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THE LAY PIONEERS OF AMERICAN METHODISM

by

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American Methodism began in England before 1766, and it is therefore fitting that we should study our lay pioneers of 1766-1769 against the background of earlier Methodist laymen.

During the winter of 1711-12, over 250 years ago, the father of the Wesleys was in London fulfilling his duties as a member of the Convocation of the Church of England, leaving a somewhat ineffective curate in charge of the parish of Epworth. Susanna Wesley not only conducted prayers and read sermons for her own large family, but threw open her home for as many of the parishioners as wished to crowd into her kitchen. On occasion as many as 200 assembled on Sunday evenings, most of them standing all the time. Others could not get in and decided to come earlier the next time. The jealous curate complained to the Rev. Samuel Wesley that his wife was turning the parsonage into a dissenting meeting house. She herself, indeed, spoke of the gathering as "our society". Samuel Wesley wrote asking her to desist. She refused to do so unless he expressly commanded it - as a good seventeenth century bride she had promised to obey her husband, and was indeed prepared to do so. Having upon his conscience the spiritual impoverishment of his flock, he wisely hesitated to press his authority too far. The meetings continued until his return.¹

In later years a youthful member of that kitchen congregation was to speak of Susanna Wesley as "in her measure, a preacher of righteousness." This was no other than her son John, a very serious eight-year old when his mother became the first Methodist lay preacher. Thirty years later he must have recalled this unorthodox venture when his widowed mother checked his hasty anger that one of his own lay helpers had taken it upon himself to preach - a religious exercise which Wesley considered only permissible for ordained ministers like himself. "Take care what you do with respect to that young man," Susanna Wesley urged, "for he is as surely called of God to preach as you are." After Wesley had heard Thomas Maxfield preach his strong prejudices were overcome. He was compelled, however reluctantly, to agree with his mother, saying with the aged Eli at the call of young Samuel, "It is the Lord: let him do what seemeth him good."²

¹ John Wesley's Journal, London, 1938, III:32-4. In his collected works Wesley adds asterisks to this passage to emphasize its special importance.

² Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society, London, XXVII, 8.

In fact John Wesley had already followed his mother's example some years earlier. As a missionary in Georgia he had founded societies, one meeting in the parsonage for fellowship additional to the regular church worship. Later he spoke of the first such meeting, held in Savannah exactly 230 years ago, in April 1736, as "the second rise of Methodism." Already in Georgia, also, he had accepted the help of a layman as an assistant pastor. Charles Delamotte was a sugar merchant's son, aged 21, who volunteered to accompany the Oxford Methodists on their mission to the infant colony in 1735. He became the first schoolmaster in Savannah, and gave more time and thought to instilling the principles of religion into the children there than to building up any trade or business for himself. Nor did he seek any payment for his services.

So dependable was Charles Delamotte that on one occasion Wesley left the complete care of the parish in his hands for nearly three weeks, and on his return noted, "I found my little flock in a better state than I could have expected, God having been pleased greatly to bless the endeavors of my fellow laborer while I was absent from them." Delamotte played the part of a trusted friend in urging caution on Wesley both in his infatuation with Sophy Hopkey and in his subsequent disciplining of her, though to no avail. One by one the Oxford Methodists left Georgia, Charles Wesley after six months, Benjamin Ingham after a year, and John Wesley after nearly two. Delamotte stayed on, the shepherd of the Methodist society, holding his head up in the midst of continued persecution. He maintained fellowship meetings for the members in his own home, and urged his friends in Oxford to send more helpers. Thomas Causton, the chief magistrate, tried to get rid of him as he had done of Wesley, by summoning a grand jury, but his charges against Delamotte were dismissed as caused by "nothing but spite and malice against Mr. Wesley."³

