

Introduction

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For almost two hundred and fifty years, Methodism has been one of the most dynamic, diverse, and culturally significant forms of religion in America. To be sure, Methodism was not the first English religious movement to arrive in America. That distinction belongs to the Puritans. However, it was not long before Methodism exploded onto the American religious landscape, and it soon rivaled Puritanism “in its force and intensity,” as well as in its ability “to mobilize followers, to generate new modes of communication and organization, and to instill habits of industry, sobriety, and mutual accountability.” By the mid-nineteenth century, the Methodists were “the largest religious body in the United States and the most extensive national organization other than the Federal government.”¹

Despite its phenomenal rate of growth and its pervasive influence in American culture, Methodism was until very recently underrepresented in the scholarly study of religion in America.² In a way that resembles the meteoric growth of Methodism itself, a slow beginning has now given way to a veritable explosion of scholarly interest and work. Indeed, the last twenty-five years have witnessed the development of a significant scholarly literature and conversation related to American Methodism. This literature is multidisciplinary in nature, including contributions in social, political, cultural, and intellectual history, the sociology and psychology of religion, theology, and more. There is also a great deal of diversity with respect to the topics and themes that scholars are exploring. For example, in addition to period,³ regional,⁴ and denominational studies,⁵ there are now hundreds of monographs and articles that explore Methodism and race,⁶ Methodism and gender,⁷ Methodism and alcohol,⁸ American Methodist missions,⁹ and American Methodist worship, to name just a few.¹⁰ Moreover, there is a fast growing list of outstanding critical biographies of significant people in the history of American Methodism.¹¹

Among the many lessons to be learned from this recent scholarly work, two are especially worth noting. First, American Methodism is

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not a static form of religion. Throughout its history, Methodism has continually adapted to and agitated for change within American culture.¹² In other words, Methodism has been deeply shaped by the tensions and transitions in American culture across space and time, but it has also played a leading role in advocating for social and political change and thereby shaping American culture.

Second, American Methodism is not a monolithic form of religion. On the contrary, American Methodism comprises of a dynamic and diverse group of churches and denominations. In early American Methodism, for example, theology, ethnicity, and race contributed to the formation of African-American and German Evangelical-Pietist churches that represent American Methodism as much as the larger and predominantly white Methodist Episcopal Church.¹³ Over time, disagreements over whether and how best to adapt to American culture and over whether and how best to agitate for change led to the formation of other American Methodist groups and churches, a development best illustrated by the division of the Methodist Episcopal Church over slavery and by the churches and denominations that resulted from the holiness controversies of the mid- to late nineteenth century.¹⁴

The present volume *reflects* these and other interpretive insights that have emerged in the scholarly study of American Methodism over the last quarter century. It does so by taking a multidisciplinary approach to the subject, highlighting the dynamic and diverse nature of American Methodism, paying close attention to the relationship between Methodism and American culture, and introducing readers to the most important scholarly literature related to a wide range of themes and topics (the endnotes in each chapter contain a gold mine of bibliographic information for additional research and study). However, it also *builds upon* recent interpretive trends insofar as each chapter compares and contrasts a range of American Methodist groups or denominations in an effort to provide a more textured and nuanced reading of the whole. This volume also advances the conversation by attending to themes or topics that are less prominent in the scholarly literature to date, including clergy and laity, Methodism and popular culture, healing, asceticism, and war.

