

Happenings Around the Church

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HAPPY 225TH ANNIVERSARY, AMERICAN METHODISM (PART 3)

In 1955 Roy L. Smith, author, once pastor of Methodism's largest church (Los Angeles First), former editor of *The Christian Advocate*, and known as "Mr. Methodist," wrote a well-received book, *Why I Am a Methodist*. Methodism at the time seemed at the height of its influence. Smith reiterated the many missional and institutional accomplishments of Methodism. He then offered his opinion that part of Methodism's greatness was in its liberality of viewpoint. There had not been doctrinal controversy in Methodism, Smith thought, because of 1) official literature in the Sunday school which assures a "uniform" approach to learning; and 2) the way ministers are required to undergo uniform training and preparation.

Methodism in America is now 225 years old. But, as has been mentioned, Methodism, which once claimed a third of all American church members (in 1850), has experienced 45 years of decline and seems only a shell of its former self in terms of influence in America. The 225th anniversary is a time for soul-searching.

It can be argued that Smith's observation about Methodism's greatness in its view of "liberality of viewpoint" along with "uniform" teaching and training, was also responsible in part for what is today increasing irrelevance and decline.

To begin with, "liberality of viewpoint" is in tension, if not in conflict with, the idea of "uniform teaching" and learning. Some of us who lived in the 1950s (when Smith wrote) were not at all impressed that "standardized" teaching and training was part of Methodism's greatness. "Standardized," whether in church school materials, college education, or seminary training, basically meant "one size fits all." In Sunday school material, one philosophy and one theology (liberalism) was deemed not only acceptable but mandatory for all churches, whether rural or city, conservative or liberal, inner city or suburb, small church, large church, black church or white church. This might conceivably work as long as the educational enterprise was based on Christian presuppositions, beliefs, and values, but the story of Methodist education is one where Christian beliefs, presuppositions, and values were increasingly compromised.

Methodism's rapid growth in America was accomplished without the support or guidance of either colleges or seminaries or denominational curriculum control. When commitment to education came—and when it came it seemed an all-consuming passion—it came with the assumption that America could be Christianized through teaching and learning. The benefits of education would bring civilization and democracy and a more just society. Science and new learning were welcomed because truth was truth, and the findings of science would surely be compatible with the gospel. This education was known as "progressive" because it was forward-looking. The goal was no less grand than "The Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man."

Hindrances to the progressive education were superstition, sectarianism, revivalism, ignorance, and backward cultures. The way to address America's native American problem was to separate young Native Americans from their tribes and educate them in progressive Indian schools so that eventually they would become civilized. Fundamentalism, the theological reaction to progressive thinking, was to be resisted in all forms. Sectarianism, such as that furthered by Catholic parochial schools, was seen as undermining progressive values.

The problem was, of course, that the new learning, in whatever discipline, did not believe it needed to be based on Christian presuppositions. The enlightenment had taught that truth could be discovered

by reason without revelation. Thus Christian presuppositions in the public sector, as well as in church colleges, moved more and more to the periphery. The Methodist colleges which once sought to offer a Methodist and Christian education became schools that sought to offer a nonsectarian but Christian education. These in turn became schools that sought to offer religious but not specifically Christian education. These then became schools that sought to offer a value-centered education. Finally the schools sought to offer merely "excellent" education. Methodist schools moved from being Christian schools to church-related schools, and when even that was offensive, to being "historically church-related" schools.

. These views also infected Christian education. E. B. Chappell, editor of church school materials in the M.E. Church South would write in 1935 that Christian education needed to be based not on theological presuppositions but on the new psychology of religion and the scientific approaches to human nature. (Recent Developments of Religious Education in the Methodist Episcopal Church South). Thus began the change from Christian education to religious education to church education to church-related education.

The change was evident also in seminary education. Writing in the Methodist Quarterly Review in 1926 C. G. Thompson noted that seminaries were being criticized for compromising the integrity of the faith, then made this amazing assessment, "There are dangerous heretics in the Church, and a few of them occupy professional chairs in theological seminaries, but the Church is suffering a thousand times more from poorly prepared ministers than from heresy" (July 1925, p. 415).

When Roy L. Smith wrote in 1955 it appeared that the mainline denominations would direct America's future. The National Council of Churches was in its prime, and claimed to represent as many as 75% of America's Protestants. Methodism (including E.U.B.s) could claim over 11 million members. But mainline dominance began to unravel with post-modernism and the view that reason was no more a reliable guide to truth than revelation. The rebellion of the 1960s was more a reaction to the sexist and racist liberal "one size fits all" approach than it was to conservative and traditional Christianity's understandings of truth and culture.

It is being said that Christianity no longer dominates American culture. If this is so, then the church must no longer identify with the forces of secularism which dominate university as well as public education. It must be counter-cultural, even as the early church was counter-cultural. If our "church" colleges can no longer see themselves as Christian, then they should be freed to pursue an independent existence. If our seminaries want to see themselves only as schools of religion, worshipping at the altar of academic freedom, and without Christian confession, then they need also to pursue an independent existence. For sure, it is not good stewardship to pour 15 million (Ministerial Education Fund) dollars of apportionment money into schools that do not advance the Christian cause. And to deny approval to evangelical schools because they operate with confessions of faith while approving schools like Harvard and Chicago which don't even claim to be Christian, is unconscionable.

Can the United Methodist Church be renewed? Given the present corporate culture it seems unlikely. But then God is in the business of doing unlikely things.

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