

“Methodists and their Antagonists: the Irony of Antebellum Methodist Conflict”

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Social historians of 19th century America agree that evangelical Protestantism had an important part in the development of society both in the north and in the south.¹ “Evangelical Protestantism,” however, was not a monolithic entity. It was comprised of a large number of autonomous denominations without any centralized control or any real efforts to coordinate their activities. Whatever impact evangelical Protestantism had on 19th century America depended on how denominations such as the Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Lutherans related to one another and how each one chose to relate to the larger society. Since the Methodists were the largest group, they were critical in how evangelical Protestantism affected the development of the United States.² The decisions the Methodists made regarding how they would relate to the rest of American society, whether it was politics, the emerging market economy, other denominations and religions, slavery, among other things helped determine the nature of American religion and how it would affect its surroundings. In the states that are now referred to as the Midwest, the Methodists interacted with the world in two distinct patterns. Early in the

¹ Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997); Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revival in Rochester, 1817-1832*; There are a few samples of a huge genre. There is even some agreement on what the impact of religion was, with historians of the north claiming it helped implant and create the bourgeoisie-whig/republican ethos that paved the way for the Market Revolution; in the south it supported the hegemony of the slaveholding class.

² Nathan Hatch, “The Puzzle of American Methodism,” *Church History* 63 (June 1994): 178. By 1860, the combined membership of the northern and southern churches contained over half the membership of all the evangelical churches in the U.S. . The work of Hatch and people such as W.W. Sweet, John Wigger, A. Gregory Schneider, Doris Andrews, and many other fine scholars explain the reasons for the success of Methodism.

19th century, the Methodists regarded much of the outside world with suspicion and at times even hostility. They competed vigorously and even bitterly with other Protestant denominations. They described their conversion experiences in martial and violent terms; railed against materialism and worldliness; even fought physically to uphold their right to preach and defend their personal honor; and even refused to cooperate with the other Protestant denominations in pan-evangelical movements such as Sunday schools and temperance societies.

By the mid-19th century, however, the Methodists had moved to the center of the cultural and social establishments in both the north and the south. They continued to engage in conflict except their targets had changed. Gone were the accounts of preachers getting in brawls; they now cooperated with other denominations in pan-evangelical reform movements; and they toned down their competition with other denominations and stopped railing against wealth and refinement. Instead, they redirected their combativeness and edginess towards other targets, taking the side of their regional political interests and of the cause of evangelical Protestantism. For example, they participated in one deepest cultural/social conflicts in 19th century America, the Catholic-Protestant divide by denouncing Catholicism and warning of its growing size and influence. More significantly, they participated in the bloodiest conflict in American history, the sectional controversy that led to the Civil War in which an untold number of Methodists fought and died as soldiers. The denominational leaders on both sides sanctioned and legitimized the appalling levels of violence and bloodshed in the Civil War in their sermons, publications, and other public statements. This paper will hopefully show the willingness of 19th century Methodists in the Midwest to engage and

confront the world, sometimes in a competitive, good natured way but also in ways that bordered on hostility. Born in an age of Revolution, political, social and economic, Methodism thrived amidst swirling conflicts.³ Called a “fighting religion” in Harold Frederic’s classic novel *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, the targets of this confrontational, feisty attitude changed with the circumstances of the denomination. Early in the 19th century, the Methodists had to compete with other denominations in order to gain converts and establish themselves as a prominent denomination. They found themselves in countless battles, sometimes on the stump and sometimes in the press, with their denominational rivals.

Peter Cartwright’s remarkable autobiography is full of recollections of confrontations with other Protestant groups over converts and theology. He describes an incident that took place in 1808 near Busroe, Indiana that pitted Methodism against Shakerism. According to Cartwright, the “dangerous heresy” of Shakerism had spread throughout the area. There was no Methodism preacher with the necessary skills to take them on in debate until Cartwright came to the area. His presence had been requested by the local Methodists for the purpose of taking them on in debate. When Cartwright came to the area, he challenged some of the Shakers to a public debate, which “they dared not refuse.” He recalls the terms: “A local preacher I had with me was to open the debate, then one or all of their preachers, if they chose were to follow, and I was to bring up the rear.” When it came his turn to speak, he felt “the approbation of God,” and he talked for several hours. At the end of his talk, he invited all that would “renounce Shakerism to come and give me their hand.” Forty seven did so and “there openly denounced the

³ David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

dreadful delusion.”⁴ At least according to his recollections, Cartwright’s willingness to confront the Shakers stopped its spread in frontier Indiana.

