

METHODISM AS NEW CREATION: AN HISTORICAL- THEOLOGICAL ENQUIRY

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How arrogant! How sectarian! How unecumenical! How dare one confuse the new creation with one's own communion? And equating the new creation with a denomination, even Methodism? What claim would be more laughable, more readily dismissed, more easily ridiculed? Methodism as the New Creation? Really? Is polity the new creation? Organization, structure, institutions, bureaucracy? Who would look at ecclesial organization today—at my own church's plethora of structures, at all levels, topped by the General Council of Ministries or General Board of Global Ministries—who would look at too-complex-to-chart United Methodism and credibly discern the new creation? Who would think the denominational structures and the denominational form of the church anticipatory of the new creation?¹

Polity, organization, denominations receive far different valuation, both from scholars and in popular discourse. We term them *passé*,² dinosaurs, ethical failures, bureaucratic, mission-inhibiting, elitist, corporate,

1. But see my colleague's insightful treatment, one that influences this analysis and its conclusions: Thomas Edward Frank, *Polity, Practice, and the Mission of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997). Compare Jack M. Tuell, *The Organization of The United Methodist Church*, revised edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).

2. For such a judgment, see William M. Halvorson, *Atlas of American Religion: the Denominational Era, 1776–1990* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2000).

irrelevant.³ They seem closer to the Antichrist than to re-creation. So intimated my two former Duke Divinity colleagues, Paul A. Mickey and the late Robert L. Wilson, who years ago set the tone for much subsequent commentary. *What New Creation? The Agony of Church Restructure*⁴ saw anything but new creation in the bureaucratic, denominational reorganization of mainline Protestantism, United Methodism in particular.

NEW CREATION?

Yet, North American Methodists who know their early history realize that we held up our polity, our organization, and our structured discipline to be God's new order. We employed the word "Zion" as self-description. We understood our order, our polity, to be providentially ordained. We understood our purpose to be re-creative, reforming a continent. We undertook such a grand design by the recreation of individuals, making new creations of persons otherwise despised by this world. We revered nature—God's first creation—and found both individual solace and corporate strength therein. We knew our movement to emblem God's new order and so sought within it to overcome those disunities, injustices, principalities, and powers that ruled this world, most notably slavery. And we celebrated and acknowledged our polity, our organization, our structured discipline as God's new order in eschatological, eucharistic, ecumenical gatherings, gatherings that we termed conference.⁵

By these several gestures early Methodists attempted through their polity a restoration of the image of God, a restoration of the natural image, of the political image, of the moral image—of what Randy Maddox elsewhere in this volume terms the cosmic, socioeconomic and spiritual dimensions of new creation. These gestures performed Methodism's new creation theology and would be perhaps better displayed in close, ethno-

3. On the end to denominationalism, see Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton University Press, 1988) and especially *The Struggle for America's Soul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 72-94. See also Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

4. Paul A. Mickey and Robert L. Wilson, *What New Creation? The Agony of Church Restructure* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977).

5. On the new creation and re-creation of persons as central for John Wesley, see Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997); *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999); and *John Wesley: A Theological Journey* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003). See also Scott J. Jones, *John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), 48, 60, 96, 152, 156-58, 199, 204, 215-16, 218-22. For creation and new creation in the longer Methodist tradition, see my colleague, Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998); and Walter Klaiber and Manfred Marquardt, *Living Grace: An Outline of United Methodist Theology*, translated and adapted by J. Steven O'Malley and Ulrike R. M. Guthrie (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), especially 311-414.

graphic-like representations of Methodist behavior, gatherings, and initiatives. Here we take a shortcut in reproducing some of the rhetoric which points to the behavior, but we do so mindful of the fact that Methodists were far better at doing their theology than in speaking it.

To show Methodism as New Creation I appeal to the early Methodist saga in North America. I focus on the period around and particularly after the formation of The Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784. That formalization made it possible and necessary for North American Methodists to represent their self-understandings to themselves and wider publics. In such representations we can see just how fully they imagined that their polity, their structure, and their discipline anticipated what had been promised in the new creation. Similar narratives, I imagine, might be rendered for Methodism's planting in other climes and places.

ZION

Methodists positioned their structures, practices, and community in relation to the new creation by applying to themselves a very special biblical word. When they spoke of their new ecclesial existence, they employed the term that equated themselves with the agents of new creation, God's chosen people. They referred to Methodism as Zion and employed the word "Zion" when speaking of Methodist endeavors. So Bishop Francis Asbury noted in 1789, "The number of candidates for the ministry are many; from which circumstance I am led to think the Lord is about greatly to enlarge the borders of Zion." In a letter of 1792 he affirmed, "I feel myself uncommonly moved to believe the Lord will give peace to his church, and great prosperity to his Zion this year."⁶ James Haw reported on a Kentucky revival of 1789, "Good news from Zion—The Work of GOD is going on rapidly in the new Western world."⁷ Asbury in 1796 gave Mrs. Martha Haskins instructions to further Zion's cause:

"My soul longeth for the prosperity of Zion. Oh that the sisters would establish prayer meetings once a week."⁸

6. *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, ed. Elmer T. Clark, 3 vols. (London and Nashville: Epworth Press and Abingdon Press, 1958) [Hereinafter referred to as *JLFA*.], 1:606, July 31, 1789. *JLFA* 3:109, January 1, 1792. For discussion of Zion as a Methodist self-referent and evangelical commonplace, see Richey, *Early American Methodism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 42-46.

7. *Arminian Magazine* (Philadelphia) 2 (1790): 202, "An Extract of a Letter from James Haw, Elder . . . to Bishop Asbury."

