

# Reflections on the Methodist Historical Pie: Re-engaging the Puzzle of American Methodism

Christopher H. Evans

## *Abstract*

In 1994, Nathan Hatch challenged historians to conduct more research on American Methodism, engaging what Hatch called “the puzzle of American Methodism.” This article reviews significant developments in American Methodist historical scholarship since 1994, culminating in two recent publications: *The Methodist Experience in America* by Russell Richey, Kenneth Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, and *The Cambridge Companion to American Methodism* edited by Jason Vickers. These two works underscore the creative historical scholarship on American Methodism that has been written over the past twenty years; they also provide an opportunity to reassess the current state of American Methodist scholarship—what the author refers to as the “Methodist Historical Pie.” This essay explores possible themes that might characterize future historical writing on American Methodism and addresses questions of how the study of American Methodist history can be formative for ministry in The United Methodist Church.<sup>1</sup>



---

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article was presented at the Wesleyan Studies Group at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, November 2014.

## Introduction

A few years ago, a graduate student acquainted me with a folk song popularized in the 1930s by Gene Autry called “Methodist Pie.” The song instills a sort of nostalgic vision of Methodism as a revivalist faith that provides spiritual care of the soul, fellowship with one’s neighbor, and in good Methodist fashion, tasty food. The song’s refrain reflects a classic theme of American religious populism:

I’m a Methodist, Methodist, that’s my belief  
I’m a Methodist till I die  
Till the old grim death comes a-knocking at the door  
I’m a Methodist till I die.<sup>2</sup>

In many ways, this song represents themes that are prominent in several historical studies of American Methodism. Particularly, it embodies Methodism as a tradition steeped in revivalism, offering persons an easy-to-understand faith that is deeply personal, yet appealing to a wide range of people. The metaphor of the Methodist Pie reflects upon something that is quintessentially American, in its populist theological vision of simplicity and ubiquity. But from an historical standpoint, is this image the most accurate storyline for understanding American Methodism?

Twenty years ago, Nathan Hatch published an important article, “The Puzzle of American Methodism.”<sup>3</sup> Based upon his 1994 presidential address to the American Society of Church History, Hatch challenged scholars to do something that he felt many American religious historians had avoided: engage in sustained research and writing on American Methodism. I think using Hatch’s article is important, not just from the standpoint of showing how much distance we’ve traveled in twenty years. But the questions Hatch raised in 1994 help us identify how the writing of American Methodist history might develop in the future.

Hatch argued that a serious study of American Methodism offered historians a compelling alternative of American religious history to the common trajectory that focuses on New England Puritanism. Picking up on the rationale from his 1989 book, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, Hatch

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Matthew Sigler, now serving as assistant professor of Wesleyan theology at Seattle Pacific University, for bringing this song to my attention.

<sup>3</sup> Nathan O. Hatch, “The Puzzle of American Methodism,” *Church History* 63 (June 1994): 175–89.

called for a decentering of the Puritan narrative by looking at how Methodism retold the story of American religion from the perspectives of religious voluntarism, popular religion, and the shaping of a nineteenth-century democratic culture.<sup>4</sup> For Hatch, prioritizing American Methodist historical sources would provide historians with a completely different interpretation of American religious history from the histories offered by scholars such as Perry Miller, Winthrop Hudson, Sidney Mead, and Sydney Ahlstrom.<sup>5</sup> As opposed to focusing on religion as intellectual history, by engaging the "puzzle" of American Methodism, "we would more readily understand religion as experience and community rather than as abstract ideas."<sup>6</sup>

Since the publication of Hatch's article, one can point to two distinctive genres of American Methodist historical studies.<sup>7</sup> First, we have seen numerous monographs that have dealt chiefly with Methodist historical sources (and like Hatch's work, have primarily focused upon the nineteenth century). Second, scholars have written denominational-oriented histories, in particular works that focus upon the historical development of The United Methodist Church. In reviewing these works, historians have made great strides toward engaging Hatch's "puzzle." However, many aspects of this puzzle remain to be explored, in terms of interpreting the history of American Methodism and engaging how this scholarship contributes to United Methodist identity.

---

<sup>4</sup> Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Perry Miller, *The New England Mind*, 2 vols. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1939–1953); Winthrop Hudson, *The Great Tradition of the American Churches* (New York: Harper & Row, 1953); Sidney Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963); and Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972). Ahlstrom's 1972 study has often been seen as the culmination of a "consensus model" of historiography that focuses upon the wider institutional dominance of what has been called mainline Protestantism. For a more recent interpretation of this earlier tradition of Protestant historiography, see Christopher H. Evans, *Histories of American Christianity: An Introduction* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Hatch, "The Puzzle of American Methodism," 189.

<sup>7</sup> By American Methodism, I am referring primarily to faith traditions with historical antecedents in The United Methodist Church. For a wider treatment upon broader historical movements within the American Wesleyan heritage see Jonathan R. Baer, "Holiness and Pentecostalism," in *The Blackwell Companion to Religion in America*, ed., Philip Goff (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 569–86; and Christopher H. Evans, "Wesleyan Tradition," in *The Blackwell Companion*, 684–98.