Another similar incident was a battle for influence with the Baptists in the Stockton Valley of Tennessee circa 1816. Cartwright, an ordained circuit riding Methodist clergyman at that time, only visited particular preaching areas once every few weeks. A local Methodist exhorter feared the Baptist preachers would take advantage of Cartwright’s absence and try to win over recent Methodist converts. He tracked down Cartwright making his rounds on the circuit and convinced him to come back to this particular preaching place to stop the Baptists. Cartwright came back and attended a Baptist meeting without attracting attention. At that time, preaching of any kind was relatively rare in frontier regions and people often attended revivals and meetings outside their denomination. Cartwright grew concerned when one of his congregants agreed to be baptized by immersion, effectively leaving the Methodist church and becoming a Baptist. Not one to sit by and allow this to happen, Cartwright devised an unusual plan to regain this congregant and stop further losses. Cartwright announced to the meeting he would join the Baptist church but only on the condition that he would not have to be baptized again. The Baptist preachers present at the meeting did not accept those terms and did not allow Cartwright to make his case for infant baptism before the congregation. Cartwright got in a last word, saying that he would make his case outside, several “rods” from the church in case any one was interested. He had piqued the interest of many congregants, so they followed him to hear what he had to say. Cartwright describes his successful pitch:

“The people flocked about; I mounted an old log, and crowd gathered about me

⁴ Peter Cartwright, *The Autobiography of Peter Cartwright*, (New York: W.P. Strickland, 1857), 53-55.

I showed them the inconsistency of the Baptist preachers, and laid it to them as well as my inexperience would permit; and closed by saying that, as I and my children in the Gospel could not in any consistent way, be admitted to the Baptist church, I was not determined to organize a Methodist church...Twenty seven came forward, all of my twenty converts, and four others..."⁵

By using a combination of assertiveness and rudimentary theology, Cartwright won a small battle among the Protestant denominations for influence in this particular area of frontier Tennessee. The Methodists became notorious for their success and willingness to engage in and win more than their share of such battles.

Cartwright, however, had also been on the receiving end of sectarian bitterness. Immediately after entering the Methodist ministry at age 17, he went against the wishes of his clerical elders and sought out a formal education. He enrolled at a boarding school run by a Presbyterian minister named Mr. Rankin. Initially excited and believing "providence had opened my way to obtain a good education," Cartwright soon soured on the experience. He recalls that Mr. Rankin and many of the students hated Methodists and harassed him unmercifully, causing him to leave the school.⁶

To outsiders, the competitive Methodists did not always behave in a noble way. William Cooper Howells recalls bitter competition between the Methodists and New Light Christians during the 1820s near Steubenville, Ohio. Among the Methodists, more people wanted to preach than were needed. The New Lights recruited these people to preach for them. While not especially good at preaching, these former Methodists nevertheless did denounce their former brethren as "dead in the love of the world." According to Howells, the Methodists responded by falling into "a spirit of jealousy, and they fell into the indiscretion of persecuting the New Lights by denouncing the preachers

⁵ Cartwright, 69-72.

⁶ Ibid., 28.

as ignorant and wanting in good standing before the world.” The Methodists were apparently the losers in this conflict and became so frustrated that they took the time to formally expel members who had already left. The resentful Methodists “talked violently” about the New Light preachers, and treated them “in a most unchristian manner.” Howells goes on to credit the New Lights for reforming some “pretty hard boys from the woolen factory,” which is more than he credits the Methodist with having done. This case shows the competitiveness of the Methodists but how it could work against them, leaving an unsavory impression in Howell’s memory.⁷