8. *JLFA* 3:140, February 17, 1796, letter from Charleston.

Similarly two years earlier he preached an ordination sermon on “Woe to them that are at ease in Zion.”⁹ And he took note of just such “ease in Zion,” in 1795, while traveling in my home state:

I rode forty miles to Moore’s. My body is weak, and so is my faith for this part of the vineyard. God is my portion, saith my soul. This country improves in cultivation, wickedness, mills, and stills; a *prophet of strong drink* would be acceptable to many of these people. I believe that the Methodist preachers keep clear, both by precept and example; would to God the members did so too! Lord, have pity on weeping, bleeding Zion!¹⁰

Asbury made clear the connection between Methodism as Zion and God’s universal re-creation and eventual redemption in his year-end meditations for 1802:

My general experience is close communion with God, holy fellowship with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, a will resigned, frequent addresses to a throne of grace, a constant serious care for the prosperity of Zion, forethought in the arrangements and appointments of the preachers, a soul drawn out in ardent prayer for the universal Church and the complete triumph of Christ over the whole earth.¹¹

Freeborn Garrettson also caught some of the nuance in early Methodist understanding of Zion:

I love Zion, for she is my chief joy.—I pray for the militant church wherever scattered, or of whatever sect; but I engaged to confine myself to the people with whom I have lived, and for whom I have spent the prime of my life.¹²

Connecting Methodist structure and endeavor to Zion, Ezekiel Cooper spoke of going “Zionward.”¹³ So later Methodists offered *The Methodist Magazine* in the trust “the work will be found both useful and entertaining to the real friends of Zion.” And the next year, 1819, they launched the Missionary and Bible Society with an appeal to “the friends of Zion.”¹⁴

The term recurs through early Methodist rhetoric as an ecclesial self-reference, seemingly preferred over the more prosaic but also self-limiting

9. *JLFA* 2:28, April 28, 1794.

10. *JLFA* 2:46, March 30, 1795.

11. *JLFA* 3:372, December 28, 1802.

12. *JLFA* 3:287. Freeborn Garrettson, “Substance of the Semi-Centennial Sermon before the New York Annual Conference” (New York, 1827).

13. George A. Phoebus, *Beams of Light on Early Methodism in America* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1887), 9.

14. Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 12th ed., 4 vols. (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1860), 3:73, 90.

“church.” “Zion” served to expand rather than limit, to place Methodism central in God’s redemptive activities, to claim for it connection with God’s people Israel and the whole of redemptive history, to position Methodists as (among) the elect who would march into the New Jerusalem, to warrant the claim on the land, the continent, to put mission and purpose in specifically territorial terms.¹⁵ Fittingly, the special care with which God cared for biblical Zion, Methodism thought provided for itself as well.

PROVIDENCE

American Methodism perceived itself and its polity as providentially given and as instrumental to the new creation. That perception, constitutive of the church, took no great ingenuity on its part. Indeed, when Mr. Wesley finally recognized that the Americans needed to be set off as a distinct polity and wrote instructing them in how so to do, he began, “By a very uncommon train of providences. . . .”¹⁶ And when the Americans gathered for the Christmas Conference in 1784, they provided a constitution or quasi-constitution for the new church by adapting that “providentially” elaborated by John Wesley for the British Methodists, “The Large Minutes.” In that text, their *Discipline*,¹⁷ the Americans asked, as had Wesley, a question about providence, “What may we reasonably believe to be God’s design in raising up the Preachers called Methodists?” Their answer, enriched slightly, was brought forward to preface the *Discipline* in 1787. Thereafter it retained that place of prominence and has been recited down to the present as a statement of Methodist purpose. It nuanced Wesley’s answer to fit Methodism’s providential mission into the new land. God’s design was

15. This paragraph is taken from Richey, *The Methodist Conference in America: A History* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1996), 34.

16. Wesley’s letter “To Dr. Coke, Mr. Asbury, and our Brethren in North America” can be found in *Letters* (Telford) 7:237-38; and in a variety of other places, including Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, eds., *The Methodist Experience in America: A Sourcebook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 71-72.

17. The first *Discipline*, that of 1785, followed the question and answer format of the British Minutes and its sequence of questions. See Jno. J. Tigert, *A Constitutional History of American Episcopal Methodism*, 3rd ed., rev. (Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1908), 532-602. The initial version of the American Discipline suggested in its title the loyalty to the Wesleyan format: *Minutes of Several Conversations between The Rev. Thomas Coke LL.D. and The Rev. Francis Asbury and others, at a Conference, begun in Baltimore, in the State of Maryland, on Monday, the 27th of December, in the Year 1784. Composing a Form of Discipline for the Ministers, Preachers and other Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America* (Philadelphia, 1785).

To reform the Continent, and spread scriptural Holiness over these Lands. As a Proof hereof, we have seen in the Course of fifteen Years a great and glorious Work of God, from New York through the Jerseys, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina, even to Georgia.¹⁸

The providential (and scriptural) character of our system Methodists took for granted. Others, including critics without and dissenters within, found such assertions hard to swallow. Their critique of one or more aspects of our polity—conferences, superintendency, presiding elders, itinerancy, the appointive system, class meetings, our discipline—prompted ever more explicit apologetic claims for the providential character of our order from Methodist spokespersons. Such assertions became a standard part of the Methodist apologetic. These apologetic claims suffuse the early and authoritative version of the 1798 *Discipline* in which Bishops Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury provided extensive explanatory notes.¹⁹ Their annotations, undertaken at the request of the prior General Conference, explained and defended Methodist order, answering various critics, including particularly the reformer/schismatic, James O’Kelly. Asbury and Coke wrote, aware of Wesley’s consciousness, “that the whole plan of Methodism was introduced, step by step, by the interference and openings of divine Providence.” They labored, as had he, to show each aspect of the American Methodist system as scriptural and providential, as apostolic and revival producing, and as faithful to Wesley’s perspective. So they concluded a long defense of the presiding eldership by pointing to the conversions, revivals, and overall growth of Methodism and by claiming,

