman who prized his independence.¹⁷ Finally, the Methodists proved remarkably effective in disseminating literature wherever they went in the form of books and denominational weeklies, all of which helped to reinforce the message that Americans heard from the Methodist preachers, in the Methodist meetings, and in the Methodist songs.¹⁸

¹⁴ William Warren Sweet, *Methodism in American History* (New York, NY: The Methodist Book Concern, 1933), 143-144.

¹⁵ Sweet, 146-148.

¹⁶ Sweet, 151-155.

¹⁷ Sweet, 159, 169-170.

¹⁸ Sweet, 150, 184-185.

Sweet observed that this close relationship between Methodist evangelism and American culture led to a shift in Methodism during the Gilded Age, causing a fear of Methodist declension by virtue of the denomination moving from being “organic” to “mechanistic” with more of a focus on wealth, impressive buildings, and high-class pastors. One example he provided of this fear dealt directly with evangelism. He noted the fact that there was less tension between the church and the culture, making the barrier to conversion lower and bringing about the rise of “professional evangelism” which could just go through the motions of attracting new church members without any attempt at developing Christian discipleship in those members.¹⁹ However, even in view of these problems, Sweet rejected the lens of declension and focused on the ways that the denomination continued in mission by adapting to the progressively more urbanized and internationalized United States. The only failing of Methodist mission occurred, according to Sweet, when the Methodists fell into the general malaise that affected much of the American populace after First World War. Their enthusiasm over “making the world safe for democracy” shattered, the Methodists began to curtail their giving to missionary efforts significantly over the course of the 1920s.²⁰

While working with three decades of additional hindsight that was not available to Buckley, Sweet sounded a note very similar to that of Buckley. He acknowledged that declension was a real possibility because of the close ties between the Methodist Episcopal Church and particularly the culture maintained by those in the higher socio-economic strata in the United States. He even noted that some declension was evident in how the denomination backed away from its traditional modes of Christian formation. However, the explosive growth in membership and continuing size of the denomination proved too much for Sweet to conclude any serious declension occurred.

Four decades later, Frederick Norwood penned *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974). This book is one of the most common textbooks in Methodist history courses in United Methodist seminaries because it compresses the entirety of American Methodist history into a single volume and because it includes not only the Methodist Episcopal Church but many of the Methodist denominations such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Zion, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church. In it, Norwood borrowed heavily from his nineteenth-century forebears when he stated that American Methodism was itself a missionary enterprise meant to develop indigenous American Methodist leaders.²¹ It began with Methodist missionaries from England and Ireland evangelizing in the colonies, and it continued its missionary nature by keeping pace with the westward movement of the American frontier. Indeed, for Norwood, westward expansion was essential to the organization, influence, and spirit of American Methodism. Advancing a list similar to Sweet’s, Norwood claimed that it was because of westward expansion the Methodists developed their unique organization for evangelism through itinerancy, local lay leadership, and the substantial flexibility in how to carry out their work.²² Likewise, it was in the closing of the frontier and the rise of the great cities along with the immigrants who streamed into those cities that Norwood believed the Methodists struggled to redefine themselves and their missionary work.²³

Norwood also asserted that as the Methodist Episcopal Church expanded its membership and influence in the United States its evangelistic practices transformed: “The truth is, at the same time the church was demonstrating

¹⁹ Sweet, 334.

²⁰ Sweet, 384-386.

²¹ Frederick A. Norwood. *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 70.

²² Norwood, 16.

²³ Norwood, 342.

so convincingly its success in Christian witness in the United States, it was paying the price of victory in becoming a great institution, burdened with numbers and organizations, increasingly displaying tares along with the wheat.”²⁴

While Norwood clearly saw this shift as entailing a movement away from the purity of the evangelistic work the denomination engaged in during the revolutionary era, Norwood, like Sweet, refused to claim categorically that this shift to an organizational form of evangelism was part of a broader story of declension. Rather, he made the more modest claim that it showed the story of American Methodism to be a “human tale . . . warts and all.”²⁵ This tale included “revival, westward movement, social process, metamorphosed theology, Americanization, and the many diversities caused by the tensions between authority and freedom, between isolated independence and involvement in the Atlantic community, and between racial and ethnic and social variants.”²⁶

