

**AN ASSESSMENT OF THE LIFE, THEOLOGY AND INFLUENCE OF THE FIRST
AMERICAN OF AMERICAN METHODISM:
MR. WILLIAM WATTERS**

by

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DECLARATION

I declare that An Assessment Of The Life, Theology and Influence Of The First American Of American Methodism: Mr. William Watters, is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

Wayne P. Smith

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SUMMARY

William Watters was American Methodism's first itinerant preacher born in America. Although raised in an Anglican home, Watters was converted under the preaching and influence of Methodist preachers and soon became a class leader. At the invitation of Robert Williams, one of John Wesley's earliest workers in America, Watters embarked on his first itinerant preaching journey to the southeastern region of Virginia in October 1772.

Watters quickly rose to prominence in the budding Methodist movement as a preacher and leader and was appointed to his first circuit at the 1773 Conference. As the Revolutionary War against Britain grew more intense Wesley's missionaries left the country or went into hiding. As a result Watters became a significant leader of Methodism, which included becoming the first American Methodist to chair a Methodist Conference in 1778.

In the late 1770's the growing problem of limited access to the ordinances of baptism and communion came to a head with Methodists in Virginia and North Carolina ordaining themselves so that they could administer the ordinances. This created a split in American Methodism since preachers north of Virginia disagreed with these actions. In 1779 and 1780 the split was even more evident, with two separate annual conferences meeting. William Watters was the only preacher determined not to allow American Methodism to suffer irreparable damage from the schism. His proactive peacemaking efforts resulted in the reunification of the movement that met in a united Conference in 1781.

Watters gave America Methodism fifty years of distinguished service as an itinerant preacher, a local pastor, trustee and benefactor. Health took William Watters off the punishing circuits but it could never keep him from serving the Lord through American Methodism.

KEY TERMS

William Watters

Itinerant Preacher

Methodist Conference

John Wesley

Devereux Jarratt

American Methodism

Ordinance Schism

Christmas Conference

Francis Asbury

Circuit Preachers

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INTRODUCTION

So it is with men. Some live uneventfully in a dull age. They can be measured by such local landmarks as the dates of their birth and death, the children they rear, and the honorary degrees they receive. But sometimes we come upon a man who defies such a conventional sketch and William Watters was such a one. (Blakemore 1951 : 1)

The seventy-five years and five months that William Watters walked this earth is measured by far more than the dates of his birth and death. Watters did not set out to solicit the praise of men or to defy any convention. He simply sought to serve his God while he served humanity through the vehicle of Christian ministry. By so doing William Watters unassumingly rose to the forefront of one of the most significant institutions in the early years of his nation's existence: early American Methodism. His numerous achievements as a young novice preacher, although humbly executed, helped to galvanize Methodism in the American colonies during a period of critical unrest, for the movement and the nation. Regrettably, these efforts have not received the deserved recognition in the annals of history, which they are due. In 1928 Clarence Corkran (383) referred to Watters as "A Neglected Hero of the Cross" and went on to say:

Having just passed the one hundredth year after the death of the Rev. William Watters, the first native-born itinerant Methodist Preacher in America, it seems that we are far enough away from his services and contribution made to Methodism to accord him his proper place without any thought of favor or slight. However, it seems strange that one holding such a unique place in so great a denomination should be neglected this long.

Since Corkran penned the above sentiment almost eighty years ago, only a small handful of brief articles have been written on Watters. The simple fact that William Watters was the first American born Methodist itinerant preacher is within itself a feat worthy of extensive acknowledgement, however, it is not the only aspect of his life that warrants both casual and scholarly treatment. Watters "quickly became a recognized leader of American Methodism, placed in the forefront of the preachers through his wise judgment and administrative ability." (Burke 1964 : 139). When war and division threatened the survival of the fledging Methodist movement, Watters passionately worked for its continued advancement and healing. When chronic health problems threatened Watters' life after more than a decade of punishing itinerant ministry he did not retreat to the comforts of retirement but continued for many years as a local preacher, a trustee, a benefactor and he even returned to itinerancy for a season.

In 1806 Watters published his autobiography, which today is one of the most useful historical documents of early American Methodism, particularly for the Virginia and Maryland areas, and is a valuable source for general American history of the late eighteenth century. With reference to his personal journal Watters (1806 : 82) said, “Although I have a particular memorandum by me of each day's exercise and employment, I have no wish to publish what could not be useful to any but myself. Yet, I hope I shall be excused in giving a short extract of what I wrote down from day to day.” What Watters did with his journal is unknown. In the Spring 2000 issue of the Virginia United Methodist Heritage, a verbatim transcription of Watters’ 1806 autobiography, along with his “spelling . . . [and] penchant for sprinkling commas almost anywhere” (Wrenn 2000 : 2) was published. It was accompanied by numerous editorial comments by Rev. Raymond Wrenn, distantly related to William Watters by marriage, and a recognized Methodist historian. This research will make reference to the 1806 publication of Watters’ work and to the 2000 publication of Wrenn’s editorial comments.