[W]e have no doubt, but the full organization of our body, and giving to the whole a complete and effective executive government, of which the presiding eldership makes a very capital branch, has, under God, been a grand means of preserving the peace and union of our connection and the purity of our ministry, and, therefore, *in its consequences*, has been a *chief instrument*, under the grace of God, of this great revival.²⁰

In a similar and interesting attestation of confidence in the providential character of their church order—of Methodist polity—the book editors,

18. *A Form of Discipline, For the Ministers, Preachers and Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America* (New York, 1787), 3-4.

19. *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, with Explanatory Notes*, by Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury (Philadelphia, 1798); facsimile edition, edited by Frederick A. Norwood (Rutland, Vt.: Academy Books, 1979), iv, Advertisement to the Reader: “The last General Conference desired the Bishops to draw up Annotations on the Form of the Discipline.” In his “Introduction,” Frederick Norwood argues that O’Kelly’s movement motivated these annotations.

20. *Ibid.*, 49, 53.

Daniel Hitt and Thomas Ware, exhibited *The Minutes of the Methodist Conferences from 1773 to 1813* as evidencing the work of God:

[T]his publication must confessedly contain the best history (as far as it goes) of the Methodists and Methodist preachers in America, now extant; from the commencement thereof to the year 1813:—shewing to the reflective mind, what the Lord hath done for us, and by us, in the space of 40 years past.

Noting the dramatic growth and prosperity of Methodism, the editors commented, “With wonder and gratitude, we may exclaim, what hath God wrought?”²¹ Around that providential motif Jesse Lee structured the first formal narrative of the American church, *A Short History of the Methodists*, construing Methodism as a series of revivals so that, at the end of conference year after conference year, he could proclaim “the Lord hath prospered us. . . . This is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes.”²²

REFORMING THE CONTINENT

In framing their purposes (cited above), the Americans altered Wesley’s formulation in interesting fashion. They changed his “To reform the Nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the Land,” a political construal of purpose, into a statement about geography, about the created order, about a new creation. The Americans purposed: “To reform the Continent, and to spread scriptural Holiness over these lands.” The Americans substituted “continent” for Wesley’s “the Nation, particularly the Church.” They also made the singular “Land” plural.²³

No minutes or journal entries explain these changes. By themselves such assertions might mean little. They were not, however, the only renderings of Methodist purpose in terms of a re-created order. “You cannot, you dare not,” Asbury wrote Coke in 1797, “but consider yourself as a servant of the church, and a citizen of the continent of America.”²⁴ Methodists

21. *Minutes of The Methodist Conferences, Annually Held in America: From 1773 to 1813 Inclusive* (New York, 1813), iii, iv.

22. Jesse Lee, *A Short History of the Methodists* (Baltimore: Magill & Clime, 1810; Facsimile edition: Rutland, Vt.: Academy Books, 1974), 340.

23. Tigert, *Constitutional History*, 535. Tigert arrays the “Large Minutes” and the first *Discipline* in parallel columns.

24. *JLEA* 3:157-58, February 8, 1797. Asbury makes comparable statements “continental” in their emphasis. See *JLEA* 2:29, October 2, 1794; 2:155, March 4, 1798; 3:148-49, November 1, 1796; 3:162, August 29, 1797; 3:430, June 2, 1810; 3:456, November 27, 1811; 3:476, 480, 482 in the Valedictory of August 5, 1813; 3:563, January 11, 1806; and 3:568, August 11, 1806.

belonged to the continent, Asbury thought. So after the Baltimore conference of 1802, Asbury recorded, "We had a day of fasting and humiliation for the conference, the continent, and the Church of God." A month later for the Philadelphia conference, Asbury spoke of "a day of fasting and prayer to be observed on the fourth of May, for the conference, the Church in general, and the continent at large." In New York in June, he noted, "We had a day of solemn fasting and prayer for the Church, the conference, the continent, and for the world."²⁵

Such formulations do not recur through the journals of other itinerants, but, of course, no one else had, as Asbury not immodestly noted, the grand view.²⁶ One does find, however, constant engagement with the created order, with the continent as it presented itself, recurring through the journals of Asbury and other preachers. Itinerants experienced firsthand and daily, indeed hourly, the often punishing, physical challenge of the North American continent—its rivers, mountains, swamps, thickets, forests, downpours, snowfalls, and mosquitoes. Asbury and Coke described their—as also all itinerants’—suffering and hardship traveling:

Through the heat and the cold, the rain and the snow, the swamps and the rivers, over the mountains and through the wilderness, lying for nights together on the bare ground and in log-houses, open to the wind on every side, fulfilling their appointments, as far as possible, whatever be the hindrance.²⁷

And one finds running through the journals and diaries as well the missionary imperative to extend the gospel throughout these lands—lands that lay unexplored, lands that opened new frontiers for the Word, lands that might well extend around the globe. A mission to reform "this extensive continent,"²⁸ as Asbury and Coke put it, and to spread scriptural holiness over these lands, opened the unchristianized universe to them. Busy about their missionary mandate, the American Methodists had neither the leisure nor the talent to theologize on the new creation as a transformed cosmos, a reformed continent, a renewed physical reality. Doubtless they would have welcomed any foretaste thereof that dealt with the swamps and the mosquitoes. Their vision, perhaps a narrow one, was through the wilderness to the next settlement. They would stop, however, in the great cathedral of nature that God had given them for their own spiritual renewal.

