The preaching of the missionaries aimed to convey an understanding of the Christian life that differed from what Mexicans had known before the North Americans’ arrival in 1873. Moreover the missionaries believed that the attitudes and values they were bringing would lead to the betterment of Mexican society. These newly arrived Methodists could not conceive of a “civilized” nation that did not function according to Christian values and norms as they understood them.

Undergirding their approach was a new understanding of religious experience. In 1875, William Butler asserted that basic missionary preaching must be about an experienced and lived religion. Through such preaching, he asserted, hearers would be transformed into “new persons” who had the security of a direct relationship with God. Understanding and experiencing this relationship would give the individual confidence in the divine grace of salvation. In this way, the convert would feel spiritually satisfied. Ultimately, this satisfaction would provide the strength believers needed to transform their personal lives and their social surroundings as well. This was, and continues to be right up to our own day, one of the essential teachings of Methodism.

From the beginnings of Methodism in 18th century England, the classic example of this personal transformation has been the conversion experience of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist societies. Indeed, Wesley’s biography was one of the first works published by the Methodist Publishing House in Mexico. The conversion of this Anglican minister had a profound

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1. [57th Annual Report of the Board of Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1875, p. 140.](#)
impact on his life and that of all of those who came to be known as “Methodists.” After Wesley’s conversion, two concerns were uppermost in his mind: the wellbeing of his friends, especially any whom he felt he had harmed; and the urge to share this religious experience which had given him a feeling of security and peace for the first time in his life.

At bottom, Methodism was a return to the doctrine of salvation by divine grace that makes the person a “new” being; a change that manifests itself in a life of seeking perfection and sharing with others what the believer has felt and experienced. The fundamental doctrines of this understanding of the Christian religion are not especially complicated. John Wesley summarized them in 25 doctrinal precepts, a synthesis of the 39 articles of the Church of England. The most relevant aspects of this belief system, important because they implied ethical norms that guided the life of the believer, were: 1) belief in the existence of a God in three persons (hence the “Holy Trinity” that appears in the names of so many churches built by the Methodist Episcopal Church in Mexico); 2) the conviction that people are sinful by nature; 3) an acknowledgement of individual moral freedom; 4) confidence in the victory of Jesus Christ over sin; 5) an experience of pardon for sins; 6) a sense of security grounded in this experience of pardon; 7) the pursuit of sanctification in the life of the believer; 8) confidence in the sufficiency of the Bible as a guide for the faith and practice of the convert; 9) belief in the divine origin of the church; and 10) a hopeful expectation of the coming of the last judgment and the eternal life to follow.²

These themes were the essence of the Methodists’ preaching in Mexico. They considered this appeal for conversion to be indispensable for an abundant life in the here and now and in the life to come. The appeal rested on two pillars: the redeeming grace of God and the individual’s

decision to admit that they are a sinner and in need of God’s pardon. Methodists placed great value on the individual because in the individual’s own hands was the responsibility to accept or reject what was being offered. Concern for the wellbeing of individuals and respect for the capabilities of individuals followed naturally from this premise. While it represented a very individualistic worldview, it was not indifferent to issues of social concern.

The practical consequences of these teachings were what Wesley himself described as “the Methodist character,” which can be reduced to four basic elements: a) a personal experience of salvation, that is to say, certainty that divine grace, and only divine grace, gives eternal life; b) “concern for the spiritual wellbeing of others,” and not just for their souls, but for all aspects of life including economic and social circumstances; c) striving for Christian perfection; and d) maintaining unity in fundamentals while keeping an open mind on other religious questions. These ideas provided the foundation for the endeavors that Mexican Methodists undertook in various spheres of life between 1873 and 1930. Their desire to engage in mission work, their support of education at all levels, their creation of hospitals and medical clinics, their defense of democratic and liberal ideals, and their preaching of specific ethical and moral values were based on these Methodist doctrines. Indeed, they were the reason for the Methodist presence in our country.

**A. Preparing the Soil**

The initial work of William Butler, the mission’s founder, consisted of making contact with groups of potential sympathizers of the cause. The soil had already been prepared by a combination of external and internal developments. In 1824, the year that the first attempt was

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3 Selecman and Jones, *The Methodist First Reader*, pp. 12f.
made to establish religious toleration in our country, the United States Bible Society explored the possibility of entering Mexico. In 1827, one year prior to the second liberal effort to reform the Constitution with regard to worship, James D. Thompson began activities on behalf of the British Bible Society. During the Mexican-U.S. War of 1846, soldiers and chaplains of the invading army passed out Bibles and scripture portions. A year after the war ended, Dr. Greyson M. Prevost began mission work in Zacatecas. A bit later, Melinda Rankin began her evangelistic efforts in Matamoros which eventually reached all the way to Monterrey. Thus, even before the promulgation of the Law of Religious Freedom by liberal reformers in the middle of the century, efforts had been made to spread Protestantism south of the Rio Grande.

Internal developments also played a crucial role in the rise of Methodism in Mexico. At the end of the eighteen-fifties and the beginning of the sixties, a group of Catholic priests who supported the liberal reform movement separated themselves from the Roman Catholic Church and attempted to form an independent Mexican church. The schismatic priests were called the “Constitutionalist Fathers” and they received the backing of the liberal political authorities who provided them with buildings confiscated from the Catholic Church and other resources. This schismatic movement established a church that was “reformed, national, and founded on the scriptures and the apostolic creeds.” At its peak in the 1870s, the so-called Church of Jesus had more than seven thousand members in approximately fifty congregations.4

The Church of Jesus was merely the largest of a number of efforts by Mexicans to create congregations separate from the Roman Catholic Church at a time when liberals were attempting to establish religious toleration in Mexico. It was to these independent groups that the Methodist

4 The group lacked the authority to ordain new ministers according to the principal of apostolic succession so they sent representatives to the United States to secure an Episcopal bishop who had the authority to ordain new priests. For a variety of reasons, the church was never able to establish an independent episcopacy. After a period of decline, its remaining congregations attached themselves to the Episcopal Church of the United States.—Trans.
missionaries directed their efforts. When John W. Butler surveyed the first half century of missionary work in our country, he indicated that “many Protestant congregations had their origin” in these pre-existing groups. Moreover several of the first Methodist pastors in Mexico were recruited from among the “Constitutionalist fathers.”