The Methodists’ competitiveness towards other Protestant denominations also manifested itself in their reluctance to cooperate with pan-evangelical efforts, such as Sunday schools. As was the case with other pan-evangelical reform movements, the Presbyterians led the way by spearheading the formation of the American Sunday School Union in 1824. The leaders hoped to bring all or most evangelicals on board but many Methodists chose not to join, instead forming in 1827 the Sunday School Union of the Methodists Episcopal Church. Since the Methodists had both a huge membership and organizational skills and energies, they were a formidable rival to the American union. American Union officials criticized the Methodists for being sectarian and setting back the progress of a noble cause.⁸ For the time being, however, the Methodists stuck to their guns. An address in one of their denominational newspapers explains the reasons for turning their back on it:

The Methodist Church is now composed of nearly four hundred thousand members, upwards of fourteen hundred traveling preachers...From this

⁷ William Cooper Howells, *Recollections of Life in Ohio from 1813 to 1840*, (New York, 1977), 104-5.

⁸ Anne Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790-1880*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 78.

particular organization of this church, all these are considered as one body, adopting the same doctrines...make a population , including children of not less than two millions...

Without even insinuating the want of soundness in the cardinal principles of Christianity in the major part of other Christian denominations in our country...the managers will not conceal the fact that they give a decided preference to their own church...whatever may be the intention, each teacher of religion will more or less inculcate his own peculiar views of Christianity... We are of the opinion that the most likely way for the several denominations to live and labour together is...for each denomination to conduct its own affairs.⁹

The Methodists justified their stance by boasting that they were large enough to manage their own Sunday schools and they did not wish to expose their congregants to the Calvinist theology they disagreed with. Because of the Methodist refusal to cooperate, the American Sunday school Union never achieved its goals of creating a widespread, uniform system of Sunday schools. Several decades later the Methodists began supporting the national Sunday school movement and by the late 19th century finally achieved or at least approximated the lofty goals of the founders back in the 1820s.¹⁰

The Methodists' rivalry with other denominations encouraged them to increase their efforts at establishing and maintaining colleges. As early as 1802, President Joseph McKeen's inaugural address at the Presbyterian sponsored Bowdoin College claimed that his college could do a great deal of good for the Methodists and the Baptists whose clergy were "illiterate vagrants who understood not what they say nor whereof they affirm."¹¹ In 1814, Lyman Beecher issued an even more sweeping criticism of the Methodists' clergy lack of education. Without mentioning them by name, Beecher lamented the shortage of college educated preachers in the United States. He referred to an additional

⁹ "Address," *Christian Advocate and Journal*, April 21, 1827.

¹⁰ Boylan, *Sunday School*

¹¹ Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), 70-71.

force of some 1.500 uneducated ministers, referring to the Methodists and Baptists, as generally “illiterate men, often not possessed even of a good English education, and in some instances unable to read or write. By them, as a body, learning is despised.”

Beecher feared that educated Americans not respect these preachers and consequently not religion.¹² With the success of the Methodists, their rivals took them increasingly seriously. These kinds of criticisms stung the Methodists and support grew within the denomination to turn their attention to promoting higher education.

Denominational rivalries also affected the decisions of regional Methodists to establish colleges. By 1832, when the Indiana Conference was formed, a number of denominational colleges had been built west of the Appalachians. The Indiana Methodists planned to build one of their own. Before embarking on that task, however, the Methodists merely hoped to gain more influence in the state University in Bloomington, which the Presbyterians controlled. From the time of the founding of Indiana University, the Methodists had been petitioning for more influence. In 1824, one of the few Methodists involved in the founding of I.U. requested that a Wesleyan chair be established. In an 1834 petition to the state legislature, the Methodist argued that a public institution should be open to all groups and not dominated by one, referring to the Presbyterians. The Methodists sent six more petitions to the state legislature asking for more influence at Indiana University. In response to the Methodist petitions, one state legislator quipped that there was not one Methodist in the nation qualified to serve as a professor.¹³ After feeling rebuffed and insulted time and time again, the Methodists decided to act on their own. One Methodist preacher accused the Presbyterians of

¹² Lyman Beecher, *Address of the Charitable Society for the Education of Indigent Pious Young Men for the Ministry of the Gospel*

¹³ George Manhart, *DePauw Through the Years*, 2 volumes, (Greencastle: DePauw University,)1: 1-5.

treating the public institution like “an adopted child” and the Methodists like an “inferior caste” and using it to proselytize Calvinist principles.¹⁴ By the time the state university finally hired a Methodist professor in 1836, the Methodists had lost patience and went back to their original plan of establishing a new college of their own.