25. *JLFA* 2:332, April 5, 1802; 2:337, May 1, 1802; and 2:342, June 5, 1802.

26. *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, with Explanatory Notes*, by Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, 52.

27. *Ibid.*, 45.

28. *Ibid.*, 45. Such a "large" view recurs through this nearly 200-page volume. See especially 33-53 where the bishops explain their office and that of the presiding elder.

NATURE, THE WOODS

The preachers sent over by Mr. Wesley found the North American forests intriguing, welcoming, and sometimes enchanting. If “the continent” represented nature writ large as object of Methodist mission, “the woods” offered itself as nature in its immediacy as site for mission and for encounter with the Lord.

“The woods” figure in the American Methodist lexicon in places where Wesley and his compatriots used the word “field.” One hears little from the British missionaries to North America, or for that matter from those preachers raised in the colonies, about fields or “field preaching.” When forced to preach outside—when little homes proved too small, church buildings were denied them, and public buildings were unavailable—preachers took their congregations to the woods or assembled them under some shady tree. In October 1771 near Philadelphia, Joseph Pilmore noted,

Sat: 12. . . . In the afternoon as the new Chapel would not near contain the congregation I preached in the Wood. The stately trees extended their branches and afforded us a fine refreshing shade, while I called upon the listening multitude to look unto the Lord, whose wings are ever stretched out to cover and defend the upright in heart.

Sun: 13. Set off pretty early for Ches[t]nut-hill, where I found a vast concourse of people assembled in the Grove where I preached before. I began immediately and was greatly assisted from above while I explained the Parable of the fruitless figg tree.

The following month, again at Chestnut-hill, he noted, “I took my old stand in the Wood, and explained the Parable of the tares of the field.”²⁹ Few equaled English-born Pilmore in his sensitivity to the sylvan setting as hermeneutic for the biblical text. He proved not at all unusual in his assembling people in nature, in the created order, and in his resort there for his own spiritual renewal. American-born Freeborn Garrettson, whose *Experience and Travels* was published at Mr. Wesley’s request, indeed his demand, recounts frequent assemblies in the wood:

Sunday, June 7, 1779, on the Sussex Circuit in Delaware: “At eleven o’clock there was such a number collected, that I was obliged to preach under the trees.”

29. Frederick E. Maser and Howard T. Maag, eds., *Journal of Joseph Pilmore, Methodist Itinerant* (Philadelphia: Message Publishing Co. for the Historical Society of the Philadelphia Annual Conference, 1969), 104, 108. See 91 for a reference to a field but 101, 104, 108, 134, 137, 139, 140, 141, 148, often with more than one entry, on sylvan preaching.

Sunday, June 21, on the Sound: "At twelve about 1500 gathered and the Lord made bare his arm under the spreading trees."

Sunday, July 5th, near Dover: "preached at brother B's at nine, to hundreds who stood and sat under the trees for want of room in the house. . . . I rode on six miles and preached at one o'clock to a listening multitude, under the trees in Mother Kill."³⁰

A decade later John Kobler noted that one Sunday the congregation exceeded the capacity of the house so he went to the woods "where I stood upon a table and preached."³¹

Similar reports recur through the journals of early itinerants; so also their resort to the wood for devotion. Like Pilmore who "retired a little into the wood for private prayer," Garrettson resorted for spiritual renewal to the wood:

December 27, 1779: "Being weary, I did not rise until after daybreak, I find my mind much composed. I retired in the wood, spent some time in prayer to God to grant a blessing on the day."

February 25, 1780: "I withdrew to the woods, and spent much time before the Lord."³²

In the woods early Methodists encountered the Second Person of the Trinity. William Spencer, who traveled on the Surry Circuit in 1790 and 1791 reported: "Sat. 31st . . . After meeting, I retired into the solitary woods, a long distance from the house. I there prayed and meditated, and held sweet Communion with my dear Saviour."³³ On another occasion he noted,

It was a calm, pleasant morning, and I went a considerable distance from the house, into the private woods, to hold sweet Communion with my blessed Saviour. I met him indeed to the great joy of my soul.³⁴

30. See Garrettson's *The Experience and Travels of Mr. Freeborn Garrettson, Minister of the Methodist Episcopal Church in North America* (Philadelphia, 1791), reprinted along with ample selections from the manuscripts which underlie his account in Robert D. Simpson, *American Methodist Pioneer: The Life and Journals of The Rev. Freeborn Garrettson, 1752-1827* (Rutland, Vt.: Academy Books for the Drew University Library, 1984), 82, 85, 86.

31. John Kobler, "Journal and Sermons," 86 (June 1791). These manuscript materials are held at Lovely Lane Methodist Church, Baltimore, and used with permission.

32. *Journal of Joseph Pilmore*, 186; Simpson, *American Methodist Pioneer*, 161, 165, a Garrettson ms. portion from which derived the published *Experience and Travels of Mr. Freeborn Garrettson*.

33. William Spencer's *Diary on the Surry Circuit*, June-July 1790, *Virginia United Methodist Heritage* 3 (Fall 1975): 9-27, p. 27. [One of several such references in this short excerpt. See for instance June 24, p. 10; June 26, p. 11; and July 1, p. 14].

34. *Ibid.*, June 26, 1790, p. 11.