Not surprisingly, conflicts soon surfaced between the missionaries and the new Mexican pastors. The correspondence of William Butler and William Cooper between 1874 and 1876 is riddled with complaints about the misdeeds of the “native preachers.” Their open conflicts with the Catholic Church and their lack of respect for the authority of the missionaries were the principle subjects of complaint. And more than one native preacher was separated from the mission for pursuing a lifestyle that showed too little evidence of sanctification. Recruitment of these “political Protestants” gave an initial impetus to the work, but the mission could not be sustained on such a weak foundation. Butler was convinced that the long-term success of the undertaking would require something more than merely opposing the Catholic Church or supporting the ideals of the political liberals as some of the ex-priests seemed to do. Becoming a Protestant believer required more than a simple “change of opinion,” asserted John W. Butler in 1885.

However it was impossible to teach all of the fine points of the new religion quickly and completely to potential converts. Hence, the first task of the mission was to provide a form of worship that gave whoever adopted it a religious experience they had never had in their former religion, “without worrying too much about whether or not they were following all of the correct

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6 Between March 6 and November 5, 1874, William Butler complained at least six times about the irresponsibility and poor spiritual lives of the Mexican pastors, and also about another missionary.

7 67th Annual Report of the Board of Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1885, p. 220.
rules." But that approach depended on the personal testimonies of those who had already had this religious experience. From that followed the necessity, which William Butler insisted upon, of obtaining young missionaries from the United States who felt called to preach the gospel, at least until the Mexicans had fully absorbed the new faith.

Meanwhile, the missionaries continued to address the problem of attracting and training congregants capable of living and preaching the new creed. As early as 1876, Bishop Gilbert Haven boasted that “the creation of a Christian system free of all errors and the old formalism, that has a life and an identity of its own, … is in the process of being realized.” The very nature of the Methodist approach provided them with effective methods for spreading their ideas such as praise expressed through congregational singing; the encouragement of certain virtues such as temperance, saving, and work; the construction of churches that made the Methodist presence visible; public controversies which helped to spread ideas; and the development of social and educational projects—all were direct extensions of the Methodist understanding of their Christian duty. At the same time, they were also the means by which they made themselves visible in Mexican society and attracted those who were open to a new way of Christian living.

B. Finding Places to Preach

The missionaries found an environment already prepared to welcome them, they could count on the favor of those Mexican groups that were looking for new religious and social alternatives. In addition, there were groups of foreigners, English primarily, who took advantage

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8 57th Annual Report of the Board of Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1875, p 141.
9 57th Annual Report of the Board of Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1875, p. 141.
10 Haven, Mexico, p. 142.
of the arrival of the new ministers to establish formal church organizations. For the rest, in
general terms, the liberal authorities offered their protection to the preachers. By contrast, the
opposition of the Catholic Church led to acts of persecution that were sometimes bloody. This
made impossible one of the most characteristic elements of Methodism and the secret of its great
success in the poor neighborhoods of England: open air preaching. Wesley, whose determination
to stick by his principles got him kicked out of the Church of England, found a way to make
himself heard by the miners of Cornwall. He abandoned the cloistered confines of the sanctuaries
and expounded in the open air. The reformer found that in this way he could reach vast
audiences. “The world is my pulpit,” he said, signifying that the preaching of the gospel should
not be confined within the four walls of the church.

In Mexico, open air preaching proved impractical. The opposition that the missionaries
encountered was one of the reasons. There are numerous stories, especially from the first decade
of the mission, about pastors and worshippers who were attacked and wounded even when they
were inside a church building engaged in worship services. Beyond that, open air preaching
never really “caught on” among Mexicans. The American substitute for Wesleyan-style open air
preaching was the camp meeting, a kind of rural holiday where farmers from the western frontier
would gather for several days to attend religious services, pray, and just spend time together. In
actual fact, these camp meetings were more like social gatherings than religious retreats. They
were opportunities for westerners who lived on widely scattered homesteads to get to know each
other, to have fun together, and to contract marriages.11 In Mexico, only one meeting of this type
was ever organized. It was held in 1887 at the Hacienda of Alfajayucan in the state of Hidalgo.
Although it was a “total success” according to the editors of El Abogado Cristiano Ilustrado

11 Richard M. Cameron, Methodism and Society in Historical Perspective (New York: Abingdon Press,
1961), pp. 121-123.
(The Illustrated Christian Advocate), the official publication of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Mexico, no such event was never held again.\textsuperscript{12} We should note that rural Mexicans didn’t really need a religious pretext to justify getting together socially. In addition, liberal reform legislation which restricted public worship to churches and temples undoubtedly contributed to the absence of open air meetings. For a variety of reasons, Methodist worship in Mexico would almost always occur indoors.

The obvious way to secure a place to preach was to acquire and adapt buildings for Protestant worship. Even before a congregation existed, the missionaries hurried to buy church buildings and other spaces that were suitable for their ends. The cities of México, Puebla, Orizaba, and Tulancingo all witnessed such efforts. The Missionaries were interested in creating centers that could serve as “headquarters” for specific zones of the country and that would at the same time attract the attention of the population.

