

Methodist Sermons as a Lens Through Which to View The Impact of Broader Cultural Changes on the Life of the Church, 1880-1905

Kevin D. Newburg
Drew University

Introduction

The twenty-five years between 1880 and 1905 witnessed greater changes in the United States than any other similar period. Scientific discoveries and technological progress altered the country's landscape especially in the urban environments. Immigrants arrived in unparalleled numbers, from a greater diversity of homelands, establishing or strengthening sub-cultures across the country. The economy shifted from an agrarian to an industrial base. For these and other reasons the U.S. population shifted from a predominantly rural nature to an ever increasing urban context. As a part of that process, the number of major urban centers grew rapidly, while the size of the largest cities reached unprecedented proportions. Educational institutions proliferated across the country, accompanied by a growing number of people possessing advanced and specialized degrees. Social changes included ever strengthening efforts for temperance, women's suffrage, and labor reform.¹ Major theological shifts occurred as

¹ In the "Introduction" to "Part IV: A Flourishing Church in a Prospering Nation: 1876-1919" Volume II of *The History of American Methodism*, Emory Bucke, gen. ed., (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964), Ralph Morrow provides succinct statistical data regarding some of the changes taking place in the U.S.

The railroad mileage of the nation increased by 650 per cent between 1860 and 1900. In the same period the output of coal multiplied almost twenty-five times, crude iron and steel almost thirty times, and petroleum more than six hundred times. These sensational gains were echoed through the whole economy. While the nation's population increased only two and a half times in the forty years after the Civil War, the amount of capital invested in manufacturing establishments was multiplied by fifteen and the value of their products grew more than tenfold. The census of 1890 related the monumental change that had taken place in the economic base of American life. For the first time in the history of the united States, the total value of manufactured commodities exceeded that of agriculture. p. 587

According to the census of 1860 less than 20 per cent of all Americans lived in communities of 2,500 or more. By 1900 the percentage had risen to 40. ... In each of the last four decades of the nineteenth century the population of New York City grew by a half million, and that of Chicago rhythmically doubled. Only eleven American cities could count more than a hundred thousand inhabitants in 1860. The total in 1900 stood at forty-five. p. 589

From 1860 to 1900 fourteen million Europeans immigrated to the United States, more than twice the total of the preceding forty years. The swelling tide of immigration was accompanied by a shift in its sources from northern and western Europe to the southern and eastern parts of the continent. In the 1870's the British Isles, Germany, and Scandinavia contributed 90 per cent of the newcomers. By the end of the century more than half came from Italy, Russia, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. ... In 1900 one seventh of the American population was foreign born, and of these fully three fourths were classified as urban. p. 590

a result of the spreading acceptance of evolutionary theories of creation, and the introduction of new forms of biblical criticism. Methodists enjoyed a new level of affluence, social standing, and political influence. All of these changes impacted Methodism's practices of worship and discipleship. These major shifts, as well as many others, led to a variety of outcomes which continued to impact the broader American church over the next century. Many of the tensions and conflicts which developed during this period continued to demand the church's attention, and often led to ruptures within denominational frameworks. To truly understand the state of the American church at the end of the twentieth century, one needs to understand the foundational developments which took place at the end of the nineteenth century.

One way to explore those foundations is by looking at the changes which took place in the worship practices of the typical church, especially the content and style of the sermons which were preached/heard. For Methodists, these sermonic shifts first occurred in the northern, urban areas. These city churches often had the services of the most highly educated preachers in the denomination, ministers who were exposed to and engaged with the new forms of higher criticism. The urban churches were forced to acknowledge and address the broader cultural changes, for those changes were impacting the cities in a way which would take decades to reach the small towns and rural areas across the country. In general, the sermons preached by these northern, highly educated, urban ministers, over the course of these twenty-five years, moved away from the traditional Methodist expositional sermon aimed at the conversion and discipleship of individuals, to a topical address directed to the social needs facing the community, with possible solutions to those needs being offered. As these urban ministers became the next generation of denominational leaders and educators, these sermonic shifts would spread across Methodism, sometimes with ease but more often engendering yet a new source of local and national church conflict.

This paper looks at the sermonic response to the broader cultural changes facing northern, urban Methodism. The source material for the paper is limited to published volumes of sermons. Four topics will be briefly examined under the general categories: optimism; declension; evolution and biblical criticism; and capital-labor conflict.

Optimism

In the midst of the various changes impacting the United States at the end of the 19th century, a pervasive optimism was dominant. This optimism was based in large part on two interconnected realities. First, the technological and scientific advances made during the last two decades of the century were historically unparalleled. These advances led to an ever broadening affluence, especially among the settled urban populace. The middle class was growing while an extreme elite upper class emerged. Generally speaking, the average family benefited in a wide variety of ways from the various inventions and discoveries made during this era. Second, the United States was achieving a level of domestic development and industrial production which made it a major force in the international arena. For the Methodist Episcopal Church, these were heady days. Their rise to social and political prominence had been achieved. While they did not have the Puritan pedigree, they boasted the membership and financial resources to compete with anyone. This competitive spirit manifested itself in the construction of new or major remodeling of existing church buildings, educational institutions, hospitals, and other benevolent centers.

As much as anyone, the Methodists embraced the “American way,” seeing in the United States a unique example of God’s will and blessing for a nation. It is hard to imagine a more optimistic sermon than that preached by soon to be bishop, Frank Bristol. In his sermon “Christianity and the Anglo-Saxons” (based on 1 Peter 2:9-10) Bristol argued that when the gospel was proclaimed in all other parts of the world, it was like seed cast upon worn out, nearly sterile soil. “But when the seed of the Gospel truth fell into that Anglo-Saxon mind it found a deep, rich, original soil -- fertile, vigorous, and inexhaustible. Hence the student of the philosophy of history will look upon our Anglo-Saxon civilization as the noblest result of Christianity’s influence upon the development, manners, character, and destiny of a people. This is the finest fruit, the richest harvest, that has sprung from the living and life-giving power of the Gospel.” Because the virgin land which became the United States was initially settled by, and the culture shaped by these same Anglo-Saxons, America took on a unique and special role in God’s divine plan, “... in this Americanism they [the Anglo-Saxons] were to become the converging center of all races.” Bristol continued, “As we see it to-day, the ends of the earth are

meeting, centralizing, not in Germany, not in Russia, not in India, not in China, not even in England, but in America. And the dominant characteristic of this people is not Romance, it is not Italian or Spanish or French; nor is it Keltic, Scottish, Welsh, or Irish; nor is it Greek or Russian; but it is manifestly and pre-eminently Anglo-Saxon.”

For Bristol the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon was not simply in his superior grasp of the gospel, but is even evident in the English language itself:

In looking for a language which shall express the thought of the twentieth century in all its richness, complexity, variety, and power; in its poetic feeling, its scientific knowledge, its moral conviction, its political freedom, its humanitarian benevolence, and its religious faith; in looking for a language that shall embody and vibrate with the spirit of the age, and voice the faith, hope, ambition, freedom, brotherhood, spirituality, conscience, and prophetic genius of the world's most progressive century, what language is comparable with the Anglo-Saxon, the English language spoken by our people. Has not God prepared that language, and is He not still preparing it in all its vigor, fullness, majesty, and adaptability to be the language of the brotherhood of nations, the federation of the world, the Kingdom of Christ on earth?

So, it is with confidence that Bristol returned to his text and proclaimed, “If there is any race on the earth to-day to which the Apostle Peter's language may be addressed, it must be the Anglo-Saxon race. ‘But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; ...’”