The Methodists laid out their case for building a college in a September, 1835 article in the *Western Christian Advocate*. Making a case similar to the one made by the Sunday school editorialist, this Methodist writer pointed out that they outnumbered the Presbyterians in the state 24,000 to 4,000. Admitting that they had lost out by “negligence” of gaining their fair share of influence at the State University, the article states the urgency of building their own colleges. After all, if the Presbyterians who already had control of the state University could also establish two more colleges of their own—Hanover and Wabash—“cannot we, with a much greater number, bring all our forces to bear... and establish a college or seminary of our own?” He (presumably a he) goes on to say that the Methodists had sufficient wealth and educated men to staff a college faculty. He wraps up by chiding his brethren for their lack of initiative: “Why stand here all the day idle?”¹⁵ Rivalry with the Presbyterians motivated the Methodists in Indiana to establish Indian Asbury. Nationwide, this same rivalry led to the creation of thirty four permanent colleges before the Civil War, which is remarkable considering the late start the Methodists had in this field of endeavor and the suspicion which the earliest American Methodists had for formal higher education.¹⁶

¹⁴ Fernandez Holliday, *The Life and Times of Allen Wiley*, 71.

¹⁵ *Western Christian Advocate*, September 9, 1835.

¹⁶ Donald Tewksbury, *The Founding of American Colleges and Universities Before the Civil War*, (Archon Books), 64-65.

While denominational competition and mistrust led them into the college building business, that very same business became part of the process that changed their relationship to the rest of the world. Although sponsored and affiliated with religious denominations, the colleges through their curriculum and stance toward the outside world did not emphasize sectarian differences. Instead, they projected a generic evangelical Protestant message and the colleges of the different denominations were quite similar in subjects taught.¹⁷ The colleges were joint ventures between the denominations and local boosters, so they had to work and cooperate with wealthy businessmen and farmers. In order to remain financially solvent, especially during and after the Depression of 1837, the colleges had to appeal to financial contributions from wealthy people. The Methodists could not afford to alienate them. Matthew Simpson, the Methodist clergyman who was president of Indiana Asbury during the 1840s, described the college's purpose as "the precursors of great improvements, whether in government or in the arts of civilized life."¹⁸ Henry Ward Beecher, the famous Presbyterian preacher, addressing I.A.U.'s Platonean society in 1840, praised his rival denomination's college for helping to provide a strong foundation for the American civilization and being "another bulwark of liberty and religion."¹⁹ The dozens of colleges like Indiana University spread across the American landscape, although born out of sectarian rivalries, helped homogenize American Protestant culture and link the interests between Methodism and the regional establishment and elite. The Methodist church increasingly turned its energy and feistiness and combativeness to the fights and concerns of this elite.

¹⁷ William Ringenberg, *The Christian College: A History of Protestant Higher Education in America*, (Grand Rapids: Christian University Press, 1986), 67.

¹⁸ Simpson, "Inaugural Address," 483.

¹⁹ Henry Ward Beecher, *An Address Delivered Before the Platonean Society of the Indiana Asbury University*, (Indianapolis, 1840), 4.

By the middle of the 19th century, the Methodists believed the future success of the nation depended on the spread and eventual triumph of evangelical Protestantism. And they saw Roman Catholicism and Catholic immigration as the greatest threat to this triumph. The Methodists contributed their fair share to anti-Catholic sentiment in the United States, using their publications to denounce Catholicism and Catholic immigration in terms ranging from mild criticism to accusing it of being the spearhead of a plot to destroy the republican foundations of the United States and place it under the control of the Pope. The territory and eventual state of Michigan had more concern about Catholicism because there was a French-Catholic presence in place before the first Anglo-Protestants showed up. Elijah Pilcher, one of the pioneers and builders of Methodism in Michigan, criticized the effectiveness of Catholicism before the first Protestant missionaries showed up. “The mere ceremonies of Romanism did not lay restraint on the people” to prevent them from wasting their time, and especially their winter months, “to pleasure, particularly to music and dancing, which tended to weaken the mind and vitiate the moral sensibilities...”²⁰ Pilcher goes on to credit the first Protestant missionaries with being the first true Christians in the region because “we do not recognize the Romish church as a true Christian church...” He does, at least, give it this much: “yet, she has some semblance to Christianity.”²¹

