When the 1908 General Conference of the American Methodist Episcopal Church issued its statement on "The Church and Social Problems" (later referred to generally as the Social Creed), it summoned "all our ministry, Bishops, District Superintendents, and Pastors, to patient study of these problems and to fearless but judicious preaching of the teachings of Jesus in their significance for the moral interests of modern society" [1908 *Discipline*, p. 481]. This statement, which moved the Methodist Episcopal Church to a leadership role among the other denominations, was the result of careful planning by such leading figures in the newly formed Methodist Federation for Social Service as Herbert Welch, Worth Tippy, Harry Ward, Frank Mason North, George Albert Coe, and John R. Mott. Their work has been recently described by Donald Gorrell in his *The Age of Social Responsibility: The Social Gospel in the Progressive Era 1900-1920* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988). In spite of what to many would have been the radical nature of the report, it was passed unanimously, and the *Daily Christian Advocate* "made no mention of it when summarizing the outstanding events of the General Conference" [Gorrell, p. 101]. Was the success of the report due only or primarily to the behind the scenes work of the Federation, or had there also been a climate of opinion established during the preceding decade which facilitated its passage? Gorrell says that
Methodism was not so moribund that sparks of social concern were totally missing. In 1892, 1896, and 1904, some Annual Conferences petitioned the quadrennial General Conference to take some action concerning social problems or social reform, but invariably the requests were ignored. Such inaction was not the result of a lack of knowledge because the bishops pointed to social needs in their Episcopal Addresses. But preoccupation with a constitutional crisis and withdrawal of holiness sympathizers in the 1890s, and fear of declining membership after 1900, distracted attention from social questions. Furthermore, no charismatic leader or group attained national recognition as the champion of the social cause [pp. 89-90].

The lack of any mention in that paragraph of outstanding preachers who took up the cause during the pre-1908 period has led me to an examination of a collection of sermons by notable Methodist Episcopal preachers which was published in 1904 and 1905 to see to what degree the "social problem" was addressed by them and how the concerns of the social gospel characterized the content of their preaching.

Eleven volumes were published in the 1904 series. The authors were among the most prestigious in the denomination and represented cardinal pulpits. They were: William F. Anderson, pastor of Highland Avenue M.E. Church, Ossining-on-Hudson, New York; Frank M. Bristol, pastor of the Metropolitan M.E. Church, Washington, D.C.; Camden M. Cobern, pastor of St. James M.E. Church, Chicago, Illinois; George Elliott, pastor of Central M.E. Church, Detroit, Michigan; Matthew Simpson Hughes, pastor of Independence Avenue M.E. Church, Kansas City, Missouri; D.W.C. Huntington, chancellor of Nebraska Wesleyan University; Charles J. Little, president of Garrett Biblical Institute, Evanston, Illinois; Wallace MacMullen, pastor of Madison Avenue M.E. Church, New York; William A. Quayle, pastor of Grand Avenue M.E. Church, Kansas City, Missouri; A.H. Tuttle, pastor of the M.E. Church in Summit, New Jersey; and Jesse Bowman Young, pastor of Walnut Hills M.E. Church in Cincinnati, Ohio. Six of the eleven were delegates to the 1908
General Conference, where three of them (Anderson, Bristol, and Quayle) would be elected bishops. A fourth, Hughes, had to wait until 1916 for election.

There were twelve volumes in the 1905 series, and these reflect a movement away from the previous year's monopoly by pastors and academic figures and toward the institutional hierarchy. Those contributors were: Isaac Crook, presiding elder in the Ohio Conference; George P. Eckman, pastor of St. Paul's M.E. Church, New York City; Robert Forbes, First Assistant Corresponding Secretary of the Board of Church Extension of the Northern Minnesota Conference; Cyrus Foss, who was elected to the episcopacy in 1880 after five years as president of Connecticut's Wesleyan University; Heber D. Ketcham, presiding elder in the Cincinnati Conference; Abner H. Lucas, pastor of First M.E. Church, Montclair, New Jersey; Naphtali Luccock, pastor of Union M.E. Church, St. Louis, Missouri; M.C.B. Mason, the only African-American in either series, who was Corresponding Secretary of the Freedman's Aid and Southern Education Society; Edmund M. Mills, presiding elder in the Central New York Conference; Charles Bayard Mitchell, pastor of First M.E. Church, Cleveland, Ohio; James Henry Potts, editor of the *Michigan Christian Advocate*; and John W. Sayers, pastor of Trinity M.E. Church in Chester, Pennsylvania. Five of these were delegates to the 1908 General Conference, but none were elected bishop. Luccock was elected in 1912 and Mitchell in 1916.