Another way in which this volume contributes to the scholarly conversation has to do with understanding and appreciating American Methodism *as a theological tradition*. American Methodism has been perceived for too long as a form of religion that revolves around pragmatic concerns rather than around deeply engrained theological sensibilities. For example, Charles Wood, an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church and long-time professor of Christian doctrine at

Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, began a recent book on Methodist theology with the following remark:

It is widely believed that a walk through the Methodist doctrinal pond would hardly get one's feet wet. It is not only other Christians who have this impression of us, of course; many Methodists share it, and take it either as a point of pride (the dominant view, so far as I can see) or as a reason for self-reproach (a minority view, whose influence waxes and wanes periodically).¹⁵

When American Methodism is not being perceived as theologically or doctrinally superficial, it is frequently characterized as involving a “bewildering spectrum of doctrinal diversity.”¹⁶ Taken together, these two caricatures have discouraged scholars from working to identify the theological sensibilities and doctrinal commitments that have animated American Methodists across the centuries. Thus, despite the considerable progress made in the scholarly study of American Methodism over the last twenty-five years, an account of American Methodism as a theological tradition has yet to appear.

With a view toward correcting this misreading and the oversight that results from it, the present volume begins with an account of American Methodism as a theological tradition. Contrary to the widespread notion that Methodism is either too theologically shallow to be compelling or too diffuse to constitute a theological tradition, Chapter 1 maintains that both the dynamism and the appeal of Methodism stem from doctrinal commitments and theological sensibilities that have persisted across space and time.

Following this initial chapter on American Methodism as a theological tradition are three chapters that correspond roughly to the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. These chapters combine to provide the reader with a wide-ranging overview of the history of American Methodism in its many forms. They attend to the evolution of Methodism from a movement within the wider horizon of trans-Atlantic revivalism to a Church with an episcopal form of government (Chapter 2), to the fragmenting of Methodism into several Churches and/or denominations (Chapter 3), and to the many and varied attempts to reunite and renew Methodism in the twentieth century (Chapter 4). These three chapters also introduce the reader to many significant materials, persons, practices, and events in the history of American Methodism, including the so-called “Christmas Conference” of 1784, books of Discipline, Richard Allen, Francis Asbury, and Phoebe Palmer, the holiness movement, camp meetings, and much more.

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The second section of the book takes a closer look at the religious culture of American Methodism. Chapters 5 and 6 provide an overview of the liturgical or cultic life of American Methodism as it inheres in preaching, the sacraments, and life-cycle rituals. Chapter 7 compares and contrasts approaches to church government or polity in several American Methodist churches/denominations. Chapters 8 and 9 examine evolving notions about the roles and contributions of clergy and laity in American Methodism. Chapters 10 through 13 highlight a range of practices and commitments at the heart of American Methodist life, including asceticism, healing, the reading and writing of spiritual biographies and autobiographies, and learning through higher education.

The third section of this volume considers the ways that Methodists have responded to major issues, movements, and developments in American society. Chapters 14 and 15 provide an overview of the ways in which American Methodists have responded to issues and developments related to race, including but not limited to slavery, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement. Chapter 16 examines the roles and contributions of American Methodist women, giving special attention to the ways in which Methodist women have thought about and advocated for gender equality in church and society. Chapter 17 provides a framework for thinking about the ways that Methodists have responded to or participated in wars, and Chapter 18 considers the ways in which American Methodists have interacted with popular culture.

Finally, by way of introduction, the reader should note that every effort has been made to present American Methodism in a way that honors its theological, political, and denominational diversity. For example, the authors were encouraged to include examples or illustrations from a variety of time periods as well as from a wide range of American Methodist churches and denominations. While some topics lent themselves to this more than others, all of the authors strived to provide as much comparative analysis as possible. Moreover, the authors themselves represent a wide range of American Methodist denominations, including the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Church of the Nazarene, the Free Methodist Church, the United Methodist Church, and the Wesleyan Church, as well as a wide range of theological and political views.¹⁷

Notes

- 1 Nathan O. Hatch and John H. Wigger, "Introduction," in *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture*, edited by Nathan O. Hatch and John H. Wigger (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2001), 11.