The case of Mexico City is an example of these multiple motives. Bishop Haven, who arrived in Mexico City on January 1, 1873, on the very first Mexican Railway train to complete the trip from Vera Cruz to the capital, began his missionary labors with a zealous search for a locale suitable for a Methodist church. However it was not till March that Haven, in the company of William Butler, located the cloister of the former convent of San Francisco on recently opened Gante Street. Because both men had failed in earlier attempts to purchase property, they conducted their search in such a way as to hide, especially from the owners of the building, their plans to transform the home of the “venerable sons of Saint Francis” into a Protestant sanctuary. The means they used to complete the purchase were rather tortuous and risky. Butler had become acquainted with an Irish officer who had served in the British Army in India. The Methodist

\textsuperscript{12} El Abogado Cristiano Ilustrado, 11/8 (May 1887), p. 61.
missionary had spent more than seven years in that country and had published his impressions of
life there in a book titled The Land of the Veda. To his surprise, Butler found that this officer had
served under General Havelock, a figure who appeared prominently in the book. A copy of The
Land of the Veda was placed in the hands of the officer who, in compensation, offered his
services to the author. Butler asked the Irishman to complete the purchase of the property for him
using funds from the mission. The deal was closed and, although afterwards certain individuals,
“probably instigated by the priests,” tried to buy it back, the Irish soldier fulfilled his promise to
deliver the property to the Methodists.

Having failed in their efforts to rescue the cloister from the hands of the heretics, these
individuals began to circulate anti-Methodist pamphlets throughout the city. One, which was
titled: “From Bad to Worse,” described the situation as follows:

They say that the Protestants have purchased the Chiarini Circle. Do you know that this
locale encompasses the patio of the monastery of San Francisco? Oh the venerable shades
of Belaunzarán and Pinzón! They must be wandering about this place, once sanctified by
the presence of the venerable sons of Saint Francis and now profaned in a descending
spiral by square dancing, immoral entertainments, licentious behavior, and rituals of a
sect that is the enemy of the Church. This is a true profanation, but it cannot be remedied
while the profaners are being protected by the liberal authorities. 13

The tract thus attacked the “heretics” and the liberal government that protected them. Obviously
there were individuals in Mexico who did not want the introduction of a new religion nor any of
its practices!

13 Quoted in Gonzalo Báez Camargo, Biografía de un templo (México, D.F.: Sociedad de Estudios
Históricos del Metodismo en México, 1973), pp. 120f. The original has not been found. This is a translation by Báez
Camargo of a transcription made by William Butler.
This property, acquired for the sum of 16,300 pesos, was remodeled to serve as the “headquarters” of Methodism in Mexico. The modifications not only made the cloister more suitable as a Protestant place of worship, they also added apartments for missionaries, space for a girls orphanage, and rooms for other uses such as a bookstore and, later, a publishing house. The dedication of the new church complex, now named “Holy Trinity,” took place on December 24, 1873. The Northern Methodists thus found themselves with an appropriate building and with a presence in the very heart of Mexico City. Mexican journalists reported on the ceremony that marked the inauguration of this Protestant sanctuary. The attractiveness of the building which made this new acquisition so exciting when it was first announced was still evident years later according to the Annual Report of the Missions Society for 1887: “Accustomed as they are to worship only in elegantly decorated sanctuaries, a solid ecclesiastical edifice, clean and beautiful, means more to these people than it would to our more practical American population.”

The building was also an unmistakable sign that the Methodists were here to stay. Whether it was in a big city or the smallest village, the purchase of construction of an appropriate building was a demonstration of the vitality of the church. For that very reason, it continued to be the policy of the church that, as soon as they had acquired property in the areas where they intended to establish centers of operation, the congregations themselves would provide the materials and labor to build the new sanctuaries. As late as 1929, just one year before the departure of the Missionary Society from the country, the Methodist President for the District of Puebla announced that “the greatest achievement of the past year was the dedication of the Church of la Magdalena Tlatelulco,” in Tlaxcala. But what is most interesting in this triumphal

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14 69th Annual Report of the Board of Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1887, p. 249.
announcement is the reason offered for this grand announcement: “The neighbors had been saying that the Protestants weren’t worth much, that they had lost their enthusiasm, and that they would never be able to build a church. This goaded our brethren, who have furnished the sanctuary beautifully, giving us one of the loveliest rural churches that we possess.”

The life that manifested itself within these churches could not help spilling out into the surrounding community. It was a matter of serious concern that the sanctuary not serve merely as a place for worship but that it also attract passersby. It needed to be a “light” situated upon a hill. Hence it followed that the churches needed windows which would allow the preaching and the songs of the faithful to be heard by those outside. This desire for visibility in the community pointed to the advantages of congregational singing and encouraged an “open door” policy toward anyone who desired to enter the sanctuary. It also contributed to their dissatisfaction with the church building in Querétaro, “which is not adequately situated to allow people to hear what is going on as they pass by…” The same thing was true of the first property acquired in Orizaba, an old convent that was hard to reach and which didn’t even look like a church.

Moreover the sanctuary, as a visible image of the life of the church, served as one more way to make Methodist influence felt in the community. The believers saw themselves as the leaven of society; the seeds of a better Mexico. El Abogado Cristiano Ilustrado reported that in Atzacán, Vera Cruz, the cleanliness and whiteness of the Methodist church, situated directly in front of the Catholic parish church, prompted the priest to order that his own church be cleaned up. Then the neighbors on the main street of the town had to whitewash their homes so as not to


16 68th Annual Report of the Board of Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1886, p. 255.
clash with it. “In this manner, Protestantism tends to elevate the living standards” of the Mexican people, concluded the article.\textsuperscript{17}

Despite the Methodists’ eagerness to acquire and renovate churches, the growth of their congregations always outran their ability to raise houses of worship. Two solutions were tried in response to this problem. On the one hand, they rented venues; on the other hand they remained constantly interested in purchasing already existing church buildings, whenever it was practical and legal to do so.

The practice of renting rooms to house a congregation was risky and expensive. Renting a space for worship was often difficult if not impossible to arrange, and the danger of being evicted was ever present. The issue of whether or not to rent was a frequent source of conflict between William Butler and the Treasurer of the Missions Society. Renting required money in advance, said Butler, because throughout the entire country bills had to be paid in cash in advance and the missionaries couldn’t run the risk of being thrown out of their building.\textsuperscript{18} The very act of renting negatively affected the image that the missionaries were trying to project as the idea was widespread that Protestantism “could hardly be regarded as a religion because they were willing to use any old warehouse or rented room as a place of worship.”\textsuperscript{19} As a practical matter, it often proved nearly impossible to obtain adequate quarters because of the reluctance of the population to rent space to “heretics” and because of a lack of monetary resources. In 1896 it was reported that the congregation in Rio Blanco, Vera Cruz, needed a meeting place but that it had found it nearly impossible to obtain one because all of the suitable property in the area

\textsuperscript{17} El Abogado Cristiano Ilustrado, 19/227 (Feb. 24, May 1895).