Pilcher goes on to criticize Catholicism in even more severe terms. He describes an incident where the Methodist itinerant Alfred Brunson was traveling through frontier Michigan and came upon a Frenchman selling fish. The Frenchman knew that Brunson was a clergyman and asked him to pardon him for his sins. Brunson told the Frenchman

²⁰ Elijah Pilcher, *Protestantism in Michigan: Being a Special History of the Methodist Episcopal Church and Incidentally of all the Denominations*, (Detroit: R.D.S. Tyler & Co., 1878), 11.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

he did not and could not pardon sins. Pilcher quotes Brunson's account of this incident: "Let the Catholic priests say what they will about referring their people to Christ, their people expect them to absolve them." He goes on to accuse the French adventurers of being motivated by greed and/or fame, "and not to find a home for liberty and religious toleration. They were all Romanists and had no desire for either civil or religious freedom." In discussing a late 19th century political issue, he accuses the Catholics of denouncing and trying to sabotage the public school system in Detroit and yet "manage to secure a large portion of the teachers to be of their faith and order."²² Pilcher's fear of growing Catholic influence was typical of the Methodist view by the second half of the 19th century..

The Methodists also used their "highest-brow" publication, *The Methodist Quarterly Review*, to criticize Catholicism throughout the middle of the 19th century. An essay published in 1833 is typical of this approach. At one point, the editorialist warns against the alarmism of an imminent Catholic threat to America's republican polity: "At present, therefore, we think there is no call for the many warnings which are said to guard against the encroachments of the Roman Catholics upon our civil liberties." He does concede, however, that "incipient efforts have been made to grasp at political power."

And he goes on to quote John Wesley on the subject of Catholicism and toleration:

"With Persecution I have nothing to do. I persecute no man for his religious principles. I consider not, whether the Romish church be true or false...yet I insist upon it, that no government, not Roman Catholic, ought to tolerate men of the Roman Catholic persuasion.

I prove this by a plain argument....That no Roman Catholic does or can give security for his allegiance or peaceable behavior, I prove thus...It is a Roman Catholic maxim, established...but by a public council, that 'no faith is to be kept with heretics...but it was never openly disclaimed. But as long as it is so, nothing can be more plain than that the members of that Church can give no reasonable

²² Ibid., 133, 156, 169-70.

security to any government of their allegiance or peaceable behavior. Therefore, they ought not to be tolerated by any government, Protestant, Mohammedan, or Pagan.”²³

Although the Methodists did not officially support discrimination against Catholics at this time, these kinds of articles certainly show that at the very least it was on their minds.

Other articles in the *MQR* condemned Catholicism in even stronger terms. Some Methodist writers doubted whether or not Catholicism could even be considered a “church of our Lord Jesus Christ.” One article even called them “the church of Satan.” In a few cases the *MQR* even dabbled in one of the most scurrilous anti-Catholic invective, the convent horror stories. This level of condemnation was not universal, however, as some articles believed they were “still our brethren.”²⁴ The growing number of Irish-Catholic immigrants and historical Anglo-Protestant fears of Catholicism inspired the Methodist reaction, but it was also the readiness of Methodists to get involved in controversy and their confrontational attitude that led them to take what appears to us today to be such a bigoted stand.

While there is not time here to go into the full story of Methodism and the Civil War, a brief summary should suffice. John Wesley’s movement opposed slavery from the start, and the early American Methodists in the late 18th century continued this opposition. The Methodist *Discipline* stated that any Methodist who did not free his slaves would be denied the sacraments and expelled from the church.²⁵ This anti-slavery stand is a good example of early American Methodism’s willingness to confront its society. Francis Asbury, the first American Bishop of Methodism, went so far as to meet

²³ *Methodist Quarterly Review*, July 1833, 339-340.