A second and little known work of Watters was published in 1782. It briefly tells the story of the life and death of one of Watters’ brothers-in-law and fellow Methodist itinerants: William Adams. Although this 34-page booklet does not offer any significant additional insight into early Methodism as such, or the life of the author, it does allow the reader a very clear and useful window into his theology. This research will make extensive use of both of these publications of Watters. In 1898 D. A. Watters published the only objective extensive work on the life and accomplishments of his great uncle, however, it is more of a personal narrative than a scholarly treatment of the life of Watters as it impacted early American Methodism. In addition to the above, there are only about a dozen noteworthy journal articles, encyclopedia entries or brief scholarly papers on William Watters that have been published or delivered in the past two hundred years, yet this man’s contribution to early American Methodism was extensive and his proactive efforts when Methodism teetered on the brink of possible disaster, arguably saved the movement from significant impairment.

Many of Watters’ contemporaries who left written records make personal references to him, several of them affectionately, as they detail the significant issues wherein Watters played leading roles. Asbury, Rankin, Shadford, Haskins, Pilmore and Jarratt penned some of these primary resources. Methodist histories written by some of Watters’ contemporaries or those close to his era that are of great value include Lee, Bangs, Atkinson and Stevens. Many twentieth

century Methodist historians are also useful. Heitzenrater, Richey, Barclay, Burke and Sweet are only a few of those who will be considered in this research.

The omission of Watters from some compilations of significant early American Methodists betrays the fact that he has not received the attention his life warrants. Kirby's (1996 : 255-373) Biographical Dictionary of Methodist Leaders has over seventy entries, with the exclusion of Watters. M. H. Moore's 1884 publication of Pioneers of Methodism in North Carolina and Virginia also omits Watters.

Watters' great-nephew said, "We seek not to create a hero of our subject." (D. A. Watters 1898 : 5). This writer believes that William Watters deserves hero status rather than the scant consideration given to his life and work. D. A. Watters (1898 : 5-6) went on to say, "His place at the head of the itinerancy; his devotion and arduous labors during the Revolution . . . his position as peacemaker between the two factions of the Church concerning the ordinances, make his life at least a pleasing consideration." It is the goal of this research and subsequent writing that the life and work of William Watters will receive its just recognition while being diligent not to elevate the man above his rightful place in history, which his humble spirit would have chafed against.

In the years before Watters first heard the term Methodist he was a spiritually troubled young man growing up in a single parent family with his only window into Christianity being the uninviting trappings of formal Anglicism. Not too far from his childhood home in Harford County, Maryland, rudimentary Methodism was taking root under the maverick leadership of Robert Strawbridge and in New York, Methodism was budding with the work of cousins Barbara Heck and Philip Embury. Across the Atlantic Ocean British Methodism was in its third decade and was slowly impacting that country's religious and social landscape. When Watters opened his heart to experiential religion as believed by Methodists, and when he responded to the invitation to preach under the umbrella of American Methodism, he was stepping into what was to become a worldwide movement, producing a rich heritage that millions around the world would join.

William Watters was not the father of American Methodism nor was his role the only or strongest link in the movement's chain of success. It is impossible to quantify how Methodism would have emerged from the tensions of the American Revolutionary War of Independence and the division caused by the ordinance issue if it were not for Watters' proactive leadership. What

is clear is that the efforts of Watters both as a preacher and as an organizational leader during early American Methodism's most trying years paid significant dividends: revival broke out in much of Virginia; the movement not only survived the war, but it grew during it; and the great divide that threatened to irreparably hurt the movement, was bridged and healed. Watters deserves so much more than being a mere neglected hero.

Chapter One of this paper will set the ecclesiastical and historical scene onto which William Watters would walk. A brief overview of Methodism's historical background is accompanied with biographical sketches of the missionaries and volunteers that John Wesley sent or approved for the Methodist cause in America in the late eighteenth century, most of whom worked alongside Watters. Accounts of the early lay pioneers of American Methodism who had immigrated are also presented. It is important to note that the accomplishments of Watters was within the framework of American Methodism's rudimentary infancy, which was characterized with much trial and error as the movement took root alongside that of its host nation.

Chapters Two and Three will detail the life and work of Watters: from his birth in 1751 to the Fourth Annual Conference held in 1776, in Chapter Two: then Chapter Three will cover the departure of the English preachers, Watters' leadership of American Methodism, into his later life. An overview of the growth and development of American Methodism will be sketched as we recount Watters' most active itinerant years from 1771, the year of his conversion, to early 1784 when he located for the first time. Chapter Three will also briefly cover the last four decades of Watters' life, for which not much information is available. After recovering from illness Watters returned to itinerant work for a brief period in 1786. Over the next twenty years, while battling many extended bouts of poor health, Watters served several local preaching points and traveled more than his health should have permitted. Watters died in 1827, spending the last decade of his life in almost total blindness.

The very impressive list of distinctive qualities and achievements for which Watters is credited is detailed in Chapter Four. They include:

- The first American Methodist itinerant preacher.
- The first American appointed to a circuit.
- Among the first Americans to attend a Methodist Conference – 1774.
- American Methodist leader during the Revolutionary War.

- The first American to chair a Methodist Conference.
- American Methodist peacemaker during the ordinance schism.
- Tireless worker and benefactor of early American Methodism.

On April 19, 1775 shots that would reverberate around the world, rang out in Concord, Massachusetts, that started America's War of Independence against Britain. By 1777, all of Wesley's British leaders who had come to America had either left the country or retreated from active service. The war ended in 1781 with a peace treaty being signed in Paris in 1783. The fact that Methodism not only survived the war years, but actually thrived in some parts is a testament to the fact that the vacuum the British leaders left was capably filled by native preachers, the leader being William Watters. Chapter Five will tell this story.