My purpose in this essay is to address two questions. First, where might the study of the American Methodist historical “pie” lead us in the future, in terms of understanding American religious historiography? In particular, I wrestle with the question of whether the recent stress on evangelical populism called for by Hatch has obscured other significant questions and topics in terms of interpreting American Methodism. Second, how might the varied “slices” of this historical pie serve as interpretive tools for ministry formation for persons within the United Methodist tradition? As The United Methodist Church wrestles with numerous questions regarding its future, how can these emerging interpretations of American Methodist history provide insights into the Church’s mission and theology?

### *The Historical Pie of American Methodism*

Even a cursory view of some of the monographs published since 1994 indicates that American Methodism has become a central field for many religious historians. Picking up on some of the populist themes discussed by Hatch, scholars such as Gregory Schneider, Christine Heyrman, John Wigger, Cynthia Lyerly, and David Hempton have explored the ways Methodism emerged as a dominant religious force in the early nineteenth century (with many of these studies paying particular attention to Methodism in the American South).<sup>8</sup> Other scholars such as Rosemary Keller, Carolyn DeSwarte Gifford, Wendy Deichmann, Morris Davis, Dana Robert, Jean Miller Schmidt, and Priscilla Pope-Levison have explored important questions related to how American Methodism enhances our understanding of race, gender, institutional development, and Christianity in a global context.<sup>9</sup> During the past 20 years, the field of United Methodist history has been largely defined by Russell

<sup>8</sup> See Gregory Schneider, *The Way of the Cross Leads Home: The Domestication of American Methodism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); John Wigger, *Taking Heaven By Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) and Wigger, *Francis Asbury: American Saint* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Cynthia Lyerly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> See Rosemary Skinner Keller, ed., *Spirituality and Social Responsibility: The Vocational Vision of Women in the United Methodist Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993); Jean Miller Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient: A History of Women in American Methodism*

Richey.<sup>10</sup> Along with Kenneth Rowe and Jean Miller Schmidt, Richey has produced a compendium of books that have examined American Methodism's historical and institutional development.<sup>11</sup> In particular, Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt's two-volume *The Methodist Experience in America* has emerged as the standard text in United Methodist Studies courses, replacing Frederick A. Norwood's well-worn 1974 history, *The Story of American Methodism*.<sup>12</sup>

Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt's two-volume *Methodist Experience in America*, and the one volume *American Methodism: A Compact History*, make vital contributions toward our understanding of American Methodist history.<sup>13</sup> First, these historians integrate a wider range of movements and churches into their narratives. Seeing American Methodism as one of two major historical wings of Global Methodism (along with British Methodism), they enlarge the story of American Methodism's development to discuss women, African Americans, Native Americans, and other racial-ethnic groups. Far more than previous denominational histories of American Methodism, Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt reflect upon the diversity of the United Methodist heritage—including a far greater discussion of the movements that combined to form the Evangelical

---

(Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999); Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1996); Wendy J. Deichmann Edwards and Carolyn DeSwarte Gifford, eds., *Gender and the Social Gospel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Morris Davis, *The Methodist Unification: Christianity and the Politics of Race in the Jim Crow Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Priscilla Pope-Levison, *Building the Old Time Religion: Women Evangelists in the Progressive Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> For a summary and assessment of Russell Richey's scholarship, as well as a bibliography of his significant publications, see Rex D. Matthews, ed., *The Renewal of United Methodism: Mission, Ministry and Connectionalism; Essays in Honor of Russell E. Richey* (Nashville: The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of The United Methodist Church, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> See Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: A History* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010). This textbook appears as Volume I in a two-volume series. Volume II, a compilation of extensive primary sources, was published in 2002. See Richey, Rowe, Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America: Sourcebook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974).

<sup>13</sup> Richey, Rowe, Schmidt, *American Methodism: A Compact History* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012). The *Compact History* is a pared down version of *The Methodist Experience in America: A History*.

United Brethren Church in 1946 (a tradition in which there is still a dearth of interpretive histories).<sup>14</sup>

Second, *The Methodist Experience in America* and the *Compact History* effectively show the important interconnection between Methodism's historical development and church polity, especially through the development of Wesleyan understandings of "holy conferencing." In many ways, *Methodist Experience in America* expands on themes that Richey explores in his earlier work, *The Methodist Conference in America*, as well as his work with Dennis Campbell and William Lawrence on the multivolume series, *United Methodism and American Culture*.<sup>15</sup> Both *Methodist Experience in America* and the *Compact History* discuss how American Methodism's changing historical understandings of conferencing led Methodists to address questions of theological development, global mission, institutional expansion, schisms, mergers, regional differences, and local church life. The Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt histories represent a capstone of scholarly attention paid over the past 20 years upon American Methodist ecclesiastical life. Represented by a series of monographs and edited volumes published by Kingswood Books, scholars have written important work on American Methodist liturgy, the episcopacy, and various aspects of Methodist social witness.<sup>16</sup>