This Anglo superiority is so self-evident that around the world the light was shining, “The world hails the dawning of universal peace. What men! what events! what history! Can any other race boast of such a glory as crowns the thousand years and more of Anglo-Saxon progress?” Bristol's optimism reached what in retrospect seems either fantasy or obduracy. In either case, it is difficult to fathom that he and his listeners truly believed that the America he described, actually existed:

Never before was the standard of manly honor so high; never was woman so profoundly and universally revered; never was such care taken in the mental and moral training of children; never was education so widely diffused; never was there so little poverty and ignorance: never was there less intemperance, less superstition, less bigotry, less inhumanity; never were the poor and unfortunate so mercifully and tenderly cared for; never was labor so dignified, so well rewarded, and so prosperous; never was government less tyrannical and despotic, so humane and democratic; never was religion more practical, the Bible more authoritative, Christ more manifestly King of kings and Lord of lords. Anglo-Saxon civilization is Christian.

Bristol concluded by stating that which must be obvious to all who had followed the sermon to this point, "To-day the English-speaking peoples are foremost in the enjoyment of law-protected liberty. They are leading the world toward the universal Christian democracy. Anglo-Saxon Christianity is the only truly catholic Christianity. ... All races are looking to him for light -- political, scientific, and religious light."²

Yet in the midst of this optimism, there was an obvious concern, what about the various non Anglo-Saxons who are flooding into the United States? A couple of sermons give helpful instruction regarding how to manage these new immigrants. The first quote comes from a Thanksgiving sermon by Patrick Maveety, who was soon to become a full-time employee of the Freedman's Aid Society and the Southern Education Society of the MEC.

Our common school system provides for the destruction of ignorance, and attendance thereon should be made compulsory upon all. No one should be permitted to grow up in ignorance in this land, and no one coming here from a foreign country should be allowed the privileges of citizenship until he has learned to read and write in the language common to the nation. The nation owes it to itself to protect itself against the consequences of an ignorant mass of voters.³

The critical nature of Maveety's concern became apparent a little later in the sermon when he made the common assertion of his day, perhaps a common assertion of too many days, "To be loyal to our country is to be loyal to our God."⁴ Maveety's sentiments were amplified by George Peck:

The other day, according to the *Herald*, six thousand immigrants landed at our doors, ... I suppose they are an economic treasure. But the trouble is, we are trying to make them citizens of our great Canaan before the smell of Egyptian

²Frank M. Bristol, *The Religious Instinct of Man*, The Methodist Pulpit (Cincinnati: Jennings and Pye, 1904), 33-52.

Bristol (1851-1932) served as a bishop from 1908 until his retirement in 1924. He earned two degrees from Northwestern University. At the time this book was compiled he was serving on the Baltimore Conference.

³ Patrick J. Maveety, "Remembrance of God and Obedience to Him the Prime Condition of Our National Preservation" Deut. 8:6-20, in *The Methodist Episcopal Pulpit, A Volume of Sermons by Ministers of the Michigan Conference of the M.E. Church in Michigan*, ed. C.S. Eastman (Monroe, MI: Sermon Printing House, 1898), 87.

Maveety (1855-1946) graduated from Garrett in 1878. Around 1907 he became the Assistant Secretary of the Freedman's Aid and the Southern Education Society of the MEC. At the time this work was compiled he was the presiding elder of the Albion District.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

garlic has left their garments. We give them the ballot before they have the least idea what they are voting for. Less and less must a thoughtful observer believe in manhood suffrage. It is the peril of our land. No man is fit to vote until he has been under the discipline of our institutions for a term of years. Possibly some of our immigrants might not acquire a vote for several generations, but the foundations of our republic would be more safe. We shall have to come to it, beloved. The signs are wrong to-day. We shall never be rid of the curse of American politics until the men who can be led to the polls like cattle are disfranchised for a time. Let them tarry at the Sinai of our republic until they are fit for its Canaan. The Wilderness must never be left out.⁵

This American/Anglo-Saxon optimism was carried over into theological and denominational realms in a sermon by Charles Wesley Blodgett. In this sermon Blodgett contended that the theological expression of his day was superior to that of any preceding time. By this he did not mean that the theology was “deeper”, but rather it possessed a “vitality and symmetry” which prevents “idiosyncrasies.” “The extremes in theology are meeting to-day. ... Is not the harmonious mingling of theological extremes into a symmetrical system the coming of the universal Christian mind into the fullness and balance of the Bible?” Because of this harmonious mingling, “We are no longer, as denominations of the one church of the one Master, quarreling with each other.” Instead Blodgett perceived that the church had entered into “golden days” in which “we find ourselves as members of one church but of different denominations, one in aspiration, argument and expectation. Everywhere around the world, except where the dry rot of formalism has paralyzed Christian zeal, God’s people are holding love feasts.”⁶

This optimism regarding Anglo-Saxons, theological symmetry and American supremacy is reflected by Lewis Fiske, President of Albion College. In this sermon Fiske clearly articulated one of his underlying premises, “The purpose of Christianity is to develop an ideal state by creating social righteousness, national uprightness, race

⁵ George Clarke Peck, “The Tragedy of the Quails” Num. 11:33-34, in *Bible Tragedies* (NY: Eaton & Mains, 1900), 44f.

Peck (1865-1927) graduated from Yale, A.B.; and Drew, B.D. He was raised in a Methodist parsonage. These sermons were all preached in the evening services. In 1900 Peck was at First Church, Mt. Vernon, NY.

⁶ C.W. Blodgett, “An Optimist Survey,” in *The Methodist Episcopal Church Pulpit, A Volume of Sermons by Ministers of the Detroit Conference of the M.E. Church in Michigan*, ed. C.S. Eastman, (Monroe, MI: Commercial Printing House, 1897), 299.

Charles Wesley Blodgett (1845-1931) attended Garrett Biblical Institute and law school. He worked with D.L. Moody in Chicago.

integrity, a universal coalescence of spirit, truth and right everywhere triumphant.” For Fiske it was axiomatic that the God given purpose of the church would be achieved, “The question is never raised whether the Christian Powers can triumph over pagan lands, but only which Christian nations shall be in control.” Fiske did not discount the transformational power of the gospel on the individual, but insisted that to limit the transformation to the individual is to only see part of the picture. “Turning our gaze toward that which is social and organic in the world’s being let me say that it seems to me God must have a purpose somehow, not only to make the moral life of the individual perfect, which may be regarded as the immediate and direct aim of the gospel, but also to make national life perfect, to cover this earth with great, strong nationalities, mighty statehood, built upon imperishable foundations.” Given those premises the only question remaining for Fiske was what the proper method was for Christians to fulfill their God given purpose, “Is it unchristian to fight for liberty; is it unchristian to draw the sword for national rights and independence? Let the tongue be palsied that would charge the gospel with making men craven-hearted. ... God calls on me in my self-asserting personality to employ all my energies in the best way in the interest of truth and right, which I cannot do in servitude. ... Christianity comes to make men brave, to make nations mighty.” Lest one be left with the impression that either God or Fiske was a warmonger, Fiske was not arguing for an ongoing Christian militancy, instead, he believed that the solution was for America to become so powerful that no nation would dare proffer opposition to the gospel. “But one of the specific purposes of the Christian religion is to bring war to an end. ... God intends that for a righteous purpose Christian nations shall be mightiest of all the nations of the earth, and that the spirit of the gospel shall ultimately be so fully incarnated in the lives of men and nations that the last sound of war shall die from human ears.”⁷

These late Victorian Methodists were not naïve, they were aware that there were alternative voices preaching a message of skepticism, of pessimism, of doom and gloom. Future bishop William Anderson was quick to repudiate those who would cast

⁷ Lewis R. Fiske, “Christ in Everyday Affairs The Hope of the World” John 12:32, in Eastman, 1897, 12-18.

