

Module 2

The Wesleyan Methodists and Social Reform

Several forces led to the creation of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection in 1843. The abolitionist movement was undoubtedly the precipitating factor that led several pastors to break with the Methodist Episcopal Church. But we might push back further to find other currents that led to this decision.

We might start with the impetus for Europeans to leave the security of their homeland and settle in the wilderness of North America for religious freedom. The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century had ruptured the seamless robe of Roman Catholicism and created an ever-increasing number of new denominations. Martin Luther had defended his break with the Church by what has become known as the “Protestant Principle.”

Facing the princes of Germany, he had argued that he was no longer obligated to show allegiance to the institution that had ordained him. Unless he could be persuaded by solid reason, he was bound to his conscience and the Word of God. Within a short period of time others – Calvinists, Anabaptists, Moravians, Quakers—found ample justification for forming their own expressions of Christian faith which they believed more clearly followed the teachings of Scriptures. When persecuted, many of these groups emigrated to the colonies where they hoped to find freedom from ecclesiastical constraints.

The American Revolution and the consequent forming of the United States solidified this impetus for religious freedom and pluralism. The Bill of Rights prohibited the formation of any state church and protected the rights of almost all people, no matter what their beliefs. America was ripe for new expressions of religious faith. The same region of the country where Scott and Lee called for a convention had already seen the creation of Shakers, Latter Day Saints (Mormons), Spiritualists and dozens of small sects that lasted only for the lifetime of their messianic leaders. A new denomination of Wesleyan Methodists would have not been a surprise at all to a nation of multiplied Protestant denominations.

The Methodist Episcopal Church could be listed among the many religious groups that were birthed in the post-revolutionary era. In this case, the issue was not a matter of Biblical teaching or convictions of conscience. It was rather the close ties Methodism had during its formative years with the Church of England. When his followers urged John Wesley to create a separate Methodist Church, he asserted that he would live and die a member of the Church of England. He wanted the Methodist Societies to be a para-church organization without creating another schism. However, during the “War of Rebellion” (as the British called it), virtually every Church of England minister returned to England voluntarily or they were driven from the Colonies by American patriots. With the collapse of the Anglican Church in America, John Wesley had no other alternative but to establish a distinct church for the soon-to-be United States of America.

This new denomination, the Methodist Episcopal Church, was free from all ties to the Church of England, but the structure was modeled closely to that ecclesiastical institution – so much so that “Episcopal” was incorporated in the name. Even though Wesley would have preferred to

have its leaders designated as “Superintendents,” both Francis Asbury, Thomas Coke and their successors claimed the title of “Bishop” instead. Authority was top down. Although these Methodists would gather in general conferences to act on legislation, the primary power lay in the clergy and particularly the bishops.

Such a structure might work well in England where there was still a strong monarchy and nobility. But in America a republican and democratic government was forged with authority arising from the common people through duly elected representatives. When bishops began to assert their authority, particular to squelch voices of protest, heavy handed measures were used to preserve the status quo. In no place was this more evident than the issue of whether members of the church could hold slaves as property.

Despite Wesley’s abhorrence of American slavery and a strong anti-slavery sentiment at the founding conference in Baltimore, pressures from members in the South led to increasing tolerance and blind disregard of slave-owning in the denomination. Protests from abolitionists, primarily residing in New England, were stifled by an ecclesiastical model that favored institutional status quo rather than radical change. Thus, the organizers of the Utica Convention of 1843 were passionate about changing both the Methodist stance toward slavery and the ecclesiastical structure that protected it.

Yet another force that prevailed in the first half of the 19th century was the second Great Awakening. The Wesleys, George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards, a New England Calvinist had been the primary drivers of the first awakening a century earlier. But it was the impact of a Presbyterian lawyer turned evangelist who had much to do with the spiritual fervor that surrounded the formation of the Wesleyan Methodists.

Charles Finney broke from the prevailing Calvinist and Lutheran theology of the time that assumed that divine election was the dominating force in an individual’s coming to faith. Finney believed that human agency played an important role in salvation and so he proposed “new measures” that could produce a revival – both in individual conversions and transformation of society. Scheduling special services (He called them “protracted meetings.”), identifying sinners by name, and closing services with an appeal to come forward and make an immediate decision (altar call) were all ways of promoting active engagement of humans rather than waiting passively for divine intervention in the affairs of men and women. If one desired a spiritual change, one must act aggressively to make that change a reality.

