

Happenings Around the Church

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BY: DR. RILEY CASE

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HAPPY 225TH ANNIVERSARY, AMERICAN METHODISM (Part 1)

225 years ago the first preachers of the newly formed Methodist Episcopal Church were riding out of Baltimore to win America for Jesus Christ. John Wesley had understood that the Americans needed to be independent of British oversight.

To achieve this he did the following:

- 1) Appointed two leaders, Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, to serve as general superintendents (redesignated "bishops" by Asbury) for the new church;
- 2) Made a clean break with Anglicanism by agreeing to have lay preachers ordained.

Coke never quite got the hang of what was required in the new world, and was basically useless to the Methodist cause. Asbury, however, had lived in America during the revolution, had become thoroughly Americanized (which meant among other things that he insisted on an election before he took charge of the church), and like a general leading an army, deployed his preachers, not primarily in the cities, where it was comfortable to live, but in the rural areas and on the frontier.

Overall it was not a promising time for religion in America. American Anglicans were reeling because of their associations with Great Britain; the Congregationalists would never get beyond their New England parochialism. Mennonites and Quakers actually faced persecution for their pacifism and unwillingness to join the Revolutionary War effort. Only one in ten Americans was a church member. The western frontier was described as lawless.

But Asbury had a vision. He wrote in his journal: "O America, America, God will surely make it the glory of the world for religion." The Americans took what they could use from Wesley and de-emphasized the rest. They were not so interested in Wesley's clerical collar, his Sunday Service, or his Anglican view of the sacraments. They were, however, committed to the Articles of Religion, the General Rules, the circuit system, the class meeting, the lay preacher, and field preaching (Methodism was introduced in New England when Jesse Lee stood on a gambling table on the Boston Commons in 1790 and called on Bostonians to repent).

The marching orders for the new church, inscribed in the minutes of the Christmas conference of 1784, were: "you have nothing to do but save souls." Unlike other denominations of the time the Methodists had no political connections, no ethnic or national base, no money, and no trained clergy. They had no colleges, no seminaries, and no book concern. We might also note they did not have agencies to monitor diversity or to lobby for political causes in Washington.

Methodism spread by conversion growth. More specifically, they spread by revival growth. Methodists were scorned by Calvinists, by Unitarians, and by people of social standing, but the common people and the frontier people heard them gladly.

Methodists in the first 50 years of existence railed against the formalists, against ruffles, against the wearing of gold, against dancing and alcohol. After a great outdoor revival at a place called Cane

Ridge in Kentucky in 1800 the Methodists added the campmeeting in their arsenal of weapons to use against the devil. The campmeeting would soon contribute to evangelical ethos the altar call, and the spiritual (both white and black), the forerunner of the gospel hymns, or what would be later called "Methodist music."

If Asbury's journal is to be believed, in 1809 when Methodism in Indiana could boast of only one church building, they could report that 17 campmeetings had been held. By 1850 in Indiana when (according to census figures) the Congregationalists reported 2 churches and the Episcopalians 24, the Methodists could count 778.

By this date Methodism, from its humble beginning in 1784, when it could claim only a 2% share of the church membership in America, could now report (adding together all Methodist bodies) that one-third of all church members in America was a Methodist. It was perhaps the most spectacular and dramatic account of church growth in the history of the church.

Are there lessons to be learned from the story of early Methodism? Yes, and some of these will be discussed in the next Happenings article. But one lesson, basic to all the others is this: early Methodists never compromised the essentials of Wesleyan theology. They proclaimed without apology the truths of Original Sin, the Blood Atonement, Salvation by grace through faith, Unlimited Atonement, Free Grace, the New Birth, and Total Sanctification. It is the contention of the Confessing Movement and other evangelical renewal movements in the United Methodist Church that Methodist decline is in direct proportion to the compromising of these doctrines.

Can Methodism reclaim some of its former glory? The place to start is to examine the message we preach, and to measure its power to transform lives and culture.

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