Fiske studied at Wesleyan Seminary, Albion, Michigan, received a B.A. from the University of Michigan in 1850 and then studied law. He was a professor of natural science and also chemistry. He was the president of Albion College from 1877-1898.

dispersions on this optimistic tenor. He noted that many “philosophers” offer little hope to their students. He recognized that some Christians had even adopted a pessimistic perspective.

And, worst of all, there is a school of morbid literalistic interpreters of the Bible who tell us that the world is waxing worse and worse; that it is God’s fixed purpose and intention to have it do so, and that it will so continue. This is one of the most deadly and the most unpardonable of all modern heresies.

Now the purpose of our discussion to-day is to show that there is no ground for pessimism or discouragement.⁸

Recognizing the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon and his modern English language; seeing the vitality and symmetry of theology; and armed with confidence in their God given task to spread individual and national perfection, there was little doubt that the rest of the unenlightened world would soon embrace Christianity. In a sermon by the future editor of the *Methodist Review*, George Elliott, we find a cogent explanation of why the church should be optimistic about the worldwide spread of Christianity. Elliott contrasted “dull Asia” with “energetic Europe”⁹ between which there exists “a spiritual struggle between the East and the West, the past and the future, the old and the new, the living and the dead.”¹⁰ Elliott saw in the events at the turn of the twentieth century a “critical moment” in which the church must act or lose a great opportunity. Unlike Fiske, Elliott was less interested in the benefits of American power, military or otherwise, and offered a more holistic, though equally optimistic formula for the worldwide advancement of Christianity:

God’s call, once whispered in a vision of the night, now is loudly thundered by the voices of the day. ‘Come over and help us!’ How shall we help? Not by the might of militarism or the conquests of commerce, but by the sweet sovereignty

⁸ William F. Anderson, “The Helping Stars” Judges 5:20, in *The Compulsion of Love: Sermons Preached at Ossining-on-Hudson, N.Y., in the Highland Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church. by Rev. William F. Anderson, D.D.*, The Methodist Pulpit (Cincinnati: Jennings and Pye, 1904), 88f.

Anderson (1860-1944) was elected by the 1904 General Conference to be the Secretary of the Board of Education of the MEC. In 1908 he was elected bishop. He attended West Virginia University, graduated from Ohio Wesleyan University, 1884, received a B.D. from Drew, 1887, and a M.A. from New York University, 1896

⁹ George Elliott, “The Macedonian Cry” Acts 16:9, in *The Beauty of Jesus: Sermons Preached in the Central Methodist Episcopal Church, Detroit, Mich., by Rev. George Elliott, D.D.*, The Methodist Pulpit (Cincinnati: Jennings and Pye, 1904), 35.

Elliott (1851-1930) attended Otterbein University and graduated from Cornell College, Mt. Vernon, Iowa, 1872. He was elected editor of the *Methodist Review* in 1920, reelected in 1924 and 1928, and served in that capacity until his death.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 38.

of loving service. Whether or not we care for political expansion and Anglo-Saxon imperialism, we must believe in the expansion of Christianity and the universal reign of the imperial Christ. For our noblest triumph in the Orient the gospel is greater than gunboats, Christian schools cheaper than soldiers, and missionaries mightier than armies and munitions of war. The millions spent in engines of destruction would be a thousand-fold more effective if used to equip the armies of salvation.¹¹

By linking itself so closely to the overriding optimism prevalent in the United States, Methodism both intentionally and unintentionally saw itself as a partner with the government in both domestic and international efforts to spread the intertwined ideals of liberty, democracy and protestant Christianity. While this co-opting would wax and wane over the next century, in many ways there remained a constant association of the “American way” with Methodist self-understanding. This close connection was not however, universally viewed in positive ways, and it is to the other side of the story that this paper now turns.

Declension

Ironically, it was the very “success” that the church and the nation were enjoying that caused some to perceive a state of declension. Declension has been a constant theme throughout the history of the church. Whether it be a longing for the good old days of one’s youth or a return to the patterns of the early church, no period of church history has not witnessed prophetic voices calling attention to the manner that the people of God have wandered from the true way. A sermon by William Brodbeck outlined broad areas of concern within the church, concerns which were shared by many. Brodbeck began his critique by comparing the early church, the church of *Acts*, with contemporary Methodism. He first contended that the strength of the early church was, “Not in great numbers,” an idea which “prevails largely at the present day that in order to success in any church, there must be large numbers. We must have a crowd, and thus impress the world by our very immensity.” He went on to argue that the methods used by many churches in order to draw a crowd “are not overscrupulous (sic).”

¹¹ Ibid, 52f.

Brodbeck's second point was that the strength of the early church did not "lie in wealth" which he said was "Another idea that prevails in many quarters is that a church must be wealthy in order to success; must have great means at its command." He argued that oftentimes when people became well off they no longer felt the need for God in their lives. He further argued that the best days for Methodism were when its constituents were poor. "Never was Methodism a greater power in the land than when her people were poor; when they came directly from the masses. And an evil day will it be in her history when she turns away from the poor and seeks only the rich."

In Brodbeck's third critique he argued that the strength of the early church had nothing to do with social standing, which he further argued had become the common thinking of Methodism, social status being considered "a necessary element of success. If the people of a church are largely from the more intelligent and cultured ranks of society, and have social standing, this will render the church popular; will attract the people." He returned to the argument that things were different in the good old days.

Never in her history was the Methodist Church more successful than when her people were tabooed by aristocratic society and stigmatized as crazy fanatics. Many of you can remember the time when it cost a young man or woman all social standing to join the despised sect. And never was the Methodist Church a greater power than at that time.

Brodbeck's fourth criticism had to do with the beautiful new church edifices being built, which he argued were contrary to the vitality of the early church which had nothing to do with "grand surroundings." He wrote, "Another idea which prevails too largely in our day is, that we must have grand churches, grand music, and eloquent scholarly preaching, if we would succeed in our work. But this is a great mistake." In contrast, Brodbeck advocated for a simplicity in both facility and style, contending the church was better served by having "nice churches, good music and good preaching...." Once again he looked back to the earlier days of Methodism to find evidence for his opinions.

And never perhaps was Methodism a greater power in winning souls for Christ than when, shut out of the churches by the authority and jealousy of a state ecclesiasticism, her people worshiped in the fields, and her preachers proclaimed the blessed gospel from stumps, and wagons, and tombstones, or whatever could be improvised into a pulpit.

