

Vic's Pics

BOOKS EVERY METHODIST PREACHER SHOULD OWN

DR. VIC REASONER, PRESIDENT, SOUTHERN METHODIST COLLEGE



PART VIII

WESLEY'S VETERANS

In 1965 Robert E. Chiles published *Theological Transition in American Methodism* (reprinted in 1983). He traced three major changes in Methodist doctrine from 1790-1935.

*From Revelation to Reason

*From Sinful Man to Moral Man

*From Free Grace to Free Will

Each doctrinal change is traced through three periods of development. Whether the change is viewed as progress or apostasy depends upon our perspective. The first period was that of the founders of Methodism: John Wesley, John Fletcher, Richard Watson, Adam Clarke, and Joseph Benson.

The second period covers the last half of the nineteenth century, culminating in John Miley. By the third period, which brings us up to 1935, Methodism has become liberal and had departed from its foundations. Methodism was slower to adopt higher criticism than any other major denomination in Great Britain in the decades prior to World War I. I believe this conservatism may have been due to the heavy emphasis upon Scripture in Methodist liturgy, along with their emphasis on fervent Chris-

tian experience. However, American Methodism was sold out by its educational institutions.

In the section dealing with authority, Chiles establishes Scripture as the basis of early Methodist teaching. However, Wesley certainly allowed for the validity of tradition, reason, and experience to confirm his interpretation of Scripture.

While the authority of Scripture was still affirmed in the next generation of Methodists, there was a growing awe of science and philosophy. By the early twentieth century Methodism has succumb to a rationalism based upon evolutionary philosophy.

The early Methodists did not trust reason as their ultimate authority because they believed that human depravity darkened the unregenerate mind. However, the second major change was in the theology of sin. Early Methodism held to the doctrine of original sin which resulted in total depravity.

By the second period some American Methodists concluded that the doctrine of original sin was too Calvinistic. Daniel Whedon wrote *The Freedom of the Will as a Basis of Human Responsibility and a Divine Government* (1864). Thomas Langford wrote that this new emphasis placed more emphasis upon human capability and gave less weight to the grounding of this ability in prevenient grace.

By the early twentieth century Methodism held that man is a rational being capable of knowing God and entering into fellowship with him. Albert Knudson denied any such thing as an inherited moral depravity. Sin is no longer a necessity. It is

the result of man's free choice. And prevenient grace becomes the "spark of goodness" within every person. In contrast Chiles concluded that human goodness was Wesley's goal, not his starting point.

This leads to the third major transition — from free grace to free will. If man is depraved, God must make the first move and he does so through preliminary grace. But if mankind is not sinful, he can choose right. Thus the early Methodist emphasis on prevenient grace was abandoned for an emphasis on free will.

Thus, in 1879 John Miley "fixed" the Methodist doctrine of atonement. He replaced the early Methodist view of satisfaction with his subjective governmental view, which holds that the purpose of the atonement was to impress upon mankind the importance of our right choices.

By the modern period salvation is no longer the rescue of helpless man; it is his own choice to improve his condition. This new doctrine of salvation is not based upon Scripture or tradition, but upon prevailing philosophical liberalism.

It is because of this departure from early Methodist doctrine that I find it difficult to recommend more modern Methodist writers. I am not saying that nothing is worth reading beyond W. B. Pope, but I am saying that to the degree that theologians in our tradition have abandoned historic orthodoxy in their quest for acceptance by the modern secular mind they are not trustworthy.

The next installment will be the last, as I chronicle a Methodist theologian who moved from modernism back to orthodoxy.