



HAPPENINGS AROUND THE CHURCH

METHODIST SECTARIANISM AND THE WAY FORWARD

By Dr. Riley B. Case

I am pleased to announce a new book, *Faith and Fury* Eli Farmer on the Frontier 1796-1881, the autobiography of an early Methodist circuit-rider in Indiana with stories on camp meetings, the Western frontier, dramatic church growth, politics, fist fights, and religious sectarianism, with commentary by Riley Case. I share some conclusions from the book because I believe Eli Farmer's story offers some insights into historic American Methodism's attitude toward institutional unity, which appears to be an obsession for many United Methodists today as the church ponders its "Way Forward."

Methodism thrived in America. When Methodism organized in 1784 America was in a spiritual vacuum. Christianity, at least orthodox Christianity, did not fare well during the Revolutionary War. The rebellion against England was in part a rebellion against the Church of England and the Church of England's God. The Founding Fathers were trending toward deism. Only 10% of Americans in 1790 were church members. Methodism alone, it seems, was optimistic about America's Christian future. Asbury proclaimed, "America, America, God will make it the glory of the world for religion." The vision was grandiose: save souls and reform the nation.

The Americans inherited from Wesley a doctrinal system and a revival spirit. Its counter to the prevailing Calvinism of the day was the doctrine of unlimited atonement--Christ died for "all;" therefore the invitation was to "all." "All" included African-Americans (slave or free), unconverted Presbyterians, and all of the common, ordinary people of the new land. Methodists were the first to effectively reach African-Americans with the gospel. Even after two Black groups split from the Methodist Episcopal Church--the AME's and the AME Zion--by 1820 the ME Church was still 20% Black.

Methodists intentionally reached out to the poor. Allen Wiley, early Methodist leader in Indiana, urged the young preachers under his care not to seek "the most intelligent, wealthy, and accomplished...but the ignorant, the poor, the uncouth...Unitarianism...Socialism...Arianism...and Universalism...will never hunt up the outcasts of men and better their condition." It helped that Methodists themselves, at least at first, were themselves among the poor. And if not poor, they were often as on the fringes of society. They were counter-cultural: they witnessed against fashion and ostentatiousness and sought to separate themselves from the world, understood in part by fancy clothing, wearing of gold, and pretense in style.

Eli Farmer (b. 1794), a native of Kentucky and later of Indiana, came to Methodism by way of the camp meeting. After Cane Ridge, the granddaddy of all camp meetings which took place in Kentucky in 1801, camp meetings became a major part of the social and religious life of the Methodists. It was the

Methodists who repurposed “the altar” in the early 1800s. In most churches the “altar” was the place of sacrifice, Christ’s sacrifice, to be exact. Christ’s presence was (and is) symbolized at the altar, specifically in the Sacrament of Communion. But the revivalists believed another kind of sacrifice was needed, namely, the sacrifice of the individual to God. So the “altar” became the place to which one was invited to make the sacrifice. It did not matter that the place was a stump, or a bench, or a kneeling rail. The “altar call” was an invitation for conversion.

The implications for the doctrine of the church were far reaching. Suddenly the ordained priest or minister was superfluous. Any Spirit-filled Christian could minister at the altar—male, female, ordained, not ordained. For most denominations it took months or years for a person to qualify for altar service. For Eli Farmer, converted and filled with the Spirit, it took all of ten minutes. This was radical priesthood of all believers. This was egalitarianism to the extreme. It was also a leap toward ecclesiastical sectarianism. So Methodist clergy were never “priest,” and seldom “reverend” or even “minister.” They were “preacher” and “brother.” And sometimes “sister.” Phoebe Palmer’s “altar theology” included women as early as the 1830s. The Wesleyan Methodists were ordaining women in the 1840s. In Indiana the first Methodist Protestant woman pastor, Eleanore Davvisson, was ordained in 1846.

It was in the West (west of the Appalachians) that Methodism took sectarianism even farther. There was no prevailing religious culture in the West to moderate or restrain the Methodists. No one told the Methodists that it was inappropriate to speak of visions or to shout and get slain in the Spirit. Catholics believe the unity of the church is more important than the purity of the church. Sectarians believe the purity of the church is more important than the unity. UM bishops today can hardly open their mouths without offering a discourse on unity. Mention of “unity” was almost unknown among Methodists in the 1800 (except for those who believed in “contextualization” in regard to the owning of slaves). Methodists were about saving souls and reforming the nation.

