VIII

EPILOGUE

The existence of Protestant churches in Mexico rested on two circumstances. First, there were groups in our country who were not satisfied with the dominant church, the Catholic Church, and all that it represented. Second, foreign individuals and institutions desired to preach a new and different way of understanding the Christian faith. The motives of both groups were mixed. We cannot ignore the existence of political reasons, such as the desire of the North Americans to undermine a religious rival, one of the pillars of the Hispanic way of life. Nor can we deny the possibility of economic motives on the part of Mexican converts—a church paid for by others was cheaper. Yet neither can we pass over the reality that many of the reasons for preaching, and accepting that preaching, emerged from the spiritual experience of individuals. The desire to express what one is feeling and what has given meaning to life should be included as one of the motivations of the preachers. The need to feel complete, to see oneself as an individual with inherent and inalienable value, must be taken into account in explaining why some Mexicans would adopt a creed and social life so different from the prevailing orthodoxy.

The support of Protestant mission agencies gave religious dissidents the necessary resources to extend their influence broadly throughout Mexican society. Such support was only possible because of the consolidation of the Restored Republic. The strengthening of the central government, the adoption of liberal principles, and the opening of the country to North American social and commercial influences were all
essential to the entry of Protestant missionary societies into the country. Methodists were no exception to this pattern. By 1872 the promoters of Methodist missions to Mexico believed that the nation was starting down the road to peace and progress. According to the missionaries, evangelical preaching would provide Mexico with the Word of God, the foundation it truly needed to reach its goals of prosperity and progress.

The arrival of the Methodist Episcopal Church in December 1872 fit in perfectly with the aims of the liberal political elite that was governing Mexico at that time. The missionaries, people of their time, brought the traditions and peculiarities of the North American mindset as cultural baggage, particularly Millennialism and Manifest Destiny. Their appeal to the need for a new birth implied a radical change in the life of the individual. Their millennialism entailed a marked anti-Catholicism. Methodists considered the Catholic Church a hindrance, not an agent of progress. Missionaries also put much emphasis on education which, in their opinion, would improve individuals and with them, society. The introduction of customs such as saving, temperance, and hard work, Protestant—and Methodist—virtues par excellence, would in their understanding make Mexico a better country: more wealthy, dynamic, and just. Hence it is not strange that these people were well received by a Mexican government that wanted to reduce, by any means possible, the power of the Catholic Church; a government that promoted secular education as a means of bettering society; and one that, in its desire for industrial development, promoted a new work ethic that would allow the accumulation of capital.

Methodist preaching implied new conceptions of the Christian life and of the world for the Mexican people. First of all, religion became a personal experience that had very clear material manifestations. Concern for brothers and sisters in the faith, a desire
for progress, and changed personal habits were some of them. The church, a community of believers, was responsible to provide the means to achieve them.

To disseminate their beliefs, Methodists used attractive instruments as well as economic appeals. The construction of churches, the exploitation of controversy, and the publication of tracts and hymns, were some of the means they used. In these ways, the missionaries called to everyone, rich or poor, good or bad, anyone who felt the need to be secure in the midst of “tribulation,” to join the church. The most influential methods in the mission’s development were those that involved or that provided the qualifications needed by a modern society: reading and writing.

Consequently, the mission appeared to grow in tandem with the modernization of the country. In the opening phase of the mission, the selection of locations as bases of operations was determined by the possibilities for communication—and they in turn were determined by each locality’s degree of integration into the nation’s economic life. Other considerations included the level of support found in the area—developed mainly through contacts with foreigners, especially English residents—and by the response encountered in the area as determined by the personal needs of individuals. In a later phase, the prime consideration was accessibility to those who had already incorporated themselves into the new church.

The Methodist mission presented itself as a distinct alternative to the problems that the people were experiencing. At a time when the application of liberal policies was disrupting the lives of many Mexicans and tearing them away from their traditional ways of life, the mission presented itself as an agency that offered worth to individuals who
were losing everything and it provided them with the means to incorporate themselves successfully into a changing society. Converts found in Methodism a concern for their material needs and support for their efforts to adapt and succeed in the face of societal change.

Helping to prepare them for the new society, the Methodists offered schools—in reality an entire educational system—and personal contacts in different regions of the country. The creation of an entirely new field of opportunity within the mission allowed the most capable people to develop their talents and obtain training that would permit them to succeed in the secular environment, principally in the field of education. The Methodist presence was felt in education even more than in the religious or political realms. The importance of the academic system for the mission, as well as for the many communities that had schools, was made possible by a strong concentration of resources, above all human resources.