John Kobler reported such encounters with the Lord at various times:

I retired into a wood where I had deep impressions of Divine things.
 This morning I feel a great hunger and thirst after righteousness.
 I retired into a wood where I found the Lord to be very precious to my
 soul, the very trees of the wood is praising of him, much more reason
 honor I who am a Brand plucked out of the fire.
 This morning I retired into the wood, where I had sweetness in com-
 muning with my beloved Savior.³⁵

Neither in individual journal musings nor in early official writings have I discovered a theology of the created order—some statement that moved from Scripture, to a mission to the continent, to nature’s shady hospitality for Methodist gatherings, to sylvan invitations for spiritual retreat, to the import of finding Jesus there, to Methodist discovery that “Camp Meetings R Us,” to a doctrine of new creation. Such theologies of creation have only recently been teased out, and only partially teased out, in studies of quarterly and camp meetings, but we are far from understanding the dimensions and meanings of Methodist practices vis-à-vis creation. And until we do, we will not grasp fully Methodist practices of and preaching about a renewed creation. However, with respect to “new creation” on a less grand scale, with respect to individual piety—as expressed in sylvan retreat or nurtured by Methodist structures, Methodists were hardly at a loss for either words or effort. There they invested both energy and rhetoric.

INDIVIDUAL AS NEW CREATION

Spiritual renewal, the transformation of the individual about which Paul speaks in 2 Corinthians 5:17, lay at the very heart of the movement.³⁶ That particular text for some strange reason did not particularly appeal to Bishop Asbury. He apparently preached on it only once.³⁷ On the theme, however, he preached constantly as did Methodist preachers generally. In his first sermon “after my ordination,” he offered the Methodist gospel, “the unsearchable riches of Christ” and “the plan of

35. Kobler, “Journal and Sermons,” 56 (December 29, 1790); 93 (June 15, 1791); 133 (September 23, 1791).

36. Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Knopf, 1997), John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind, 1770–1810* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), and Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton University Press, 1999).

37. “Index of Sermon Texts,” *JLFA* 2:818-24, p. 822.

mystery hidden for ages” (Eph 3:8) and with other preachers sustained the incredible Methodist focus on sin and salvation.³⁸ Early American Methodists knew themselves to be committed to conversion and revival, to individual renovation, and to corporate renewal, with the attendant expectations of piety and discipline. Asbury and Coke affirmed on behalf of the church: “[O]ur one aim, in all our economy and ministerial labours, is to raise a holy people, crucified to the world and alive to God.” Speaking of ministry, they asserted, “Our original design in forming our religious Society. . . . To raise a holy people. . . . We will have a holy people, or none. In every part of our economy, as well as doctrine, we aim at crucifixion to the world and love to God.”³⁹

And in that endeavor Methodism had succeeded famously, insisted Jesse Lee, who in his history of the movement presented Methodism and Methodist polity as essentially a revival machine, a machine to fabricate individual new creations. The denomination in and through its organization—in its annual conferences and quarterly meetings, the organizational fabric of the day—provided occasions of revival, so taught Lee. His *Short History of the Methodists* gives us revival as conference and conference as revival—the corporate story being a compilation of conversion narratives, history as body count or to be more Wesleyan, conference as a means of grace.⁴⁰ Even general conference could so function. Lee showed little surprise that the general conference of 1800 began “a glorious revival of religion” which then spread across the church so that he could affirm, “I suppose the Methodist connection hardly ever knew such a time of a general revival of religion through the whole of their circuits, as they had about the latter part of the year 1800.”⁴¹ Methodism and Methodist polity continued to be an engine of conversion and revival insisted Lee’s successor as historian, Nathan Bangs:

We believe, indeed, that God has made the Methodists, unworthy as they may be, instruments of reviving and spreading pure Christianity among mankind. We believe that the evangelical labors of Wesley, his coadjutors and followers, “have provoked every man” “to love and good works,” and that thereby gospel light, love, and holiness have been

38. *JLFA* 1:479. On Methodism’s focus on individual as new creation, see Jones, *Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture*; and his “The Rule of Scripture,” in W. Stephen Gunter et al., *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 39-61, esp. 56-61. See especially the several Collins references in note 5. Note as well Paul W. Chilcote, ed., *The Wesleyan Tradition: A Paradigm for Renewal* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002) and his summation of the Methodist message as living word, saving faith, holistic spirituality, accountable discipleship, formative worship, and missional vocation.

39. *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, with Explanatory Notes*, by Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, 159, 167.

40. See below for elaboration of this point.

41. Lee, *Short History of the Methodists*, 271, 273.

extensively diffused among the different orders of Christians; and we are anxious that the same enlightened zeal, the same ardor of piety, and the same labor of love and active benevolence, should still distinguish us as a people that the "lust of the eye and the pride of life" may not impede our progress in our career of usefulness. With all those who are engaged in the solemn work of converting the world to Jesus Christ, we wish most heartily to co-operate, that we may unitedly carry on the warfare against the "world, the flesh, and the devil."⁴²

What Lee and Bangs tell us about the whole movement, individual preachers tell us about classes, love feasts, preaching occasions, and quarterly meetings. Methodism's business was new creation. William Colbert reported on business in the Philadelphia area in 1798:

[Monday, February 5, 1798] I spent part of this day reading Doctor Cokes most excellent advice (in 4 sermons) to the Methodist Ministry in particular, and met the women band at night at Thomas Rutters. It appeared that their souls were fill'd with Divine Love, and that they were fit to fly! (Hyperbolically speaking) out of the body.

[Thursday 15] preached at Bethel in Philadelphia at night from Matt. 11th 28 to a large company of black people, and some white. Charles Cavender gave an exhortation after me. I lodged at Richard Allen's with James Moore, and Charles Cavender.