\textsuperscript{18} William Butler to R. Dashiell, March 10, 1876, Methodist Episcopal Church Archive, Correspondence of William Butler, 1874-1876.

\textsuperscript{19} 69th Annual Report of the Board of Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1887, p. 294.
belonged to a thread making factory.\footnote{20} The solution they finally came to was to hold their worship services in the home of a church member.

On top of all these other problems, the Porfirian government decided to enforce a law which restricted acts of public worship to just those places intended, and registered with the authorities, for that exact purpose. In 1896 some congregations were forced to stop meeting for this reason. Thirty years later, the greatest period of expansion in the history of Mexican Methodism was brought a halt by another act of government interference: the promulgation of the so-called Calles laws of 1926 which ruled, among other things, that no acts of public worship could be conducted in places not specifically dedicated to that purpose.\footnote{21}

\section*{C. Scattering Seeds: Bibles and Tracts}

In 1901, Catholics celebrated a series of religious festivals in Jilotepec. According to their promoters, they were a complete success, the most magnificent festivals held in that place for many years. Among the noteworthy activities was the preaching of the local priest who was in charge of the festivities. One of the principle themes of his sermons was the encroachment of Protestantism. His approach to the topic was simple, it contrasted the works of Catholicism with those of Protestantism, showing the divine origin of the first and emphasizing the spurious character of the second. Among the examples he used was the following: “The honorable priests are complying with Christ’s mandate to ‘go and preach the Gospel throughout the world,’ but Christ did not say: ‘Go and pass out a lot of Bibles and tracts in all the world’ the way the

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{21} In 1896, exactly as in 1926, they had to suspend worship in some places due to the strict application of the laws governing religious observance: they could not conduct public worship places that had not been registered for that purpose.
\end{footnotes}
Protestants do who walk about with their baskets full of Bibles, passing them out by the thousands, maybe even by the millions.  

Apart from the illogic displayed in his argument, it is interesting to notice what the Jilotepec priest deplored: that Protestants were handing out lots of written material in their evangelistic efforts. A review of the statistics on material printed by the Methodist House of Publications confirms his perception. Pedro Flores Valderrama, who was for many years director of El Abogado Cristiano Ilustrado, the official magazine of the mission, and who later served as director of the Methodist Mexican Institute, calculated that between 1877 and 1898 the Methodist press printed 56,912,894 pages. Clearly, the Methodist mission came to be an important center for the production and distribution of literature. The materials produced there were not only circulated within Mexico, but also throughout the rest of the Spanish-speaking world, especially Central and South America.

Two basic ideas lay behind this herculean effort: there was an urgent need to rebut written attacks against the mission and, given the insufficiency of preachers to share the Good News, it was thought that the flyer, the tract, and above all, the periodical, could easily give

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23 I do not know how he arrived at this number but it must be assumed that he included in it all of the materials produced for the use of the mission which would include, among other things, El Abogado Cristiano Ilustrado, the Hojas Bereanas, hymnals, books, tracts, and flyers. On the other hand, the statistic is not very reliable. The same year John Wesley Butler claimed the total number of pages produced was 68,844,846, according to Pedro Flores Valderrama, “La Prensa,” in Los primeros veinticinco años del metodismo en México, [no editor given], (México, D.F.: Imprenta de la Iglesia Metodista Episcopal, 1899), p. 47, and John Wesley Butler, “La Sociedad Misionera en México,” ibid., p. 11.

24 86th Annual Report of the Board of Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1904, p. 349.

25 William Butler based his request for funds to support the mission’s publications on the need to answer the attacks of the Catholic press which were going unchallenged.
Methodists a presence in whatever locale they wished. In fact, the opening of a new field of mission work was usually preceded by a strong effort at literature distribution. We should recall the work of James D. Thompson in 1828 and 1836 along with the work of the North American Bible Society from 1824 onward. In effect, Protestant missions in Mexico began with an “invasion” of Bibles and tracts.

The approach was simple. First, “colporteurs” were sent to sell Bibles and books of an evangelistic nature. Simultaneously, they gave out free tracts which urged readers to accept the Protestant Gospel and lead a new life. Decisions were made about the possibility of expanding the work based on the response that the colporteurs encountered. Colporteurs might be attacked—there were cases where their literature was seized and even where the colporteur himself was thrown into the municipal jail. In such cases, the mission agencies would vigorously demand respect for the Reform Laws that guaranteed freedom of religion. If on the other hand, the enterprise was well-received, as manifested in good sales, the mission agency would explore the possibility of establishing contacts with broad-minded liberals in the vicinity to organize evangelistic meetings. The end result of all this work was, if not conversion, then at least the formation of small study groups that it was hoped would develop into full-fledged congregations.

Handing out literature was a very practical method for conducting the work of evangelism. Because tracts could be kept indefinitely, they were more effective than oral sermons which left no record. For example, obituary notices of converts make constant references to their having saved a certain tract for many years without bothering to read it until

26 Valderrama, “La Prensa,” p. 44.

27 James Thompson was a Scottish Baptist who travelled throughout Latin America in the 1820s and 30s as a representative of the British and Foreign Bible Society and the Lancastrian Educational Society. His mission involved distributing Bibles and encouraging literacy which won him the support of prominent Latin American liberals.—Trans.
finally one day they did so and were “saved.” There were also cases of congregations having been formed through the influence of literature that was not even distributed in their locality. The case of the church at Itzacalco is illustrative. In an adjoining area, alongside the Canal de la Viga, a Methodist congregation was established and disbanded several times. During that time, members of the church distributed tracts in the nearby market area of Merced. Some of the vendors from that place took the literature and carried it to their homes in the community of Itzacalco where a small congregation of 20 members sprang up and eventually invited missionaries to come. Thus it isn’t surprising that the preachers were also distributors of books and tracts. The tasks that were essential to the work of the itinerant preacher were to establish contact with potential sympathizers, to share literature, to take subscriptions for *El Abogado Cristiano Ilustrado*, and to organize preaching sessions.

