

Faith and Doctrine

Churches differ as to government and doctrine. The Methodist Church is episcopal in its organization, on this point resembling the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Episcopal churches, and the Church of England, in that all have bishops. The line of "apostolic succession" in the Methodist Church came through the ordination of Dr. Thomas Coke as superintendent, or bishop, by John Wesley, a presbyter of the Church of England. Wesley, however, had long since given up any belief in the apostolic succession, and though his procedure has been questioned by some, the Methodists have been more than satisfied that his stand was justified. For them, episcopacy is an "office," not an "order."

As to doctrine, there have been major disagreements within churches and minor differences between churches and sects. Because of these variations in official teaching, thousands of Christians have been persecuted, tortured, or put to death.

John Wesley had little quarrel with the theology of the Church of England; it was the lack of real spirituality which disturbed him. He was never much interested in opinions, except in a few fundamentals. "Persons may be quite right in

their opinions, and yet have no religion at all; and on the other hand, persons may be truly religious, who hold many wrong opinions."

What Wesley desired and Methodists sought was a change of heart, more fellowship with God, more love for one's fellowmen. The one condition that Wesley prescribed for membership in his societies was an affirmative answer to the question, "Dost thou love and serve God?" If the applicant could answer, "Yes," and if his conduct indicated that he meant what he said, Wesley would reply, "It is enough. I give thee the right hand of fellowship." This does not mean that Wesley did not have his opinions, for he earnestly sought answers to many theological questions, and he gave learned yet lucid expositions to his congregations.

If doctrines meant less than spiritual life to the university-trained John Wesley, it is not surprising that itinerant Methodist preachers cared little for theological abstractions. Their textbook, often their only reference book, was the Bible. They believed, as did all Christians of a century ago, in the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures. The higher criticism — research into the composition and translation of the books of the Bible — and the theory of evolution did not reach the frontier until the middle of the nineteenth century.

This did not mean that doctrinal questions were not discussed. In an area where religious beliefs, social standards, and economic positions were un-

settled, the preachers debated the doctrines which aligned the people with or against the churches. There was, for example, the doctrine of original sin. Was man condemned forever because of Adam's disobedience? And if salvation from sin was the gift of Christ, through his death, was this sacrifice limited, as the Calvinists believed, to those already foreordained or predestined to salvation? The Methodist preachers had definite opinions on these points. They taught that man was by nature evil, that he was unable, of himself, to free himself from sin; but they paid little attention to original sin as inherited from Adam.

As to a second point, free will versus predestination, the Methodists were aggressive exponents of free will. They conceded that all men had fallen short of the divine standard, and they taught that only God's grace could free them from past sins and keep them from sinning in the future. But they also taught that any person could receive this forgiveness and assurance. The key word for the Methodists was "whosoever," and they stressed the love of God for the sinner. The Calvinists' doctrine of predestination was anathema to the Methodist preachers.

The gift of salvation might be given anywhere, but revivals and camp meetings were frequently the scenes of mass conversions. Frontier preachers were often dynamic speakers and practical psychologists. In facing men and women who had,

perhaps, been too busy to think much of their spiritual responsibilities, and deeply concerned that the people who listened should repent and be saved, the preachers used every means to persuade them to seek the Lord and to turn over a new leaf. Those "under conviction" crowded to the altar or so-called "mourners' bench." Prayers, songs, exhortations, and other emotional appeals were used to encourage those at the altar to give up their sins and worldly interests and to seek the forgiveness of God and the witness of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes these meetings continued far into the night. Once the decision was made, the man or woman rose to testify, to pray, or to sing, and those around joined in the rejoicing. The early camp meetings were sometimes accompanied with abnormal physical manifestations of hysteria, including the "jerks," but this stage had largely died out before the Methodists began their work in Iowa.

The Methodists also disagreed with the claim of Baptists and "Campbellites" that immersion was the only acceptable method of baptism, even though on many occasions Methodist converts were baptized in a near-by stream or lake. Children were presented for baptism at an early age.

Pioneer Methodists disapproved of the ritualism of the Catholic and Episcopal churches, recalling that ritualism and formality had once been associated with worldliness and complacency in the

presence of evil. Sometimes their opposition to form and ornamentation led them to refuse to use formal prayers, instrumental music, stained glass windows, and similar aids to worship; instead, they depended on the sermon or exhortation, extemporaneous prayers, and congregational singing led by the preacher or a layman with or without musical ability.