A survey of all references to social issues indicates that the preachers in the 1904 series were less likely to address those matters which were to become the subjects of the Social Creed. Only Anderson spoke of the rights of labor, for instance.
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-given right, and the Church of Jesus Christ must recognize it as such before these problems are solved. [The Compulsion of Love (Cincinnati: Jennings and Pye, 1904) p. 22]

Political corruption was Anderson's other great concern, although he may have been too sanguine concerning its demise.

The influence of corrupt political organizations is another species of power debasing to society. Submission to them means degradation to any community. The American public has been longsuffering towards this infamous excrescence of our modern civilization, but the voice of an "organized public conscience" is coming from all sections of the country. This means that the defiant, tyrannical rule of the political boss and of corrupt political parties is rapidly hastening on to an inglorious end. [Anderson, pp. 22-23]

With the exception of these two vigorous passages, Anderson generally reflected the spirit of the other preachers in the series, that is, his primary emphasis was upon individual piety and the renewal of society through the enlarging of the church’s membership with persons who take seriously the Sermon on the Mount. In a thirty-one page sermon on "Methodism's Responsibility to the Kingdom of God" only personal religion was stressed except for one quotation from a Scotch Congregationalist who was advocating a "new interest in the social aspects of life as distinguished from a merely individualistic piety" (p. 160), but Anderson did not elaborate upon what that might mean.

The sermons in the 1905 series are more likely to address social questions, and of those Charles Bayard Mitchell draw a fuller picture of what
the Kingdom of God might mean and what is involved in the process of bringing it to realization. For him the presence of the Kingdom is intimately related to individual moral striving:

... wherever [God's] laws are operating, and wherever obedient men and women are seeking to keep them, there is the kingdom of God. Go where any man is striving to do the will of his Heavenly Father; go where any earnest soul is struggling with temptation, --and there you will find that God has set up His kingdom. That kingdom can be found in the palace or in the cottage. I can take you into the workshop, into the office, into the school-room, into the home, and show you where the kingdom of God is already established. [The Noblest Quest (Cincinnati: Jennings and Pye, 1905) pp. 17-18]

Also for Mitchell, unselfishness is a primary characteristic of those who are in the Kingdom.

Selfishness cannot flourish in the soil of the kingdom of God. I promise you that if you seek and find the kingdom of God, no sooner will you have entered it than all that ugly selfishness will have dropped from you. You may get into the kingdom by seeking your own good; that is necessary; but I warrant you that you will not stay in the kingdom if you continue to seek only your own good. [Mitchell, pp. 22-23]

In his sermon on "The Dignity of Labor," Mitchell sought to apply his understanding of the Kingdom to this particular issue. For him the dignity of labor is rooted in our cooperation with God in the work of creation. "Every honest laborer is working with God" [p. 71]. Mitchell's vision of the product of such cooperation bore a strong resemblance to the progressive's view of American destiny:

We place honor upon the man who co-operates with God; turns forests into cities; converts the crude ore into the currency of the realm; constructs railways which bind all parts of the nation together with bands of steel; constructs ships which sail on all seas, and has made all the wonders of modern civilization possible. [Mitchell, p. 71]
His sermon isolated ten principles (pp. 75-83) which Mitchell believed to be "essential to industrial health." They clearly reflect the tensions that were present in his affluent Cleveland parish and his attempt, however inadequate from our perspective, to provide a moderating point of view. His dependence upon individual Christian commitment and action over against legal measures is obvious. His principles were:

1. Every man has a right to work for whom and for what wage he pleases. No compulsory union membership.

2. The principle of the open shop should everywhere prevail.

3. The principle of compulsory arbitration should be recognized.

4. Labor should share with capital its profits and its losses.

5. Each laborer should be paid according to his own worth, not according to a uniform wage scale which places a premium on incompetency.

