II
INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

[Translators note: Protestantism appeared in Mexico during the mid nineteenth century, a time of violent struggle between conservative and liberal political factions. Conservatives wanted to preserve those elements of the colonial order which they regarded as vital to the character and stability of Mexico. The most important of these was the Catholic Church. At that time, the Church enjoyed legal recognition as the official religion of Mexico, it acted as the principal if not exclusive provider of education, and it owned large amounts of property that it had acquired over the centuries. The Church also offered religious justification for a stratified, paternalistic social order which is why conservatives were so committed to the preservation of its exalted place in Mexican society. Liberals believed that the Catholic clergy exercised a malign influence on society, encouraging superstitious ideas and defending outmoded social structures such as peonage. Moreover the fact that the Church’s property could neither be taxed nor bought and sold represented a serious impediment to the sort of economic development that the liberals were seeking to promote. To end these perceived barriers to progress, liberals issued a Constitution in 1857 that abolished the legal privileges of the Catholic clergy, and two years later liberal President Benito Juárez ordered that all Church properties not used directly for religious purposes to be sold at auction. Conservatives resisted violently with the result that Mexico endured a decade of civil war and French military occupation until liberals, under the leadership of Juárez, won complete control of the country in 1867.]

The establishment of a liberal federal administration in Mexico at the end of the 1860s represented the triumph of ideas that were to revolutionize our country. This transformation did not just involve institutions—attitudes and values were also changed. What the liberals had in
mind went beyond the simple adoption of new political structures or a search for new social and economic relationships; it implied a different outlook on life and it demanded a new work ethic, a faster-paced conception of time, and a more active citizenry. England and the United States, the nations that had the most modern political and economic systems at that time, served as Mexico’s examples.

Since the end of the eighteenth century, there had been strong movements in these two countries to revive one of the most characteristic features of Western Christianity—its missionary spirit. A product of very powerful religious revivals, this missionary emphasis spawned many important organizations and undertakings through the course of the nineteenth century. Perhaps the most important of these movements in England was the Methodist revival.

Begun in the middle of the 1730s, Methodism spread throughout the poorer areas of England which were enduring the effects of nascent industrialization. With time, what had started as an effort to help the Anglican Church carry out its mission was transformed into a powerful force not only within the church, but in society at large. During the next fifty years, hundreds of thousands of English men and women found a new way of life in Methodism which not only provided them with personal fulfillment but also enabled them to better integrate themselves into the changing conditions of a society in transition.

The pietistic roots of the movement, along with an emphasis on the concepts of salvation and Christian perfectionism, made it possible for Methodists to pursue personal improvement and social progress simultaneously. According to their own testimony, Methodists desired to reform society through the transformation of individuals. Hence charitable deeds, educational endeavors, temperance work, and an emphasis on cleanliness and health, spread among the converts. However one aspect of the Methodist movement surpassed all others by far: a desire to
share their experience of salvation with their neighbors. The main attraction of Methodism for those who were willing to listen to the testimonies of its adherents was the confidence they expressed in the face of death and their certainty about what came afterwards. The desire to communicate this message led them to cross the ocean and preach the gospel in the English colonies of North America.

The growth of the Wesleyan faction in the territories that later became the United States was incredibly rapid. Converts began calling their denomination the Methodist Episcopal Church when they ordained Francis Asbury as the first American bishop in 1784, thereby asserting their independence from the English Methodist Church and from the tutelage of John Wesley. In the following decades as the frontier of settlement moved westward, Methodists became one of the largest and most influential religious groups in the United States.

During the nineteenth century the Methodists were strong enough to develop work on three distinct fronts: growing in numbers and expanding throughout the frontier districts in the United States, developing missions to African Americans and Native Americans, and launching foreign missions. With the aim of collecting and dispensing funds as well as giving coherence and organization to their local and foreign missions, Methodists established a Board of Missions in 1817. Through this institution, the influence of the North American Methodists was spread to Africa, Asia, Western Europe, and Latin America.

Along with their preaching, Methodist missionaries brought North American customs, ideas, and even institutions. From the start, the Methodist Episcopal Church was motivated by a desire to incorporate such values as lay representation and majority rule into its ecclesiastical

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1 In this text, the term “North America(n)” refers to the people and institutions of the United States. In the original Spanish-language text, most such references use the term “Norte Americano,” reflecting Latin American usage which distinguishes “North America” (the United States and Canada) from “Latin America” (Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean)—Trans.
structures. Hence, joining the church was itself a way to become acquainted with liberal and democratic institutions. As had been the case in England, the adoption of many of the values preached by Methodist missionaries enabled converts to better integrate themselves into the new industrial economy. Thus it isn’t surprising that Protestant groups within Mexico were able to awaken the interest of certain Mexican liberals; the best known examples being Matías Romero and Benito Juárez. But the support given to them by political leaders cannot explain the birth and growth of Protestantism, or in this case Methodism, in our country.

In general, the growth of Mexican Methodism was a gradual process. By 1930, after 57 years of effort, the Methodist Episcopal Church numbered a little more than ten thousand members in our country. Yet the church’s importance should not be measured only by the number of people who had been formally integrated into its ecclesiastical structures. It also influenced the lives of many other Mexicans who, without embracing Methodism, were touched by its organizations and activities and received from them the ability to involve themselves in the life of the nation.

This work’s primary interest is exploring the Methodists’ worldview. What motivated the Methodists? How did they persuade other Mexicans to listen to them? What material and spiritual benefits did Methodists offer to those who listened to their message? How did Mexican society perceive them? These are the questions that have guided my research.

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2 Benito Juárez (1806-1872) was a Zapotec Indian from the state of Oaxaca who became the most prominent leader of the liberal movement. He served as governor of Oaxaca in the 1840s and 50s and President of Mexico from 1858 to 1872. Matías Romero (1837-1898) was a liberal politician who served in several government posts during the second half of the nineteenth century including 26 years as Mexico’s minister to the United States. Both men expressed support for Protestant missions in Mexico.—Trans.