Nor did the Methodists quite agree with the Lutherans that faith was the sole consideration in religious matters. Faith was, indeed, the gift which made possible spiritual life, but the light secured by faith must shine forth in "good works." First among these, for members in good standing, was obedience to the Ten Commandments and the commandments in the New Testament. Among such commands were the love of God, keeping the Sabbath holy, honesty, chastity, respect for life and property, giving honor and obedience to one's parents, baptism, prayer, and loving one's neighbor. Profanity was definitely a sin and no doubt one frequently committed by the frontiersmen. Breaking prairie with several yoke of oxen provided plenty of provocation. Attendance at prayer meetings, church services, Sunday school, and class meetings was an informal requirement and the means of protection against the wiles of the Devil. Members were also expected to have family worship morning and evening, to say grace before meals, to read the Bible daily, to pray, and

to testify in prayer and class meetings. In 1784 the Conference resolved that Methodists must follow the Golden Rule in buying and selling, "particularly in selling horses."

To the biblical commandments the church added others. Most Methodists believed that certain habits and forms of recreation were incompatible with holiness. Theater-going, card-playing, and dancing were considered extremely sinful by the early Methodists, many of whom also frowned upon ruffles and jewelry. The ornamentation of churches, instrumental music, cushioned pews, and colored windows were also opposed.

The Methodist societies in England were formed, in part, to help free their members from the temptation to drink. Drunkenness and the buying and selling of spirituous liquors were strictly forbidden for the leaders and frowned upon for the members. On the American frontier, liquor was made and consumed in great quantities, thus creating a baffling problem for all the churches. The Methodist rule pertaining to the trade in intoxicating liquor was stricken out in 1789 and was not restored until 1848 at which time the Iowa Conference unanimously approved its restoration. For the past hundred years the Methodist Church in Iowa has been an active opponent of the liquor traffic. In 1886 the Reverend George C. Haddock, pastor of the Methodist Episcopal Church at Sioux City and active in the prohibition

fight, was shot by a man who was never convicted. The property of John Mahin, a newspaperman of Muscatine, suffered damage because of his opposition to the Mulct Law.

Another habit which attracted the attention of the Methodists was the use of tobacco. Its use was not forbidden by the rules of the General Conference, but the church opposed the habit both for ministers and for members. Many of the early preachers, however, came from the ranks of the frontiersmen and had acquired this habit before their conversion and dedication to the ministry. There are frequent references in the conference minutes to efforts to eliminate the use of tobacco by ministers. In 1867, for example, the Upper Iowa Conference adopted a resolution advising all addicted to its use to practice self-denial and to give up this pernicious habit while those not so addicted were urged not to form it. A rule against the use of tobacco by ministers of the Upper Iowa Conference evoked the rather reasonable protest at the session of 1871: "That we consider the above rule useless, so long as members in full standing continue the use of the weed in any form." In 1890 a committee of the Northwest Iowa Conference declared, "That the use of tobacco be considered a bar to any man's entering the 'Northwest Iowa Conference' or advancement in the ministry."

The Methodist Church has also steadfastly op-

posed the display and sale of literature which contributes to indecency and immorality; even so, Methodists have never compiled an *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*. In 1883 the Iowa Conference passed a resolution condemning the circulation of such papers as the *Police Gazette*, *Saturday Night*, and *Fireside Companion*. The last of the three certainly had a disarming title.

A touchy subject in the early and some later churches has been membership in secret societies. Methodists seem to have had little trouble with this problem, although the Iowa Conference of 1845, taking notice of the anti-Masonic movement, passed a resolution, "That in the opinion of this Conference it is inexpedient for our ministers to connect themselves with Masonic Lodges and similar institutions and that we respectfully request those members of this Conference who are now connected with Masonry to discontinue their attendance on the lodges." Three years later the Conference added a resolution urging its members not to speak or lecture publicly against Free Masonry or the Odd Fellows. By 1850 the Conference decided that membership in such secret societies was a personal affair, and the matter was dropped.

The attitude of the Methodist Church toward war has varied, depending upon the cause of the war. In most cases the church has permitted its members to make their own decisions. Wesley

opposed the American Revolution. It was, in his opinion, more important for men to free themselves from the bondage of sin than to secure greater political freedom. The attitude of Americans on the Mexican War depended largely on how they felt about the extension of slavery. The Iowa Methodist Conference seems to have ignored this war.

In the Civil War, however, the moral issues were more distinct. By that time Methodists in the South had withdrawn to form their own church, while the Methodist Episcopal Church whole-heartedly supported the Union and advocated the abolition of slavery. Of the contribution of churches in the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln wrote to the General Conference in 1864: ". . . the Methodist Episcopal Church sends more soldiers to the field, more nurses to the hospitals, and more prayers to Heaven than any other." Among the nurses were two Iowa Methodists, Mrs. Annie Wittenmyer of Keokuk, who started diet kitchens for army hospitals, and Mrs. James Harlan of Mount Pleasant, of whom it was said that she "outranked Halleck."

Methodists differ as to many theological questions, but there have been no major divisions of the church on doctrinal lines and but few charges of heresy; John Wesley's broad-minded acceptance of all who love God and their fellowmen has set the pattern for Methodists.