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METHODIST ITINERANTS

By Joseph M. M. Gray

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METHODIST ITINERANTS: CREATORS OF CLIMATE

Thomas Wentworth Higginson, in one of the entries in his Journal for 1852, quotes a friend as saying that "Every New Englander looks as if he were just stopping here a minute on his way to parts unknown." It may have been only a passing remark with no more substantial basis than humorous fancy, but it is singularly descriptive of the Methodist preachers whose coming to New England in the path of George Whitefield was mentioned in the preceding chapter. That was not to be until nineteen years after Whitefield's death, when Jesse Lee reached Norwalk, Connecticut, on the twentieth of June, 1789, and one woman having refused him

permission to preach in a house and another forbidden him to stand in her orchard, he addressed himself to some twenty people who gathered around him on the street. "When he was done," a spectator reported later, "and we had an opportunity of expressing our views to each other, it was agreed that such a man had not visited New England since the days of Whitefield. I heard him again, and thought I could follow him to the ends of the earth." [1] At the time Jesse Lee was the only Methodist in all New England. Eighteen years later, when he revisited New England for the last time, there were eleven thousand Methodists, organized in classes, churches, circuits, districts and Conferences. Francis Asbury had again and again traveled its towns, cities, and countrysides, as his Journal and that of Lee record.

The Methodists came to New England as to a land in spiritual need. The old order was changing rapidly, and while they have left no records to indicate any appreciation of the new ways of thought and life, the facts are clear, and it is not difficult to believe that minds as shrewd as theirs recognized them.

"The principles of liberty, the right of men to happiness and representative government, which nourished the zeal of the American patriots in their struggle with England and shaped the ideals of the newly freed country, had already made the theology of Calvinism irrelevant to the social thought-patterns of the period. [2] It was not, however, the irrelevance of Calvinism which challenged the Methodists; it was the sterility in personal religious life which they saw was compatible with its theology. They did not underestimate its intellectual distinction. To the contrary, while opposing its theological errors and seeking to make good its spiritual failure, they acknowledged the disciplines of mind and conduct which it wrought:

"The cross, with its subduing and transforming influences, was removed from its position in the system of redemption; and instead of concentrating the heart with its affections, the soul with its hopes, upon Christ -- the only Saviour of sinners -- the pulpit sought to employ the mind with a dull and endless speculation upon eternal prescience, and the omnipotence of divine decrees. The effect of such a system of religious training might have been easily foreseen. The habit of considering doctrines so abstruse and intricate cannot fail to enlarge and strengthen the intellect. And, when superadded to even the common-school system of education, it will contribute very materially to the social rectitude and moral integrity of a people. Such was the character of the New England states, at the period of their history now passing under review. The people were of grave and orderly deportment, of an inquisitive turn of mind, fond of controversy -- especially upon religious subjects -- strict observers of the Sabbath, and devoted to their ecclesiastical government, their modes of faith, and forms of worship." [3]

New England was peculiarly proud of and loyal to its colleges. But the colleges, whatever services they rendered the intelligence of the time, did nothing for its moral character. The Rev. Dr. Ezra Stiles, president of Yale for seventeen years during which the religious life of the college steadily deteriorated, indicated the helplessness of the "liberalism" which he represented when, in a sermon some five years after his installation, he said, "Here deism will have its full chance; nor need libertines more to complain of being overcome by any weapons but the gentle, the powerful ones of argument and truth." Dr. William Warren Sweet, in his Drew Lectures, puts beside that utterance of the president of Yale, the observation of Lyman Beecher, who became a student there before Doctor Stiles left:

"College was in a most ungodly state. The college church was almost extinct. Most of the students were skeptical, and rowdies were plenty. Wines and liquors were kept in many rooms; intemperance, profanity, gambling, and licentiousness were common."

It is only fair to New England to add that like conditions prevailed in colleges elsewhere. Secular affairs in the New England states, as contemporary historians report, flourished but spiritual conditions had grown seriously worse. The influence of Tom Paine was registered in increasing infidelity. "Great looseness of manners and morals had replaced the ancient Puritanic strictness." "The profanation of the Sabbath," said Timothy Dwight in 1801, "before unusual, profaneness of language, drunkenness, gambling, and lewdness, were exceedingly increased."