Literature distribution had another advantage: the members of the congregations as a whole, even the school-age children, could become distribution agents and, as a consequence, agents of evangelization. For example, in 1906 it was reported that the members of the church in Zaachila, Oaxaca, had constituted themselves “a tract commission, and each week they distributed a large number of pamphlets.” As described in the same issue of *El Abogado*, the case of Rio Blanco in the state of Vera Cruz was similar. Pastor José Rumbia reported that “the prevailing custom at the conclusion of every Sunday School is to give each member ten pamphlets to distribute later in the day.”

Virtually none of the pamphlets and tracts passed out before 1920 have survived except for one by Emilio Laveleye about the social consequences of the Protestant and Catholic

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28 Interview with Manuel Vásquez, February 17, 1985, Ixtacalco, México.

29 88th Annual Report of the Board of Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1906, pp. 373 and 375.
religions. Many of the materials passed out were Bibles and Scripture portions. Generally these texts, as is done even today, were printed without exegetical commentary. For a long time the versions that were distributed were the translations approved by the Catholic Church such as those of Padre Scio or Torres Amat. The only difference between them and the Catholic Bibles was that the Protestant ones did not include the Apocryphal books because of traditional Protestant doubts about whether they belonged in the Biblical Canon. Even so, the Catholic authorities tried to halt their circulation, a practice that allowed Protestant preachers to claim that “Romanist priests” didn’t want the people to become acquainted with the Bible.

About the content of the other literature, we know little. It seems likely that some of them were polemical in nature, but this does not seem to have been the rule. From the titles we find in the stock list at the Methodist Publishing House and preserved in the pages of *El Abogado Cristiano Ilustrado*, we can deduce that the majority dealt with the personal experience of salvation and its practical consequences. Titles such as “Salvation, complete and free in the here and now”; “Evidence for Christianity”; “Diary of a Happy Life”; are illustrative of this point. There were also pamphlets of a doctrinal nature such as the so-called catechism of the Methodist Church in which the basics of the new faith were presented by means of questions and answers. Two other topics included among the published literature were sermons directed specifically to Catholics, for example, “Spiritual Conflicts of a Roman Catholic”; and presentations of the gospel truths as the only way to address social problems, such as, “Leaves from the Tree of Life for the Healing of the Nation.”

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30 Laveleye, *Catolicismo y el protestantismo*.

For a long time the materials used were translations of the writings of English and American authors. Only a few pamphlets have surfaced which were written by Mexicans and published by the United House of Publications, an organization that came about from the consolidation of the Protestant houses of publications in 1918. All of these have a polemical character. They aim to answer questions about the activities of Protestants in Mexico and what they have accomplished.

The problem of financing these Methodist Publications was resolved in several ways. First and foremost was the direct subsidy from the Missions Board. This included financing the on-going costs of printing. In second place were donations received from foreign individuals and institutions. Generally these donations were given in cash and helped greatly to reduce the costs of printing the material—the press generally used imported paper, ink, and type. In third place was income from the House of Publications itself. This came from the sale of its literature and above all, revenues generated by printing services provided to the public. Any person or company that had the wherewithal to pay could rent this service, even government agencies did so. In this way, Methodist publications were kept very inexpensive. *El Abogado* also included a paid advertising section. Thanks to these sources of income, the mission could sell *El Abogado* very cheaply even though they gave away reading material and calendars during their annual subscription campaign.

As the official publication of the Methodist mission in our country, *El Abogado Cristiano Ilustrado* deserves special mention. Founded in 1877 by William Butler, *El Abogado* came to be the most important Protestant magazine in Mexico. The regularity of its publication—it did not miss a single issue from the date of its establishment to the time of its first suspension in 1919—combined with its large circulation—2500 weekly copies—gives some idea of its importance.
We should add that this periodical circulated in Central and South America, in Spain, and even in the West Indies.

*El Abogato* began as a monthly publication in 1876, became a bi-weekly in 1888 and a weekly in 1898. It disappeared in 1919 to make way for *El Mundo Cristiano*, an inter-denominational review that sought to unify all of the Protestant missionary organizations in Mexico. *El Abogado* reappeared in 1928 in the wake of the obvious failure of *El Mundo* to become an effective outlet for Protestant ideas and then disappeared permanently in 1930 with the closing of the mission.

*El Abogado* was almost like a letter of introduction from the mission to Mexican society. The editors constantly sought to give it an air of novelty by means of abundant illustrations and written content that, within the limits imposed by its “religious character,” included political, social, and even scientific topics. This allowed the magazine to gain entry into circles that were not specifically Protestant, to open the doors of liberal homes in certain regions, and to “win friends” for the mission. For example, Matías Romero who had served as Mexico’s ambassador to Washington and Secretary of the Treasury under President Juárez, was an annual subscriber. The travels of itinerant preachers had as one of their aims soliciting subscriptions for *El Abogado*. In fact, the first preaching mission to a given locality often began in the home of a subscriber.

In general the character of the periodical was polemical. More than half of its content was comprised of anti-Catholic sermons. It also included segments to instruct believers. For example, temperance, education, and biblical interpretation all had permanent sections in *El Abogado*.

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32 Matías Romero Archive.
Other themes included commentaries on “current events,” descriptions of civic festivals, especially Cinco de Mayo and July 18,\textsuperscript{33} and news about the work of the mission.