- 2 For an account of the relative neglect of Methodism in the scholarly study of religion in America, see Nathan O. Hatch, "The Puzzle of American Methodism," *Church History* 63:2 (1994): 175–189.
- 3 Examples of period studies include Dee E. Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760–1800: The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Russell E. Richey, *Early American Methodism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991); Lester Ruth, *Early Methodist Life and Spirituality* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2005); and John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998).
- 4 For exemplary regional studies, see Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind, 1770–1810* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Beth Barton Schweiger, *The Gospel Working Up: Progress and the Pulpit in Nineteenth Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Randall Stephens, *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), and Brian K. Turley, *A Wheel within a Wheel: Southern Methodism and the Georgia Holiness Association* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999).
- 5 Recent examples of denominational studies include James T. Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998); *Our Watchword and Song: The Centennial History of the Church of the Nazarene*, edited by Floyd Cunningham (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2009); Dennis C. Dickerson, *A Liberated Past: Explorations in AME Church History* (Nashville, TN: A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 2003); and Othal Hawthorne Lakey, *The History of the CME Church* (Memphis, TN: CME Publishing House, 1996).
- 6 For example, see Morris L. Davis, *The Methodist Unification: Christianity and the Politics of Race in the Jim Crow Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); and Peter Murray, *Methodists and the Crucible of Race, 1930–1975* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004).
- 7 See Jean Miller Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient: A History of Women in American Methodism 1760–1968* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999); A. Gregory Schneider, *The Way of the Cross Leads Home: The Domestication of American Methodism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994); and Susie C. Stanley, *Holy Boldness: Women Preachers; Autobiographies and the Sanctified Self* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2002).
- 8 For example, see Jennifer Woodruff Tait: *Poisoned Chalice: Eucharistic Grape Juice and Common-Sense Realism in Victorian Methodism* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2011).
- 9 For example, see J. Steven O' Malley, *On the Journey Home: The History of Mission of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, 1946–1968* (New York: General Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 2003); and Russell E. Richey, "Organizing for Missions: A Methodist Case

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- Study," in *The Foreign Missionary Enterprise at Home: Explorations in North American Cultural History*, edited by Daniel H. Bays and Grant Wacker (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2003), 75–93.
- 10 See Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- 11 See Edith Blumhofer, *Aimee Semple McPherson: Everybody's Sister* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993); Sandy Dwayne Martin, *For God and Race: The Religious and Political Leadership of AMEZ Bishop James Walker Hood* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999); Howard A. Snyder, *Populist Saints: B. T. and Ellen Roberts and the First Free Methodists* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006); Charles Edward White, *The Beauty of Holiness: Phoebe Palmer as Theologian, Revivalist, Feminist and Humanitarian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis and Taylor, 2008); and John H. Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- 12 On adaptation and agitation within American Methodism, see David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).
- 13 See Russell Richey et al., *American Methodism: A Compact History* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012). Also see *Methodist and Pietist: Retrieving the Evangelical United Brethren Heritage*, edited by J. Steven O'Malley and Jason E. Vickers (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2011); and Harry V. Richardson, *Dark Salvation: The Story of Methodism as It Developed among Blacks in America* (Garden City, NJ: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1976).
- 14 For more on the holiness movement and the churches that resulted from it, see Randall J. Stevens, "The Holiness/Pentecostal/Charismatic Extension of the Wesleyan Tradition," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, edited by Randy L. Maddox and Jason E. Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- 15 Charles Wood, *Love that Rejoices in the Truth: Theological Explorations* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 1.
- 16 E. Brooks Holifield, *Health and Medicine in the Methodist Tradition: Journey Toward Wholeness* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 4.
- 17 Three of the authors are not members of any American Methodist body.