If political advantage was one of the aims of those who supported the Methodists, one cannot say that the movement was very effective. In reality, the mission was of little use as a counterweight to the Catholic Church. This is evident in the small numerical growth and weak pastoral control of local congregations. Nevertheless, these congregations served as a medium for the development of the political skills of their members. Their undeniable connections with liberal groups right from the beginning; the nature of Methodist ecclesiastical organization which favored the participation of the laity in the decision-making process; exposure to the reality of a government that was moving further and further from its self-proclaimed liberal and anti-clerical principles; and, following the Revolution, declining opportunities within the mission itself to satisfy
the ambitions of its members, can explain the growing participation of Methodists in the socio-political processes of the country.

But even as individuals were becoming actively involved in these processes, the institution stayed on the sidelines, insisting that respect for constituted authorities was a divine mandate and therefore obligatory. This permitted the relatively peaceful coexistence of divergent political positions within the mission. There seemed to be an understanding that the fundamental work of the church was nothing other than preaching the Gospel while putting its consequences into practice was a matter for individuals to do in their daily lives.

With the enactment of the Constitution of 1917, the scene changed completely for Protestant missions in Mexico. The restrictions imposed on religious organizations by the anti-clerical legislation greatly affected the Methodists. The new laws stripped Methodists of their schools which constituted their principal means for making their presence felt in society. In the process they also took away their most effective instrument for recruiting and training administrative and ministerial personnel.

With the implementation of the modus vivendi between the government and the Catholic hierarchy in the 1930s, Methodists lost another of the elements that had united them in their earthly crusade: the ideological threat of resurgent Catholicism. A successor to it could be found in nationalism, but that did not serve to unify, only divide the church. On one hand, it represented nothing more than the process of incorporating themselves fully in what the government was doing outside the mission, thereby stripping Methodists of their identity. On the other hand, within the mission, nationalism led to a definite
estrangement between Mexican preachers and North American missionaries. The result was the church’s autonomy in 1930. In addition, in the face of popular demands, the revolutionary government began devoting greater resources to the provision of those services that the mission had been offering such as education.

Methodists, and Protestant missions in general, lost their traditional reason for existence in Mexican society. Paradoxically, the triumph of the principles that Methodists had defended since their arrival in the country caused their downfall. The incorporation of some of their old members into government organizations served merely to ease the pain of the situation. Once they lost their contacts, Protestant churches remained deprived of a social presence. But they kept on working and, although in small numbers, they have continued growing. Ultimately, or perhaps it is better to say from the first, this could only be explained by the nature of the Protestant church itself. It is an instrument, one among many, for the dissemination of what it considers to be the true Gospel. That is its reason for being, and that explains its persistence.

Document for Epilogue

1) MEXICAN METHODISTS ASSERT THEIR INDEPENDENCE

Once the church obtained autonomy in 1930, the relationship between Mexican Methodism and its American mother-churches changed. The first Mexican bishop, Juan N. Pascoe, explains the situation at the MEC General Conference in 1932.

Bishop Juan N. Pascoe’s Fraternal Discourse
Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church’s General Conference of 1932: it is a great privilege for me to bring you greetings from the Mexican Methodist Church.

I have come in the official capacity of fraternal delegate, duly named by the First General Conference of the Mexican Methodist Church. But it seems to me now, that a new name or concept should be adopted, because I feel like I should be something more than a fraternal delegate, a subsidiary delegate, or more still, to be the son that returns home…

You have given us the privilege of organizing our own General Conference to elaborate our own ecclesiastical laws. You have given us the privilege of supervising our work by means of the election of our own bishop and the elaboration of the guidelines to guide the church. You have given us the privilege of organizing the Council of Cooperation that acts as a link between the mother churches and the new church. You and the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South have granted us all of these great privileges, great opportunities that are at the same time great responsibilities. But maybe these privileges and responsibilities…change your attitude towards us?

Certainly we desire to see the same interest that you showed before. Surely we need your prayers as much or more than before. We certainly need your advice and guidance, now more than ever, as we begin to feel out our own road. We also need your financial support, now that we have new and wider possibilities for service.

I know that there was some questioning about the establishment of a new church. But frankly, there was no other route. The Mexican laws and circumstances there demanded it. The unification with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South required it.
Your Annual Mexican Conference could not participate with the rest of your Latin American missions of the Central Conference and elect your own bishop, without making it obvious that only a Mexican would be elected, because Mexicans restrict ministry to Mexican citizens by birth… The Methodist Episcopal Church, South had rejected the plan for Central Conferences in 1930. How could we develop a unification plan considering all these elements?

There was only one road, the establishment of the Mexican Methodist Church, and with it a Mexican General Conference. This carried us past the facts and needs, and this is what is so great about Methodism. It is adaptable to new times and situations with the objective of carrying out its main purpose – the establishment of the Kingdom of God in Mexico, and throughout the world – through the salvation and sanctification of human beings.