Following Norwood, Charles Ferguson wrote the book *Methodists and the Making of America* (Austin, TX: Eakin Press, 1983), opening it with the statement that “Methodism is America in microcosm.”²⁷ Ferguson then expanded on his claim by demonstrating, largely through vignettes, most of which he gathered from various other histories and edited together, how Methodism became a significant force in shaping the United States. He highlighted the temperance movement, the inclusion of the Oregon Territory into the Union at the behest of Methodist missionaries sent to the Flathead Indians in that region, and the rise of Goodwill Industries as direct ways that the Methodists worked to create a “more perfect Union.”²⁸ Anecdotal rather than providing a critical history, Ferguson’s list at least is useful in demonstrating that while the American culture influenced the Methodist Episcopal Church, the denomination also impacted the nation. In the cases of all three examples cited, it is notable that it was Methodist evangelistic efforts to change people’s moral commitments (temperance), faith commitments (missionaries to the Flathead Indians), and physical conditions (Goodwill Industries) that changed the American landscape. Clearly, for Ferguson, there was no hint of declension in the denomination, since he chose to follow the path of Stevens and Simpson by emphasizing how the nation was influenced by the denomination. However, this book is rarely assigned in courses or cited because of its lack of academic rigor. Ferguson himself was an editor for *Reader’s Digest* prior to authoring this text, and the style of writing common to that periodical is easily detected in this book.

Since the 1990s, several histories have appeared exhibiting strong academic work. In *The Methodist Conference in America* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1996) Russell Richey approached the relationship of American culture and the Methodist Episcopal Church by way of considering Methodist polity, specifically the conference structure in which Methodist leaders would meet as a council to consider church discipline for the denomination. Richey’s approach was the first to take this political route since several partisan histories published just prior to the Civil War in which the Methodists argued over the legality of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South separating from the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Richey argued that conferences were not simply a means of carrying out the business of the denomination, but were a means of grace the Methodists used to sanctify geographical space and the passage of time in the American Republic.²⁹ Richey further noted that the conference system was effective for Methodist evangelism by being flexible enough to allow for the development of quarterly conferences, which provided a setting for Methodists to

²⁴ Norwood, 234-235.

²⁵ Norwood, 442.

²⁶ Norwood, 441.

²⁷ Charles W. Ferguson, *Methodists and the Making of America: Organizing to Beat the Devil*, (Austin, TX: Eakin Press, 1983), 1.

²⁸ Ferguson, 2, 5-7, 372.

²⁹ Russell E. Richey, *The Methodist Conference in America: A History* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1996), 31-34.

engage in the business of the denomination on a local level while also participating in the kind of spirited camp meetings that the Methodists embraced in their ministry on the American frontier.³⁰ However, Richey claimed that the very success of the Methodists in growing their denomination throughout the nineteenth century led to the “routinization” of conferences as the desire for revival and evangelism waned and the business agenda came to the forefront. Ultimately, Richey argued that by the end of the century “Methodism had simply become too big, too complex, too institutionalized, too wealthy to run itself by a conference that met only periodically. The gravity in Methodism had shifted from conference to its boards and institutions.”³¹ Movement in this direction meant that evangelism, as all other ministries of the church, was bureaucratized and professionalized. Methodists replaced a denominational commitment to all Methodist preachers promoting revivalism with specialized denominational agents and committees tasked with carrying out evangelism for the Methodists.

Moreover, Richey suggested that while the Methodists wanted to sanctify America by the conference system, they ended up sanctifying specific views of the American political system, views that were often tied to regional perspectives. Richey claimed this eventually led to the division of the denomination based on whether annual conferences, each of which had authority to conduct Methodist ministry within a region of the United States, were in favor of slavery or against it. He pointed specifically to several major changes that occurred in the Methodist conference system during the 1830s and 1840s along these lines: 1) The annual conferences became increasingly identified with the sectional politics and prejudices where they operated. 2) Annual conferences began to judge the righteousness of each other based on the political views espoused by the conferences. 3) Memorials and legislation from annual conferences to the general conference, which met every four years and set denominational policies and laws, demonstrated that annual conferences focused on their own sovereignty with the general conference serving as a venue where the annual conferences could battle for the supremacy of their views. While the bishops attempted to keep the general conference purely spiritual, they were unsuccessful. 4) Undergirding this entire process was a growing belief in a “Christian America” and the movement toward adopting a civil religion that best expressed the competing sectional ideals the conferences adopted.³²