What, however, roused the crusading passion of the Methodists, perhaps more strongly than anything else, was the absence from the lives of the orthodox Christians of that vital and creative personal experience which, as Wesleyans, they identified with conversion; belief in which was not a factor in New England faith. One of the foremost critics of Whitefield's preaching had declared that "conversion does not appear alike necessary for ministers in their private capacity." [4] Regeneration was considered "not ascertainable by investigation, and not necessary to church membership or the ministerial office!" [5] The experience with which Methodism is most distinctly identified, that of the knowledge of the forgiveness of sin, New England denounced as heretical presumption. No less a person than Jonathan Edwards defended himself from the suspicion that his "assurance of faith," implied it.

Holding convictions at such variance from the views of New England orthodoxy, the Methodist preachers found the theological climate particularly cold, but no colder than the social weather which they encountered. Jesse Lee's Journal, like the journals of his colleagues everywhere, is a vivid picture of perseverance which only an overwhelming commitment of duty could sustain. He preached on a certain very cold and wintry Christmas Eve, and then recorded in his Journal: "Tonight, thanks be to God, I was invited by a widow woman to put up at her house. This is the first invitation I have had since I first came to the place, which is between six and seven months." Repulsed again and again, meeting discourtesy on every hand, insult often and abuse not infrequently, the Methodist preachers nevertheless persisted. While they were primarily concerned for the practical life and experience of the people, they recognized in the doctrines of Calvinism the deep-lying causes of New England's dearth of vigorous religious experience. Their sermons consequently were not only invitations to repentance and expositions of their distinctive doctrine of the witness of the Spirit; they were a practical apologetic for Arminianism, over its whole range of Free Will, Growth in Grace, Christian Perfection, the possibility of a Christian's falling from grace-the entire body of doctrines against which Calvinism had fought from the beginning, and to which New England was peculiarly hostile.

The story of Methodism in New England is a story, therefore, not only of intellectual controversy but, as elsewhere, of physical hardships, personal sacrifice and suffering, social humiliation, and public abuse, endured by intrepid men whose "enthusiasm" has been recognized with contempt on the part of opponents and honor by fellow evangelicals, but whose intellectual gifts and discriminating theological minds have seldom been fully appreciated. The Methodists were to be recognized by qualities of conduct and life, but it was life that took its direction from

an experience which had been evoked by the confident acceptance of clearly articulated doctrines of faith. Their theology interpreted their experience.

But Methodism, in its creative stage in New England, cannot be set before us in the sketch of any one preacher. For its preachers were not settled in a community so as to gather around themselves, and so become the representatives of, the current movements of life and thought. They were itinerants constantly on the road. They preached almost daily and in a different place each time. Slowly, of course, there came the establishment of fixed pastorates, but even then, the preacher remained on the same circuit, and later the "station," for only a year or two at the most. Even this to us normal and desirable evolution was resented by the pioneers. As early as 1813, twenty-four years after Jesse Lee first came, Francis Asbury, during one of his visits throughout New England, wrote in his Journal: "I have difficulties to encounter, but I must be silent. My mind is in God. In New England we sing, we build houses, we eat, and stand at prayer: Here preachers locate, and people support them, and have traveling preachers also. Were I to labor forty-two years more, I suppose I should not succeed in getting things right. Preachers have been sent away from Newport by an apostate; so we go. O rare steeple-houses, bells (organs by and by?) -- these things are against me, and contrary to the simplicity of Christ."

Bishop Asbury might disapprove of the way in which Methodism developed in New England, but at heart there was no difference between him and his colleagues in their convictions on the essentials of faith and life.

The texts from which Jesse Lee preached on his first invasion of New England, as reported in his biography by Leroy M. Lee, are revealing:

"John 3:7 -- Ye must be born again.

"Romans 6:23 -- For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

"Amos 5:6 -- Seek ye the Lord, and ye shall live.

"Isaiah 55:6 -- Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye...

"John 10:27 -- My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.

