

Happenings Around the Church

22-02-10

BY: DR. RILEY CASE

[Printer Friendly Version](#)

HAPPY 225TH ANNIVERSARY AMERICAN METHODISM (PART 4)

United Methodism is presently celebrating its 225th anniversary as an American Church. The occasion offers opportunity not only to rejoice for the way God has used United Methodist Church in the past, but also to consider what lessons can be learned for the days ahead.

When 60 preachers gathered in Baltimore at the Christmas Conference, 1784, to organize the Methodist Episcopal Church, they asked a question that John Wesley had asked at the first Methodist Conference in London in 1744: "What may we reasonably believe to be God's design, in raising up the preachers called Methodists?" The response was the same in 1784 in America, as in London: "To reform the nation, more particularly the Church: to spread scriptural holiness over the land."

One might be curious as to how the nation could be re-formed at that time before it had even yet been formed for the first time, but that would be to miss the point. Methodists had a big dream, a grandiose dream, of a nation claimed for God, characterized by scriptural holiness.

It would be helpful, and this is not always appreciated (even in such classic works as Wade Crawford Barclay's monumental 562 page work on Methodist missions, *To Reform the Nation 1769-1844*), to recognize that the operating eschatology in the early 1800s for evangelical Christians was post-millennialism, the view that the world was itself being redeemed and would eventually, perhaps soon, experience the promised millennium, God's kingdom on earth. The way to achieve this was through revival, that is, by bringing sinners to conversion. Of course, social reform in many instances went hand in hand with revival, though not without controversy. Some anti-war, pro equality-for-women, pro temperance, anti-slavery, pro-millennial evangelical Methodists broke away to form the Wesleyan Church in 1844 because the M.E. church was dragging its feet on this renewal. It is worth noting that the radical reform was coming from the bottom up. Methodist bishops were doing the foot-dragging.

Reforming zeal suffered a severe setback with the Civil War. The millennial vision ("Mine eyes have seen the coming of the glory of the Lord...") not only had not been accomplished with the war; the wreckage of sin and war seemed to put the vision beyond reach. Many evangelicals flipped their millennial views and became pre-millennial (the world is getting worse and will only be redeemed by a literal 2nd coming of Christ). They now thought of the purpose of the church not so much in terms of reforming the nation, but as rescuing individuals from the ruin of this world.

But others, including many Methodist leaders, were intrigued by a new idea: the world was still getting better and better but advancing science convinced them that the means to this betterment was not so much through revivalism as through education and the spread of democracy. Capitalism was still in favor at this point and was also a part of the equation.

In 1907 a new social reformist group, Methodists Federated for Social Service, (now MFSA), drafted a Social Creed, and launched what would soon be known as the social gospel. The creed stressed equal rights for all, justice, abolition of child labor, and causes that hardly seem controversial today. What was controversial was the understanding behind the creed that evil was not linked so much with original sin and the human heart as with unjust structures of society.

The creed was adopted by the M.E. General Conference of 1908, the same General Conference that deleted references to original sin from the baptismal ritual. In 1912 the General Conference

designated MFSA as the official unofficial social conscience of the church. The group counted bishops and seminary professors among its supporters. Thus an important shift: the task of reforming the nation no longer grew out of the movement of God among ordinary people, but with the opinions of an elitist chosen few. The one exception to this was the temperance movement, still a grass-roots cause among Methodists.

The social progressives supported World War I because winning the war would make the world safe for democracy. What was previously called the millennium was now simply the Kingdom of God—the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God. But World War I was a disillusioning experience. Peace did not come; democracy was not spread; the kingdom seemed far away. So MFSA and the social progressives did some more adjusting. Evil was now identified with capitalism and the profit motive. War—all war—was wrong because it was tied to capitalism. The Soviet Union's effort to redo the economic system through communism was followed with great interest. America was no longer the city on the hill, but part of the world problem. Society would have to be remade. The 1935 Methodist hymnal added a section called "The Kingdom of God" with 58 hymns including such progressive hymns as "These things shall be, a loftier race..." (# 512). Eugenics was one of the means by which the loftier race would be developed. "Reforming the Nation" had evolved from changing the heart through conversion to changing society through social and political action.

Progressives opposed World War II. Both the Methodist Church and the United Brethren Church carried anti-war statements in their Disciplines. As an indication of how far removed these statements were from the pew, less than one-tenth of 1% of Methodists and United Brethren filed as conscientious objectors during W.W. II (about 900 total). By way of contrast, millions of Methodists fought and supported the war. Not until 1944, even after it was known that Hitler had killed 6 million Jews, and the war had been supported by almost all Americans, and was coming to an end, did the Methodist General Conference by a close vote pass a statement that war might be justified in some circumstances.

That did not dampen the zeal of MFSA, the official unofficial "conscience" of the church, for its support of all things socialist. In July, 1947, *Classmate*, the paper for youth, extolled Joseph Stalin as a modern hero. In 1952, after a *Reader's Digest* article entitled, "Is There a Pink Fringe in the Methodist Church?" the General Conference chastised MFSA and authorized a new general board, the Board of Social and Economic Relations. This board, the forerunner of today's General Board of Church and Society (GBCS), instead of balancing and moderating the extreme views of MFSA, continued the same ideology. Along with the General Board of Global Ministries, it was said that these social activists seldom saw a revolution they did not like. In 1977 Dow Kirkpatrick, a GBGM missionary, visited Cuba and reported that "Fidel and his people celebrate the revolution they caused; we (Wesleyans) celebrate the ones we prevent...The Cuban Revolution—in contrast to the Christian Church—is one 'that is with the poor' and 'he who condemns a revolution like this one betrays Christ.'"

United Methodists today agree with the concept of "reforming the nation." The question is, by what means will it be reformed? Most United Methodists believe that reform should not be invested with one political party or the other. The purpose of the church is not to be a front for political causes, but a place where believers gather to worship and encourage one another to live out the Christian gospel.

United Methodism's social activists, on the other hand, appear to believe that liberal politics and the support of liberal causes is at the heart of the gospel, and that is what United Methodism is all about. When the controversy arose as to whether the Bush Library should be housed at Southern Methodist, a Methodist-related school, the progressive social activists argued that anything associated with United Methodism should not be identified with anything associated with George Bush, and that to allow the Bush Library at Southern Methodist would be in violation of "Methodist ethos." The reasoning suggests that in their view the essence of United Methodism ("Methodist ethos") is radical social policy.

Is there hope for the United Methodist Church? United Methodism's forty-five straight years of decline must be laid in part at the feet of those who would distract from the task of making disciples for Jesus Christ by an extreme emphasis on liberal social and political causes (environmentalism, anti-Israel advocacy, pro gay advocacy). Many United Methodists believe that that is a betrayal of the gospel. We must do better.

In an effort to be better stewards, The Confessing Movement is now able to offer the *We Confess* newsletter electronically. While unable to provide it as an email attachment, a link to a .pdf document on www.confessingumc.org will be emailed to those who request the email newsletter. If you would prefer to receive the email newsletter, please contact The Confessing Movement at confessingumc@iquest.net.

Add your friend or colleague to our email list by sending the name, address and email address to confessingumc@iquest.net

If you wish to be removed from our email list, call (317) 356-9729 or email to confessingumc@iquest.net

Post Comment

Title:

*First Name:

*Last Name:

*E-Mail:

Website:

Church/Organization:

*Comment:

Submit

View Comments

No entries

Nothing found in the guestbook.