One of the most important interpretive works on American Methodist history to come out of the Kingswood Books series was an edited volume by Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt, *Perspectives on American Methodism*.<sup>17</sup> The chapters of this incorporate much of the critical scholarship on American Methodism that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, with significant work on women,

---

<sup>14</sup> The major denominational history of the Evangelical United Brethren remains, J. Bruce Behney and Paul H. Eller, *The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979). At the same time, recent interpretive work is emerging on the historical-theological legacy of the EUB. See J. Steven O'Malley and Jason E. Vickers, eds., *Methodist and Pietist: Retrieving the Evangelical United Brethren Tradition* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> See Russell Richey, *The Methodist Conference in America: A History* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1996), and Richey, Dennis Campbell, and William Lawrence, eds., *United Methodism and American Culture*, 5 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997–2005).

<sup>16</sup> Selected titles in the Kingswood Books series dealing with topics on American Methodist history include, Karen Westerfield Tucker, ed., *The Sunday Service of the Methodists* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1996); Alice G. Knotts, *Fellowship of Love: Methodist Women Changing American Racial Attitudes, 1920–1968* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1996); and James E. Kirby, *The Episcopacy in American Methodism* (Nashville: Kingswood, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt, eds., *Perspectives on American Methodism: Interpretive Essays* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1993).

African Americans, evangelicalism, justice ministries, as well as institutional mobilization.<sup>18</sup> In many ways, Jason Vickers' edited volume, *The Cambridge Companion to American Methodism*, represents an updated and expanded version of the earlier *Perspectives* volume.<sup>19</sup> The chapters in *The Cambridge Companion* cast a wide net, seeking to show how various institutional and popular manifestations of American Methodism impacted American religious and cultural life. Broadly approaching the American Methodist heritage (discussing holiness, African American, and United Methodist traditions), the volume engages a range of topics on theology, worship, preaching, institutional developments, social witness, and a spate of chapters related to Methodism and popular culture.

*The Cambridge Companion* does not provide a unified interpretative framework for engaging American Methodist history. Discussions range from American Methodism's evolving institutional nature (for example, discussions on the changing contours of Methodist ecclesiology and polity) to topics related to Methodism and American culture (such as Methodist stances toward tobacco use, religion and healing, and popular amusements such as cinema).<sup>20</sup> However, *The Cambridge Companion* serves as an excellent complement to Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt's *Perspectives on American Methodism*, showing readers the breadth of Methodism's impact upon denominations/churches, faith practices, and ways different Methodist groups have engaged American culture. Through its multiple subject and historical lenses, *The Cambridge Companion* broadens our understanding of the historical nuances of American Methodism called for by Hatch in 1994.



---

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Rosemary Skinner Keller, Louise L. Queen, and Hilah F. Thomas, eds., *Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition*, 2 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981–1982).

<sup>19</sup> Jason E. Vickers, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to American Methodism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> For example, see Karen Westerfield Tucker, "Sacraments and Life-Cycle Rituals," 138–55; Douglas M. Koskela, "Discipline and Polity," 156–70; and Stan Ingersol, "Education," 261–78. On Methodism and popular religion see Maura Jane Farrelly, "Asceticism," 208–26; Candy Gunther Brown, "Healing," 227–42; and Christopher J. Anderson, "American Methodism and Popular Culture," 352–70.

## Areas of Neglect

*The Methodist Experience in America* series and *The Cambridge Companion to American Methodism* reflect the expanding ways that historians have studied American Methodism. Nevertheless, I think many biases that Hatch identified in 1994 on why historians ignore American Methodism continue.

Hatch noted three reasons why he felt historians avoided sustained study of American Methodism. First, he raised the issue that American Methodism was theologically derivative, lacking the intellectual rigor of Reformed Calvinist traditions. There is no doubt that many historians who have focused upon the theological development of American Protestantism often take a dim view of Methodism. Since the mid-1990s, we continue to see older patterns of historiography replicated. These biases are evident within two important books published in the early 2000s: Mark Noll's *America's God* and E. Brooks Holifield's *Theology in America*.<sup>21</sup> Both books provide extensive treatments into the theological development of American Protestantism from the colonial era to the Civil War. While these works have their own interpretive nuances, they replicate a long-standing tendency to focus their narratives around the theological pedigree coming from Jonathan Edwards. For all the ways that these books provide scholars an invaluable view into the intellectual development of American Protestantism prior to the Civil War, they repeat the pattern of previous scholarship by largely ignoring Methodist primary sources. As Noll asserts, "although the Methodists' original dynamism contributed mightily to constructing Protestant culture in America, the distinctive convictions of Methodist theology never exerted the influence on the nation's intellectual life that its spirituality did on the nation's popular religion."<sup>22</sup>

The second reason that Hatch identifies for the neglect of American Methodism was his belief that Methodists sanitize their histories. In this regard, Hatch is not necessarily identifying something that is unique to Methodism, but rather a larger pattern in the writing of nineteenth-century American religious history. The most significant late nineteenth-century survey text on American Christianity was written by a Methodist, Daniel Dorchester, who echoed other Protestant historians of that time, by stressing how evangelical

<sup>21</sup> See Mark Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) and E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>22</sup> Mark Noll, *America's God*, 332.