For six months Delamotte held together the first Methodist society in America. In June, 1738, he too returned to England, to manage a branch of his father's sugarboiling business in the northern seaport of Hull, where Wesley occasionally met him. He did not leave, however, before the arrival of the pleaded-for reinforcements in the person of George Whitefield. Indeed Delamotte had so spent his funds as well as his thought and energy that he did not have the passage money home until Whitefield pressed it upon him. Whitefield records the leave taking at the Savannah waterfront: "Friday, June 2, (1738). This evening parted with kind Captain Whiting and my dear friend Delamotte, who embarked for England about seven at night. The poor people lamented the loss of him, and went to the waterside to take a last farewell. And good reason had they to do so, for he has been indefatigable in feeding Christ's lambs with the sincere milk of the Word, and many of them (blessed be God) have grown thereby. Surely I must labor most heartily, since I come after such worthy predecessors. The good Mr. John Wesley has done in America, under God, is inexpressible...."⁴

³ Wesley's Journal, I: 315, 324-5, 356, 361; VIII, 308-10. Cf. John Naylor, Charles Delamotte, London, 1938, and Earl of Egmont, Diary, II, 314, etc.

⁴ Whitefield's Journal, London, Banner of Truth Trust, 1960, p. 157.

And so the first lay pioneer of American Methodism, dedicated and intelligent, eager yet level-headed, departed from these shores, leaving behind him a spiritual challenge not only to a handful of humble settlers in Georgia, but to one of America's greatest roving evangelists, George Whitefield, who kept the Methodist spark alive for a generation until more laymen fanned it into flame.

Whitefield was more dramatic as a preacher than his tutor John Wesley, much more emotional, but much less methodical. Those who were converted under his ministry were numbered by the thousand; the societies which he organized to build them up in the faith could be counted on the fingers of two hands. Nor was this only because he wanted to feed the existing churches rather than to found a new one. He realized the value of spiritual fellowship and encouraged others to follow the example of the Wesleys in forming religious societies, but his own forte was oratory rather than organization. Nevertheless Wesley claimed that "by his ministry a line of communication was formed, quite from Georgia to New England."⁵ For the most part this influence cannot be charted. The clearest link between Whitefield and the lay pioneers of American Methodism in the 1760's is to be found in Philadelphia.

One of the first fruits of Whitefield's evangelism in Philadelphia was Edward Evans, a cordwainer specializing in high quality shoes for ladies. It seems highly probable that he was a member of the group described in Whitefield's Journal for Friday, May 9, 1740: "Preached in the evening, and afterwards began a Society of young men, many of whom I trust will prove good soldiers of Jesus Christ. Amen." When Joseph Pilmoor arrived from England in 1769 he testified that Evans had "stood fast in the faith near thirty years," and that he was "a man of good understanding and sound experience in the things of God." For some years he had been associated with the Moravians and had also served as a greatly beloved free-lance evangelist. Now his true vocation was discovered, as one of the leaders and founding members of St. George's Methodist Society. He died greatly respected in 1771.⁶ Another of Whitefield's converts, and probably a member of that same 1740 Philadelphia men's society organized by him, was James Emerson, an Irishman who for a living sold "orange-lemon shrub." The nucleus of the Methodist society which took over the St. George's Church was a fellowship group led by Emerson, which had been meeting for some time (how long no one really knows) in a sail loft on Dock Creek belonging to Samuel Croft. The assertion that he had held together the "Methides" since 1740 may well be correct.⁷ When Pilmoor and Boardman arrived in 1769 they met still another Irishman, a Methodist whom Boardman had known in Ireland.⁸

⁵ Works, Zondervan edition, VII: 411.

⁶ J. P. Lockwood, The Western Pioneers, London, 1881, pp. 83, 134; F. H. Tees, The Beginnings of Methodism, Nashville, 1940, pp. 89-90; Albert W. Cliffe, The Glory of Our Methodist Heritage, 1957, p. 17.

⁷ Cliffe, op.cit., p. 17.

⁸ Lockwood, op.cit., p. 76.