In contrast to those who were insisting that their preachers are eloquent enough to “compete with the other pulpits in town” what the churches truly needed were “people in her pews who can compete with those in the pews of other churches in their attendance upon the house of God.”¹²

In his sermon, “Christ’s Call to the Twentieth Century,” Isaac Springer contended that Methodism had lost track of her central purpose as he argued, “Christ’s idea of a twentieth century church is something more than a social club; more than a hatchery of plans for cajoling people out of their money. His idea is found in his high-priestly prayer, It is to take up and carry forward the visible work of Christ on earth. ... Christ wants your whole community to be saved; ... and your mission is to inaugurate and persistently carry out aggressive methods of evangelistic work,”¹³

Louis Banks offered a couple of quick criticisms of the typical church, first it had become exclusive, “There has been too often a practical quarantine against ragged humanity in churches bearing the name of Christ.”¹⁴ Second, it had become common for many church members to divide “their lives into separate compartments” so that their behavior at home, and especially in business, was untouched by their Christian confession. In contrast he posited, “Nothing stands out more clearly in the Bible than that our human life is one; our religion is to permeate both our business and home life, and to give color and tone to everything we do.”¹⁵

Edmund Mills noted a number of areas that caused him great concern. On the broader scene he noted prevalent national sins citing: liquor-traffic; the bitterness of party spirit; vote buying and selling; Sabbath desecration; and especially “Lawlessness as seen in mob rule and lynch law. The guilty have escaped and the innocent have

¹² William Nast Brodbeck, “The First Christian Church” Acts 2:42 and 4:32, 33, in *Sermons and Addresses*, by William Nast Brodbeck, D.D. Late Pastor of Trinity Church, Charlestown, Mass. (NY: Eaton & Mains, 1898), 268-278.

Brodbeck (1847-1898) was raised in a Methodist parsonage.

¹³ Isaac E. Springer, “Christ’s Call to the Twentieth Century” Rev. 3:20, in Eastman, 1897, 88f. Springer (1839-1922) was raised in a Methodist parsonage. At the time the work was compiled he was the presiding elder of the Port Huron District.

¹⁴ Louis Albert Banks, “From Prince to Pauper” Gen. 1:26 & Matt. 25:40, in *Common Folks’ Religion: A Volume of Sermons and Addresses* (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1893), 42. Banks (1855-1933) comments in the introduction to this volume, “These sermons and addresses have all been delivered in the course of my regular work in my pulpit, Sunday and week-day, during the past year. ... First M.E. Church, Boston. ... May 15, 1893.”

¹⁵ “The Treasures of Darkness” Is 14:3, in Banks, 80.

suffered in many instances. The men who take the law into their own hands should be made in every case to feel its terrors. We insist that no man, white or black, shall be punished till by due process of law he is proved guilty. To do otherwise is to sow the wind and reap the whirlwind.”¹⁶ When he considered the state of the church he was particularly concerned that the growing affluence of its membership was outpacing their corresponding generosity. Like others he felt that an element of devoutness had been lost over time, “Relatively, we are not giving as much as our fathers did.” Interestingly his suggestion was not for greater generosity in the offering plates, but rather that Methodist philanthropy be directed to “her schools, hospitals, and orphanages.” Mills strongest criticism, however, was reserved for the attitude of too many local churches where he perceived there existed, “a spirit of caste not less to be condemned and shunned because found in America and not in India. May it not be that while the observance of class distinctions is disappearing from India, it is waxing stronger and stronger in America? To the Church that has a welcome only for the man ‘with a gold ring in goodly apparel,’ the Carpenter of Nazareth, ‘who had not where to lay his head,’ is saying, ‘I know you not.’”¹⁷

Patrick Maveety saw danger in the practices of large corporations and the government itself. He was especially critical regarding the lack of support for Sabbath rest:

If our great corporations, employing hundreds of thousands of men, and our government, employing hundreds of thousands more, forget the one day in seven set apart of spiritual culture and worship, and force their men to work on that day, thus depriving them of the only opportunity to cultivate their spiritual natures, and these men thus thrust out into the battle of our complex life drift into the maelstrom of anarchy, communism and nihilism, and afterwards turn their hands against those who denied them the civilizing and refining influences of Christianity, they will learn when it is too late that man without religion is a savage.¹⁸

¹⁶ Edmund M. Mills, “What Makes a Nation Great?” Prov. 13:34, in *Only a Profession: and Other Sermons*, The Methodist Pulpit (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1905), 114.

Mills (1848-1933) graduated from Wesleyan University in 1872. He was a delegate to the General Conference nine times, and served as the Secretary of the General Conference in 1920. He was also a delegate to the 1901 (London) and 1911 (Toronto) Methodist Ecumenical Conferences.

¹⁷ “A Withered Hand” Mark 3:1, in Mills, 144-147.

¹⁸ Maveety, 91f.

Lewis Fiske preached against widespread corruption in government which he perceived to exist from the local to the national levels. While strongly advocating that strong government was God's will, he believed that God did "not endorse political machines or machine workers."¹⁹ Springer evoked an interesting image when he argued that Christ would like to, and should be allowed to, attend "political caucuses and conventions," however Christ would prefer "to attend them without having to breathe the poison of tobacco smoke, nor having his ears pained by blasphemy and ribaldry. And he would like to have come with him, leaning upon his arm, noble womanhood, to take an honored and honoring part in politics, without stain to her garments or soul."²⁰ Continuing on the theme of political corruption, Anderson predicted "that the defiant, tyrannical rule of the political boss and of corrupt political parties is rapidly hastening on to an inglorious end."²¹

Charles Mitchell, while giving no indication that he was familiar with nor endorsing the theories of the Social Gospel, nevertheless, offered a critique of corporations which sounded similar.

We are losing the old-fashioned keen sense of sin. We still denounce the individual man, who in his own private life commits a sin against the individual or State; but so much of our modern business is conducted by corporations that we are failing to see that there is at the same moral obliquity involved in the theft of a corporation as in the theft of an individual. We denounce the individual man who commits murder, but we have no corresponding words of denunciation for the corporations which, by the simplest neglect, kill not one, but many of those whose lives are in their hands for safe keeping. We need to-day, as never before, men with consciences which are not lost when incorporated with others; consciences that are as keen to feel their moral responsibilities in official place as in private life, in company or alone.²²

George Peck in his sermon "The Tragedy of the Quails" offered two intriguing criticisms on both the declension which had taken place in the church and that which had taken place in the nation. In both cases Peck called into question the widely

¹⁹ Fiske, 20f.

²⁰ Springer, 85.

²¹ Anderson, 22f.

²² Charles Bayard Mitchell, "Remember Thy Creator" Eccl. 12:1, in *The Noblest Quest: And Other Sermons Preached in the First Methodist Episcopal Church, Cleveland, O., The Methodist Pulpit* (Cincinnati, Jennings and Graham, 1905), 96f.

Mitchell (1857-1942) served as a bishop from 1916-1928. He received a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. from Allegheny College.

accepted idea that Methodism and America were intrinsically linked as a part of God's divine plan being worked out in history. Peck questioned this linkage, and expressed severe doubts regarding the church's adoption of the American capitalistic goals and evaluative tools. He also questioned the almost reflexive attitude of many in the church to the foreign affairs of the United States. Rather than regarding such activity as inevitably good, Peck set up his own criteria for evaluating foreign activity which led him to a ambivalent conclusion regarding the then current activity of the U.S. military in the Philippines. First, his comment on the church:

When Christianity meant self-denial; when the worshiper had to carry a shotgun in one hand to protect the hymn book in the other; when pews were cushionless and hard, and sermons were measured by the hour, our fathers found no difficulty in building up the Church. But now that worldly wisdom has so largely gotten in and we do things on a commercial basis, when the bitterest truths are sugared and the Gospel doors flung wide, we are having conventions throughout the country to consider the outlook for the Church. Dear friends, we are dying of what we prayed for. We asked for wealth and social prestige and an uncrucified Christian life, and these very blessings have become our curse.²³

Next Peck's comment on the situation in the Philippines:

I confess that in the light of this old Scripture I do not know how to pray -- save this. If we are in the Philippines for the light we can bear and the brotherhood we can teach; if our armies are fighting for the dominion of the truth and the enfranchisement of man, I believe God can bless every gun, and cause the Sun of righteousness to be reflected in every bayonet. But if we as a great nation are simply out for spoil, if we are merely lusting for dominion, if the spirit of our war is carnal, I believe it will prove to have been the sorriest day in a thousand years when Dewey entered Manila Harbor. Better that the Spanish guns had blown our noble ships to atoms, better that there should have been no immortal dash up San Juan Hill, better that not a soldier boy come home in safety, that that victorious steel should dig the grave of our imperial lusting.²⁴

In a sermon preached at Chatauqua, Bishop John Vincent posited that his was a "scientific age" where the belief in cause and effect had led to an acceptance of the "invariableness of nature," and then offered the rhetorical question, "Is not prayer depreciated in our time by the superficial multitude?" In contrast to the multitude Vincent argued that men of learning, those who had studied history, theology, and

²³ Peck, 40f.