Part I

The Making and Remaking of American Methodism

I American Methodism: A Theological Tradition

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The purpose of this chapter is to provide an account of American Methodism as a dynamic and living theological tradition. What follows is not a short history of American Methodist theology, but a conceptual argument about the theological sensibilities that inhere in deep, if sometimes subtle, ways in American Methodism across space and time. More specifically, it is an argument that, at the heart of American Methodism, are theological sensibilities that 1) took shape initially in the religious culture of revivals and awakenings, 2) evolved over time into five distinct theological languages, and 3) are presently awaiting dogmatic development.¹

Before turning to the origins of American Methodist theology in revivals and awakenings, it may help to say a brief word about the terms *American Methodist*, *doctrine*, and *theology*. In the account that follows, *American Methodist* denotes the African-American Methodist Episcopal, Brethren, Evangelical, Methodist Episcopal, United Methodist, and Wesleyan-holiness traditions. *Doctrine* denotes what American Methodists have believed, taught, and confessed not only in official doctrinal statements, but also in catechisms, sermons, hymns, personal testimonies, and even architecture. *Theology* is a broader term that denotes the work of ongoing reflection upon the doctrines of Methodism. At times, the work of theological reflection takes the form of criticism, revision, and expansion. At other times, it involves retrieving or renewing doctrines that have been obscured, distorted, or otherwise rendered inoperative.

THE MAKING OF AMERICAN METHODIST THEOLOGY: REVIVALS AND AWAKENINGS

The theological sensibilities around which early American Methodism coheres can be traced, not to the work of a single great theologian, but to the religious culture of revivals and awakenings. It is not simply that

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American Methodist theology originates *within* this culture; the whole history of American Methodist theology, with all of its twists and turns and with all of its methodological and material diversity, can be read as a series of creative adaptations of the theological sensibilities that took shape in this formative period. If this sounds bizarre, then it is no doubt because the standard histories have focused more on explaining the affective trappings of the religious culture of revivals and awakenings than on discerning the theological sensibilities that animated it in the first place.²

Evangelical Sensibilities

In the culture of revivals and awakenings, American Methodists were concerned primarily with proclaiming the Gospel. They proclaimed the Gospel through evangelism, personal conversation, letter writing, obituaries, spiritual biographies and autobiographies, and a host of other ways.³ Above all, however, early American Methodists were committed to the proclamation of the Gospel through preaching.⁴ In their explanatory notes to the *Discipline*, Bishops Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke stressed, “The preaching of the Gospel is of *first* importance to the welfare of mankind.”⁵

More than anything else, the commitment to preaching shaped early American Methodist theological sensibilities. As will be evident shortly, subsequent generations of American Methodists would go on to experiment with other types of theology, including philosophical and systematic theology. In doing so, they would sometimes lose the vital connection between preaching and theology. By contrast, when early American Methodists undertook theological reflection, they almost always did so with a view toward the work and the goal of preaching. Consequently, early American Methodist theology was primarily homiletical theology.

One way that preaching shaped early American Methodist theology has to do with the role of the Bible. As *the* source of preaching, the Bible was the wellspring of American Methodist doctrine and theological reflection. For instance, early American Methodist doctrinal and theological vocabulary consisted primarily of concepts and metaphors derived directly from Scripture rather than from philosophical or other sources. Moreover, early American Methodists were committed to scriptural reasoning, which is to say, to adhering closely both to the language and the logic of Scripture. Thus, Bishops Asbury and Coke urged early American Methodist preachers to “choose the plainest text you can,” and having done so, to “take care not to ramble, but keep to your text.”⁶ They also warned the preachers that the Gospel is not a matter of “fine metaphysical reasoning.”⁷

Another way that preaching deeply shaped early American Methodist theology has to do with a commitment to simplicity and



Figure 1. **Bishop Richard Allen, the African Methodist Episcopal Church**, Methodist Library Image Collection, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey.

intelligibility. Compared with other Protestants at the time, Methodists had a reputation for plain speaking. Thus Richard Allen, the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, observed,

The Methodists were the first people that brought the glad tidings to the colored people. . . . We are beholden to the Methodists, under God, for the light of the Gospel we enjoy; for all other denominations preached so high-flown that we were not able to comprehend their doctrine.⁸