Methodism had come to Ireland from England in 1747, and in that predominantly Roman Catholic country - an impoverished country, too - the Wesleys faced even greater difficulties than they did in England. The rewards were as great as to many they seemed unlikely. John Wesley thought highly of Irish Methodism, and continued to make biennial preaching tours in the island almost to the end of his long life. History has proved him right. The sturdy independence of the Irishman, his emotional fervor, his robust physique and dogged endurance, made him a tough prospect for the Methodist preachers' evangelism, but a valiant champion once won over. Among the waves of Irish immigrants seeking a new start in America during Wesley's day were many Methodists, and their contribution to the planting of Methodism far outweighed their numbers. As we have already seen, one of the lay pioneers in Philadelphia was an Irishman, James Emerson. So was the key pioneer in the south, Robert Strawbridge. So were the pioneers of Methodism in New York, the Emburys and the Hecks. An Irishman also was Robert Williams, who may be thought of as the father of the Methodist Publishing House as well as the apostle of Methodism in Virginia and North Carolina. Indeed the only major lay pioneer of early American Methodism who had no connection with Ireland was Captain Thomas Webb.

The most influential of these men, and almost certainly the first, was Robert Strawbridge. Born on a farm in Drummersnave, County Leitrim, about 1732, he moved to Sligo, where he joined the Methodists and began to preach. He seems to have been a well built man of medium height, with dark silky hair and a dark complexion. Certainly he was of an independent spirit, and just as certainly he had kissed the Blarney stone. Much about him, however, is still a matter of conjecture, or of tradition unsupported by contemporary evidence. Even that indefatigable researcher, the Rev. Edwin Schell, Executive Secretary of the Baltimore Conference Historical Society, has conducted exhaustive researches largely in vain. It is just possible that the Rev. Melvin Steadman's discovery of a Robert Strawbridge accused of pig-stealing in Frederick County, Maryland, in 1753, relates to our man - though this conjecture poses more problems than it solves, even if at the time he were still unregenerate or maliciously accused.

It seems fairly certain that Robert Strawbridge and his bride emigrated from Ireland in 1760, arriving at Annapolis, Maryland, and settling at Sam's Creek, Frederick County. Almost immediately he began preaching services both in his own home and in neighboring areas. A Methodist society was quickly formed, which Francis Asbury, on a visit to Sam's Creek in 1801, referred to as "the first society in Maryland - and America." By about 1764 or 1765 he had built a log meeting house, 24 feet square, for his followers, almost certainly the first American erection for purely Methodist purposes.

Strawbridge's enthusiasm led to the building of several Methodist chapels in Maryland, and his many preaching journeys took him as far afield as Delaware, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. Indeed, it is claimed that he was probably responsible for the founding of the Methodist society at Leesburg, Virginia, where the old stone meeting house was built in 1766.⁹ He was the spiritual father of a number of preachers, including the first American local

⁹ W. W. Sweet, Virginia Methodism, 1955, pp. 46-8.

preacher, Richard Owings, and the first itinerant preacher, William Watters, as well as Philip Gatch and Freeborn Garrettson. His independence of ecclesiastical authority, however, eventually landed him in serious trouble. As early as 1762-1763, he had taken upon himself to baptize the infant brother of one of his converts, Henry Maynard; as a layman he himself administered the Lord's Supper and urged that (Wesley or no Wesley) all the itinerant preachers at least should be authorized so to do. In his later years he acted quite independently of the itinerant preachers also, even though for a brief time he had served in their ranks. It is not surprising that on hearing of Strawbridge's death in 1781, Francis Asbury wrote: "Upon the whole, I am inclined to think the Lord took him away in judgment, because he was in the way to do hurt to his cause...." We must not too readily side with Asbury's tart judgment, however, for it was this same stubborn independence which had made Strawbridge the outstanding lay pioneer of early American Methodism.¹⁰

We are all the more appreciative of Strawbridge when we turn from him to Philip Embury, another Methodist preacher from Ireland. It seems clear that he emigrated to America at about the same time, yet for one reason or another failed to do the work of an evangelist for several years. We can sympathize with him, of course, and perhaps claim that Embury's mixed background forms at least part of the reason. His Irish enthusiasm was tempered with slower-moving German piety. His was one of fifty families which in 1709 fled from the armies of Louis XIV of France invading southern Germany, and settled in County Limerick, Ireland, where they came under Wesley's reforming and evangelizing influence.