6. Labor has the right to organize for its own protection and benefit so long as it does not interfere with the rights of others. "Such is the cupidity of human nature that had not laboring men organized in self-defense the over-reaching covetousness of the employer would long before now have made the lot of the laboring man unendurable" (p. 80)

7. Those who strike have no right to prevent others from taking up the task they have voluntarily laid down.

8. The whole principle of the boycott must be condemned.

9. Employees hired during a strike should not be dismissed when the former employees return.

10. The Golden Rule, honestly applied, will settle all labor troubles.

His apparent naivete about the complexity of the question was partially mitigated by his understanding of corporate sin.

We still denounce the individual man, who in his 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 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. [Mitchell, pp. 96-97]

A highly optimistic, progressive view of history, particularly American history, runs through many of the sermons. The end of the Civil War was only forty years earlier, and its heroes and incidents figure largely as illustrative material. In *The More Excellent Sacrifice*, a collection of Memorial Day sermons preached before veterans of the Grand Army of the Republic, John Sayers spoke of "the march of the world towards social perfection" (p. 36), and assured his hearers that "as new avenues of knowledge are being opened the world is growing better" (p. 45). Mills, in yet another Memorial Day sermon, saw the Civil War as responsible for making labor honorable by freeing it from its relationship to slavery. The payoff was that the "South is growing rich and prosperous through the labor of men who twenty-five years ago dreaded labor more than they did the leprosy" [*Only a Profession*, pp. 73-74]. He quoted Bishop Simpson's vision of the future, much akin to Tennyson's in *Locksley Hall*:

> The steamship and the railroad, tunneling mountains and spanning continents, the telegraph with its multitudinous wires encircling the earth in its network, the mastery of all languages, the triumph of science and art, to me portend the coming of an era of universal light and glory. [Mills, p. 59]

This positive view of the future did not stifle judgment on the present, and several of the preachers included catalogs of current perils or evils which they thought to be endangering the life of the nation and hindering the approach of the Kingdom. The issue which took pride of place on practically every list was the liquor traffic. It called forth the greatest
flights of rhetoric and was clearly seen as the primary social disease which, if eradicated, would bring an end to other problems as well.

Intemperance stalks boldly among us -- a crime against society, a sin against humanity, and a reproach to our boasted civilization. It swallows up the good that would lift men up, counteracts the best efforts of the Church, and sows poverty and crime, and drags its victims to the lowest depths. Think of the profanity, the immorality which float like a pestilence into the atmosphere from this sin. We need to battle against this iniquity with all the combined moral influence of Church, State, and society. [Sayers, pp. 158-59]

Among the first actions taken by the 1908 General Conference was a resolution concerning prohibition (Journal, p. 185). The enthusiasm engendered by this movement left no doubt that the denomination was willing to enter the public arena in certain areas and that it was in part vitalized by a vision of what a Christian society should and could be if Christians acted in concert.

But what determined a Christian society was one of the problems faced by these preachers, and it was in part focused on the issue of immigration which threatened to alter the familiar contours of the rural American culture. The debate may be best illustrated by these two very different passages from the 1905 series.

Another danger that threatens our political welfare is the corruption which the false teaching of foreign emigration is bringing among us -- socialism, in its most offensive form [warnings against socialism appear with some frequency in both series]; anarchy, with its unreasoning ignorance; infidelity, in its most repulsive garb, and Old World political heresies with a total want of appreciation of the beneficence of our institutions. ... We must uphold the truth of the Gospel, observe the sanctity of the Sabbath, preserve the purity of our home life, and fearlessly educate against the superstitions of a false faith. [Sayers, p. 159]