Toward the end of the war American Methodism was on the verge of disaster when the movement split into two factions. Chapter Six will show how the adamant insistence of Southern Methodists in Virginia and the Carolinas to administer the sacraments of baptism and communion, in spite of their lack of ordination, clashed with the Northern Methodists who desired to remain true to the original Methodist plan. The two groups broke ties for more than a year with William Watters serving as the sole proactive peacemaker. His apparent indifference on the issue is not an indication of a fickle disposition, but rather a heart that bled for the movement he loved and the prospects of irreparable damage that he perceived would occur if he did not stand in the gap.

Clarence Corkran (1928 : 383) is one of the few individuals to this writer's knowledge who has referred to William Watters as Reverend. In 1784 John Wesley made one of the most dramatic moves in the era of modern day church history. After decades of resisting the inevitable: breaking with the Church of England, Wesley set in motion the establishment of an independent Methodist Church in America, more out of necessity than desire. At the Christmas Conference in 1784, as a result of Wesley's initiative, Francis Asbury's agreement and the voice of the assembled preachers, The Methodist Episcopal Church of America was born. Chapter Seven will focus on the birth of the Episcopal Methodist Church in America at the now famous Christmas Conference of 1784, and the first official American Methodist ordination service that was held at the Conference. The vital issue of Watters' attendance at the Conference and his ordination will be examined.

Chapter Eight will focus on the theology of William Watters. As a young boy he did not enjoy school, partly because it took him away from his mother. He makes no mention of how far he went in education, but it is clear that he did not have any formal higher learning, yet he read widely, wrote well and clearly articulated his thoughts. Watters' theology was very clear. He proved to be a fundamental Wesleyan in areas of sin, salvation and sanctification and he was quick to recognize faulty theology in others.

Chapter Nine will focus on the legacy of William Watters, who eventually retired from both itinerant and local ministry but, never fully ceased working for Methodism. His combined experience as a quality preacher, his gentle spirit and his widely recognized business sense made him a highly sought after man. This chapter will not only list some of the churches he worked for, but details of the house he built and his physical appearance will be offered based on eyewitness accounts. Part of Watters' legacy has entailed an extended struggle over the preservation of his gravesite, the establishment of the William Watters Foundation and the naming of churches in his honor. These issues will also be discussed.

Watters' works are obviously referenced extensively in this research. About a dozen of Watters' quotes and a few from other writers appear more than once, not due to oversight, but because of their relevance in various parts of this paper.

It is this writer's hope, and the motivation behind this research, that William Watters, a hero of the cross, will no longer remain neglected.

CHAPTER ONE

EARLY AMERICAN METHODISM

The living organism that early American Methodism became drew much of its own life from the burgeoning American free and independent spirit that was saturating the landscape. The Methodist transplants to the New World, who birthed the movement in the 1760's, had no organizational structure to move within, no strong patriarchal oversight on this side of the Atlantic to glean wisdom from, and no sound ecclesiastical base to support them. They inadvertently, but fortuitously, played their trump card early, which was to fashion an identity and constituency that was not so much cultivated from comfortable towns and neat buildings as it was from the rugged 'frontierism' that already smacked of independent fortitude. From its earliest roots American Methodism was forging its own path alongside, and in many respects similar to, that of the young nation. As Norwood (1974 : 17) says "Not only in its inception but throughout its development [Methodism] was most in tune with the American song." With this said, it may be perplexing to some that the movement remained tethered to Wesley and England for as long as it did. However, it is because of its Wesleyan moorings, albeit tenuous at times, that American Methodism was able to develop into such a strong and widely respected force: arguably the most influential non-governmental institution in America in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The eventual rise of American Methodism to free ecclesiastical self-government was a natural step in the wake of America's own independence from Britain. Hempton (2005 :11) suggests that some historians have regarded "Methodism as expressly a counter-enlightenment and counter-revolutionary movement." This may be indicative of the movement's birth and growth in Britain, but it was not the case in America. In the eighteenth century England was philosophically dealing with the enlightenment as it socially responded to the promises of new industry and the threats of revolution, that were already in advance stages of fermentation across the English Channel. Conversely, by the late eighteenth century enlightenment thinking had not yet gripped the colonies across the Atlantic, at least not as it had impacted much of European religious thinking. Although revolution was on the minds of many Americans, Methodism in America did not grow in reaction to it, but rather alongside it. What is even more significant, as

will be pointed out in more detail, is the fact that American Methodism did not start as a result of a formal missionary push from Wesley and English Methodism. It began because laymen and women who had been Methodists in Britain, and who had sought a new life for themselves in America, independently desired to hear the Methodist message preached on their shores, and resolved to see it happen. Sweet (1933 : 27) says “Methodism arose out of two great urges: the first was the religious experience of John Wesley; the second was the vast spiritual destitution of eighteenth-century England.” The same could be said of the start of Methodism in the American Colonies.