[Saturday March 10] At the Quarterly meeting at the Meetinghouse near Martin Boehms. Brother Ware consulted with brother Chandler and myself on whether we should have but one or two sermons today. We told him to preach and we would preach or exhort as we felt ourselves at liberty—but instead of two sermons or one sermon, we had none, but something that was far better—Sinners crying for mercy all over the house, below, and in the Galleries, and a goodly number brought to rejoice in a sense of their acceptance with God. At night there was also a considerable move among the people.

[Sunday 11] This morning we opened the meeting—(leaving the doors open) with the administration of the Lord's supper. It was an awful time. We had a sermon, and two exhortations in English. Father Boehm gave an exhortation in German, sung, and prayed, and blessing from Heaven were showered down on both Dutch and English.⁴³

New creation business, as Colbert's references to German Methodists and African Methodists indicate, did not respect the lines that the world drew, lines of language, class, and race.

42. Nathan Bangs, *An Original Church of Christ* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1837), 381.

43. *A Journal of the Travels of William Colbert, Methodist Preacher: thro' parts of Maryland, Pennsylvania, New York, Delaware and Virginia in 1790 to 1838*, 10 vols., typescript, 2:185-86, 186, 189.

AN INCLUSIVE FELLOWSHIP

Early American Methodism did indeed emblem God's new order and sought within itself to overcome the disunities, injustices, principalities and powers that ruled this world. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, that some within the movement glimpsed the new creation and embraced its promised but difficult social realities. Others fought that inclusiveness. Divisions and civil war brought us little closer to those unities in Christ. And the difficult agenda remains with us today. Indeed, early Methodists may have been closer to inclusive fellowship than are we. Many of them labored hard, especially on matters of race, and from within social networks where slavery reigned and where slaves belonged to neighbor and kin. John Kobler, for instance, reported for a Saturday and Sunday in December 1791: "We held our Quarter Meeting in the Earleys Chappell. Many people attended both days. . . . The Black and white, rich and poor felt the arrows of the Almighty."⁴⁴ William Colbert similarly labored hard at building an interracial fellowship in Delaware and Maryland, in 1796 around Dover:

[Sunday, March 13, 1796] This morning I had a happy class meeting with the Black people in Milford.

Tuesday 22 I preached at William Conwells. . . . My feelings have been hurt in this place, when I was informed, I was to be spoken to, for calling the Black people *Brethren*, and *Sisters*, here and in Milford.⁴⁵

That summer this Milford interracial fellowship gained reinforcements from the leadership of the denomination:

[July 1796] Thursday 21 Began our Quarterly meeting in Milford. Bishop Asbury preached much to the purpose from Heb. 12 ch. 4, 5th vs. Joseph Jewel spoke after him. Brothers—Hunter and Whatcoat—also spoke. At night Brother Hunter preached from 1 John 1 ch. 9 v. with power. Two exhortations were given after the sermon.

Friday 22 This morning we had a happy Love-feast with the black people. Bishop Asbury preached from Isaiah 62 ch. 12. Brother Whatcoat spoke. . . . and Caleb Boyer after him. And so ended the Quarterly meeting in Milford, where the enemy has thrust hard at me.

Saturday 23 Yesterday afternoon I had some thoughts of going to Dover Quarterly meeting, but could not fully git my consent, as I should have to disappoint at the Northwest Fork Chapel.

44. Kobler, "Journal and Sermons," 149-50.

45. *Journal of the Travels of William Colbert*, 2:83-84.

Sunday 24 I preached at the N. W. Fork Chapel with a degree of power from Ps. 84th 11. Here I felt it my duty to bear testimony against the horrid practice of dealing in human flesh and blood—buying—selling, and stealing the poor negroes. I met the society and received a young woman into society by name of Charlotte Alexander.⁴⁶

Such strong witness for racial inclusiveness and against slavery—and again, I should reiterate, within a slave culture—did elicit vehement resistance, from members of the Methodist movement as well as from without. In the face of that hostility, even violence, some remained stalwart. African American leaders emerged, individuals such as Harry Hosier and Richard Allen. Black and white preachers traveled and worked together, as did Garrettson and Hosier, and stayed together, as did Colbert with Allen, as we have already seen. Some spoke out eloquently on the church's behalf against slavery, as did William Spencer, who reported on the consequences thereof to another preacher:

I have had the high honor, mean as I am, to be hated and despised upon the earth for the sake of Jesus for about ten years, and I am still for a fight. Halleluiah! Halleluiah! O, my dear, I have lately seen the stately stepping of King Jesus in some parts of this circuit. A blessed spirit of justice, mercy, and humanity is evidently prevailing among the Methodists; some have lately broken the infernal yoke of slavery, and have let the poor oppressed go free, while numbers are so powerfully convicted on account of their injustice in holding their fellow-creatures in bondage, that their sleep departs from them. I hope the time is at hand when God will save our poor, dear, bleeding Zion from the curse of human blood; and I have not a doubt in my soul, but it would speedily be the case, provided our dear preachers would unanimously agree, and bear a bold testimony against a practice so contrary to the pure word of God, and all the tender feelings of humanity. My very soul abhors the infernal practice and spirit of slavery more than ever, and I cry aloud wherever I go; but alas! Some, ah, many of our preachers are silent on the point, and hardly ever, directly, or indirectly, say one word about it. I hope and trust that my dear brother Sale, who so much loves the meek, lowly, just, and merciful Jesus, is a man for liberty. I wish you would write to me on the subject. For my part, I have not the smallest expectation of any great thing among us, till that horrid evil is removed from among us.⁴⁷

Spencer's courage reveals, unfortunately, that Methodism had not succeeded in what had been a collective resolve and was, indeed, in retreat

46. *Ibid.*, 2:103-104.