The interests of the editors were cyclical, but this did not imply any variation in the direction of the publication. Thus, in December of some years, attacks on Marian devotion intensified. We can also see times when it became highly politicized as it was in 1888 with the second re-election of Díaz or in 1898 with the onset of the Spanish American War. The only constant themes were anti-Catholicism, Protestant morality, and sermons against vices of every type. Even news of the mission was not always given attention. By 1896, there was already very little news of the opening of churches or new fields of mission work. The schools barely received any attention other than the acknowledgement that they continued to grow numerically and to have an influence on their localities.

\textbf{D. Promoting Controversy}

Protestants received a decidedly mixed reception in Mexico and this actually created another advertising tool: controversy. While it is true that provoking controversy could be regarded as not very Christian and even less effective, to which we must add its value was questioned even within the mission itself, it remained quite popular during the first thirty years of the missionary effort, a situation that is due perhaps to the popularity of polemics in 19\textsuperscript{th} century Mexican journalism generally. While the Association of Liberal Journalists to which the editors of \textit{El Abogado} belonged sought to establish rules of respectful dialogue, the Methodists preferred to maintain a contest of ideas. Whether by means of magazines, flyers, or personal encounters,

\textsuperscript{33} Both were “liberal” holidays: Cinco de Mayo commemorates the 1862 victory of Mexican troops over an invading French army that was allied with Mexican conservatives and July 18 commemorates the death of Benito Juárez, Mexico’s most illustrious liberal reformer of the nineteenth century.—Trans.
they believed that controversy was an ideal way to help people to gain an acquaintance, however small, with the doctrines of Protestantism. This approach was taken because they felt that the Mexican people had no other way to encounter the gospel. If it didn’t lead to conversions, at least it would promote respect for their endeavors, said the defenders of controversy.\footnote{66th Annual Report of the Board of Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1884, p. 200.}

In reality, the contest of ideas, which often turned into an exchange of “heated words,” was just another way to carry on the battle with the Catholic Church. For that very reason, it was looked down on by some prominent individuals in the mission. William Butler, for example, pointed out in his 1875 report that “bitter controversy” was not the correct path to take in carrying out the task of evangelism.\footnote{57th Annual Report of the Board of Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1875.} His son John Wesley Butler was not inclined to get involved in controversies despite the fact that he was the object of constant attacks during the forty-four years of his missionary service in our country. For that he was “defended” by the editors of El Abogado Cristiano Ilustrado. As late as 1930, Gonzalo Báez Camargo declared that this habit of argumentation, “which has at times become truly and sharply aggressive,” was worse than useless. For Báez Camargo this result followed from the very nature of controversy. Right from the start it was understood that no participant would admit defeat. Not only that, but “this type of activity generally produces nothing more than an atmosphere of animosity and is the least helpful means for arriving at truth, especially in matters of religion.”\footnote{Gonzalo Báez Camargo, El por qué del protestantismo en México (México, D.F.: Casa Unida de Publicaciones, 1930), pp. 6f.} The inevitable result of controversy, said Báez Camargo, was that the participants felt hurt, foolish notions
multiplied, “spectators enjoyed the fight, but in the end it didn’t lead to any conclusion whatsoever.”

Nothing further is needed to demonstrate the truth of what Báez Camargo said than to examine the unfolding of numerous controversies in the pages of *El Abogado*. Again and again it was apparent from the official publication of the Methodist Episcopal Church that disputation was a favorite pastime of the editors. All topics and participants were fair game. On occasion they would even devote an entire segment of the publication to “controversy.” One of them was called “Lashings.” We can just imagine the Christian love and charity that were displayed in that section! The most frequent object of attack was “Romanism” and its defenders, particularly the periodical *El Amigo de la Verdad* (Friend of the Truth), of Puebla. The subjects under discussion could range from the merely doctrinal—the adoration of the saints, for example—to questions of church ritual or governance—such as the infallibility of the pope—passing by matters of education and ethics along the way.

There was another important topic of controversy: from the beginning of the missionary undertaking, Protestants were accused of promoting Yankee expansionism. Again and again this charge was leveled. The arguments were neither many nor varied. The attackers maintained that the Protestants came to “denationalize” the Mexican people. Their supposed attack on national values, their reverence for North American virtues and heroes, and their introduction of “strange” customs to the Mexicans were cited as proofs of the charge. The Methodists alleged that none of these claims was true. They argued that Protestants and their institutions were respectful of the nation’s values. As a tangible demonstration of this they hosted civic festivals in memory of the great heroes and events in Mexican history. They admired North Americans, they

said, for the qualities that had allowed them to build a “great nation.” The values and customs
that Methodists were introducing into Mexico had no other purpose than to improve life for the
Mexican people. As we know, such arguments convinced no one. To this very day, Protestants
continue to be attacked as tools of imperialist penetration and destroyers of the national identity.

The Methodists also disputed with Protestants from other missions. The subject of debate,
as with the Catholics, mattered little. They argued with the Baptists about their particular method
of “making converts” as well as over their beliefs concerning the sacraments. In the same way,
they attacked the Church of Jesus, or the Southern Methodist mission. Illustrative of all such
controversies carried on in the pages of El Abogado Cristiano Ilustrado is the one they kept up
with the Episcopalians in 1901. The death of Queen Victoria of England prompted the English
colony in Mexico City to organize a memorial worship service in the “Church of Christ,” a
Protestant sanctuary. Because the pastorate of the church was vacant at the time, the Anglican
congregation invited John Wesley Butler and Methodist Bishop John W. Hamilton, who just
happened to be traveling in our country at that time, to officiate at this religious service. This
irritated the Director of the Episcopal Church—who had been suggested as an appropriate pastor
owing to the affinity between his church and the Anglican Church. The result was an exchange
of insults unleashed by a pamphlet in which Butler and Hamilton were accused of renouncing
Methodism. Previously, El Abogado had spoken against the custom of adorning the churches
with crosses and as the Church of Christ had several, the flyer said that the Methodist ministers
must have renounced their convictions. As the argument developed, the Episcopalians accused
the Methodists of usurping the priestly function and of going where they had not been invited. El