The Methodists who had made their way across the Atlantic did not abandon the religious experiences they had in England. They passionately wanted to share the same with their new fellow countrymen as they quickly recognized that the state of religious affairs in America was deplorable. John Wesley, himself a product of a heritage of dissenters from the ecclesiastical establishment, welcomed and aided the American initiatives as they allowed him to further stretch his patriarchal cloak. “At no stage of its early history was Methodism a democracy. John Wesley was a Tory and by natural temper, training, and deliberate choice an autocrat.” (Barclay 1949 : XXXVIII). Yet Wesley was never able to fully develop American Methodism on his own terms. The Atlantic Ocean served as sufficient enough of a barrier to not allow Wesley to pull the American Methodists completely away from their free spirit and into his firm autocratic ways, although he attempted many times through like minded leaders such as Rankin and Coke and through external events such as the American War of Independence and his loyalty to the British Crown. Eventually Wesley too would have to allow the Americans to make their own way in the world. Fortunately for the movement, and contrary to their secular counterparts, American Methodism and Wesley parted formally within a spirit of mutual love and respect and not through the barrel of any ecclesiastical or theological gun. In this sense “Methodism, from humble and rustic beginnings . . . always has shared the American dream.” (Together 1965 : 2).¹

In spite of its infant struggle for self determination American Methodism, from start to independence, was ably led by British born leaders, except for a brief critical period during the Revolutionary War, and at the top of the hierarchy was obviously Wesley, whose mark was clearly imprinted on all he did. “Early American Methodism embodied the spiritual passion, the

¹ For more details on this publication see the Bibliography under the title of the article: “Methodism: Reared in Log Cabins.” No author is listed.

religious experience, and the faith and teaching of John Wesley.” (Barclay 1949 : XV). It must be stated, however, that if it were not for the strength, commitment and resilience of American born Methodists who stepped forward to ride and preach on rugged circuits; who took the brunt of anti-English sentiment by their fellow patriots; who stood in the vacuum of leadership when their English leaders no longer could; and who kept their independent spirits in check long enough for them to learn to adequately walk and run before the English apron strings were cut, it is doubtful if any of Wesley’s efforts across the Atlantic would have lasted as long and as well as they did. When American Methodism was formally and independently instituted in 1784, it was a result of the cumulative achievement of Wesley’s administrative genius that had stretched across the ocean; Francis Asbury’s dogged and sacrificial leadership; and the gritty efforts of dozens of America’s own sons who dedicated their lives for the cause of Methodism in America. This research is going to highlight the critical contributions one of those often neglected sons of America made to early American Methodism, but first, it is important to set the stage onto which William Watters walked.

1.1 JOHN WESLEY IN ENGLAND

On February 1, 1738, after a disastrous two-year stint of missionary service in America, Wesley landed back in England. His desires to evangelize the American natives never fully materialized; his efforts to impose his conservative high-church ways rubbed the colonists the wrong way; and his bungling efforts at romance with the daughter of a local leader did not bode well for the little Englishman. As a result nothing noteworthy of Wesley’s work in America lasted beyond his stay although Baker (1976 : 70) does refer to Wesley’s and George Whitefield’s work in America as “a generation of seed-sowing.” Almost ten years earlier Wesley had actively led a group of pious fellows at Oxford, England, in daily and weekly religious disciplines that engendered the nickname “Methodists.” Three months after his return to England and just three weeks before his famous spiritual awakening on Aldersgate Street in London, Wesley started the Fetter Lane Society. He later withdrew from it over doctrinal issues and started a new society at an old foundry. In the interim Wesley’s friend and former member of the “Methodists” at Oxford, George Whitefield, invited him to preach in the fields around the English town of Bristol. The experience, initially a bit shocking to Wesley’s ‘high-church’ ordered and formal senses, coupled

with his own Aldersgate revitalization, spawned the great Methodist revival that Wesley would lead for the next fifty plus years.

In 1744 Wesley presided over the first annual Methodist conference which was “the most original contribution made by Wesley to church polity.” (Barclay 1949 : XXXVI).² These meetings would become the benchmarks of Methodist development both organizationally and theologically, while never straying far from Wesley’s steadfast control. It was at the annual conferences that Wesley often made passionate appeals for more workers to step forward, especially for new developing opportunities for Methodism. In the mid 1760’s Whitefield, who had already made several successful evangelistic tours of the colonies,³ but had created no lasting Methodist structure to care for his converts, asked Wesley if he could spare any workers for America.⁴ Wesley had insufficient workers for Britain, let alone foreign fields. (Heitzenrater 1995 : 243). Soon thereafter, lay Methodists already living in America and who were actively and independently working for the cause of Methodism on those shores, appealed to Wesley to send preachers and for monetary assistance. This was the challenge that stirred the father of British Methodism to give thought for his detached children across the ocean.

1.2 EARLY METHODISTS IN AMERICA

John Wesley made forty-two ministry trips to Ireland (Sweet 1933 : 49) for the cause of Methodism, which is where America’s first active Methodists came from: Robert Strawbridge and Philip Embury. Which of these individuals started Methodism in America and where it started, has long been a source of much conjecture and scrutiny fueled by some friendly territorial pride, depending on which side of the debate one stands. A *Joint Committee on Priority* was commissioned at the 1912 General Conference in America and charged with the responsibility of ascertaining in which area Methodism in America started: New York or Baltimore, Maryland. The Committee reported back to the 1916 General Conference without a definitive conclusion, yet they did lean toward a Baltimore priority.⁵

² See also Heitzenrater 1995 : 141-152

³ For an overview of Whitefield’s work in America and accompanying results for Methodism see Frank Baker, 1976, 30-33