Protestant churches overcame the twin evils of religious sectarianism (usually embodied by Mormonism) and Catholicism.<sup>23</sup> Not only Hatch, but other historians like R. Laurence Moore have noted the tendency of many Protestant church historians to present their traditions in the best possible intellectual light, often filtering out parts of their traditions that they deem populist, anti-intellectual, or too sectarian.<sup>24</sup> Hatch singles out William Warren Sweet who while deeply interested in Methodist historical sources focused upon the movement's broader middle-class cultural and institutional respectability.<sup>25</sup> While he acknowledged Methodist evangelicalism's role in providing social and cultural stability to emerging groups of nineteenth-century Americans, "Sweet had little interest in evidence that early Methodism was white-hot with enthusiasm, confrontational and unrefined in its style, and readily dismissed much of John and Charles Wesley's liturgical formality."<sup>26</sup> While Sweet affirmed Methodism's historical significance, in Hatch's view, he came to the wrong conclusion about Methodism's historical impact by ignoring the movement's explosive populism.

Finally, Hatch argues that historians ignored American Methodism out of the perception that the tradition was bland. Put more positively, Methodism was seen as so representative of American life that it lacked the exotic curb appeal of other religious movements. "No interpretive vision of American religion has arisen organized around Wesleyanism because it so clearly represents that which we take for granted about American society . . . . Perhaps historians ignore Methodists because Wesleyans are too quintessentially American."<sup>27</sup> There is a lot of truth to Hatch's third point, especially when one looks at many survey treatments of American religious history written since the 1960s. In these works, Methodist sources are not the first point of reference in dealing with subjects such as premillennialism, fundamentalism, or even liberalism.<sup>28</sup> Hatch makes a compelling argument for understanding Methodism as a

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Dorchester, *Christianity in the United States from the First Settlement Down to the Present Time* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1888).

<sup>24</sup> See R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, William Warren Sweet, *Methodism in American History* (New York: Abingdon, 1953). For a summary of Sweet's influence upon American Methodist historiography, see Russell E. Richey, "History as a Bearer of Denominational Identity: Methodism as a Case Study" in *Perspectives on American Methodism*, 480–98.

<sup>26</sup> Hatch, "Puzzle of American Methodism," 185.

<sup>27</sup> Hatch, "Puzzle of American Methodism," 186.

<sup>28</sup> See note 5 above.

transformative movement of popular religion. However, he largely aligns himself with many historians who continue to see American Methodism as an intellectually derivative (and in some respects, theologically bland) movement.

Since the mid 1990s, I would add another bias that characterizes how many historians approach American Methodism: its distinctiveness as a religious movement occurred primarily in the antebellum period. This theme is evident in David Hempton's transatlantic history, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*. Hempton largely follows Hatch's lead in seeing Methodism's greatest impact in the antebellum era. After the Civil War, Methodism was overtaken by an era of institutionalization that led to the decline of a once vibrant movement. Hempton notes that "Methodism's cultural diffusion and ecclesiastical ambitions increased out of line with its power to recruit members and effectively disseminate its message both to its own children and to those outside the Methodist constituency."<sup>29</sup> Despite Hempton's vital contribution toward understanding Methodism in a global context, he can make one draw the conclusion that nothing of consequence happened within Methodism after 1865, except numerical decline. In many ways, Hatch and Hempton's vision of American Methodism fits the "religious growth" paradigms of American religion popularized by Rodney Stark and Roger Finke in *The Churching of America*, in which evangelical populism becomes the normative narrative for interpreting American religious history.<sup>30</sup>

Hatch's critique of American Methodist history not only addresses important issues for scholars who teach American religious history. He raises questions that require serious reflection for scholars who work out of a deeply felt need to engage both the academy and the church. For those of us who have an investment in the training of a future generation of lay and ordained religious leaders in The United Methodist Church, how do we balance our commitment to instill within our students a sense of denominational identity *and* an ability to look at that tradition critically through the eyes of the historian? I don't want to draw a false dichotomy between scholars who write primarily for the academy and those who write for the church. However, at a time of mainline Protestant decline, and when I think history as a discipline is besieged by numerous claims of postmodernity in which an absence of historical memory is seen by some as a virtue, I worry that the art of writing

<sup>29</sup> David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 199–200.

<sup>30</sup> Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

denominational histories in the future will become more marginalized.<sup>31</sup> In short, I think United Methodist scholars have a lot of work to do to keep reminding our students, as Russell Richey has done in much of his scholarship, that one cannot understand the theological languages of American Methodism without understanding its unique histories.<sup>32</sup>

Seeing Methodism through the prism of its early nineteenth-century evangelical fervor, its impact upon popular culture, and its numerical dominance before the Civil War are important historical trajectories (and the majority of chapters in *The Cambridge Companion* focus on topics related to these themes). However, the recent stress on populism can lead one to the conclusion that there is little value in American Methodism's intellectual development, its institutional evolution, and a question that was vital to earlier twentieth-century historians of American Methodism—its impact upon middle-class culture. In the following section, I draw on two broad questions to reflect upon, in terms of the future of American Methodist historical scholarship.