38 See, for example, Abd-Der-Rachman, “Calumnia o Ignorancia?” El Abogado Cristiano Ilustrado, 15/8
(April 15, 1891). Curiously, the article is directed against a journal in Pachuca called El Obrero which, on another
occasion, had praised the work of the Methodist school in Real del Monte.
Abogado answered with a question: if the ministers had not been invited, how was it possible that they were permitted to officiate? The arguments remained stuck at that point and for three or four weeks, readers of El Abogado could amuse themselves by reading about ducks that were not amphibious and about peacocks that lacked plumes, in reference to the first flyer having been signed by an Episcopalian who was “a Catholic, but not a Romanist, and an Evangelical, but not a Protestant.” As could be expected, protests multiplied to the effect that they did not want to continue an argument that made no sense and that culminated, as was to be expected, in nothing. The editors of El Abogado concluded by saying that “we are willing to discuss when the matter in dispute is worthwhile and when our opponents are willing to stick to reason, but in the present case, we would have to be out of our minds to continue a discussion with those who lack the basic capacity for reason and who are totally blinded by fanaticism.”

It seems that the Methodists never found an opponent who was willing to reason, that is to say, who was willing to reason their way. Even matters as trivial as whether to congratulate the ex-director of a Methodist school for having been hired by the government were fit subjects for argument. From the perspective of the present, perhaps the only good to thing to say about all of these controversies is that they could be quite amusing. For example, what should you say to a North American preacher who punctuated his sermon with a thunderous “Cock-a-doodle-doo”? Shouldn’t he have shouted “Ur-ur-ur-urr” like a Mexican rooster instead?

In terms of effectiveness, one can’t say much for these public disputes. Although it was claimed that they disseminated ideas and “won friends for the cause,” this does not seem to have

39 El Abogado Cristiano Ilustrado, 25/15 (April 20, 1901), p. 127. “Fanaticism” was a term used by Protestants to stigmatize the supposedly narrow-minded and unreflective members of the Catholic Church. Its application to the Episcopalians was no doubt intended to emphasize their resemblance to the despised Catholics.—Trans.

40 The first is an English version of the roosters cry, the second is the Spanish version.—Trans.
been the result. For example, when a public argument was carried on in Tlaxcala between the local priest and José Trinidad Ruiz, a future revolutionary general, the result was not favorable to the Methodists: the priest’s Aristotelian logic left the less learned Methodist preacher speechless. The defense that *El Abogado* offered in this case was that the priest was utilizing “unfair” logic.

Although few approved of them, such controversies continued. Perhaps the best that can be said of them is that they disseminated awareness of certain topics, sharpened the intellectual “weapons” of the polemicists, and made persons and positions better understood within the mission.

**E. Congregational Singing**

A far more appealing side of Mexican Methodism was its musical tradition. It has been said that Methodists are people who love to sing. There have always been Methodists who specialized in music and who were given the responsibility to perform and disseminate choruses that express various aspects of Christian life and belief. However one of the most characteristic features of Methodism is its preference for congregational singing as a means of worship.

Perhaps this zeal for music can be explained by two circumstances. In England, its place of origin, Methodism did not have any churches in which to place religious images—pictures, stained glass windows, etc.—to spread their Christian message in a quick and easy manner. Congregational singing provided a means of making up for this lack. Hymns, each with three or more verses, taught passages from the Bible or doctrinal matters that needed to be emphasized. In this way, individuals could come to understand basic aspects of the faith that they had adopted. Not only that, but even while it was encouraging learning through its lyrics, the music was also providing an outlet for the emotions of the new converts. Hymns written by Charles
Wesley continue to be a fundamental part of Methodist songbooks all over the world. And a very important part of their message is the invitation to worship by singing.

One of the first things William Butler did as Superintendent of the Mexican Mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church was to compile a collection of hymns in Spanish. This first Spanish-language Methodist hymnal—of which not a single copy has survived—circulated throughout the Methodist Episcopal Church’s Latin American missions. The interest that church authorities demonstrated in this material was natural. During his mission trip to Mexico, Bishop Haven encountered something that moved him deeply: on a visit to the “Church of Jesus” which had been established by the “Constitutionalist fathers” during the liberal Reform period, the congregation sang many songs with great enthusiasm. It seemed that the opportunity to sing hymns in their own language gave Mexicans an exciting sense of participating actively in worship. Moreover, this practice of full throated singing served to attract passersby into the sanctuary. It was natural that anyone who was walking by the doors or windows of the church would feel drawn by “the lovely music that they heard coming from within.”

In this way Methodists, and Protestants generally, gained a powerful weapon to use in their cause. They aroused the curiosity of the people by means of music and then, through the content of the lyrics, they conveyed their message. It is highly significant that the first Methodist hymnal printed in Mexico included numerous songs that invited people to accept the message of the gospel. For example, there was a hymn that began as follows: “Come, lost prodigal,

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41 Haven, Mexico, pp. 92-95.

42 Interview with Angel Baños, January 6, 1985. Mr. Baños was a local Methodist pastor who for many years had neither seminary training nor ministerial ordination. He tells how he was converted after having entered a church to learn what they were singing there.

And another that said: “Come sorrowful soul, come to the Savior / In your time of grief, give up your sorrow / Yes, come just as you are and tell him of your pain / Confess without fear, and weep no more.” These lyrics, like those of many other hymns, invited the hearer to become better acquainted with the new religion.

It is interesting to note that the principle message, or at least the most directly suggested theme, was a search for consolation from the problems of this world: sadness, loneliness, poverty, and death. “I looked anxiously all around / All I could see was the black, stormy sea / Then Jesus came and all was calm / He said: ‘Come to me.’” Another hymn went: “In all of my need, hear my cry / Clothe me with Holiness and fill me with love.” One was even more explicit: “Oh Lord, hear the cry that your people earnestly raises to you; / A cry of anxiety, a plea for freedom that you would cast our sins far from us.”