Yet another of Finney’s new measures was the expectation that new birth not only entailed a change in one’s relationship to God but a conversion of one’s behavior and lifestyle. Old patterns of conduct must be set aside and replaced by godly actions. Foremost in these changes was abstaining from alcoholic beverages, swearing and mistreatment of others. Out of this emphasis on personal conversion arose a focus on transforming the community and society into a “righteous nation.” This crusading spirit fostered organizations calling for temperance, women’s rights, stricter sabbath observance and the abolition of slavery. The formation of a denomination that championed many of these causes along with a strong appeal for saving sinners would be no surprise; Orange Scott and Luther Lee calling for such a connection of

like-minded congregations was appealing to many, even those outside the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Although the Wesleyan Methodist Connection did not champion the cause of women in its founding documents, those individuals who advocated the rights of women to own property, vote in civic elections and serve in roles traditionally reserved for males found considerable support in this new denomination. The organizers of the first national convention for women's rights prevailed upon the pastor of the Wesleyan Methodist congregation in Seneca Falls, New York to use their newly-constructed chapel as the site for their organizing convention. After giving his consent, the pastor abruptly left town shortly before meeting, leaving the chapel locked. However an open window at the rear of the building provided access and today The Wesleyan Church can claim the honor of having hosted such a gathering. A recently re-constructed chapel at the site is sponsored by the National Park Service.

In a similar fashion, the first woman publicly ordained to the Christian ministry in the United States, and possibly the world, was not a Wesleyan Methodist. Antoinette Brown was a Congregationalist. When the clergy of her denomination were reluctant to publicly endorse her status as clergy, she turned to Luther Lee, the pastor of a nearby Wesleyan Methodist congregation to deliver the ordination sermon – now a classic document laying out the Biblical and practical grounds for such an action.

The Wesleyan Methodists' objection to slavery was clear-cut and universal. Less so was the issue of membership in secret societies. Many participants in this moral crusade considered secret societies, especially the Masonic order as contrary to Biblical teaching and social justice. The strong oaths taken by initiates to the order and the universalist teaching contained in its religious rituals struck many as a false religion that was incompatible with Christian doctrine and practice. Furthermore, through secret codes and symbols, the Masons had many discriminatory practices – special discounts only for fellow Masons, refusal to bear witness against a brother in criminal proceedings, exclusion of certain individuals from membership – that countered the call for liberty and justice for all. The sudden disappearance of a former Mason near Buffalo, New York who had exposed many of their secret practices only heightened the opposition to this group.

Notwithstanding these concerns, several of the leaders of the new denomination, including Luther Lee, were faithful members of a Masonic lodge. While the issue was skirted at the Utica Convention, later action prohibiting membership in secret societies caused an exodus of many new congregants. That position opposing membership in secret societies continues in The Wesleyan Church to the present.

The forces of denominational fracturing – republican rather than episcopal structures and moral transformation of society – all contributed to the decision for members of the Methodist Episcopal Church to meet in Utica in 1843 to create a new denomination that proposed to adhere more closely to the teachings of Scripture and John Wesley. The religious climate of that time was ripe for such an organization, and it is no wonder that the Wesleyan Methodist Connection experienced phenomenal growth in the decade after its formation.

Shortly after the breakaway, the Methodist Episcopal Church divided into two separate denominations – North and South – staunching the exodus of its members to the Wesleyan Methodists. After a Union victory ended the Civil War, a significant portion of the membership returned to their former denomination, preferring the mainline reputation of the Methodists to the more radical mindset of the Wesleyan Methodists. Contributing to this return was the fact that the crusading spirit of the abolitionists turned inward to a prohibition of many lifestyle behaviors that were condemned as being too worldly.

In a few decades, the Wesleyan Methodist Connection transitioned from a social reform movement with national leadership limited to an editor and a book agent to a more institutionalized “church” with a geographical headquarters in Syracuse, New York (later Marion, Indiana) and a robust full-time staff. The surge for social reform faded as the focus shifted toward the rising holiness movement and the fundamentalist reaction to liberal theology that questioned the authority of the Scriptures.

In subsequent decades liberal elements of many mainline denominations in America largely abandoned orthodox faith, replacing orthodox teachings with a “social gospel.” This contrasted with the more evangelical wing of American Christianity that abandoned Wesley’s concerns for societal righteousness and focused instead on Finney’s emphasis on saving souls through evangelistic methods. The moral dimension of Christian faith was not lost by the Wesleyan Methodists, but it largely turned inward to matters of personal experience and behavior. Any passion for bringing Christ’s kingdom to earth through social reform would fade into the background until after the merger with the Pilgrim Holiness Church a century later.