Philip Embury himself was born in Ireland in 1728, was educated in both English and German, and trained as a carpenter. In November, 1752, he took a bride from the same German-Irish background, Margaret Switzer. A month later, on Christmas Day, he was converted, and soon became both a class leader and a local preacher for the Methodists; he was also placed on Wesley's reserve list as a possible itinerant preacher. A few years later, however, his and several related families, including the Hecks, decided to better their lot and escape from their grasping landlords by a still further emigration to the land of the free. Finding no Methodist society in New York, they gravitated to their ancestral Lutheran Church. In Trinity Lutheran Church their children were baptized, and here they took communion. Here also Embury secured a livelihood as a teacher, forsaking his original trade. Late in 1765 more of their relations and friends came from Ireland to join them, including Barbara Heck's brother, Paul Ruckle.

At least two versions survive of how Paul Ruckle unintentionally brought about the formation of the first Methodist society in New York. Neither is documented with absolute certainty. That which I like best tells how Barbara Heck returned home one day to find her brother playing cards with some companions in her own kitchen. Her Methodist conscience aroused, she swept the pack of cards off the table into her apron, and threw them into the fire - warning the players that they, too, were well on their way to the fires of hell. Seeking out her cousin Philip Embury, she challenged him to preach in his own home to his fellow immigrants, lest they all go to hell

¹⁰ Asbury, Journal, London, 1958, I: 60, 411; cf. 88, 120. For Strawbridge in general see Ruthella Mory Bibbins, How Methodism Came, 1945.

together. Soon the congregation gathered by Barbara Heck outgrew Embury's home, and they hired a large rigging loft in Horse and Cart Street. They also enrolled some of the listeners into a weekly fellowship class. Another true Methodist society was in being.

Helpers joined them, including three members of the British regimental band stationed in the nearby barracks. The turning point came with the visit of a retired army officer, Captain Thomas Webb, the fire and novelty of whose preaching necessitated the erection of a permanent preaching house. When that time came, Philip Embury was able to turn his original trade as carpenter to good effect, personally building the pulpit, from which he preached the dedicatory sermon on October 30, 1768. Within two or three years the Emburys and the Hecks, along with most of the German-Irish community, had moved to a parcel of land granted them in Ashgrove, New York, where another Methodist society was founded, and where Embury died in 1773. Meantime Wesley's itinerant preachers had arrived from England to tighten up the organization of New York Methodism and to settle the first Wesley Chapel in New York on a deed approved by Wesley. Tribute is nevertheless due to Philip Embury, and no less to his prompter-in-chief Barbara Heck, for their contributions as the pioneers.¹¹

As we have seen, of key importance in building up the New York cause - as well as many others - was Captain Thomas Webb. Dr. Marvin Harvey has rightly called him "our number one layman."¹² Philip Embury and Barbara Heck were pioneers in the day of small things in New York, as Evans and Emerson were in Philadelphia. Strawbridge did more, both founding societies in the locality of his own home and preaching over a very wide area. Captain Thomas Webb accomplished both this and much more, for he was a man of more substance and more leisure, as well as of at least equal eloquence. He was also a little older than both Embury and Strawbridge, in his early forties, having been born in England on May 31, 1725. He came to America in 1758 as a lieutenant in the 48th Regiment of Foot, among the reinforcements designed to stem the advance of the French in the north. He was present at the siege of Louisburg, and a year later lost his right eye (and nearly his life) during the battle of Montmorency - a shattering English defeat preceding Wolfe's great victory at Quebec. Webb had been hoping for military promotion, and had published in Philadelphia a military treatise later used by George Washington against the English. (Washington's copy rests in the Boston Athenaeum). Eventually in 1764, Webb was offered a captaincy, but the loss of his American wife apparently moved him to return to England to sell his commission, leaving his infant son in the charge of his wife's family. Breaking through the dark clouds of his depression came the radiant glow of the gospel, and on Passion Sunday, 1765, he was converted. Soon he linked up with the Methodists, and began telling with rough eloquence the story of his conversion. In 1766 Webb returned to America, with money in his pocket and gospel enthusiasm in his heart. He was now financially secure, having both his officer's pension and a steady income with few responsibilities as barrackmaster of the British forces at Albany; the lightness of his duties may be gathered from the fact that he retained this position when he left Albany to live near his in-laws on Long Island. Both at Albany and on Long Island he not only conducted family prayers in his home, but continued to tell all who would listen

