

Vital Piety and the Mind

By Riley B. Case

Good News board member, the Rev. Dr. Riley Case, has written an invaluable book for United Methodism. In *Evangelical and Methodist: A Popular History*, published by Abingdon Press in 2004, Case documents how the spread of Methodism in America divided into two branches. One was the Methodism of tall steeples. That is, Methodism becoming institutionalized, with authority residing in bishops, conferences, and later, boards and agencies. The other branch is what Case calls populist Methodism. This was the Methodism of log cabins, moral crusades, circuit preachers, revivals, camp meetings, prayer bands, and indigenous Methodist gospel music. It is often referred to as "grassroots" Methodism. It was Methodism not as an institution, but as a movement.

This important new book tells the story of the second branch of the Methodist tradition in America. It recounts the history of Methodism's evangelical wing, with particular focus on twentieth-century developments. This article is an excerpt from Chapter 7, "Vital Piety and the Mind."

In the late 1950s, Billy Graham was coming to Chicago. Some of us at the seminary I attended thought it would be good for the school, and good for Billy Graham, if he would speak in chapel or in some way be invited on campus to interact with students. With that in mind, several students spoke with the president of the seminary. The word back was that Billy Graham would not be invited, because "we do not wish to be identified with that kind of Christianity."

For those in a Methodist seminary during the 1950s, or, for that matter, during the 1940s, or 1930s or 1920s or 1960s or 1970s or 1980s, such a response was common. If not outright hostility, there was either subtle discounting or, even worse, a failure even to acknowledge, let alone understand, the part of Christianity that maintained faithfulness to the doctrinal standards of the Church and understood itself to be part of the evangelical approach to the faith.

I spoke one day to the faculty person responsible for finding chapel speakers. I asked if it would be possible to invite a well-known evangelical to be "preacher of the quarter." He was cautious:

Who was this "evangelical?" This was not the first time we had played word games at the seminary. He commented that at the seminary all were "evangelicals," so obviously I had another group in mind.

A couple of years earlier, when I was trying to decide what seminary to attend, I had sought the counsel of a number of persons—friends, pastors, and other people I respected. I heard horror stories about individuals who had gone to "liberal" seminaries and had graduated confused about faith and as cold and "formal" as the churches they would eventually serve. The Methodist counsel I received disputed those stories and argued that since I was Methodist, I should go to a Methodist seminary. It was sure to be a broadening experience. The advice given was that those who graduated confused were likely not mature to begin with.

When I mentioned to a district superintendent one day that I had tentatively made a decision to attend Fuller Seminary in California, he told me that Fuller was really in the category of a Bible school and I would not receive a good education

there. Indeed, it was unacceptable, and if I went out there I should not expect to come back to the North Indiana Conference. I eventually ended up at Garrett Biblical Institute. Garrett had high academic standards, was close enough to Indiana so I could pastor churches in my home conference while in seminary, and was supposed to be-so everyone associated with the school assured me-diverse and open to many different points of view.

It was indeed academically challenging. And it was diverse. Some were convinced that pastoral counseling would save the world, others, that what the Church needed was liturgical worship. Still others, that the Church could never influence the world without social and political involvement-mostly fighting racism and exploitative capitalism.

This was during the heady days when neo-orthodoxy and existentialism were the current theological fads. We read Karl Barth and Rudolph Bultmann and Reinhold Niebuhr and discussed personalism and existentialism and process theology. The theological and biblical perspectives of the professors covered all of the positions that ranged from radically extreme liberal to extreme liberal to liberal to-as conservative as anyone got-moderate.

There were no evangelicals, at least as I understood the term. There were no fundamentalists. There were no conservatives. There were no Pentecostals. A large part of Protestantism simply did not exist in that seminary community, at least not in serious form. Its representatives were not invited on campus. Its books were not read. Its perspectives were not taken with seriousness. When it was recognized at all, it was almost always with negative implications. It was religion that was "privatized," "individualized," and "simplistic." It was referred to as "literalism," "fundamentalism," or "pietism." It was religion that existed in backwoods areas, among the

uneducated, and among those fearful of modern times.

Furthermore, this "fundamentalism" was identified with an intolerant spirit that simply would not be tolerated. Early in my seminary life, I handed in a paper critiquing the professor's favorite author and had concluded that the man's views were heretical. The paper came back with an F. The professor then commented in class that papers judging the author's work not to be Christian had been submitted and such views simply would not be allowed. Here was a new understanding of "heresy." Heresy was no longer deviation from historic standards of doctrine, but rather believing that historic standards of doctrine mattered. So we learned early that ideas needed to be guarded, speech carefully chosen, and one's true convictions suppressed.

