

Methodist Revivalism and Mainstream American Protestantism

When a speaker on American Methodism is asked to make a presentation before a secular historical society, a genealogical society, or members of another denomination, two questions invariably arise from the audience. Prompted by the fact that the Reformed, Lutheran and Presbyterian denominations were well established in America long before Methodism was born in England in 1738 and organized as a separate denomination in the United States in 1784, those two questions are:

1. Why was there a need for another denomination? What distinctives did Methodism bring to American Protestantism?
2. Why did Methodism grow so quickly and numerically overtake the established Reformed, Lutheran and Presbyterian denominations?

While the complete answer to these questions involves consideration of complex theological (e.g., pietism) and church governance (e.g., the itinerant system) issues, the simplistic answer to both questions is “Methodist revivalism.” While the Reformed, Lutheran and Presbyterian denominations are confession-based, Methodism is experience-based. Membership in the first three bodies is based on intellectual acceptance of a particular statement of faith (the Heidelberg, Augsburg and Westminster Confessions respectively). Membership in the Methodist Church is based on a personal relationship to Christ through, to use the words of John Wesley, a “heart-warming” experience.

Clarification should be made at this point about use of the term “Methodist revivalism.” First, “Methodist” is used in a generic sense meant to include all those religious movements (particularly those that are now, or once were, within denominations now associated with United Methodism – such as the Evangelical Association and the United Brethren Church) influenced by the theology of John and Charles Wesley. Secondly, “revivalism” is taken to mean a pro-active form of pietism seeking both personal and corporate spiritual growth.

Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705), a Lutheran, is often cited as the founder of pietism. In 1675, he published his *Pia Desideria* or *Earnest Desires for a Reform of the True Evangelical Church*, the title giving rise to the term “Pietists”. In this publication he made six proposals as the best means of restoring the life of the Church:

1. the earnest and thorough study of the Bible in private meetings, *ecclesiolae in ecclesia* (“little churches within the church”).
2. the Christian priesthood being universal, the laity should share in the spiritual government of the Church .
3. a knowledge of Christianity must be attended by the practice of it as its indispensable sign and supplement.
4. instead of merely didactic, and often bitter, attacks on the heterodox and unbelievers, a sympathetic and kindly treatment of them.

5. a reorganization of the theological training of the universities, giving more prominence to the devotional life.
6. a different style of preaching, namely, in the place of pleasing rhetoric, the implanting of Christianity in the inner or new man, the soul of which is faith, and its effects the fruits of life.

In truth, pietism has always (although sometimes much apart from the “official” church) been present in such persons and movements as Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430), John Huss (c1372-1415), and the Anabaptists (1500’s). The particular branch of pietism instrumental in the awakening of John and Charles Wesley was the Moravian Church as it developed under the patronage and protection of Nicholas von Zinzendorf (1700-1760). Moravian pietism developed amid persecution from both the established church and the secular government. This led to more personal, private and low-key expressions of faith – such as the one on one ministry of Peter Bohler to the Wesleys. John Wesley and his preachers, however, as a part of the established church, were able (for the most part) to proclaim their message to the masses without fear of recrimination. In the New World, where there were essentially no church or state restrictions on preaching, a preacher could share the message as openly and as aggressively as he felt called to do.

It was pietism in conjunction with the Methodist itinerant system (which was also employed by the United Brethren of Philip William Otterbein and the Evangelical Association of Jacob Albright) that fueled Methodist revivalism. The two key features of the itinerant system relevant to this discussion are (1) the assignment of pastors to fields not necessarily of their own choosing and (2) the use of an untrained ministry. Expansion and growth in the Reformed, Lutheran and Presbyterian denominations were greatly hampered by (1) a system that allowed pastors to choose their own places of service [resulting in fewer persons reaching out to the less-convenient but often very promising rural areas] and (2) the requirement that pastors receive appropriate theological training before being accepted into the ministry [severely limiting the number of persons available to supply pulpits].

Trusting that the reader is at least marginally familiar with the spiritual journey of John Wesley “from head knowledge to heart knowledge,” these introductory remarks conclude with the story of Philip William Otterbein – in some sense the quintessential picture of Methodist revivalism in America. Otterbein’s spiritual journey is a German translation and an American transplanting of Wesley’s own heart-warming experience, quest for church renewal, and establishing a structure to continue the vision. We can think of no better way to set the stage for the following comments on Methodist revivalism and the Reformed, Lutheran and Presbyterian denominations in America.

Philip William Otterbein (1726-1813)

Seminary-trained Philip W. Otterbein came to America in 1752 in response to the appeal of Michael Schlatter for more ordained Reformed clergy to minister to the German immigrants who were flocking to the New World. In Pennsylvania alone there were reported to be 30,000 German Reformed people, but only 53 organized congregations and 4 ordained clergy. Although raised and educated in strong pietistic traditions, young Otterbein had never found himself in a position that necessitated his full and personal commitment to its basic principles. Serving in the New World in Lancaster, separated from family and human theological support, he sought and found a heart-warming experience similar to what John Wesley enjoyed at Aldersgate Street in 1738.