¹¹ Methodist History, January, 1965, pp. 11, 16-25.

¹² Together, October, 1963.

about his own conversion, adding a word of exhortation which often led to further conversions or rededications. Within a few months of his coming to Long Island early in 1767, twenty-four local people had been converted and were joined together in a Methodist society.

Hearing of the infant society in New York in February, 1767, Webb paid them a visit. Another English layman, Thomas Taylor, thus reported the results to John Wesley: "The novelty of a man preaching in a scarlet coat soon brought greater numbers to hear than the room could contain...and obliged the little society to look out for a larger house to preach in." Webb both headed the subscription list and began begging from friends everywhere. Without him it is doubtful whether the bold project could have been successful, though he was ably seconded by a former comrade-in-arms, William Lupton.

Webb could be restricted neither to Long Island nor to New York. It was his bustling enthusiasm which organized and invigorated the tiny Methodist group in Philadelphia, so that when Wesley's itinerants arrived in 1769 they found a society a hundred strong and ripe for building a chapel. Later that year Webb's key importance was acknowledged by an invitation to preach the opening sermon in the newly acquired chapel in Philadelphia. His eagerness to help them also to liquidate their debt even extended to venturing in their behalf in a state lottery. We find Webb also organizing Methodist societies in other Pennsylvania cities such as Chester and Bristol, as well as in New Jersey, in Trenton, Burlington, and Pemberton. Similarly it was Webb who formed the first society in Wilmington and in New Castle, Delaware. He also collaborated with Strawbridge in Maryland.

All this was before Wesley's itinerants had visited these places. Webb realized his own limitations, however, and not only added his plea for official guidance from Wesley's itinerant preachers, but himself met the first two to volunteer (Joseph Pilmoor and Richard Boardman) when they arrived in Philadelphia. In 1772 he returned to England to plead the American Methodist cause in person, and to plead it both eloquently and successfully. He continued to give support and shelter to the Methodist itinerants during the Revolutionary War, until arrested as a loyalist spy, interned in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and eventually exchanged for an American prisoner of war and returned to England, where he put his generosity and zeal to work for British Methodism until his death in 1796.¹³

The last of the major forerunners of Wesley's regular itinerant preachers was another Irishman, Robert Williams. He was not in quite the same category as the other laymen, however, for Wesley had listed him among the stationed preachers in the Minutes of Conference for 1767 and 1768 as serving at Castlebar in Ireland, though he was listed by his initials only, a sign that he was not recognized as a fully qualified itinerant preacher. Nor was Wesley prepared to sponsor him for the American cause, perhaps partly because of his limited gifts, but mainly because of his tactless criticism of the Anglican clergy. Williams managed, however, to secure Wesley's permission that he should go at his own expense, provided that he remained subject to the senior itinerants when they arrived. He also managed to persuade another Irish layman, Thomas Ashton, not only to pay his passage but to emigrate with

¹³ See Religion in Life, XXXIV, 406-421 (Summer, 1965).