### *Future Questions*

(1) *Based upon the current state of the field, what topics might map out some future directions for American Methodist historical scholarship?*

Recent scholarship has provided us a much clearer picture of American Methodism's uniqueness as a series of movements, churches, and denominations. However, we need to be careful that we don't lose sight of Methodism's larger impact upon American culture—especially throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In many ways, I believe a time has come for us to revisit some of the historiographical questions raised by William Warren Sweet. Sweet has come to symbolize what many historians in the late twentieth century fought against—his accounts of Methodism's success were often too focused on white male clergy and upon Methodism's growing institutional status.<sup>33</sup> For all of the ways that Sweet's work had important omissions, I believe he was essentially right in his assertion that Methodism offers historians a unique vantage point to interpret and critique religion's impact upon American culture.

<sup>31</sup> See Christopher H. Evans, "Rethinking Classroom Diversity: Three Student Cultures in a Mainline Seminary," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 10 (October 2007): 223–30.

<sup>32</sup> See Richey, "History as a Bearer of Denominational Identity," in *Perspectives on American Methodism*, 480–98.

<sup>33</sup> See Hatch, "Puzzle of American Methodism," 185.

In looking at American Methodism, I would identify four topics for historians to consider pursuing. First, I want to make an argument that historians need to show more interest in the intellectual underpinnings of American Methodism—whether it’s examining more closely Methodist theologies or broad-based studies that look at how Methodist belief patterns impacted wider developments in American religion. To talk of intellectual history can lead historians to a relatively narrow sample of thinkers. Yet part of American Methodism’s uniqueness is not only that it manifested distinctive types of popular evangelicalism, but how the movement historically embodied such a wide range of theological beliefs and practices.

The complexity of American Methodist theology is evident when one looks at the various Wesleyan interpretations of the doctrine of sanctification. While scholars continue to develop a growing awareness of how Wesleyan understandings of sanctification impacted holiness and pentecostal movements in American religion, we need to take seriously the connection between Wesleyan themes of sanctification upon the development of theological liberalism. A study of Methodist liberalism is important not simply in terms of looking at American Methodism institutionally, but can cast light on wider movements of American religious history.<sup>34</sup> For example, the story of the social gospel movement is usually told from the perspective of non-Methodist sources. The wider story of the social gospel engages the importance of pioneer Methodist women like Frances Willard, Lucy Rider Meyer, Mary McDowell, and Georgia Harkness, as well as important African-American Methodists like Reverdy Ransom.<sup>35</sup> Finally, Methodist theological sources are critical in terms of understanding the social thought of perhaps the most significant

---

<sup>34</sup> Douglas Strong’s chapter in *The Cambridge Companion* underscores the important connection between views of sanctification and Methodist theological development in the nineteenth century. Building on the earlier work of Timothy Smith and Donald Dayton, Strong shows how common caricatures of “evangelical” and “liberal” are challenged by Methodist historical sources. See Strong, “The Nineteenth Century: Expansion and Fragmentation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Methodism*, 63–96. See also Strong, *Perfectionist Politics* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999); Timothy Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform* (New York: Abingdon, 1957); and Donald Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

<sup>35</sup> On the role of Methodist women in the social gospel, see John Patrick McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982). On Ransom, see Anthony Pinn, ed., *Making the Gospel Plain: The Writings of Bishop Reverdy C. Ransom* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999).

American reformer of the twentieth century: Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>36</sup> An examination of the wider history of American liberal theology shows that Methodists were not just followers, but helped craft what Gary Dorrien has called the most original movement of American theology.<sup>37</sup>

Second, American Methodist studies need to take seriously efforts to engage the historical trajectories of evangelicalism, moving our understanding of Methodist evangelicalism beyond the antebellum period. Methodist evangelicalism in the North and the South offer a critique of dominant interpretations of American Protestantism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. An important illustration is the way Methodism challenges standard historical accounts of the so-called Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy of the 1920s. Like their Reformed counterparts, Methodists debated and fought over questions of theological modernism. However, these debates did not lead to the denominational ruptures that one sees within the northern Baptists and the Presbyterians.<sup>38</sup> To examine the history of Methodist evangelicalism might enable historians to develop a more nuanced perspective on broader theological developments in the twentieth century that have often been defined mostly by churches coming out of the Reformed tradition.<sup>39</sup>

Third, Methodism's impact upon American culture should be studied through the numerous student networks that emerged by the late nineteenth century. This requires that historians examine the importance of young people to a range of Protestant organizations, including Methodist participation in organizations such as the Student Volunteer Movement and the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), as well as Methodist youth organizations like

<sup>36</sup> King's connection to the theology and ethics of what has been called "Boston Personalism" is well documented. See Rufus Burrows, Jr., *Personalism: A Critical Introduction* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999).