²⁴ Ibid, 38f.

science, did not disdain the effectiveness of prayer nor assert the inevitability of moral and ethical development. Therefore, “Faith in prayer is not a characteristic either of ignorance or of a limited intellect.” Vincent then exemplified his point with two curious subjects. First, he cited Lord Kelvin as an example. Kelvin, a well known name among the educated of the time was regarded as highly learned, quite successful, immanently honored, “second only to Newton,” yet “Though he has weighed nature from molecule to sun, he has continued a humble Christian.” For his second example, he used the life of Ellen Watson, as written by Miss Buckland. Watson, intelligent, educated, refined, capable, moved from scientific disbelief, “I do not need religion; scientific truth thoroughly satisfies me,” to devout faith, “I believe in God because I have felt the Divine Presence; ...” all by the age of twenty-four.²⁵

They got what they prayed for, and then wondered if that was what they really wanted; which in turn, caused many to question just how to pray for the future. While it might have seemed facile for some to point out where the church had lost her zeal, or how the church had ceased to welcome the outcasts into her midst. It was not as easy to determine just how to return to a correct path now that they had seemingly wandered down the wrong one. It was not possible to actually go back to meeting in simple structures with backless wooden benches, too much had changed. The course then was not to return, but somehow to move forward by properly adjusting to the new realities, the new possibilities, the new culture which was emerging, and to do so while still maintaining the essentials which defined one as Methodist. Agreeing on the adjustments, or even on the essentials, proved also to be an onerous task as will be evident in the next section of this paper which focuses on two of those controversial issues, evolution and biblical criticism.

Evolution and Biblical Criticism

By 1900 the theories of evolution, natural selection, and survival of the fittest had been debated in both the scientific and theological communities for over fifty years. Within a few more decades these debates would lead to some of the most public and

²⁵ John H. Vincent, “Prayer” James 5:16, in Eastman, 1898, 10-24.

Vincent preached this sermon in 1896 at Chautauqua, NY.

Vincent (1832-1920) was one of the founders of Chautauqua. He served as bishop from 1888-1904.

politicized conflicts both within and outside of church denominational structures. Generally speaking, the Methodist Episcopal Church navigated these choppy waters without much incident and the sermons preached on this subject give ample explanation of how the denomination managed relatively smooth sailing. The two typical responses to the issue of creation, and specifically the creation of humans, were either to ignore the subject, it not being worth discussion; or to accept the scientific consensus while simultaneously accepting Scriptural authority by contending that the Bible functions not as a science or history text but rather as a theological exposition and guide to salvation.²⁶

Camden Cobern, soon to be professor Cobern, in his sermon “The Divinity of Man” exemplified one extreme of the Methodist spectrum when he argued that it did not matter how God created man, nor how long it took God, all that really mattered was that God was the Creator.

Man has a divine origin. That is true by whatever method God created him. I am not saying anything against evolution as a method of divine creation. ... But this I do insist upon that man when he first appeared was not simply a featherless biped, a sorry sort of a brute, differing only from other animals in the shape of his thumb or an additional convolution of the brain. Man, when he first appeared, was man, divinely created, divinely endowed, a ‘clothed eternity,’ as Emerson called him with the currents of the universe flowing through him and having the Creator as his nearest relative. It was not the brute that was his father, but God. When you read man’s genealogical table you may find criminals and idiots in the list, and for all I know, somewhere in the list the tiger or the ape; but earlier than the criminal, earlier than the tiger or the ape, earlier than the fire-mist or the protoplasmic jelly, you will find as the first ancestor of the race -- God.²⁷

George Elliott echoed Cobern, though with an ambiguous shading, when he wrote, “Whatever may be its validity, there is something sublime in the biological theory of

²⁶ Frederick Norwood provides a similar assessment in his, *The Story of American Methodism*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 322.

In Methodism, over the long run, the voices of men like William North Rice, professor at Wesleyan University, were heard to the effect that, although Darwinism might be suspect on scientific grounds, yet it did offer a reasonable explanation of available data on the processes of life. At the same time it did not deny the creative activity of God nor the Christian view of humanity.

²⁷ Camden Cobern, “The Divinity of Man” Ps 132:6 and Gen. 1:27, in *The Stars and the Book: Sermons preached in St. James Methodist Episcopal Church, Chicago*, The Methodist Pulpit (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1904) 79.

Cobern (1855-1920) graduated from Allegheny College, 1876, earned a bachelor of sacred theology degree from Boston University School of Theology, 1883, and a PhD from Boston, 1885. From 1906-1920 he was the James M. Thoburn Professor of English Bible and Philosophy of Religion at Allegheny College. He was a member of the 1906 Joint Hymnal Committee.

evolution in its Theistic form, which sees a continuous chain from dust to Deity, blossoming out into saints and angels on the way.”²⁸

An opposing position was offered by Matthew Hawks who countered that the choice of creation theory was critical to one’s confession as a Christian.

Yet I am aware that we are living in an age when the minds of men are full of conflicting theories concerning the origin of human life. White and black are not more opposite in color, than are these theories in their significance. One brings man up from below, the other brings him down from above. One gives him an ascent from the ape, the other a descent from the Creator. One evolves him from the basest material through long processes of animal growth; the other speaks him into dignified being at the fiat of Almighty God. I shall waste no time in trying to refute the first theory. Why should we seek to disprove what has never been proven, and what the most voluminous writer of modern times upon the same theory has declared ‘would never be proven?’ The profoundest living physicist of Europe, Prof. Verchow, of Berlin, says: ‘The theory of man’s evolution from the brute has no solid scientific foundation.’²⁹

To men like Camden Cobern, men like Matthew Hawks were to be tolerated and humored. They were immature in their understanding, unwilling or unable to see and accept the truth “that a man is not necessarily an infidel because he believes that God’s method in creation was a little different from what we thought it was when we were boys; and such a change has not hurt either our religious experience or our reverence for the Bible. Whatever method God used in making the world was a right method, and does not contradict the Bible when rightly understood.”³⁰

Perhaps George Peck’s position on this subject stated the typical Methodist ambiguity when he preached, “Men can be first-class Christians without knowing whether they believe in creation or evolution.”³¹ For Peck, and many Methodist preachers, it was the life of the Christian that ultimately mattered. They were willing to tolerate a fairly wide range of beliefs regarding issues which they did not see as central to the Christian life. While they certainly insisted that God was the creator, they found little value in debating the methodology God employed. Springer used the ambiguous terms “Creator and Governor of Nature” to describe how he believed Christ would like to

²⁸ Elliott, 58.