47. Excerpt from a letter dated May 2, 1797, from Spencer to the Rev. Anthony Sale printed in the *Richmond Methodist Advocate* August 17, 1848 in William Spencer's *Diary on the Surry Circuit, June-July, 1790*, *Virginia United Methodist Heritage* 3 (Fall 1975): 9-27, 25n. Note use of "Zion."

from its high watermark commitment to antislavery. That might be placed in the conference of 1780 (the “northern” or Asbury conference of the briefly divided movement).⁴⁸ The actions on slavery in that conference proved so courageous that when the church published the *Minutes* in 1794, it suppressed certain statements, as for instance, the action to be taken against “those travelling Preachers who hold slaves” and who fail “to set them free—on pain of future exclusion.” The 1780 conference further mandated that the preachers witness to the evils of slavery and hold the people accountable to free their slaves. An enabling query in the *Minutes*, later suppressed, asked and would have been asked at a circuit level, “Who of our friends have freed their slaves?” and provided that “the Conference keep a register yearly of the names of the masters, slaves, and age.” The conference specified the witness and its reasoning as follows:

Does this conference acknowledge that slave-keeping is contrary to the laws of God, man, and nature, and hurtful to society; contrary to the dictates of conscience and pure religion, and doing that which we would not others should do to us and ours?—Do we pass our disapprobation on all our friends who keep slaves, and advise their freedom?

Answ. Yes.

As a further implementation procedure, the conference provided, “Shall we read the minutes in every Society? and the thoughts of slave keeping, which was approved last Conference & tell the people, they must have but one year more, before we exclude them? Agreed.”⁴⁹

By incorporating within their community the diversity of the human family, including those whom the world despised, and by witnessing against that institution which most emblemed the principalities and powers of this world—namely slavery—Methodists pointed to the new creation and to themselves and their polity as anticipatory thereof. They did so as well by the quality of their life together. They pointed to new creation by anticipating it in their conferencing.

CONFERENCE AS A MEANS OF GRACE

Conference as a means of grace has been a theme of my writing on American Methodism.⁵⁰ Virtually anywhere I turn in the manuscripts of

48. For these *Minutes*, see Richey, et al., *Methodist Experience in America*, 1780a.

49. “The Leesburg Minutes of the Methodist Connection, 1775–1783,” *Virginia United Methodist Heritage* 5 (Fall 1977): 5–43, 27–28.

50. See especially the chapter by that title in Richey, *Early American Methodism* and the whole of Richey, *Methodist Conference in America*. Both publications provide ample citations and some discussion of the changes, over time, in Methodist practice of Christian conference.

early North American Methodists I find testimony to the spiritual power of the series of conversations about the Christian life that Methodists created. They went by different names but classes, societies, quarterly meetings, annual conferences, and general conferences all functioned as Wesley intended, as occasions for Christian conversation.

The gracious character of the smaller meetings—classes and societies—has not been overlooked.⁵¹ Less noticed has been the revivalistic character of quarterly meeting (conference) and annual conference. These also gathered the Methodist faithful, exercised discipline, offered sermons in abundance, celebrated the Lord's Supper, provided time for testimony, and resulted, as we have already noted and as Lee reported, in conversions and revival. Typical was John Kobler's report for a 1791 conference:

April 20 our Conference began in Petersburg. The ministers from all the circuits around attended. We also had Bishop Coke from Europe to sit at the head of conference. Here we continued three days and it was a great time of God's power both in publick and in private.⁵²

All these Methodist gatherings combined business and spirituality. All brought Methodists together for sustained, sometimes long, periods of engaged intimacy. Note, for instance, the experience of William Colbert who left the dear souls around Milford in successive, gloomy, leave-takings in early October and then began a month of traveling and then conferencing with his other family, the preachers, first in annual, then in general conference.

[October 1796] Sunday 9 This morning Ezekiel Cooper preached at the Methodist Meeting house in 4th street from Heb. 2 ch. 1st. In the afternoon I heard Bishop Asbury preach from Psalm 8th 20. to the end of Psalm, at Ebenezer. At night I heard Solomon Sharp preach. I lodged at William Doughties.

Monday 10 This morning I heard Nathaniel B. Mills preach in Ebenezer. . . . spent this day in conference, and at night heard Charles Cavender preach. . . . Solomon Sharp gave an exhortation. . . . Tuesday 11 The preachers Characters were examined. At night I preached at Bethell from Col. 2 ch. 6 v.

Wednesday 12 An election for the office of Elders, and Deacons. At night Richard Whatcoat preached in Ebenezer. . . . Daniel Hitt gave an exhortation. . . .

51. See especially David Lowes Watson, *Forming Christian Disciples: The Role of Covenant Discipleship and Class Leaders in the Congregation* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1991); *Covenant Discipleship: Christian Formation through Mutual Accountability* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1991); and *The Early Methodist Class Meetings: Its Origins and Significance* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1985, 1987).

52. Kobler, "Journal and Sermons," 77-78 (April 20, 1791).

Thursday 13 A few preachers gave in their experiences, and in the afternoon the appointments were read out. . . . At night I heard Valentine Cook preach at Ebenezer. . . .

Friday 14 A day of fasting and prayer before the ordination of the Deacons and Elders. At night we held a Watchnight in Bethel. Anning Owen preached. . . . I gave an exhortation after. . . . Swiny spoke after me. William Early spoke after him, and Seely Bunn concluded the meeting which I trust was profitable. I lodged with Seelee Bunn at Richard Allen's.