In making this argument, Richey nuanced the question of whether the denomination or the nation was most impacted by the other. As he explained it, the influence primarily flowed from American Methodists to the culture of the United States during the 1800s—1820s. However, by the 1830s, the various cultural values arising in the sections of the United States began to take predominance in influencing the Methodists. Richey’s writing suggests that this shift is a story of declension for the Methodists as they fell from their once prominent and sanctified position.

In *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1998), John Wigger studied the rise of Methodism as a popular evangelical religion during the period just following the Revolutionary War. According to Wigger, Methodism capitalized on three hallmarks of American society that were solidified during the revolutionary era: 1) The development of a free religious marketplace in contrast to the establishment of state churches. 2) The widespread acceptance of republican ideology, along with the leveling social implications that it carried. 3) The growing strength of the people in the geographical and cultural peripheries of the nation, especially along the frontier. There were four ways that Methodism capitalized

³⁰ Richey, 51-52, 60-61.

³¹ Richey, 142-143.

³² Richey, 99-101.

on these hallmarks: 1) It identified itself with the middling class by encouraging both spiritual and economic well-being. 2) It developed an “efficient system of itinerant and local preachers, class meetings, love feasts, quarterly meetings and campus meetings.” 3) It embraced “popular religious enthusiasm.” 4) It provided roles for women and African-Americans in its ministerial and evangelistic outreach.³³ Methodism proved so effective at connecting with Americans that “American Methodism was the largest, most geographically diverse movement of middling and artisan men and women in the early republic.”³⁴

In spite of this, much as Richey, Wigger argued that the story of American Methodism is one of declension, suggesting that by the mid-1800s Methodists began to lose their distinctive identity in favor of a closer relationship to American culture. He pointed to the fact that American Methodists grew in wealth throughout the early part of the nineteenth century, allowing them to participate in the higher echelons of society. It is because of this greater wealth and social respectability in the mid to late nineteenth century that the Methodists found themselves in a position to defend the system and culture that had profited them so well as opposed to challenging it. According to Wigger, “As Methodists grew progressively more comfortable in American society, they inevitably relaxed their discipline. The church simply could not be both respectable and countercultural. Eventually it did not represent a subculture of American life.”³⁵ Thus, Wigger concluded that Methodism was supposed to be able to hold two ideas in tension: that it was set apart from the world to reform the nation, and that it was a popular religion of the people. In the end it could not do this, needing to curtsy to popular beliefs and sensibilities if it was to continue to grow successfully. As such, it allowed the new respectability of middle-class America to define it.³⁶

Following in a similar vein to Richey and especially Wigger, David Hempton, in *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2005), considered Methodism as it developed a transatlantic missionary empire, spreading from England to the United States, and then on to the rest of the world. Hempton opined that the initial success of Methodism in this missionary movement came because Methodists were “clever parasites” who attached to, yet remained distinct from, an Anglican host. As such, “Methodism spread into most parts of the world opened up by British imperial and Anglican expansion.”³⁷ Methodism followed its parasitic ways in the United States by developing a symbiotic relationship with its host culture.³⁸ However, according to Hempton, what gave Methodism its greatest strength was not just that it was able to attach itself to Anglo-American cultures successfully, but that it lived in a series of dialectics which allowed it simultaneously to draw nourishment from its host cultures while also remaining independent from them through its moral dictates and focus on holiness. According to Hempton,

Methodism as a religious movement . . . appeared to thrive on the energy unleashed by dialectical friction. It was a movement of discipline and sobriety, but also of ecstasy and enthusiasm. It was a voluntary association of free people, but also specialized in rules, regulations, and books of discipline. It railed against riches, but became inexorably associated with the steady accumulation of wealth. It once prided itself on its appeal to the unlearned, but then founded educational institutions with

³³ John H. Wigger. *Taking Heaven by Story: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 5.

³⁴ Wigger, 6.