The desire to merge and cooperate in religion is a catholic desire. The catholic vision of the Church is that of a big tent, which almost always includes diverse and sometimes competing values and almost always requires compromise. Methodists in early America, especially in the West, did not compromise. They took on Calvinists and Unitarians and Campbellites and Presbyterians and Catholics in order to keep pure the Methodist vision. These groups in turn took on the Methodists. When Indiana College (now Indiana University) was established in 1828 it was considered a Presbyterian school. The Methodists asked how it was that the Presbyterians in Indiana with only 5,000 members had three colleges and the Methodists, with 24,000 members, had none. They petitioned for a Methodist professor. Sam Bigger, a trustee (and later governor of the state) laid the petition on the table with the remark he knew of no Methodists in the state who were qualified. When the Methodists then started Indiana Asbury (now DePauw) Matthew Simpson, the first president, addressed the matter of sectarianism. Would the school be sectarian? Of course. All are sectarian. The only ones not sectarian believe in nothing or in everything.

The whole church culture was moving toward what Nathan Hatch would label as The Democratization of American Christianity: sectarian, egalitarian, individualist, suspicious of outside authority, and republican. When they were not debating others, churches debated among themselves. And split. And divided. By 1850 in Indiana there were ten Baptist groups, four Presbyterian groups, six Methodist groups, eight Quaker groups, and Christian Union Groups like sand on the sea. When the historic sectarian group like the Mennonites arrived they joined in the action and soon there were seven Mennonite and Amish groups. The Brethren would subdivide into eight groups.

To the modern mind the fracturing of Christianity would seem a disaster. The early 1800s church scene (the time of the Western Revival) hardly presented itself as Christianity advancing the cause of

civilization with the goal of, as the ecumenists of later years would declare, the forming of a Protestant World Order. Yet it can be argued that the sectarian turmoil of the first half of the 19th century, is what made America religiously distinctive among the Christian nations of the world and made Methodism its dominant form (at least until 1900). From 1790 until 1850 the percentage of Americans who were church members increased from 10% to about 35%. And Methodists, once 2.5% of those who were church members, would claim fully one-third by 1850. In Indiana it is said that by 1850 one out of every 10 persons in the state was attending a Methodist Sunday school. From 1810 to 1850 Indiana's population grew by 4,000%. During the same period Methodist membership grew by 9,000%.

As for Eli Farmer--alas, he was a casualty to Methodism. During his Methodist ministry he (by his account) took 5,000 members into the church. But by the 1840s he began thinking the Methodist "authorities" were no longer as interested in the poor. Their growing respectability and their upward social status was a compromise of the gospel. He sought to form a new Christian Union group (which in the name of non-sectarianism, became just another sect).

By the turn of the 20th century Methodism was abandoning its sectarian and egalitarian roots. Crosses began to appear in Methodist sanctuaries in the early 1900s, as did divided chancels. Popular professors like Borden Parker Bowne would speak of the necessity of letting "scholarly investigators" bring the church out from the "swamps of ignorance and superstition." Thus, the rise of Methodist (and now United Methodist) institutionalism, led by mediating elite, wishing to "progress" the church toward secular cultural acceptability.

There is no better example of this than the proposed One Church Model which will be considered at the February, 2019 General Conference. It is a denial of Methodism's rich evangelical heritage. In removing all negative references to traditional understandings of marriage and homosexual practice it rewrites the church's (to say nothing of the Bible) understandings of chastity and fidelity. It places the church back to the Bible's summary of the period of the judges: "In those days there was no king in Israel: all people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25). Those who support the plan argue that United Methodists can live by "love" and unite in their understanding of "mission." Unfortunately, we are not even agreeing on definitions of "love" and "mission." We are hopelessly divided.

Unity is a good thing, and to be pursued, but not at a cost of seriously compromising the faith. It would be better to divide amicably and let groups pursue a more focused vision.

*(If interested in the book *Faith and Fury*, or any other of Riley Case's book, or any of the past*

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