My seminary was evangelical, as long as the seminary could define what evangelical meant. It was Methodist, as long as it could define what Methodist meant. It was diverse, as long as it could define what diverse meant. It was faithful to the gospel, as long as it could define what faithful to the gospel meant. It was also open-minded, as long as it could define what open-minded meant. Open-minded in the seminary meant that we would be "stretched" and challenged by points of view from the theological left, but did not need to hear anything from the theological right.

With a few exceptions, administration and faculty at the seminary did not understand that they were operating from a parochial point of view. And, unfortunately, the attitude of the seminary was becoming the attitude of the larger institutional church, and especially of "the hierarchy," a phrase usually used pejoratively and signifying a system operated by a mediating elite of seminaries, bishops, and agencies. This mediating elite needed to filter and approve what was appropriate teaching or action for common

ordinary Methodists. A professor commented one day that without a critical understanding of the Bible, supplied supposedly by seminary-trained pastors, the Bible in the hands of a layman was a dangerous thing.

Many of us who graduated from these seminaries predicted that, given the pastoral leadership supplied by the seminaries, the mainline churches would soon face disintegration and decline. This, to our sorrow, was exactly what would happen in the years to come. Inasmuch as there was hope, it would come to us because of the evangelical influences apart from seminary. This, to our encouragement, is precisely what would happen in the months to come. One of those influences was the Good News movement.

What the Good News movement did for numbers of evangelicals was to provide a safe space for persons to be themselves, to share their stories, to speak their language and give expression to their worship. Clergy and lay could talk openly about the blood of Jesus, being saved, the return of the Lord, answers to prayer, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Renewal group gatherings and national convocations became times of spiritual refreshment because the environment was open and accepting. "I never knew there were so many other United Methodists who shared my convictions" was a phrase heard over and over.

At these gatherings and in other relationships made possible by Good News, the church-related colleges and seminaries were often discussed. The accounts were not positive. Some of the best evangelical candidates had left the denomination. Seminary atmospheres were described as stifling and oppressive. There were some bright spots. Students who had attended Candler School of Theology could find encouragement from Dr. Claude Thompson. Others could relate to moderates such as William Hordern of Garrett and Albert Outler of

Perkins, but beyond that, from top to bottom, in every geographical area, United Methodist seminaries offered a hostile environment to evangelicals.

Struggles over ministerial training were not new to Methodism. Methodism from its very beginning was a populist and egalitarian movement that valued the changed heart above the trained mind. At Methodism's organizing conference in 1784, preachers were advised never to let study interfere with soul-saving: "If you can do but one, let your studies alone. We would throw by all the libraries of the world rather than be guilty of the loss of one soul."

Between 1780 and 1829, during the period of Methodism's most rapid growth, forty colleges and universities were found in the United States, mostly by Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Congregationalists. Hardly any were Methodist. While Presbyterians and Congregationalists were steeping themselves in classical studies so that they serve as the cultured and educated elite of the nation, Methodist preachers were organizing camp meetings, preaching revivals, and winning the hearts of the masses. The Methodist message that all could be saved (unlimited atonement), that every person had value in God's sight, and that in God's sight the experience of the heart was more to be desired than the trained mind, made it attractive to all people, rich and poor, black and white, sophisticated and unsophisticated.

Methodists were not necessarily anti-learning, but they were suspicious of "aristocrats," "formalists," and the cold intellectualism that was often associated with highly educated clergy who had lost the ability to communicate with common people. Methodism was a "bottom-up" religion rather than a "top-down" religion ruled by mediating elites.

In 1832, Congregational seminaries enrolled 234 students, Presbyterian seminaries, 257,

Episcopalians, 47, Baptists, 107, and the Methodists, none. The first Methodist seminary opened in 1847. In 1859, the other denominations enrolled over 1200 students to the Methodists' 51. Yet Methodism claimed the allegiance of one-third of the entire American population.