²⁹ Matthew C. Hawks, “The Dignity of Human Life” Gen. 2:7 and Job 33:4, in Eastman, 1897, 65f. Hawks (1851-1919) briefly attended law school.

³⁰ “The Stars and The Book: A Plea for the Critical Study of the Scriptures” Ps. 19, in Cobern, 12f.

³¹ Peck, 15.

be understood, and said that the truly important point was that people “recognize the moral purpose in creation”³² and infuse that moral purpose in all aspects of life.

The various arguments regarding creation naturally were interlinked with arguments about biblical authority. It is not surprising then that the same type of ambiguity expressed in the creation argument was also expressed on this issue. Once again, the consensus of opinion revolved around the central Methodist theological issues of salvation and Christian practice. As long as one accepted the authority of Scripture in those basic areas, other issues were negotiable. Maveety stated a common understanding of the quest for truth as the ultimate goal of every Christian.

No true religion has any reason to fear the light of reverent and unprejudiced scientific investigation. Ignorance has shrouded religion in mystery and superstition, has added dogmas not of God and then has stood guard with flaming sword lest intelligence should break in and drive out the false intruders. A false and ignorant form of worship may be better than none at all, but it is only when man intelligently understands his relation to God and comprehends eternal truth that he can worship with profit to himself and to the nation of which he is a part. An ignorant worshiper is to the church what an ignorant citizen is to the State.³³

Cobern, again stating the case for the more liberal or accommodating side of the spectrum, argued that the truth and superiority of the Bible was actually enhanced by vigorous critical analysis:

For one, I am not afraid of the truth. I believe this Book can stand the most critical examination as to its origin, its composition, its accuracy, its spiritual supremacy and aloneness. If I did not believe this I would not believe that it was from God. No other religious book of the ancient world can bear the scrutiny of modern scholarship as the Bible can. I do not ask skeptics to use an easier test or a different test when they examine these Bible documents than when they examine other ancient documents. ... That is the reason I look with favor on the ‘higher criticism,’ and every other criticism which applies historic and literary tests to this great revelation.

Once again Cobern contrasted the uninformed views of the past with the enlightened understanding of his day to posit hyperbolically that the only people who hold to the beliefs of the past are those who are not allowed to move forward into the future.

³² Springer, 80f.

³³ Maveety, 87.

Whatever method God used in making the Bible was a right method. ... They said [most men in the past] the Bible was false and valueless unless it (sic) was an infallible revelation which had been received, recorded, preserved, transmitted, copied, translated, and interpreted infallibly. No one believes that now, unless it be some ignorant Roman Catholic. We Protestants, most of us, believe that the revelation was infallible, but that it was recorded, transmitted, and translated by fallible human agents. ...

In an interesting move, Cobern appeared to yield the ultimate decision regarding truth not to the theologian but rather to the scientist, "Whatever scientific research may prove to have been God's method in giving this revelation, it can never cease to be the Christian's authoritative guide book." He went on to say that, "It is not the ink marks (the letters and words of the Book) that are inspired, but the thought and spirit of it."

We call the Bible as a whole God's Book; not because we must give up our Bible if it is proved that the Song of Solomon or Second Peter, or Jude were not written by the men we thought they were; or that Jonah is a parable and Genesis is a poetical picture-story instead of literally history; but because as a whole the Old Testament is pervaded by the same great holy hope of a coming One; and the New Testament is pervaded with the holy joy of One who is come. Jesus Christ is the vindication of Old Testament prophecy and the certification of New Testament theology.³⁴

Once again Peck echoed Cobern's sentiments when he proclaimed:

Yet I am impressed that this ancient picture has a tremendous message for today. Whatever it may have lost in historic interest it has more than gained in moral cogency. It means more for human life in our restless, active age than it ever could mean as literal panorama of antediluvian fact. Let it be true, as modern expositors affirm, that the whole Eden story is poetry instead of prose. Let it further appear that the story was not original with Hebrew bards, but brought with them from their native soil in the distant East. ... Be it also allowed that in the theologic (sic) sense there never was a 'fall;' that man has always struggled upward. Even so, this ancient record is vital yet. With all its historicity and dogmatic bearing gone, it still remains one of the most tremendous dramas of language.³⁵

For Cobern the time had come to accept that the Bible had a more limited role in the total scope of man's knowledge, though still the preeminent role in the most important aspect of life. Cobern argued that the Bible was "not given to teach history or

³⁴ Cobern, "Stars", 11-23.

³⁵ Peck, pp. 14f.

philosophy or science, but to teach religion.”³⁶ George Peck believed himself to have reached a new level of objectivity in his approach to Scripture, which allowed him to simultaneously find portions of the biblical account both quaint and enlightening.

It [the Bible] pointed the way to holiness and heaven, and enforced its moral truth with poetry and image. This is my conception of certain records of the Old Testament, and of some sections in the New. It does not embarrass me to come upon these weird old pictures. I do not get my science from the first chapters of Genesis any more than I do from the meditations of Job or the Psalms of David. Newton and Huxley are for that. When I come here, I come for moral inspiration; for the word of human life; for guideposts on the way to heaven. And that is what I find.³⁷

For the most part, Methodists would avoid the bitter modernist-fundamentalist conflict which would soon impact other denominations. They did so for two reasons. First, those who held a stronger view of biblical authority, especially regarding creation, tended to be willing to avoid conflict by simply ignoring the issue. Second, those who embraced an evolutionary perspective of creation and employed the methods of higher biblical criticism, tended to do so without discounting the Bible’s authority for issues of salvation and discipleship. Whether by design, or happenstance, most Methodists were able to agree that what really mattered was the centrality of Jesus Christ as both the means of salvation and the example to be followed. All of Scripture was filled with instruction for the practice of Christian life, and at their core, Methodists were ultimately practical. With that in mind, we move to address the questions of what is right, and what is practical, regarding the tensions which developed between capital and labor during the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Capital-Labor Conflict

The two most well known incidents of labor unrest during the last two decades of the nineteenth century were the Haymarket Riot in Chicago and the Pullman Strike also in Illinois. The sources of the conflict in each of these cases was also at work in countless other large and small capital-labor conflicts during this time, and thus they have become representative of the overall tensions which impacted the newly

³⁶ Cobern, 26.

³⁷ Peck, 18.

industrialized urban areas. The Methodist response to these two events is also symbolic of the wider reaction of Methodist clergy to issues of capital-labor strife. In the Haymarket incident the vast majority of clergy offered no support for the actions of organized labor. While they were sometimes sympathetic to their needs, they did not feel that they were justified in their actions of civil disobedience. It was during the Pullman strike that two Methodist ministers raised their voices in support of the striking workers, gaining national prominence for their efforts and opening the eyes of many ministers to the legitimacy of both the complaints and the actions of the employees.³⁸

The predominant sermonic response to capital-labor tensions seems rather simplistic. Both sides simply needed to pray, become more devout, and seek to apply Christ's teachings to this area of their lives. Specifically, the two primary teachings that were looked to as the solution to this problem were Jesus' instructions to treat others as you would want them to treat you and his injunction to love your neighbor as yourself. For most Methodist clergy this issue was little different than the conflict which might arise between a farmer and his hired laborers, or a skilled craftsman and the man that he was training. The problems were typically not depicted in terms of soulless corporations versus socialistic unions, though there were hints in those directions, but rather as problems which existed between individuals, an employer and an employee.