<sup>37</sup> See Gary J. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), xiii–xxv.

<sup>38</sup> See George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Historians are beginning to grasp more fully the theological nuances that differentiated Methodists from commonly accepted definitions of fundamentalism emerging from northern denominations such as the Baptists and Presbyterians. While certain early twentieth-century Methodists did adhere to what could be called fundamentalism (such as a support of biblical inerrancy) the emphasis on sanctification in the Wesleyan tradition often provides a different theological orientation to the "classic" criterion of fundamentalism discussed by Marsden. See Priscilla Pope-Levison, *Building the Old-Time Religion*.

<sup>39</sup> For a theological assessment of American Methodism during the 1920s and 1930s, see Richey, Rowe, Schmidt, eds., *The Methodist Experience in America: a History*, 340–43.

the Epworth League. It also requires us to examine the relationship between youth and the growing importance of the religious education movement in American Methodism.<sup>40</sup> Telling the story of these developments not only will help us understand the ways Methodism evolved institutionally. It accentuates the growing theological radicalism that increasingly found expression in organizations that laid a foundation for the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s.<sup>41</sup> One especially noteworthy development of this radical Methodism was the publication between 1939 and 1972 of *motive* magazine. A publication of the Methodist Student Movement, *motive* served as a cutting-edge periodical that engaged a range of religious, cultural, and political issues in the mid- twentieth century.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, while historically American Methodists often drew a sharp theological distinction between themselves and those traditions and movements that came out of the Puritan-Reformed legacy, I think the time has come to understand more fully how Methodist and Reformed strands of American Protestantism interpenetrated, especially as Methodists sought a wider impact upon American culture. A starting point for this examination might begin by examining how Methodists helped galvanize the ecumenical movement. While an aspect of Methodism's ecumenical legacy relates to the role of theology, it also reflects upon how Methodist leaders sought to address a wide range of social, political, and cultural issues that continue to inform religion's role in twenty-first-century America.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> For a summary of the religious education movement, see Allen J. Moore, "One Hundred Years of the Religious Education Association," *Religious Education* 98:4 (2003): 426–36. Moore underscores the importance of Methodist George Albert Coe to a wider tradition of religious education and theological radicalism that increasingly found expression in a wide range of Methodist youth organizations in the early twentieth century.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Dan McKanan, *Prophetic Encounters: Religion and the American Radical Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011).

<sup>42</sup> See B.J. Stiles, "Methodism's Icon and Albatross," [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBYpO\\_Uxw4E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBYpO_Uxw4E). Boston University's Center for the Study of Global Christianity is currently engaging in a digital preservation project of *motive*. See <http://www.bu.edu/cgcm/scm-usa-project/motive-magazine>.

<sup>43</sup> See Walter G. Muelder, *Methodism and Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1961); Theodore H. Runyon, ed., *Wesleyan Theology Today: A Bicentennial Theological Consultation* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1985); Steven M. Tipton, *Public Pulpits: Methodists and Mainline Churches in the Moral Argument of Public Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), and Jill K. Gill, *Embattled Ecumenism:*

Throughout the nineteenth century Methodist apologists had a lot to say, usually not favorably, toward their Calvinist competitors. Likewise, Methodism's ecclesiastical languages of conferencing often distinguished themselves from the congregationally-centered languages of Reformed churches.<sup>44</sup> Yet just because Methodists found themselves at odds with the heirs of Puritanism does not mean that Methodists did not engage in their own creative synthesis of the Puritan cultural ethos. Numerous studies of American religion point out the power of the New England religious ethos, in particular, the appeal of John Winthrop's address to the settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630 that they needed to build a "city upon a hill." Winthrop's words have been reinterpreted, and misinterpreted, by numerous generations of Americans.<sup>45</sup> However, the ramifications of this Puritan sentiment had consequences for how a disparate range of Protestants, including Methodists, sought to influence broad cross sections of Americans—religiously and culturally.

Hatch concludes *The Democratization of American Christianity* with an almost disparaging assessment of Nathan Bangs, Methodist theologian and long-time head of the Methodist Book Concern. Bangs was not only a symbol of Methodist institutionalization, but of a person who wanted Methodist voices to be at the center of American culture.<sup>46</sup> While we may debate whether theologically this trend was a good or bad thing for Methodism, there is no doubt that Bangs got his wish. One cannot deny Bangs' importance in crafting Methodism's powerful institutional and cultural legacy in American Protestantism, and how his shadow can be found in later figures like Matthew Simpson and G. Bromley Oxnam in the North, and William Cannon in the South.<sup>47</sup> These latter two figures were central to what scholars refer to as "the Protestant establishment" that reflects upon a wider history of religion's public

---

*The National Council of Churches, The Vietnam War, and the Trials of the Protestant Left* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Press, 2011).

<sup>44</sup> Since Jesse Lee published the first history of American Methodism in 1810, Methodist historians sought to show how Methodist theological uniqueness tied into the ecclesiastical identity of conferencing. See Richey, "History as a Bearer of Denominational Identity," and *The Methodist Conference in America*.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Evans, *Histories of American Christianity*, 21–42.