⁴ See Maser 1965 : 18, 21; See Arminian Magazine August 1782, 439f

⁵ See General Conference Journal – Methodist Episcopal Church – 1916, 453, 462, 692-685, 1503-1508

Robert Strawbridge left no written records of his work in the Baltimore area but a record of a son of one of Strawbridge's converts, John Evans, listed his father's conversion "about the year 1764." (Porter 1928 : 379). A letter in the possession of the United Methodist Historical Society of the Baltimore-Washington Conference⁶ written by a Michael Laird on August 20, 1844, states that "Robert Strawbridge emigrated in the year 1760, with his wife and children, and settled in Maryland, and commenced soon after his arrival to hold meetings in his house, which resulted in the conversion of many." (Porter 1928 : 379-380). Francis Asbury, (II 1958 : 294) while in the home of Henry Willis, where Strawbridge had also preached, in Wakefield Valley, Maryland, on April 30, 1801, wrote, "Here Mr. Strawbridge formed the first society in Maryland – and America." Asbury may have been speculating on the historicity of his claim.

Repeated articles that appeared in the *Methodist Review* in 1928 and 1929 were still divided on the issue.⁷ It appears that other Methodists closest to those events were not as particular about assigning priority.

William Watters, (1806 : 109) a contemporary of these early Methodist events, saw no need to pin the title 'first' on any particular individual or location when he wrote, "Robert Strawbridge, a local preacher from Ireland, who with one more, Philip Embury, were the first Methodist preachers in America." In 1864 Abel Stevens (1864 : 80) writes; "Thus did Methodism begin simultaneously, or nearly so, in the north and in the middle of the opening continent." A statement as to the origins of Methodism in America contained in the official discipline approved by the Christmas Conference of 1784, which was prepared by Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke, and later amended by Asbury and William McKendree for the 1812 Discipline, offers the best non-scholarly account while possibly placating all concerned:

In the year 1766, Philip Embury, a local preacher of our society, from Ireland, began to preach in the City of New-York, and formed a society . . . about the same time, Robert Strawbridge, a local preacher from Ireland, settled in Frederick County, in the state of Maryland, and preaching there, formed some societies. (Discipline 1812, 3)

A resolution to this issue, although a challenge for any church historian, is beyond the scope of this paper and the writer's interest. Norwood (1974 : 65) correctly points out:

The real significance . . . of the lay initiative in the planting of Methodism in America - has been lost in the struggle to prove who was first. These earliest planters were certainly

⁶ Formerly The American Methodist Historical Society

⁷ See Maser 1966: 6

unauthorized. They had no warrant from anyone. John Wesley in England did not even know what they were up to, until he had a letter in 1768 asking for help.

What is evidently beyond dispute is the fact that Strawbridge was the first active and intentional Methodist in the Maryland area and Philip Embury and Barbara Heck who started Methodist activities in New York, both began their initiatives around the same time. “Nothing resembling organized Methodist societies appeared in America before 1766 when societies were organized more or less simultaneously in Maryland, Virginia, and New York.” (Smith 1981 : 14).

1.2.1 **ROBERT STRAWBRIDGE IN MARYLAND**

While the exact dates for the origins of Methodism in America are unknown, America’s first maverick is without question: the distinction goes to the “fiery, generous and energetic,” (Sweet 1933 : 51) Irish farmer, preacher and New World colonist Robert Strawbridge. No one really knows when he arrived in America, but it is believed to be somewhere between the late 1750’s and early to mid 1760’s. Strawbridge was attracted to the area of Maryland after seeing the cargo of wheat from the region being off loaded in his home of Ireland, where he had done some preaching as a Methodist. He took up preaching again shortly after arriving in the colonies, opening his home for that purpose. It is possible that “the Strawbridge home was the first focal point of organized Methodism in America.” (Baker 1976 : 39). He proceeded to build a log cabin to be used as a preaching house. The journal, Together For Methodist Families (1965 : 2) said “the earliest known Methodist log meetinghouse [was] built by Robert Strawbridge, an Irish colonist and carpenter, on Sam’s Creek, Md., in the mid-1760s.” Maser (1966 : 11) estimated that “seven or eight [Methodist] chapels erected by Strawbridge or his followers dotted this area before Richard Boardman⁸ and Joseph Pilmoor⁹ . . . arrived in 1769.” It is highly probable that Wesley had no idea what Strawbridge was doing, which would have been in keeping with Strawbridge’s nonconformist disposition.

Strawbridge often left his farm and family in the care of neighbors as his passion to preach drove him across the countryside. As “the most influential” (Baker 1976 : 33) of the early

⁸ Boardman and Pilmore were Wesley’s first formally appointed missionaries to arrive in America.