James Potts provided a typical response to capital-labor tensions in his sermon, "The Work of a Resolute People." "A good lesson here for our age. In the struggles of labor and capital harsh things are often said and done, but the best way to meet them is to pray much and work on. Sooner or later the right will prevail. Brute force is unpleasant whether used with authority or against authority, but the force of a devout

³⁸ Once again Frederick Norwood provides a succinct description of the typical minister's perspective:

During this period [the 1870s and 1880s] most Methodist leaders and editors of church papers were opposed to organization of workingmen and especially to the strike technique. They were standing in the old position of early capitalism and free enterprise for free farmers and free small businessmen. They did not yet grasp the significance of big business and the complexity of corporate fiancé and production.

But, already during the 1880s and even more in the next decade, some ministers and some writers were beginning to see the importance of a Christian understanding of economic life in the new industrial age. ... During the labor troubles and recurrent panics, the *Advocates* frequently urged relief for the unemployed, but they had little to say about the causes of labor unrest or the policies of employers. The churches, including the Methodist, either ignored or were unaware of poor safety conditions, exploitive wages, sudden layoffs, and waste of natural resources. Norwood, 343.

heart, prevailing with God, and of a sturdy arm, toiling in duty, is a kind which the world respects.”³⁹ For Potts the Victorian emphasis on duty seemed more important than labor’s calls for justice, and the optimism of the age inclined him to believe that in the future things would somehow just work out. President Fiske proffered much the same advice as that offered by Potts:

The only hope of *business* is the dominance of the spirit of the gospel. If this shall not be the leaven in society for the bringing forth of righteousness, of business concord, breaking down vicious monopolies, preventing strikes, putting employers and employes [sic] into a brotherhood, supplying a true spirit of fellowship, I do not know what can accomplish the work. ... What we need is sanctified intelligence, sanctified mental powers, the religion of the Savior breathed all through the life, so that man shall treat every other man as his brother.⁴⁰

A slightly different nuance is given to the same basic themes by Isaac Springer who presented Jesus “as the earth’s owner and as the carpenter.” He went on to admit that the future looked bleak, but his hope was firmly in Christ, whom he was sure understood the arguments and concerns of both sides, for:

He is, emphatically, a business man. He is the wealthiest capitalist in the world; as the entire earth is his, and we are but his stewards in trust and tenants at will of such portions of his property as we have in possession. He knows, therefore, how to appreciate and sympathize with the situation and interests of capitalists. But, he is, also, a workman; more than half of his lifetime working as a carpenter. He, therefore, understands, appreciates and sympathizes with the situation and interests of the working people. He has two business rules that are short and easily learned. One is: ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’ The other is but little longer: ‘Therefore, whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them.’ These simple rules, put in practice, would revolutionize and reform industrial methods and business practices. ...

While he was at it, Springer was also sure that Jesus would find a way to charge fair rates on the railroads and to get all the railroad business completed without operating on Sundays. His conclusion was quite simple, if Jesus was in charge “He would give honest, living wages for honest, capable work.”⁴¹

³⁹ James Henry Potts, “The Work of a Resolute People” Neh. 4:6, in Eastman, 1898, 38. Potts (1848-1942) became the assistant editor of the Michigan *CA* in 1877 and the editor in 1884, a position he held for forty years. He earned an A.B. degree from Northwestern. He was a General Conference delegate five times.

⁴⁰ Fiske, 20.

⁴¹ Springer, 82f.

When Charles Mitchell preached about capital-labor strife he endeavored to correct some invalid but commonly held opinions. For example, he was concerned that people believed that churches were somehow opposed to labor. “The Christian Church and its ministry assert the worth of the laboring man. There is a false notion current among some laboring men that the Church is out of sympathy with the laborer, and that the Church is the friend of the rich and the foe of the poor. Any student of this problem may quickly discover that the great majority of those who are connected with both Protestant and Catholic Churches are workingmen.” Lest he sound like he was in the pocket of unions, Mitchell was quick to add, “It is to be deplored that many labor unions have their weekly meetings on the Sabbath, and thus discourage their members from Church attendance. It is also true that many of their leaders are Socialists who are not at all in sympathy with the present religious and commercial systems.” In basically the same breath Mitchell continued to correct other misconceptions, “The real truth is that in America to-day the one class most neglected by the Church and ministry is the rich. This so-called favored class hold themselves more completely aloof from ministerial and Church influences than any other class of people.” As to the genuine, rather than perceived situation of the working man, “This is the best era in human history for the laboring man. His lot is better to-day than ever before. Not all hardships are yet removed; but it is true that the curse from labor is being lifted.”⁴²

In much the same misconception correcting vein B.L. McElroy felt compelled to point out that, “Wealth makes possible many desirable things, and yet levies its own tax on those who possess it. As a rule, rich men pay a good price for their riches, and the undoubted pleasures attendant on their possession should never be witnessed with a mean or grudging spirit. Few stop to reflect upon the burden of standing beneath a great fortune.”⁴³ Between McElroy’s sympathy for the burden the wealthy must carry, and Mitchell’s reminder that the laboring man’s lot was better than ever, one would be inclined to think that most of the sermons fell rather lopsidedly on the side of capital.

⁴² Mitchell, “The Dignity of Labor” 1 Cor. 3:9, Mitchell 71-73.

⁴³ B.L. McElroy, “Compensation, A Law of Life” Jer. 24:5-6, in Eastman, 1897, 358.

McElroy (1860-1948) occupied the Morris Sharp Chair of Applied Christianity at Ohio Wesleyan University for twenty-five years.

In contrast to this perspective, Louis Banks in his sermon “The Golden Rule as Applied to the Relation between Head-Workers and Hand-Workers” tried to point out the mutual dependence of capital and labor. Banks used the biblical metaphor of the head and the hand both needing each other. He argued, “It is the duty of the head to plan the protection of the hand from overwork. Long hours mean short men. The Golden Rule will dictate the reverse of this, and we shall have shorter hours and longer and broader manhood.”⁴⁴ Banks continued by pointing out that the typical wealthy capitalist tends to treat his employees as commodities rather than people as he argues:

“rarely indeed, even at the present day, do we find a rich man who looks upon his servants, or the employees who co-operate in the production of his riches, as his equals, or as ends in themselves. Rarely do we find one striving to encourage in those dependent upon him the spirit of independence and self-respect, by affording them every opportunity for culture, providing for their health, associating with them on equal terms. To him they are merely so many ‘hands,’ which he would gladly, if he could, replace by machines, ...⁴⁵

Banks concluded by reminding his hearers that, “The mission of our Christianity is not to save an elect portion of humanity, but to lift all souls, everywhere, out of the miry clay of slavery and sensualism, on to the solid rock of virtue, and into the air of freedom. The church must stand for the helpless and oppressed, as the hospice on the mountain, as the lighthouse in the storm, as the sure friend in every time of need.”⁴⁶

In his sermon, “The Compulsion of Love” William Anderson attempted to present a balanced evaluation of the situation, but eventually sounded more sympathetic to the plight of labor than the privilege of capital:

The tyranny of greed is as debasing as the tyranny of unjust government, and must come to an end. There are those who bewail the spirit of restlessness among the laboring classes in our times. No reasonable man will attempt to justify the lawlessness which manifests itself in connection with nearly every strike. This is anarchy, and deserves, as it receives, the severe execration of the American people. But when I think of the tyrannical attitude some great monopolies have assumed towards the laborer in defiance of American public sentiment and of the law of right, it seems to me cause for gratitude that from the masses there should come a strong voice of protest. It is the instinct of manhood asserting itself in the lowly walks of life; it is a plea for the recognition of a God-

⁴⁴ Banks, 58.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 64f. Banks indicates that he is citing Bishop Huntington on this point.