<sup>46</sup> Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity*, 193–209.

<sup>47</sup> See Robert Moats Miller, *G. Bromley Oxnam: Paladin of Liberal Protestantism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990). Critical biographical studies of Bangs, Simpson, and Cannon remain to be written.

role in twentieth-century America.<sup>48</sup> Despite the fact that Methodism often castigated Reformed theology, it also recast many aspects of that earlier Puritan “city upon a hill” mythology in ways that put Methodism at the center of America’s religious narrative. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century role that American Methodists played in Protestant institution building, including the modern ecumenical movement, were not bland derivatives. They were a creative synthesis whereby Methodism rewrote the story of American Protestantism from a decidedly Methodist point of view.<sup>49</sup>

Another way to examine the relationship between Methodist and Reformed experiences is to engage in comparative analysis with a broader trajectory of North American Methodist history, in particular, the history of Canadian Methodism. The nineteenth-century Canadian context might provide a unique way to examine the interconnection between themes of theology, revivalism, religious populism, and institutionalization that offer a unique contrast to British and American Methodism.<sup>50</sup> Further, the 1925 merger that created the United Church of Canada, uniting churches from both Wesleyan and Reformed traditions, provides an interesting contrast to the ways that many historians have looked at American Methodist mergers in the twentieth century.

The four areas that I’ve discussed are held together by one common plea: we need to push our study of American Methodism beyond the Civil War. If we are truly going to understand the wider importance of American Methodism, we need to take up the challenge to examine Methodism’s impact culturally, theologically, and institutionally.

(2) *What issues and themes should define the writing of denominational histories of American Methodism? Put bluntly, is there a future for scholars who want to write denominational histories?*

<sup>48</sup> See, William R. Hutchison, ed., *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>49</sup> The example of John R. Mott is especially instructive. Mott (1865-1955) was perhaps the major early twentieth-century American Protestant leader in promoting foreign missions and the rise of the modern ecumenical movement. See C. Howard Hopkins, *John R. Mott: A Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), and Benjamin J. Hartley, “‘That They All Might Be One’: John R. Mott’s Contributions to Methodism, Interreligious Dialogue and Racial Reconciliation,” *Methodist Review* 4(2012): 1-30.

<sup>50</sup> On Canadian Methodism, see Neil Semple, *The Lord’s Dominion: The History of Canadian Methodism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996), and Todd Webb, *Transatlantic Methodists: British Wesleyanism and the Formation of an Evangelical Culture in Nineteenth-Century Ontario and Quebec* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013).



Many of us who teach history in a United Methodist Studies context carry dual loyalties in that we identify ourselves as scholars who are motivated by a concern for preparing persons for a range of lay and ordained ministries. Yet speaking as a historian and as a United Methodist I think The United Methodist Church today faces (if I can borrow a term from Jimmy Carter) a sort of "crisis of confidence" in how we approach our history.<sup>51</sup> Many of us who teach United Methodist Studies courses increasingly confront students who come to our classes not only with an ahistorical mindset, but also wariness toward religious institutions (even as paradoxically, several of our students seek ordination in these structures).<sup>52</sup> For scholars who build on the work of historians like Russell Richey, I think one of the challenges we'll face in the future is how might the varied historical languages of American Methodism shape questions of theological identity in the present and future?<sup>53</sup>

As the discipline of Wesleyan studies was gaining momentum in the 1960s, scholars with different theological agendas like Robert Chiles and Albert Outler reached similar conclusions about American Methodist theology: it did not fully live up to their understanding of an authentic Wesleyanism. Outler prized what he perceived as Methodism's ecumenical spirit, as opposed to the exclusive revivalist spirit of the early nineteenth century.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, heavily influenced by the mid-twentieth century neo-orthodox theological critique, Chiles worried about Methodism's liberal-modernist leanings.<sup>55</sup> Both scholars can be questioned in terms of the extent that their analyses of American Methodist theology were accurate. However, they highlight two of the five theological languages of American Methodism identified by Jason Vickers in

<sup>51</sup> This phrase, used by President Carter in a 1979 television address, was meant to symbolize the inability of Americans to confront the nation's energy crisis. See Randall Balmer, *Redeemer: The Life of Jimmy Carter* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

<sup>52</sup> See Evans, "Rethinking Classroom Diversity," and Whitney Bauman, Joseph A. Marchal, Karline McLain, Maureen O'Connell, and Sara M. Patterson, "Teaching the Millennial Generation in the Religious and Theological Studies Classroom," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 17(October 2014): 301–22.

<sup>53</sup> See Richey, *Early American Methodism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). Richey discusses post-Revolutionary War American Methodism as a product of four distinctive historical trajectories (or languages): Wesleyan, Evangelical, Republican, and Episcopal.

<sup>54</sup> For a summary of Outler's theology, see Thomas Langford, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition*, Volume 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 195–98.