⁹ Pilmoor apparently had several ways to write his own name. Pilmore was the apparent rendition of choice in his later life and the spelling that will be used in this document unless in a quote. See Cofield 1980 : 9

Methodist transplants from Ireland, Strawbridge was under the conviction that God's manifest blessings on his ministry were the only mandate he needed to administer the sacraments to his constituents in spite of the fact that he was neither ordained, nor formally appointed. As "a strong-willed Irishman [he] saw no need to ask permission to carry on his ministry. He began preaching on his own, because he recognized a need. For the same need, he began presently to administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper." (Norwood 1974 : 66). Wesley had expressly and repeatedly informed his workers to never administer the ordinances if they were not duly ordained. With the majority of Anglican parishes devoid of either moral priests or priests at all, Strawbridge observed a critical need. As a result he led his young flocks of Methodist converts with all the rights and privileges of a fully trained and formally sanctioned priest but without the pomp or trappings of established ecclesiology. His efforts to administer the sacraments went undeterred for many years, even when Wesley's Assistants¹⁰ arrived to take control and bring a semblance of English Methodist order. Asbury's (I 1958 : 85, 88, 163) autocratic hand and Thomas Rankin's hard disciplinarian ways could not bend the Irishman. When his leaders encouraged him to desist from offering the sacraments, Strawbridge continued.¹¹ The Christians who came to the faith and to his society needed the sacraments and Strawbridge was going to meet that need. "His baptism of Henry Maynard may have been the first Methodist baptism in America . . . Apparently he preferred to move forward according to the immediate needs of the people rather than wait for the long-range plan of the organization." (Maser 1965 : 22, 24). By the early 1770's, his "fervor had accounted for nearly half the Methodists in the colonies." (Together 1965 : 2).

It is obvious to even the casual observer of the records of early American Methodism that the work of Strawbridge, peppered with irregularities as they were, was far more of an asset to the future of American Methodism than it was a liability. He laid a strong foundation for those who followed him, with structures to meet in, seekers to fill them, and more significantly, people to lead them. In addition to reaching people and building meeting houses Strawbridge "called forth the first native Methodist preachers in America, and eventually a whole group came into

¹⁰ An Assistant of Wesley's was one who was appointed to a Circuit or a Station and had general oversight of the local preachers and class-leaders. (Moore 1884 : 21). At this stage of the growth of American Methodism all of America would have been under Boardman's charge.

¹¹ For more on the impact of Strawbridge's practice of administering the sacraments see Chapter 6.

the itinerancy through his influence.”¹² (Sweet 1933 : 52). One of Strawbridge’s converts in Baltimore County, Richard Owen (Or Owings), became the first American born Methodist preacher.¹³ Another of Strawbridge’s native converts turned preacher, Joseph Presbury, was leading a prayer meeting in a home in the Baltimore area when a young spiritually troubled teenager was greatly impacted. His name was none other than William Watters. (Maser 1966 : 14). Richard Owens and Watters became dear friends and occasionally were preaching companions:¹⁴

It is difficult to see how Methodism could have developed or perhaps lived at all in Virginia and Maryland during the turbulent years of the Revolution without William Watters, Philip Gatch, Daniel Ruff and Freeborn Garretson beside the host of local preachers and exhorters, all of whom looked to Robert Strawbridge as their spiritual father. (Sweet 1935 : 76)

Strawbridge does not deserve all the credit for early American Methodism, but he does deserve a notable portion of it. The work of the fiercely independent Irishman was of huge significance for Methodism, for years to come. It is arguably because of his unconventional pioneering ways coupled with the fact that he “grazed in fenced pastures very unwillingly,” (Norwood 1974 : 66) that his name only appears as a formal Methodist appointee in 1773 and 1775.

For the years that he labored and for years to come, no one of American Methodism reached more people or produced more preachers. Strawbridge died in 1781 and is buried in Baltimore, Maryland.¹⁵ At the first Methodist Conference held in America in 1773, 1,160 members were recorded. Five hundred were from Maryland alone, a testament to the effectiveness of Robert Strawbridge.

“By the time that the regular itinerancy comes effectively into operation in Maryland, a band of Preachers, headed by such men as Watters, Gatch” (Stevens 1864 : 76-77) and others were poised to take Methodism to new frontiers.

¹² Burke (1964 : 125) notes that none of the young preachers who entered the ministry under Strawbridge imitated his insistence to administer the sacraments.

¹³ See Chapter 4 for more information on Owen being the first native preacher and Watters being the first native itinerant preacher.

¹⁴ See Watters 1806 : 108-109.

¹⁵ For Asbury’s harsh response to the news of Strawbridge’s death see his journal entry for September 3, 1781.

1.2.2 PHILIP EMBURY AND BARBARA HECK IN NEW YORK

Around the same time that Robert Strawbridge was doing his independent preaching in the Maryland area, a Methodist society in New York was being born. Philip Embury and his wife Margaret, along with his cousin Barbara Heck and her husband Paul arrived in America from Ireland in 1760. The Protestant Embury and Heck families, along with hundreds of others, had escaped Germany some fifty years earlier under the initiative of Queen Anne, who sought to rescue them from French Catholic persecution. (Sweet 1935 :51-53). Embury was converted under Wesley's preaching in 1752 (Maser 1965 : 25) and served as a Methodist "class-leader and local preacher" (Heitzenrater 1995 : 243) in Ireland. The group of extended family members attended a Lutheran church in New York (Baker 1976 : 41) before Barbara Heck roused Embury from his dormant Methodist leader state and pushed him to start a society in their area in 1766.¹⁶ In this sense "Barbara Heck stands for the enduring influence of lay women in Methodism." (Norwood 1974 : 67). Heck "went out and collected four persons, who, with herself; constituted his [Embury's] audience. After singing and prayer he preached to them, and enrolled them in a class. He continued thereafter to meet them weekly." (Stevens 1864 : 55). Thus we have the first formal Methodist society in New York.