³⁵ Wigger, 188.

³⁶ Wigger, 192, 195.

³⁷ David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 19.

³⁸ Hempton, 7.

unparalleled fecundity.³⁹

Ultimately, however, Hempton joined Richey and Wigger in concluding that Methodism entered decline by the end of the nineteenth century. Rather than only focusing on respectability as the reason for this declension as Wigger did, Hempton offered three reasons: 1) Methodism consolidated and institutionalized its ministry in such a way that the excitement of the original generations dissipated as later generations simply saw maintaining the denominational machinery as an end in itself. 2) Methodism lost its spiritual and moral identity, thus losing its passion for ministry and *raison d'être*. 3) Methodism foundered because the unique historical forces that had promoted its rise and growth came to an end.⁴⁰ The result of all this was that Methodism failed to maintain its dialectical relationship with the American culture, subsuming its own identity to the identity of the culture. As a consequence, the denomination lost its potency. So, Hempton concluded,

The point is that Methodism, which drew so much of its energy from the old Wesleyan imperative to spread scriptural holiness across the land and then the world, could not sustain the same momentum and commitment from its followers when the gap between the ideals of scriptural holiness defined internally by the movement and achieved externally in the wider society narrowed to quite respectable proportions. Methodism at its heart and center had always been a profoundly countercultural movement. It drew energy and personal commitment from the dialectics arising from its challenge to accepted norms in religion and society. It thrived on opposition, but it could not long survive equivoise.⁴¹

The common agreement among all of these historians is that there was undoubtedly an interrelationship between American Methodism and American culture. Moreover, the authors unanimously acknowledged that American Methodists were participants in a vast evangelistic effort which provided the nexus for the interactions between the Methodists and American culture to take place. Beyond this agreement, the authors disagreed as to how the relationship between the culture of the United States and the Methodist Episcopal Church should be viewed, shifting between the views of Stevens, Simpson, and Ferguson, who saw the Methodists as having the primary impact on the United States, and the views of Buckley, Sweet, Norwood, Richey, Wigger, and Hempton, who saw the Methodists as largely being influenced by the culture. This difference in approach often predicts whether the author saw the story of American Methodism as one of declension or triumph.

While the later histories do offer a more detached and scholarly analysis of American Methodist history, it is notable that these histories were still written by historians who are from the United States (with the exception of David Hempton, who is from the United Kingdom) and who are at least familiar with, and often friendly to, the historical view of nineteenth-century American evangelicalism. Especially as the United Methodist Church considers what it means to be in mission worldwide—an issue that received significant attention during the 2008 General Conference—a worthy addition to this collection of histories would be a history of American Methodism written through the eyes of a non-Western historian who does not have American evangelicalism as part of his or her own background. This could open entirely new vistas for the historiography of American Methodism beyond questions of declension or triumph. Likewise, more denominational histories written by women would be welcome. There is a rich story of how women participated in and shaped American Methodism that is often only

³⁹ Hempton, 7.

⁴⁰ Hempton, 179-189.

⁴¹ Hempton, 201.

mentioned in passing. A history that not only gave the work of American Methodist women equal time in the content but that was written through the eyes of a woman historian would help to address this.

WORKS CITED

- Buckley, James M. *A History of Methodism in the United States*. 2 vols. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1898.
- Ferguson, Charles W. *Methodists and the Making of America: Organizing to Beat the Devil*. Austin, TX: Eakin Press, 1983.
- Hempton, David. *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005.
- Norwood, Frederick A. *The Story of American Methodism*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1974.
- Richey, Russell E. *The Methodist Conference in America: A History*. Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1996.
- Scott, Leland. "The Message of Early American Methodism," in Emory Stevens Bucke, ed. *The History of American Methodism*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964, 291-359.
- Simpson, Matthew. *A Hundred Years of Methodism*. New York: Nelson & Philips; Cincinnati: Hitchcock & Walden, 1876.
- Stevens, Abel. *Compendious History of American Methodism*. New York: Eaton & Mains; Cincinnati: Jennings & Graham, 1868.
- Sweet, William W. *Methodism in American History*. New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1933.
- Wigger, John H. *Taking Heaven by Story: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America*. Chicago: University Press of Illinois, 1998.