<sup>55</sup> See Robert E. Chiles, *Theological Transitions in American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1965).

his opening chapter in the *Cambridge Companion*: Outler prized Methodism's modern ecumenical heritage and Chiles prized its Wesleyanism.

Vickers observes that if United Methodists are to forge any sort of doctrinal consensus in the future, they must engage in faithful conversation surrounding these five distinctive theological languages emerging out of the history of American Methodism: evangelicalism, radicalism, ecumenism, liberalism, and Wesleyanism.<sup>56</sup> He calls for United Methodists to engage these languages as sources to create a Wesleyan option in dogmatic theology. While I have some concern about how Vickers defines the concept of dogmatic theology, his reconceptualization of United Methodist theology around American Methodist historical sources is significant. It compels United Methodists to examine different strands of American Methodist history—and at times challenging United Methodists to understand and reconcile distinctive parts of their histories. Providing an alternative to the so-called “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” Vickers introduces an opportunity for creative theological conversations that takes seriously Richey's understanding of American Methodist theology primarily emerging out of a language of history.<sup>57</sup>

I also think that Vickers' method might have ramifications for those of us who regularly teach courses in United Methodist History and Doctrine. In attending the last two seminars for instructors of United Methodist History and Doctrine courses sponsored by Candler School of Theology, I was struck by the wide range of readings and topics covered in these courses. This diversity of theological perspectives is important, but it does indicate the need for teachers in United Methodist Studies to continue to reflect upon wider issues of what we deem as essential, outside of a study of the Wesley brothers, to include in these courses. There is no doubt that our personal commitments and institutional contexts do and should play a role in how we teach courses in history and doctrine. Yet in an era of increasing denominational conflict, those of us who care about critical scholarship and the mission of the church need to engage in wider conversations upon the historical questions of Wesley from the first annual conference in 1744, “What to teach, how to teach, and what to

---

<sup>56</sup> Vickers, “American Methodism: A Theological Tradition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Methodism*, 9-43.

<sup>57</sup> On the history of the quadrilateral, see Ted A. Campbell, “The ‘Wesleyan Quadrilateral’: The Story of a Modern Methodist Myth,” *Methodist History* 29(January 1991): 87-95.

do?"<sup>58</sup> No four-hour course in United Methodist History and Doctrine can fully address, nor satisfy, to everyone's satisfaction every concern about what is essential. However, my hope is that United Methodist scholars can address questions of our historical legacy not only with a critical eye to the complexities and diversities of our history and theology, but so we can instill in our students how indispensable the study of history is for understanding many of the critical issues facing The United Methodist Church today.

## Conclusion

I am mindful that this essay doesn't address other questions that will impact the writing of American Methodist history in the future, such as Native American history and the histories of racial-ethnic groups in the Methodist tradition.<sup>59</sup> Also, in an era when United Methodism grows as a global church to what extent is the focus on American Methodism necessary *and* problematic?<sup>60</sup>

Yet I do think in the face of longstanding and emerging issues, the American Methodist Historical Pie is ripe for a range of questions that build on existing work and take seriously that there is still much to learn about American Methodism—both in terms of shaping historiography and denominational identity. For within this pie, we might see how seemingly conflicting themes of personal autonomy and holy conferencing, evangelical populism and Wesleyan doctrine, personal holiness and liberal idealism, Methodist identity and ecumenical witness, and the saving of souls and the saving of society, in some way, have a place on the historian's plate.




---

<sup>58</sup> See Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 147.

<sup>59</sup> For example, see Justo L. Gonzalez, ed., *Each in Our Tongue: A History of Hispanic United Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991); Artemio R. Guillermo, ed., *Churches Aflame: Asian Americans and United Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991); Grant S. Shockley, ed., *Heritage and Hope: The African American Presence in United Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991); and Homer Noley, ed., *First White Frost: Native Americans and United Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992).

<sup>60</sup> See Dana L. Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), and Robert and David W. Scott, "World Growth of the United Methodist Church in Comparative Perspective: A Brief Statistical Analysis," *Methodist Review* 3 (2011): 37–54.

### *About the Author*

**Christopher H. Evans** is Professor of History of Christianity and Methodist Studies at Boston University School of Theology. He previously served as Professor of Church History at Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School. His teaching and scholarship focuses on the history of Christianity, American religion, United Methodist history, and ministry studies. He is the author of several books, articles, and reviews including, *The Faith of Fifty Million: Baseball, Religion, and American Culture* (co-edited with William R. Herzog II; Westminster John Knox, 2002); *The Kingdom is Always but Coming: A Life of Walter Rauschenbusch* (Baylor University Press, 2010), which received an Award of Merit for the “best work in history/biography” from *Christianity Today* magazine; *Liberalism without Illusions: Renewing an American Christian Tradition* (Baylor University Press, 2010); and *Histories of American Christianity: An Introduction* (Baylor University Press, 2013). Currently, he is writing a book on the American social gospel movement to be published by New York University Press. He is an ordained elder in the Upper New York Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church, and has lectured, preached, and taught in numerous church and professional settings and academic conferences.