Otterbein served Reformed appointments (typically one city church and several rural congregations) in Lancaster (1752-58), Tulpehocken (1758-1760), Frederick (1760-1765), York (1765-1774), and Baltimore Second (1774-1813). He began to do in the Reformed Church what Wesley had done in the Church of England. He encouraged his parishioners to seek a satisfying conversion experience, to read and study the scriptures in personal and family and corporate times of devotions, to organize into classes that would hold each other accountable, to pray and give testimony in class and congregational meetings, and to share their faith in word and deed.

These “Methodistic” practices were frowned upon by the more traditional Reformed preachers and by the Reformed hierarchy, and on more than one occasion formal charges were brought against Otterbein for his theology and practices. Nor did these events go unnoticed by others. In 1769, for example, the noted Lutheran cleric Henry Melchior Muhlenburg wrote in his journal that Otterbein “is said to have the gift of awakening the people” but that his sermons include statements “which agree with neither Lutheran nor Reformed doctrine and which give occasion for all kinds of excesses” and that “this man is working among our people [i.e., Lutherans in York] and that he has already lured some of them away.”

Although Otterbein began associating with Mennonite Martin Boehm and other revivalists as early as 1767, he never was dismissed from or left the ordained Reformed ministry. He also enjoyed such a deep friendship with Methodism’s Francis Asbury that it was Otterbein that Asbury asked to lay hands on him when he was consecrated the first bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America in 1784. The network of pastors and converts connected with Otterbein and Boehm organized informally in 1789 and more formally as the United Brethren in Christ denomination in 1800 – with Otterbein and Boehm as the first bishops. The Reformed Baltimore congregation that Otterbein was serving when he died later became (although not without controversy and a court case) a United Brethren congregation and is now Old Otterbein United Methodist Church.

The prevailing opinion of Otterbein among early Reformed historians¹ is that he was a sincere renewalist who tried to remain faithful to the denomination while caught up in a network of enthusiasts. It is apparent, however, that Otterbein's contact with the Reformed Church was minimal during the final years of his life and that he realized the future of his revival movement among the German-speaking people in America lie with the United Brethren in Christ denomination and not with the Reformed Church.

The mainstream denominations, especially the Reformed Church, had another serious objection to revivalism in general and to Otterbein in particular. One of reasons for revivalism's rapid spread was the practice of the Methodists and the United Brethren (and also the Evangelicals) to use unordained lay preachers and to have extremely low educational standards for those they did ordain. The Reformed Church argued strongly that Otterbein, who remained in their denomination all his life, even while leading the fledgling United Brethren Church, had absolutely no authority to ordain anyone – and no so-called ordination in the United Brethren Church was valid at all. This was an argument previously used to discredit John Wesley and the Methodists. And since the non-theologically educated Francis Asbury was ordained jointly by Thomas Coke on the authority of John Wesley and by Philip William Otterbein on his own authority, the mainline denominations questioned the validity of the entire Methodist movement in America.

One example of this controversy is the case of John Dietrich Aurandt.² He was one of Otterbein's preachers present at Peter Kemp's house in Frederick MD when the United Brethren denomination was officially organized in September 1800. A member of the Reformed Church, he was an effective and enthusiastic preacher for the United Brethren, but there was just enough Reformed theology in him to question whether he should be able to administer the sacraments just because he was now "ordained" in a new "denomination." Aurandt eventually returned to the Reformed Church, went through its entire prescribed educational and ordination process, and became an extraordinary circuit rider and revivalist and church planter for that denomination in Blair and Huntingdon counties.

¹ See for example Joseph Henry Dubbs, Historic Manual of the Reformed Church in the United States (1885), pp 221-222: *For a long time the "Brethren" with whom Mr. Otterbein labored were popularly known as "New Reformed," though Martin Boehm and others of their prominent leaders had no connection with the Reformed Church. In 1804 there occurred an event which, it has been said, "drove the wedge of separation." The Rev. J.A. Gueting, whom Otterbein had introduced to the Reformed ministry, became an enthusiast of the most pronounced type. In this respect he went much further than Mr. Otterbein, whose disposition was more quiet and reflective. Gueting became more and more irregular and was finally excluded. He continued to labor in the manner that pleased him best, and his memory is greatly cherished in the Church of the "United Brethren in Christ."*

² The story of John Dietrich Aurandt is told in "Centre County PA as a Microcosm of Early United Brethren Dynamics" by Milton Loyer in *The Chronicle*, vol. XIII (spring 2002), pp 26-50.