The offer was tempting. By means of song, Protestant churches invited people to draw close to a God who listened to the troubles of individuals and who even cared about social problems. More than just listening, he offered solutions. He provided an alternative to the problems of this world: “I suffered a thousand worldly cares and I lost my inner joy / Bitter and deep was my sorrow, I suffered unbearable pain / But at the sight of Jesus I was filled with inexpressible love / My soul is at rest because I found my happiness in him.”

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44 Ibid., p. 20 (hymn 28).
46 Ibid., p. 12 (hymn 15).
47 Ibid., p. 23 (hymn 31).
48 Ibid., p. 44 (hymn 57).
49 Ibid., p. 133 (hymn 219).
The practical means of finding this happiness were not explained in these songs. The pastors were called to do that in their sermons while members of the congregations demonstrated it in their daily lives. The hymns only offered the assurance that the path was accessible. And even if happiness would have to wait for the life to come, the peace that they offered was something that could be realized in this present world. This was reflected in the hymns that urged the worshippers to remain steadfast in the Christian life. “I find delightful, quiet rest in joyfully loving my tender Jesus / My hurts are healed when, with great rejoicing, I think of him in glory.”

Believers were not only exhorted to follow the new religion, but to proclaim it as well: “Now blow the trumpet, you joyful ones in Zion / Tell the news to the world: Eternal salvation.”

Of course, to follow this advice was not easy. The difficulty of following the moral precepts of an almost puritanical religion was no minor obstacle. In addition, there was danger from the persecutions and physical attacks of those who considered the Methodists to be “heretics.” For such problems as well, the hymn books had an answer: “Don’t be afraid to work for Christ / For he is on your side / Work with love, with faith, with perseverance / Your works will be rewarded.”

Through these hymns Methodists invited, consoled, and encouraged, but they also explained the distinctive aspects of their creed. The 1881 hymnal included songs for all possible occasions, ceremonies, and points of doctrine. Its pages included invitations to public worship, praises to the Trinity—whether taken altogether or in each of the three persons: Father, Son, and

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50 Ibid., p. 47 (hymn 62).
51 Ibid., p. 39 (hymn 49).
52 Ibid., p. 169 (hymn 283).
Holy Spirit—and songs about the Bible and different facets of the Christian life. The hymns also explained Methodist teachings about sin, the church, death, marriage, the birth of Jesus, and many other subjects.

Music in general, not just hymns, came to play an important role in the lives of Methodists. Rural elementary schools included music instruction in their curriculum. As a result, the study of music flourished among Methodists. By 1900, students at the Mexican Methodist Institute in Puebla had organized a choral society called “the Mozart chorus.” The results of this enterprise were quickly apparent: some of the most important collections of Mexican Protestant hymns came from this organization. Even today, many evangelical churches still sing the “Selected Hymns” published in 1904 by Dr. Vicente Mendoza, a graduate of the Institute.

The musical influence of the Methodist form of worship found expression even beyond the strictly ecclesiastical sphere. Epigmenio Velasco, one of the greatest promoters of music in the churches and organizer of several congregational choirs, directed the choir of the National Preparatory school in 1915. Even ordinary church members were caught up in a sort of fever to learn music. For example, the Carro brothers of Panotla were well-to-do farmers who converted to Methodism and donated land for a church building. They gathered in the afternoons to practice playing classical music on their instruments. Thus, even in the realm of secular music, the presence of Methodism could be felt.
Documents for chapter III

1) THE CATHOLIC CLERGY OBJECT TO THE ARRIVAL OF THE PROTESTANTS

(Missionary Levi B. Salmans visited Cuerámaro, Guanajuato, to distribute literature and look for subscribers to *El Abogado Cristiano Ilustrado*. As a result, someone distributed this flier.)

Catholics!!!

We are informed that those propagators of error, the Protestants, are distributing periodicals and other impious tracts. Remember Christians, that you are absolutely prohibited to read, hold on to, distribute, or cooperate with in any manner, even indirectly, this anti-Catholic propaganda; you should not subscribe to Protestant publications, establish relationships with them, permit your beloved children to attend their schools, go, even with the pretext of curiosity, to hear the errors they teach, give them any aid that helps to protect their false religion, or do anything that denies the name of true Catholics. Do not contaminate yourself with the falsity or ally with their poor propagators. When they invite you to their meetings or give you some nefarious paper, tell them with charity, but firmness, maintaining, yet with pity; I am Catholic, I belong to the only true religion! Do not offend them: pray to God for them, but defend yourselves from evil and remain in Christian unity: preserving yourselves as worthy children of the Holy Church.

Cuerámaro, November 6, 1892.

Source: *El Abogado Cristiano Ilustrado*, December 10, 1892.
2) METHODIST COMPLAINTS AGAINST THE INFLUENCE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

(In December 1900, *El Abogado Cristiano Ilustrado* published an insert signed by “several citizens of Matehuala” which protested President Díaz’s conciliatory policy toward the Catholic Church which, in the writers’ opinion, was ignoring the laws that limited the public activities of the church.)

They Scoff at the Reform Laws with the Prior Approval of the Authorities

Our people, due to the abominable religious education they receive and the continued and persistent fanatical labors of their spiritual directors, find it impossible to shake off the fog of ignorance that shrouds their brains. Even more serious, the [Catholic] clergy encourage all sorts of humiliations and even the loss of their rights. No wonder they declare that the reform laws do not merit their respect, that instead our flag should serve as a rug for the feet of the Vatican despot!

This is why, as free people, our conscience incites resistance and will not allow this flagrant violation of our laws to pass in silence, making this our denunciation, the most solemn protest against the authority or the authorities that do not know how to meet their obligations. We believe that anybody who rises to the post of leader of the people but who does not want to enforce the laws that govern us, should either do it correctly anyway, or resign if enforcing the law is not to their liking, since otherwise they will be a hypocrite. We believe that until the Reform Laws are abolished by a fair vote, we have to subject ourselves to them or risk a conflict that will, sooner or later, prove why these laws are needed.
Watch out liberals! Everyone who stands up for their position, the hour to choose sides has come! Clericalism is the enemy!