"Ephesians 5:1 -- Be ye followers of God as dear children.

"Matthew 22:14 -- For many are called, but few are chosen.

His biographer enlarged on this sermon, the text of which lent itself so thoroughly to Calvinism's doctrine of election.

On this occasion he had an unusually large number of hearers, and among them two ministers -- a Baptist and a Congregationalist, the former sitting at his side, the other just before him. Under these circumstances he stated and defended these propositions as the doctrine of the

text: I. That all men are called to forsake their sins. II. That with this call, the gracious power of obedience is given to the sinner. And III. That men are called before they are chosen. This was a point-blank shot at Calvinism and took effect in the very center of its creed. [6]

"Job 22:21 -- Acquaint now thyself with Him, and be at peace, etc.

"Mark 8:36 -- For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?

"John 5:40 -- And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life.

Asbury's Journal discloses the same sort of scriptural basis for his preaching, as do the sermons of the other Methodist itinerants.

The Methodist preachers, quite apart from their theology and the hardships they encountered in proclaiming it, deserve in themselves far more than a passing reference. If they could not measure up to Macaulay's famous tribute to the English Puritans whose representative was John Milton, as "the most remarkable body of men, perhaps, which the world has ever produced," they were nevertheless a remarkable body of men. There were some very able and intellectually trained men among them. Jesse Lee, after Whitefield, the leader of the Methodist invasion of New England, wrote the first history of the Methodist Church, had the reputation of being the ablest preacher in the connection, and for six years was chaplain of the United States House of Representatives, resigning the office the year before his death. Much of their essential greatness, the accuracy of their insights, the shrewd, disciplined genius of their minds, has been overlooked because their influence went into personal lives rather than into literature. They wrote few books and did not publish their sermons. There were diversities of gifts among them. They were men with individuality, and idiosyncrasies were part of their character. They had the substance of effective education and were at home in the theological controversies of the times, but no school, committed to a fixed theological method and literary standard, had cast their native abilities into a conventional form. Their varied and personal talents had freedom of range. Their judgments, their sympathies, and their insights were hampered by no standardized conventionality of appeal. As a result, they were effective propagandists, and they could hardly have been effective had they been less than versatile, for they had to capture not only trained minds in their audiences but the untrained and illiterate; and personal manner went as far in convincing utterance as theological presentation and rhetorical eloquence. They were of that gifted type of men who, whether Lollard preachers in the fourteenth century or pack-men and peddlers in every century since, have immediate access into popular favor by reason of their sheerly human qualities of sympathy, understanding, and humor.

They were, all alike, the inheritors of a definite tradition. Much has been said, and little more needs be said, of the spiritual decay into which English society had fallen in the eighteenth century to which Wesley came, both nonconformist and that which remained loyal to the Established Church. The most eloquent and uncompromising testimony to that decay has been given by clergymen of the Church itself -- Bishop Burnet, Archbishop Secker, Robert Southey the poet, and notable others. Even deeper than that as a factor in the reception which the eighteenth century gave to the Methodists was the fact that Established theology and the beliefs

of Calvinism alike had no principle of personal assurance. There was the New Testament, there were the Thirty-nine Articles, the Prayer Book, the Westminster Confession, the Sacraments; one could subscribe to them and participate in their use. But salvation was a mystery, and who could say who would be saved? Who could declare the elect? One could only hope that good would be the final goal of ill.

In, to that generation burst the ranting Methodists of England with their revolutionary evangel that men and women could know that they were saved. To the Establishment they declared that one need not grope and cling to a great tradition and the magic of a rite; but that in his heart was waiting to be summoned a witness more sure and unmistakable than absolution. To the Calvinist they thundered that God's inscrutable decrees were not concealed in the dark of a distant Judgment Day, but were already to be recognized in the Covenant written within the heart. And the tumult of such a gospel, proclaimed defiantly and triumphantly by masons and tanners and colliers and the like unlearned and ill-bred men, led by a few mad clergy who had forgotten the dignity of the altar, battered at the pride and culture of Churchmen and conforming laity, and their first rejoinder was denial and then suppression by abuse.