A law was enacted by Congress some years ago, and is still in force, that no intelligent lover of his country can think of
without pain and shame. The Anti-Chinese bill exposes us to the deserved contempt of all civilized nations. ... This bill represents not the best sentiment of this country; it is the spirit that persecutes the Jew in Russia. Creed prejudices and persecution we all feel are unjustifiable; race prejudices and persecution are no more so. [Mills, pp. 75-76]

But always included in the catalog of concerns was the growing disparity between rich and poor, the materialism and greed which the preachers saw as almost totally absorbing the nation. Bishop Foss headed his list of contemporary perils with "the corrupting influence of exaggerated and misused wealth" [p. 122]. Potts, the editor (and not having to face the same congregation week after week), sounds almost Marxist in his castigation of riches:

Wealth ... creates hurtful social distinctions, and awakens animosities betwixt rich and poor. It makes the most amiable people almost incapable of measuring the value of anything except by a money standard. It makes the rich a privileged class, and human nature never fails to abuse social privilege. "As a tropical climate breeds snakes, so does wealth breed vice, and misery feeds upon it."

[James Henry Potts, *The Upward Leading* (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1905), p. 16]

Yet even Potts could find no solution for the gulf between rich and poor except for the rich to "relieve the distressed" and to "find out fit cases for practical philanthropy, and tell other Christians about them" (p. 111).

Abner Lucas quoted an unnamed "younger statesman" as having recently said that "the politics of to-day, and still more the politics of the future, must be the politics of the poor" [*The Call of To-Day* (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1905), p. 22]. Lucas appealed to the conscience of his hearers to become involved in solutions for the world's betterment without prescribing what those solutions should precisely be.

The doctrine of human brotherhood was announced twenty
centuries ago. But if it is to be truly the property of the world, it must be proved by deeds as well as words. It demands that those who bear the name of Christ shall stand aloof from the customs and practices which grind the faces of the poor,...

The only power that will enable men to live righteously is the power of the Christ added to the individual. The old problems of humanity under the new conditions of to-day needs the old apostolic power and a man of to-day. (p. 27)

It was Naphtali Luccock who moved in his preaching beyond simple individual commitment to the suggestion that community organization should be part of the answer.

[The world] is becoming more and more collective, and less and less individualistic. ... Organization is the ruling word of the hour. ...

This is a new world we are in, and we need continually new adjustments to do the work of the kingdom in this generation. Christ is saying to us distinctly, "Recognize your own age, study its social facts and needs; think for Me, plan for Me, organize for victory." Christianity, while not abdicating its spiritual function in human society, must concern itself, in large and vital ways, with all that concerns human welfare..." (The Royalty of Jesus (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1905), pp. 138-39)

Luccock addressed both the problem of distributive justice and the sin of covetousness which he saw at the heart of all the dealings between rich and poor. He emphasized spiritual transformation, which he saw as "long-range work," a process of influence on the social order by committed Christians living out the dictates of the Gospel in a sacrificial way.

In summation, much of the preaching in these representative sermons was influenced by the dangers which the preachers saw as they looked at the Church, and it was primarily reactive and apologetic. It was frequently on the defensive against real and imagined attacks by the scientific method in historical and biblical studies. Yet to a large degree it bought into an evolutionary model of human progress and development which it found vindicated by the abolition of slavery and the nation's economic prosperity.
even though the prosperity was seen as a mixed blessing. This model made it possible the vision of Kingdom principles applied on earth.

There were voices which spoke eloquently and insistently about those issues which were to find a place in the Social Creed, and in their own way they helped to make possible the acceptance of a document which was a radical departure for the churches. This was done not by outlining social programs, but by a simple presentation of what the consequences should be for men and women who had come to accept "the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man."

At its finest, the preaching was visionary and affirmative, proclaiming the fact of the Kingdom and inviting those who had prospered in America to enter into the fullness of the Master's joy by dividing the inheritance with others. It was preaching that exalted possibilities over ideologies.

A new order will yet obtain upon this common earth, when love will dethrone selfishness, when all things will be subordinated to highest ends, when individualism will be glorified in common service, when each shall come to his own true, full inheritance, and Christ shall be Lord indeed. [Luccock, p. 160]