Methodist higher education was the result, rather than the cause, of its tremendous growth. Converted Methodist frontier persons became responsible citizens, then community leaders. A changing and more sophisticated America demanded an educated laity and clergy. There was a conviction that education did not have to undermine the gospel if it were the right kind of education, if it was an education sanctified and in service to Christ. Education was the logical next step in the desire to spread God's kingdom over all the earth.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Methodism's leading educators were making the transition from a populist and revivalist understanding of the faith to an approach that was reasoned, in tune with the latest developments in the social sciences, and at home with the respectable leaders of society. By this time, Methodism itself had also established more colleges than any other American denomination. And in addition to its denominational colleges, it had launched a number of significant universities: Boston University, Northwestern, Southern California, Duke, Emory, Southern Methodist, and Syracuse.

All of the Methodist educators could quote with conviction Wesley's famous saying about joining together "learning and vital piety," but vital piety looked more and more like religion in general, serving a God in general, advancing the cause of democracy, freedom, and the good life in general. Society would be enlightened and Christianized, but "Christianized" took on a different meaning.

What were the obstacles on the way to this Christianized society? There was, first of all, the ignorance of the uneducated. This ignorance could be found within Methodism itself. A good portion of common ordinary Methodists saw cold, formal education not as a help but as a hindrance to the spread of the gospel. It was a religion of the head and not the heart. It was not "spiritual."

Methodist religious educators on every level set out on a campaign to combat this ignorance of the uneducated.

Despite good intentions, these Methodist leaders evidently did not realize how quickly their vision would veer off in other directions. Intellectual challenges began to deconstruct the prevailing Protestant culture.

The growing acceptance of the scientific method and of Darwinism cast doubts on the biblical view of revelation. Eventually unbelief became as respectable as belief among the country's intellectual elite. Then, within a few years, belief would be seen as prejudice, doctrine as sectarianism, confessionalism as restricting, and religious tests as the denial of academic freedom.

The seminaries differed from the colleges and universities in their approach to education only in the matter of degree. The seminaries, too, desired academic recognition from the increasingly secular world, but they were also in the business of training pastors for churches. The question facing the seminaries was how to avoid sectarianism and still claim to be Methodist, or how to teach the Christian faith while at the same time, in the name of academic freedom, not requiring professors to be Methodist or Christian, or even believers of any kind.

Theological modernism offered the solution. Modernism sought to balance the claims of

science and modern learning with a religious worldview. Since doctrine and truth claims were areas of tension, modernism did its balancing simply by redefining the essence of Christianity and Methodism. Christianity (and Methodism) had always understood that the core of the faith revolved around certain "essential" (John Wesley's word) doctrines or truths. These were rejected by modernists who claimed that they were saving Christianity from a skeptical world by finding more fundamental essentials behind the doctrines.

In 1925, O.E. Brown authored the article "Modernism: A Calm Survey" printed in *Methodist Quarterly Review*, in which special note was taken of the seminary "problem." He noted the report of a special commission to the 1922 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, which stated:

"It may be that some, using the liberty which Methodism has always allowed its representatives, have gone too far in questionable speculations.. We therefore call upon all Annual Conferences, Boards of Trustees of our institutions of learning, and other responsible officers of our Church, to take all necessary steps to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrines contrary to God's word. Modish rationalism must not be permitted to affect our devotion to the established tenets of ancient and abiding Christianity."

There is no reason to believe the report was received with any seriousness. In defending the new thinking, Brown noted that modernism did not reject the creeds and historic documents, but rather understood them for "time value." The Church's doctrinal tradition told us where we had been, not where we were or where we were going. Historic statements were subject to revision, reinstatement, and reinterpretation. Brown did not make the point, but the implication was that those seminary professors,

with superior knowledge not available to the Church in all ages and in all other cultures, would themselves do this reinterpreting, and would share the new truth others were to follow. Methodism was moving toward religion by mediating elite.

Methodism was developing a ruling class of seminary-trained elitists. Pastors with seminary credentials could expect appointment to the larger churches in any conference. From the ranks of these pastors, college presidents would be selected, editors of church periodicals would be hired, and bishops would be elected. Ministerial candidates were urged to attend seminary not only to seek an academic training that would help them relate to the eminent leaders of their communities, but also because seminary, especially the right kind of seminary, would "advance their careers." Few persons were making an appeal to attend seminary because it would motivate them for evangelism or lead to deepened spiritual life.

Riley B. Case is a contributing editor and member of the Good News Board of Directors. Excerpted from Evangelical and Methodist: A Popular History (Abingdon Press, 2004). Used by permission. This book is available for purchase at Cokesbury.com.