him. Selling his horse to pay his debts, Williams arrived at the ship carrying his saddlebags, a bottle of milk, a loaf of bread, and an empty purse.¹⁴ They arrived in America some weeks before Pilmoor and Boardman, and immediately began preaching. Checking the results later, Pilmoor said: "His gifts are but small, yet he may be useful to the country people, who are in general like sheep without shepherds."¹⁵

Robert Williams preached with such good effect that revivals followed in many areas of Virginia and North Carolina, and he certainly managed to keep on good terms with at least one Anglican clergyman, Devereux Jarratt, who described him as "a plain, artless, indefatigable preacher of the gospel." Jesse Lee, apostle of New England Methodism, was one of the fruits of his evangelism. Williams remained too independent of control for Francis Asbury, however, and his pioneering publishing activities especially came under fire. Williams believed in the value of the printed word as a weapon of evangelism, and reprinted several of Wesley's publications, though he seems never to have put his own name as publisher on the title page. In a funeral sermon on his death in 1775 even Asbury was compelled to pay this high tribute: "Perhaps no one in America has been an instrument of awakening so many souls as God has awakened by him."¹⁶

What a stirring pageant rolls before our eyes as we recall these lay pioneers of American Methodism! Yet we have only touched all too briefly upon a fraction of those whose names we know, let alone the many whose names are unknown to historians though not to their Maker. Some have long had the spotlight of attention played upon them; more deserve it. There were unknown preachers like the Methodist ship's carpenter who preached in Philadelphia while his ship was docked there.¹⁷ Many like John Evans of Frederick County, Maryland, both opened their homes for Methodist meetings and looked after Robert Strawbridge's farm while he was away on his preaching journeys. Many gave the support of their money, like Thomas Ashton, the Dublin layman who paid Robert Williams' passage to America, and joined him as an immigrant, later becoming the mainstay of the Methodist cause at Ashgrove to which the Emburys and the Hecks eventually gravitated.¹⁸ Sometimes these supporters were apparently not Methodists themselves, like Joseph Forbes, the young gentleman who lent his established credit to the infant Methodist cause in New York to enable them to purchase land for their first chapel.¹⁹ Still others worked as quiet encouragers behind the scenes. Such was Thomas Taylor, whose written appeal for help to Wesley was not only most influential in

¹⁴ C. H. Crookshank, History of Methodism in Ireland, Belfast, 1885, I: 225.

¹⁵ Lockwood, op.cit., p. 86.

¹⁶ See W. C. Barclay, Early American Methodism, New York, 1949, I:29-33.

¹⁷ John Lednum, Rise of Methodism in America, Philadelphia, 1859, p. xiv.

¹⁸ Crookshank, op.cit., loc. cit.; Methodist History, January, 1965, p.24.

¹⁹ See Methodist History, January, 1965, p. 12.

recruiting itinerant preachers for America but also supplies us with our most vivid contemporary account of American Methodist beginnings before their arrival.²⁰ These and many others, men and women, old and young, rich and poor, educated and influential, illiterate and humble, were alike in one thing, their readiness to spend of themselves for the good of their neighbors and the glory of God. They waited for no directives from above, no organization by fulltime ordained ministers, no financial sponsors, but answered the call of God in simple yet mighty faith, conscious of their own limitations, but even more conscious of the unlimited resources of their Almighty Father.

We in our day may well be proudly grateful for the immense growth of Methodism, for its powerful witness in a world which so much needs the Christian gospel. Yet at times as individual Methodists we seem to lack both spiritual vision and spiritual initiative, as well as the readiness to venture into the unknown with untried weapons of evangelism. Let us mark well these years of beginnings, and marvel at the way in which God used for his work whatever human tools offered themselves to his hand - not only the eloquent, the well-to-do, and the intelligent, but also the poor, the peevish, and the pernicky. From that contemplation let us resolve that by his grace we too, with all our limitations, will offer ourselves willingly to the pioneering tasks which he is assuredly preparing for us.

²⁰ See Methodist History, January, 1965, pp. 3-15.