

What Ever Happened to... Methodist Prohibition

The picture on the cover of this “What ever happened to...” issue of *The Chronicle* is taken from a 1918 publication¹ of the General Board of Temperance, Prohibition and Public Morals of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The following paragraph from page 10 is a good summary of the content and spirit of the publication.

We are going to have a dry United States and a dry world. You doubt it? Well, you inherited that doubt from your grandfather. That is just what the old man thought about piracy on the high seas – wrong, but couldn’t be stopped; dueling – barbarous, but couldn’t be stopped; slave-trading, slave-holding, cannibalism, polygamy, lotteries, public gambling, red light district, white slavery, habit-forming drug trades – all wrong, but couldn’t be stopped. They have been wiped off the earth. And the liquor traffic is doomed – doomed as Judas Iscariot.

While one may question whether all the aforementioned evils were truly wiped off the earth in 1918, the battle against alcohol was certainly in full swing – and the Methodists were leading the way. In 1918, 21 states were dry by state law, the eighteenth amendment (prohibition for the entire country) had been passed by the US senate and was awaiting passage by enough states to make it national law as part of the US Constitution, and the Methodist *Discipline* stated the following.²

Both science and human experience agree with the Holy Scriptures in condemning all alcoholic beverages as being neither useful nor safe. The business of manufacturing and vending such liquors is also against the principles of morality, political economy, and the public welfare. We therefore regard voluntary total abstinence from all intoxicants as the obligation of the citizen and the complete legal prohibition of the traffic in alcoholic drinks as the duty of civil government.

Today the situation is quite different. The “General Board of Temperance, Prohibition and Public Morals” is now the “General Board of Church and Society,” and the list of prohibited practices that once included such things as attending dances, theaters, horse races and circuses³ as well as using alcohol has given way to exhortations for moderation. In the section on standards for the clergy, the present *Discipline* includes the following explanatory statement regarding this shift.

The changes here do not relax the traditional view concerning the use of tobacco and beverage alcohol by ordained ministers in the United Methodist Church. Rather they

¹ *The Bone-Dry Battle and The Trench Beyond*, by Dr. Clarence True Wilson. Rev. Wilson (1872-1939) of the Oregon Conference, a nationally-known dry crusader was General Secretary of the Board of Temperance, Prohibition and Public Morals.

² *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1916*, paragraph 70, section 1.

³ See, for example, *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1884*, paragraph 233.

call for higher standards of self-discipline and habit formation in all personal and social relationships. They call for dimensions of moral commitment that go far beyond any specific practices which might be listed.⁴

In truth, the 1918 position, as harsh as it may sound today, was only a step in Methodism's evolving positions in many areas. The Methodist Episcopal Church in America was formally organized in 1784, and after 100 years the denomination's once-simple *Discipline* had evolved to include the following:

In cases of...the buying, selling, or using intoxicating liquors as a beverage, signing petitions in favor of granting license for the sale of intoxicating liquors, becoming bondsmen for persons engaged in such traffic, renting property as a place in or on which to manufacture or sell intoxicating liquors...

First, let private reproof be given by a Preacher or Leader, and if there be an acknowledgment of the fault, and proper humiliation, the person may be borne with.

On a second offense, the Preacher or Leader may take one or two discreet members of the Church.

On a third offense, let him be brought to trial, and if found guilty, and there be no sign of real humiliation, he shall be expelled.⁵

Those paragraphs from the 1884 *Discipline* are especially relevant to this issue of *The Chronicle*. It was Methodism's response to the problem of alcohol that thrust Passmore (page 24) and Hogan (page 51) into the spotlight in this issue, and the church trial was the focus of the article taken from the Pittston circuit records (page 74). In general, it is the evolving nature of United Methodism in a variety of areas that created the situations presented in the bulk of the articles in this issue of *The Chronicle* and that continues to create much of the denomination's present conversations and struggles.

While a comprehensive analysis of disciplinary changes over the years would give a detailed account of the denomination's evolving position on the use of alcohol and on many social issues, suffice it to say that the building projected for Washington DC in 1918 has been a United Methodist presence and social conscience for the executive, legislative and judicial branches of our federal government for almost 100 years. A history of the building and its role in many of the movements, events and laws that have shaped our nation may be found on the Internet at <http://umc-gbcs.org/about-us/the-united-methodist-building>, within the website of the General Board of Church and Society.

⁴ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2012*, page 226

⁵ *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1884*, paragraph 233.