American Methodists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had inherited all that is involved in the circumstances that historic Methodism began in such a revolt from conformity. From the beginning it conformed to its tradition of revolt. It swept through its world in a break from established precedent, and its own precedents of difference have created for it the custom of irregularity. From its beginning Methodism has been a constitution of paradox. It has always been charged with being dogmatic; but while it has several doctrines its only dogma is freedom of belief. Criticized as ignorant, it was born in a university, and since 1775 has inspired, originated, and maintained more institutions of higher learning than any other body. Condemned as narrow, it admits without hesitation members from all other churches that exalt Christ, and dismisses its members to all others without embarrassment. It administers baptism in all forms, joins with the historic episcopate in the laying on of hands, allies itself with Independency through its Quarterly Conferences and its responsibility of laymen for all licenses to preach; keeps step with Calvinism by its conviction of the providence of God; can sympathize with Rome in its emphasis upon the supernatural character of Redemption, and matches the Quakers' Inner Light with its own Witness of the Spirit. It welcomes the most revolutionary disclosures of science and criticism, for its God is the God of the living, and it remembers the years at the right hand of the Most High, in which truth will prevail. Social propaganda does not frighten it, for in the very beginning it joined individual conversion and social reform. Politicians dislike it and it returns the compliment, but they do now awe it; for its sons have ornamented Parliaments and sat in Presidential chairs; its daughters have married princes, its ambassadors have stood before kings. Confident of another world, it is at home in this. The march of armies and the menace of governments do not alarm it, for its mission is to all nations and it knows them to be no more than men. The confusions of mind which darken judgment and deceive hope do not shake its certainties, for its only permanence is readiness to change.

The mistreatment which the Methodist preachers received in New England does not make pleasant reading, but in fairness to New Englanders it has to be remembered that this Wesleyan tradition, the very strength of the Methodists' devotion, the personal fervor of their religious experience, made it almost inevitable that they should give considerable irritation to

disagreeing minds. Human nature is so constituted that any radical piety is likely to be a provocation, and any piety claiming some special treasure is sheer vexation to conventional life. So the prophets are generally stoned and the apostles of any new faith -- social or religious -- are resented as disturbers of the peace. There are also enough eccentricities of belief engaging the lunatic fringe to make the career of a true prophet the more dangerous.

It is difficult to be radically different without being peculiar; and it is very easy for especially earnest people to believe that they are doing only their duty when they are really minding other people's business. So that the picture of many an old-time Methodist on fire for God looks, at times, uncommonly like a portrait of Meddlesome Mattie. They had strict ideas about their clothing, they were against amusements, they raised very rigid standards for their own domestic and personal life and worship -- all of which was well and good; though it was hard on their children. But they could hardly avoid attempting to dispose of other people's affairs in the same way. The annals of early Methodists are not without episodes in which it is difficult to distinguish the line between religious fervor and social frightfulness. They were instant in season and out of season, reproving, rebuking, exhorting, as Saint Paul admonished, but not always with the long-suffering which he counseled at the same time.

Through the stiffer personal qualities which are implied in such a character as this, the Methodist preachers had and instinctively employed the gift of humor which, not always refined, was neither mean nor bitter and had no respect of persons. Two familiar examples are perhaps worth recalling. The secretary of a Conference was calling the roll, one day, while Bishop McKendree presided. "William Hibbard," he called; and there was no response.

"Brother Hibbard," said Bishop McKendree, "why don't you answer to your name?"

"I will," said Brother Hibbard, "when he calls my name."

"Is not your name William?"

"No, Sir."

"What is it?"

"Billy," was the answer.

"Billy!" said the Bishop, with great emphasis. "That is a little boy's name."

"I know it," said this old-time itinerant, "I was a very little boy when my father gave it to me."

Years later, in the westward march of the frontier, a pioneer preacher named Nolley followed some fresh wagon tracks in a distant and lonely part of Missouri, and came upon a settler just unloading his goods and family on a raw homestead, remote from any neighbor. He introduced himself, and the settler made a reply that has become historic.

"Another Methodist preacher!" he said. "I left Virginia for Georgia to get clear of them. There they got my wife and daughter, and I came here, and here is one before I get my wagon unloaded."