²⁴ G. Gregory Van Dusen, “An American Response to Irish Catholic Immigration: The Methodist Quarterly Review, 1830-1870” *Methodist History* 29(1), 29.

²⁵ Sherman, 115.

with George Washington to request his help in ending slavery.²⁶ Unfortunately for the future reputation of Methodism, once it became apparent just how controversial their anti-slavery attitude was, they moderated their anti-slavery stand. Sadly, the 1804 *Discipline* encouraged Methodist preachers to “admonish and exhort all slaves to render due respect and obedience...of their respective master.”²⁷ Denmark Vesey, the leader of the aborted 1822 slaver rebellion, was a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and so after that the Methodists in the south went even further defending slavery to avoid *any* taint of antislavery sentiment.²⁸ Northern Methodists remained nominally antislavery but did all they could to prevent abolitionism from gaining a presence in the church, with northern Methodist preachers denouncing abolitionism in stronger terms than slavery. Nathan Bangs, the leading Methodist polemicist, got into a nasty exchange with William Lloyd Garrison, with Bangs accusing Garrison of favoring “an amalgamation of the American and African races” and Garrison responded by calling Bangs “an ambitious, meddlesome, domineering, painted hypocrite..” Earlier he had called the Methodist church a “synagogue of Satan” and “a cage of unclean birds.”²⁹ The Methodists, however, could not keep a lid on abolitionism and the slavery issue finally tore the church apart into northern and southern wings in 1844.

At the 1844 General Conference, James Andrews, one of the Methodist Bishops, inherited several slaves. When the northern delegates, already reeling from defections to the antislavery offshoot the Wesleyan church, refused to allow Andrews to continue

²⁶ L.C. Rudolph, *Francis Asbury, 179*.

²⁷ Sherman, 119.

²⁸ Donald Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

²⁹ Nathaniel Bangs, “The American Colonization Society,” *Methodist Magazine and Quarterly Review* 15 (Jan. 1833), 111-6; *Liberator*, March 16, 1833, 43.

serving as Bishop, the southern delegates seceded, forming the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The split was not amicable and it led to both churches fully supporting their side in the growing sectional crisis and then the Civil War. Methodist clergymen took clear anti-southern stands in all the major sectional controversies, including the Compromise of 1850 and especially the Fugitive Slave Act, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Dred Scott and so on.³⁰ By the middle of the 19th century, the Methodists were fully committed to supporting their side in the Civil War, urging on and giving religious legitimacy to the violence against the south, which necessarily pitted them against fellow Methodists. And finally, after the war started, the northern Methodists finally returned to the original position of abolitionism.³¹

At every phase of at least its 19th century history, Methodism aggressively engaged the society on a series of issues. Most of them involved legitimate religious issues but varied according to not only religious but also social and political circumstances. Their choices of antagonists and the intensity with which they fought them varied according to their perceived place in society and the threats they saw. When the outlook of the Methodists was locally or parochially oriented, as it was in the early 19th century, they competed and butted heads with Baptists, Shakers, Deists, and Presbyterians. At that time, there was no looming threat of secession and the “Catholic Menace” was not yet on their doorstep. When these larger threats appeared, the Methodists responded with their typical assertiveness. Like other northerners, they

³⁰ C.C. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the Civil War* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985,)

³¹ See Goen on page 133, where he quotes a Kentucky Methodist preacher, a Mr. Brown, who said “I trust our troops will rally and wipe out the disgrace of Manassas though it cost the life of every rebel under arms. Let Davis and Beauregard be captured to meet the fate of Haman. Hang them up on Mason and Dixon’s line...let them hang until the vultures shall eat their rotten flesh from their bones...”

ultimately saw the rise of “slave power” and secession as a greater danger than Catholicism, despite the fact they shared the same religion as many southerners. They cheered on the Civil War and in some instances even sounded blood thirsty. That is not to say that many Methodists were not horrified by the Civil War and would have loved to have avoided it, but that was the expected reaction. Whether this energy and combativeness that Methodists—both the laity and the clergy—exhibited throughout the 18th and into the 19th centuries was positive trait that gave it relevance and vitality or a negative trait that contributed to the violent history of America is one’s personal opinion, although in my opinion both are true.