The small Methodist group soon outgrew the Embury home and subsequently outgrew a nearby rented room. Just two years later, on October 30, 1768 Embury¹⁷ preached a dedicatory sermon from a pulpit he had made, in a new Methodist building on John Street,¹⁸ called Wesley Chapel, whose construction he had supervised, (Maser 1965 : 27). Although Methodism was now firmly established in New York and "Mr. Embury was a zealous and good man, yet he had but moderate abilities as a preacher." (Bangs 1838 : 52). An infusion of new life from others would be needed to propel the little society to greater heights.

¹⁶ For more information on the circumstances of Heck's challenge to Embury see Baker 1976, 42-43, footnotes included.

¹⁷ Less than two years after preaching this dedicatory sermon the Emburys and Hecks, along with other Methodists, moved further into New York State. Three years later Philip Embury died, shortly after which, his widow and the Hecks moved north into the New England area and eventually into Canada to escape the tensions of war. They remained very active Methodists wherever they went. (See Sweet 1935 : 70-71).

¹⁸ The John Street United Methodist Church is still in operation today.

1.2.3 THOMAS WEBB

One night a British soldier walked into the Methodist Meeting in New York . . . Thomas Webb, a captain in the British army, and a spiritual son of John Wesley . . . When he heard of the little group of Methodists in New York City, he hastened to join in their worship and give such assistance as he could. (Maser 1965 : 26)

“Wesley, delighted in the disciplinary regularity, the obedience and courage of military men, not a few of whom entered his itinerant ranks, evidently loved the good captain” (Stevens 1864 : 58) and being impressed with his gifts and usefulness, had thus licensed him to preach. The small young group of Methodists could justifiably have been startled at the appearance of a British officer clad in full military regalia, sporting a patch over his right eye:¹⁹

His first appearance as a stranger among the "little flock" in New York, in his military costume, gave them no little uneasiness, as they were fearful that he had come to "spy out their liberties," or to interrupt them in their meetings; but when they saw him kneel in prayer, and otherwise participate with them in their worship, their fears subsided; and on forming a more intimate acquaintance, they found that Captain Webb had "partaken of like precious faith" with themselves. He was accordingly invited to preach. The novelty of his appearance in the badges of a military officer excited no little surprise. This, together with the energy with which he spoke in the name of the Lord, drew many to the place of worship. (Bangs 1838 : 49)

Captain Thomas Webb²⁰ was on his second journey to the colonies when he joined the New York Methodist society in 1767. His strong leadership, eloquent preaching, social status as a former military officer and his generosity provided much forward motion for the small group:

Seeing a military officer preaching in full uniform with his sword lying across the pulpit, together with the natural and bold eloquence with which the Captain proclaimed the new gospel of repentance and the witness of the Spirit, soon attracted such crowds that it then became necessary to find a larger room. (Sweet 1935 : 65)

The enthusiasm that Webb infused into the little society in New York began to catch on, not only in increased attendance, but also in attitude amongst the other membership. Even Philip Embury, who tended to be staid in character, as noted in Thomas Taylor’s letter to Wesley in 1768, became “more zealous . . . more lively in his preaching; and his gifts as well as his graces are much increased.” (Bangs 1838 : 56). When land was purchased for the construction of what

¹⁹ Webb had received a wound to his right eye at a battle in America in 1759. (Bates 1975 : 4).

²⁰ Webb was positioned for promotion to Captain if he remained in the army but he sold his commission as Lieutenant in England, but retained his uniform, before returning to America. The title of Captain was a courtesy by those who knew him, which stuck for the rest of his life. (Baker 1976 : 56; Bates 1975 : 4).

would become Wesley Chapel, as mentioned above, Webb's name appears second on the deed, behind Embury.

Thomas Webb's active service reached much further than just New York. At Philadelphia on November 26, 1769, on just the second day of occupation by the local Methodist Society,²¹ Webb preached in a building purchased under his and Joseph Pilmore's²² leadership. He also preached the first sermon in the Lovely Lane Chapel in Baltimore, which was built in 1774 and was host to the founding of the Methodist Episcopal Church at the now famous Christmas Conference of 1784. Both of these congregations, in Philadelphia and Baltimore, still exist today. Webb was the first Methodist to preach in Delaware and the first to start a Methodist Society in New Jersey. (Baker 1976 : 58; Sweet 1933 : 57).

Few other workers, if any, accomplished as much for early American Methodism over the same time period as Webb had. John Adams, the second president of the United States of America, heard Thomas Webb preach in 1774 and remarked that he was "one of the most fluent, eloquent men I ever heard." (Norwood 1974 : 69). Wesley (Vol. III : 487)²³ said Webb was "all life and fire . . . and many are convinced under his preaching." Porter (1928 : 372) referred to Webb as "fiery, energetic, string-voiced, large-hearted." It is regrettable that "fierce loyalty to king and country asserted itself" (Bates 1975 : 17) over common sense. After some extended legal difficulty due to his loyalty to the British Crown in which he was accused of passing military information about Washington's troops to the British, Webb eventually returned to England in 1778²⁴ where he continued his service to Methodism, dying in 1796.