⁴⁶ Ibid, pp. 69f.

given right, and the Church of Jesus Christ must recognize it as such before these problems are solved.⁴⁷

In Mitchell's earlier cited sermon one finds a most thorough offering of advice on this subject, as he provided ten "great principles" which if followed by both sides would bring peace to the Capital-Labor conflict.

The first principle is this: It must be universally established that in this free country every man has a right to work for whom and for what wage he pleases. Compulsory membership in a trades union in order to secure employment is un-American, and should not be tolerated. ...

The second principle which must be established is, that every employer must have the right to decide whom he shall employ, and that the principle of the open shop should everywhere prevail. ...

The third principle is "compulsory arbitration"

Fourth. The principle of co-operation should prevail. Both capital and labor should be organized for mutual benefit. Labor should share with capital not only its profits, but also its losses. ...

Fifth. Every laborer should be paid the wage he earns and not the wage another man earns. ...

Sixth. Capital must recognize the right of labor to organize for its own protection and benefit; and such laborers should not be discriminated against so long as they do not interfere with the rights of others. ... It must be admitted that the union has done much good. It has improved the shop conditions where labor is employed. It has improved the dwellings in communities where they are owned by the capitalist. It has rightly shortened the hours of labor and justly increased the wages. ...

Mitchell's seventh principle is that when a union goes on strike they have no right to prevent others from taking their jobs.

Eighth. The whole principle of the boycott must be condemned. All efforts to call in the aid of others, who have no personal grievance, to join in the effort to destroy another's business, is both un-American and un-Christian. The law can not be too strict in its dealings with such cases. The American people will never sympathize with an organization which adopts the principle of the boycott. ...

Mitchell's ninth principle states that a person who gets a job during a strike cannot be fired when the strike is settled.

Lastly [tenth]. The fundamental principles of Christianity must be applied in all capital and labor relations, and both sides must obey Christ's requirement: 'Love thy neighbor as thyself.' ...⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Anderson, "The Compulsion of Love" 2 Cor. 5:14, in Anderson, 21f.

⁴⁸ Mitchell, 75-83.

While Mitchell certainly does not sound like someone who has fully accepted the message of the Social Gospel, it is clear that some Methodist preachers were moving in a much more pro-labor direction, which recognized that the issues under dispute were not likely to simply go away.

By 1905 Methodist opinion on capital-labor conflicts had begun to change. This shift away from an almost universal support of capital, toward either a balanced perspective of the conflict, or an outright support for the cause of labor would continue over the next few decades. To a great extent the changes which took place during the American industrial revolution occurred with such rapidity that most Methodists were unable to perceive the new reality in which the typical factory laborer then worked. Still functioning from a farm or small shop perspective in 1880, it would take decades for most Methodists to grasp the radically new nature of capital-labor relations. As they began to understand these new economic conditions their sermons first acquiesced toward the plight of laborers while hardening against the overwhelming greed evident in the attitude and practices of capital; and then would eventually move toward outright endorsement of the bulk of labor's demands.

Conclusion

The quest to know what the average church member believes about any subject, ecclesial or not, is always challenging. Today the Gallup and Barna organizations endeavor to meet this desire to know, but in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, no such pollsters existed. Historians can turn to the various denominational periodicals to assess what the typical church member might have been reading, and then postulate what their general opinion was on a given subject. But periodicals only tell one part of the story, a part often deeply colored by the hand of the editor. Another source of information is the official activity of a denomination, its polity changes and position statements. However, to try and understand the ways that an average church member may have responded, as a Christian, to the broad cultural changes occurring all around, period sermons offer a unique and unequalled insight into the lives of these regular folks. Most treatments of American church history which focus on this time

frame, whether surveys or more focused studies, have tended to give little attention to preaching or sermons. Those that do include this aspect of church life in their accounting have limited their focus to a few great orators, either accepting or implying that they are representative of all preachers/sermons of the era. The probable fallacy of this approach becomes clear when one thinks about the preaching stars of today, for example Joel Osteen or Bill Hybels, being labeled average or held as examples of the type of pastors most Americans worship with on Sundays.

This paper is an early effort in a longer term process to explore the impact of cultural change on the preaching and sermons of average Methodist ministers in the late Victorian era. From this small sampling a few preliminary conclusions can be drawn. On a typical Sunday, most Methodists in northern urban areas heard sermons which were very similar to those which they might have heard twenty or thirty years earlier. On some Sundays, however, they would hear a sermon which focused on the Christian response to a broader social issue: capital-labor conflict; higher criticism of the Bible; an appropriate response to the theory of evolution; or the involvement of the United States in foreign affairs. Other issues one might encounter which were not addressed in this paper are: the changing role of women; the temperance cause; the plight of the immigrant; the need for universal public education; and the Christian response to the horrible poverty conditions in cities. These topical sermons would become more common as the twentieth century progressed, becoming, in some places, the norm rather than the exception. In much the same way, the MEC, MC and UMC would devote more of its energy and resources to addressing social issues, moving away from a more personally narrowed understanding of what it means to spread Scriptural holiness across the land.

Anderson, William F. *The Compulsion of Love: Sermons Preached at Ossining-on-Hudson, N.Y., in the Highland Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church, The Methodist Pulpit.* Cincinnati: Jennings and Pye, 1904.

Banks, Louis Albert. *Common Folks' Religion: A Volume of Sermons and Addresses.* Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1893.

Bristol, Frank M. *The Religious Instinct of Man, The Methodist Pulpit.* Cincinnati: Jennings and Pye, 1904.

Brodbeck, William Nast. *Sermons and Addresses, by William Nast Brodbeck, D.D. Late Pastor of Trinity Church, Charlestown, Mass.* NY: Eaton & Mains, 1898.

Bucke, Emory, gen. ed. *The History of American Methodism, 3 vols.* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964.

Cobern, Camden M. *The Stars and the Book: Sermons preached in St. James Methodist Episcopal Church, Chicago, The Methodist Pulpit.* Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1904.

Eastman, C.S., ed. *The Methodist Episcopal Church Pulpit, A Volume of Sermons by Ministers of the Detroit Conference of the M.E. Church in Michigan.* Monroe, MI: Commercial Printing House, 1897.

Eastman, C.S., ed. *The Methodist Episcopal Pulpit, A Volume of Sermons by Ministers of the Michigan Conference of the M.E. Church in Michigan.* Monroe, MI: Sermon Printing House, 1898.

Elliott, George. *The Beauty of Jesus: Sermons Preached in the Central Methodist Episcopal Church, Detroit, Mich., The Methodist Pulpit.* Cincinnati: Jennings and Pye, 1904.

Mills, Edmund M. *Only a Profession: and Other Sermons, The Methodist Pulpit.* Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1905.

Mitchell, Charles Bayard, *The Noblest Quest: And Other Sermons Preached in the First Methodist Episcopal Church, Cleveland, O., The Methodist Pulpit.* Cincinnati, Jennings and Graham, 1905.

Norwood, Frederick. *The Story of American Methodism.* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974.

Peck, George Clarke. *Bible Tragedies.* NY: Eaton & Mains, 1900.