"My friend," said the preacher, "if you go to heaven you'll find Methodist preachers there; if you go to hell, I'm afraid you'll find some there; and you see how it is on earth, so you had better make your terms with us and be at peace."

It was this instinctive spontaneous, irrepressible humor of thought and expression, in New England as elsewhere, and down every generation, which has saved the Methodist itinerant amid the monotony and hardships of his life.

Whether truly educated, as was Jesse Lee, or trained only by common sense and piety, the Methodist preachers without much distinction among them were for the most part like the apostles before the Sanhedrin, unlearned and ignorant men when judged by the standards of New England's theological pundits. But their effectiveness was not confined to the unschooled and thoughtless. The annals of New England Methodism, like its history elsewhere, are bright with brilliant minds which it has won to its conviction of Christian faith and life. For whatever may have been the intellectual qualities of its heralds or their lack of the discipline of the schools; whatever may have been the refinements or crudities of its preachers, they have had a common evangel. Their message was clothed in as many forms there were messengers, but it was standardized by a common religious experience into a unified proclamation of the free grace of a forgiving God. The divine sovereignty, the providence of God, the pre-eminence of Christ, the universal atonement, and then their own distinctive doctrine, the Witness of the Spirit -- these were their common themes; and for them and their evangel, Whitefield's inconsistency had broken a trail. They held a good deal of essential theology in common with Calvinism, but they inferred from it a contradictory sequence. They left Whitefield's inconsistency behind them but carried forward the inclusiveness of his gospel, and through all New England, as elsewhere, they were voices of freedom, hope, and the benignant grace of God, against Calvinistic orthodoxy's inexorable decrees, its desperate uncertainty, and its exalted wrath of God. For the genius of Methodism, as it penetrated New England, precisely that which characterized it elsewhere, was its reference of everything to Christ.

"To the new Calvinism, the life of Christ, apart from the agony of the cross, was theologically irrelevant. Christian living became identified with obedience to the moral law of God as revealed to Moses, and the fear of God's vindictive justice was made its foundation. All things revolved around the 'moral law.' God became the great Enforcer of the moral law, the blood of Christ became the evidence that God will punish transgression. Holy love faded into conformity to the moral law, and such conformity was now the measure and substance of 'true virtue.'" [7]

In sheer contradiction, into every experience, in the face of every forbidding doctrine, the Methodists thrust the figure of Christ, the Son, the Incarnation, the Divine, and said, "Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world." Before His figure, as they presented Him, whether with refinements of language which the intellectual snobbery of New England did not expect, or in all the crudeness of an unlettered lay ministry, speculations dissolved, meticulous

dogmas seemed unreal, predestination was but a word. The very spirit of the pioneering Methodist preacher in New England, as in the British Isles and elsewhere in America, is in Charles Wesley's hymn:

"Happy if with my latest breath
I may but gasp His name;
Preach Him in life and cry in death,
'Behold, behold, the Lamb!'"

And while 11,000 members in the new, crude, poor Methodist churches are not a great numerical result of twenty-four years' work, the changed beliefs and attitudes and feelings in many thousands both of the unchurched and in the orthodox churches, as a consequence of the climate of faith which those eleven thousand generated and sustained, must not be underestimated. It was a climate in which Calvinism could keep alive but did not flourish; and in which liberalism, though no less repugnant to Methodism than to Calvinism itself, found a bracing atmosphere.

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ENDNOTES

1 Memoir of Rev. T. Ware, quoted in Leroy M. Lee: *Life and Times of Jesse Lee*, 221f.; also Stevens: *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 2, p. 404f.

2 Haroutunian: *Piety Versus Moralism*, p. 177. Henry Holt and Company, New York.

3 Lee: *Life and Times of the Rev. Jesse Lee*, p. 220.

4 Stevens: *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, Vol. II, p. 408.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 407.

6 Lee: *Life and Times of the Rev. Jesse Lee*, pp. 228, 229.

7 Haroutunian: *Piety Versus Moralism*, p. 176. Henry Holt and Company, New York. Reprinted by permission.

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