Saturday 15 My colleague is changed. I have Joseph Whitby instead of Thomas Sergeant. Left Philadelphia in company with five preachers—Seelee Bunn, William Hardesty, Joseph Rowen, Joseph Whitby, and John Lackey. At Chester we fell in with Bishop Asbury and Elder Whatcoat, who invited us to dine with our good old friend, the widow Withy, after which we rode on to Wilmington. Brother Bunn and I was kindly entertained at the old widow Toppins.

Sunday 16 Bishop Asbury preached this forenoon in Wilmington from Rev. 2 ch. 1-7 verses, Elder Whatcoat exhorted: in the afternoon Seelee Bunn preached. . . . At night Elisha Pelham preached . . . and when he had done I spoke. . . .

Monday 17 We picked up Jacob Colvert another preacher, and he with Seelee Bunn and me rode to the widow Stephens in Harford County Maryland.

Tuesday 18 We rode [continued picking up and dropping riding companions]. . . .

Wednesday 19 We rode to Baltimore. . . .

Thursday 20 Began the General Conference. At night Francis Poythress preached . . . and George Roberts (who is an excellent speaker) gave an exhortation.

Friday 21 At 1 oc Thornton Fleming preached At 2 oc The General Conference met, and the Committee brought before them several things. That which was debated most—was, whether the probation of the preachers should be lengthened to 4 years, or stand as it does, it was put to vote, and lost as it ought to be. . . . At night Freeborn Garrettson preached. . . . Valentine Cook exhorted. . . .

Saturday 22 Shadrach Bostwick preached

Sunday 23 This morning a Love feast was held, after which Doctor Coke preached, and John Dickins gave an exhortation. In the afternoon George Roberts preached. . . . At night Doctor Coke preached in the Old Town meetinghouse

Monday 24 . . . heard them debate on the Chartered Fund, Preachers Fund, and Book Fund, which was thrown all into one. I did not attend preaching to night, but went to the Meetinghouse. . . .

Tuesday 25 Spent in Conference

Wednesday 26 Debated—how long a preacher should travel before he was to be considered ellegible to the Office of Elder . . . terminated in

favour of his eligibility to the office of Elder after traveling two years after he is a Deacon, as a preacher travels 2 years before he is a Deacon.

Thursday 27 Doctor Coke preached a delightful sermon ... and John Dickins gave us a beautiful exhortation. After the service one of the preachers broke out in an ecstasy of joy, which affected many. . . .

Friday 28 Yesterday there was much talk about another Bishop, and in the afternoon Doctor Coke made an offer of himself . . . The afternoon was spent debating whether the Local Deacons should be made eligible to the office of Elders and it went against them. At night George Roberts preached . . . and James Tolles gave an exhortation.

Saturday 29 The subject of Negro Slavery was brought forward, and more said in favour of it than I liked to hear.

Sunday 30 This morning heard Doctor Coke preach.

Monday 31 The debate on the subject of Slavery resumed and when put to vote, it went in favour of its standing as it had.—They who hold Slaves are to be continued in Society.

Tuesday Nov. 1 Debated, whether we should continue in society such as distilled spirituous, and whether continue such an order of men in the Church as Presiding Elders, and when it was ended by a vote, we stand as we were. At night Richard Whatcoat preached.

Wednesday 2 Much said on the manner of trying members.

Thursday 3 An address in the Minutes of 1795 & 6 disapproved, and the General Conference rose.⁵³

On topics covered by Colbert in his last four entries, matters of controversy, legislative proposals, the *Journals* of general and annual conferences and our histories typically dwell. Such reporting captures appropriately the business done and the policy adopted. Lost sight of unfortunately is the new creation context of business and policy—the feast of sermons to conference and in congregations (like Bethel), the exhortations, the giving and hearing of experiences, the fasting and prayer, the watch nights, the fellowship around table, the traveling, dining, and rooming together, the love feasts. The spiritual quality and intensity of conferences, quarterly and annual especially, did indeed, as Lee showed through his *Short History*, yield conversions and revival. Conference functioned, as Wesley suggested, as a means of grace.⁵⁴

In conference, Methodism was most thoroughly itself. In conference, Methodism was most fully ecclesial—offering word, sacrament and order. In conference, Methodism made itself open to the world, performing ecumenism in its stylized evangelistic fashion. In conference, Methodism

53. *Journal of the Travels of William Colbert*, 2:115-20.

54. See on this, Richey, *Methodist Conference*; and Lester Ruth, *A Little Heaven Below: Worship at Early American Methodist Quarterly Meetings* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2000).

looked backward, around, inward, ahead to the new creation, the eschaton of which it was firstfruits. Eschatological, eucharistic, ecumenical, ecclesial, evangelistic—conference served as means of grace and elicited Methodist practice of God's new order. Conference anticipated and partook of the new creation.

SUMMARY

Methodists need look only to their early history to realize that our polity, our organization, and our structured discipline can and should anticipate God's new order. We employed, after all, the word "Zion" as self-description. We understood our order, our polity, to be providentially ordained. We understood our purpose to be reforming, our portion of the created order, a continent. We undertook such a grand design by the re-creation of individuals, making new creations of persons otherwise despised by this world. We revered nature—God's first creation—and found both individual solace and corporate strength therein. We knew our movement to emblem God's new order and so sought within it to overcome those disunities, injustices, principalities, and powers that ruled this world, most notably slavery. And we celebrated and acknowledged our polity, our organization, our structured discipline as God's new order in eschatological, eucharistic, ecumenical gatherings, gatherings that we termed conference. By these several gestures early Methodists attempted through their polity a restoration of the image of God—a restoration of the natural image, of the political image, of the moral image. These gestures performed Methodism's new creation theology.