Because of the work of these early lay Methodists in America, by the time Wesley's first official Methodist appointees arrived "in 1769 they were able to assume leadership of a fast spreading movement." (Blakeman 1951 : 2). New York, Maryland, Virginia, Delaware and New

²¹ This congregation became St George's United Methodist Church, now the oldest Methodist Church building still in use. For an interesting account of the purchase of this church building see Pilmore's Journal, 1969, 27-28. For Pilmore's attempt to placate critics of Methodism taking on too much of a "church" persona, particularly with the purchase of the church in Philadelphia, see his journal, 1969, 29-30

²² The museum of St. George's United Methodist Church in Philadelphia holds Pilmore's original journal. Frederick E. Maser and Howard T. Mang produced a printed copy of the journal in 1969 with numerous editorial notes. Maser is a noted Methodist historian and a former pastor of St. George's. This copy of Pilmore's journal is referenced in this paper.

²³ All references in this document from Wesley's Works will be from the 1979 printing of the Jackson Edition unless otherwise stated.

²⁴ One of Webb's biographers, E. Ralph Bates (1975), along with others, hold to the 1778 departure of Webb back to England. Sweet (1935 : 65) believes Webb may have returned to England as late as 1782. For more on Webb's aid to the Loyalists see Bates, 1975, 19f.

Jersey were the “seedplots (sic) in which Methodism was first planted in America,” (Barclay 1949 : 17) by laymen who did not come to America to be preachers, but who saw the need; accepted the challenge; and who rose to be more than fitting for the task. All of Methodism that followed and much of American Christianity in general owe them all a debt of gratitude.

1.2.4 APPEAL TO ENGLAND FOR WORKERS

In the introduction to his journal, Joseph Pilmore (1969 : 15) states that appeals for help from America arrived in time for the British Methodist conference in 1768. In April of that same year Thomas Taylor, a member of the New York Methodist Society wrote²⁵ to Wesley giving him a brief overview of the work along with an appeal for financial and personnel assistance.²⁶ The finance was to be a contribution toward the cost of “the first preaching-house on the original Methodist plan in all America.” (Bangs 1838 : 57). Taylor’s plea for qualified workers to be sent to America was far more passionate than his appeal for finances. He even offered his own coat and the coats of other Methodists in New York, if they could somehow pay for the passage of workers from England: “I most earnestly beg . . . and trust you . . . will not forget the Church in this wilderness.” (Bangs 1838 : 58). It was not until the 1769 conference that Wesley raised the prospect of sending preachers to America as a viable concern:

I mentioned the case of our brethren in New-York. For some years past, several of our brethren from England and Ireland (and some of them preachers) had settled in North-America, and had in various places formed societies, particularly in Philadelphia and New-York. The society at New-York had lately built a commodious preaching-house; and now desired our help, being in great want of money, but much more of preachers. (Wesley Vol. 13 : 367; See also Vol. 3 : 374)

The “Methodist Conference at Leeds, England, in 1769, hummed with the question: ‘Who will volunteer to go to America as a missionary.’” (Maser 1965 : 9). It is not surprising that no one responded to Wesley’s appeal on the first day of the conference. Giving up home, family and country to journey across the Atlantic in those days was no small feat. Wesley’s plea on the second day garnered a response. “Two of our preachers, Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmoor, willingly offered themselves for the service; by whom we determined to send fifty

²⁵ For a detailed history of the survival of this letter see Baker (Methodist History – 1965) and Baker 1976, 72f

²⁶ Appeals from both New York and Maryland petitioning Wesley for workers were made in the mid 1760’s. (Pilmore Journal 1769 : 15)

pounds, as a token of our brotherly love.” (Wesley Vol. 13 : 367-8). Wesley then printed Thomas Taylor’s letter and circulated it to his Assistants. (Heitzenrater 1995 : 244). Boardman and Pilmore became Methodism’s first formally appointed missionaries to America, and along with the other preachers whom Wesley would send, “remained the most important gift” (Baker 1976 : 80) British Methodism made to their infant children in America.²⁷ It should be noted that the evident generosity of surrendering two able workers for America and fifty pounds cash did not emanate from an over flowing well of English Methodist resources. In spite of forty-six Methodist circuits in England at the time and a membership of about twenty-nine thousand, “the preachers were nearly all poor, more than two thirds of them remaining unmarried because unable to provide for families.” (Moore 1884 : 40).

While Maryland and Virginia are key states for the early years of American Methodism because of the size of their memberships and the number of native preachers they produced, New York is equally as critical as being the society “which stirred Wesley to send out itinerant preachers as missionaries.” (Baker 1976 : 40).

1.3 WESLEY’S MISSIONARIES AND VOLUNTEERS TO AMERICA

John Wesley obviously had no inkling that the American Revolutionary War was just a few years away when he dispatched his first missionaries to the New World: had he known, he arguably would not have sent them. Had Wesley’s missionaries come during or immediately after the Revolution, it is probable that few would have been listened to because of the animosity the Americans showed the English. Providentially, the timing could not have been more favorable. The denominations that had arrived earlier had waxed and waned in many areas. In Virginia, Maryland and the Carolinas the established church was Anglican with dissenters permissible and abundant but “a large proportion of the population was uncared for. The Churches, numerous as they were, fell far short of meeting the needs of the people as a whole.” (Barclay 1949 : 9).

The Anglican Church was particularly in a slump in the Mid-Atlantic Colonies. The effectiveness of the established churches to make any inroads into the lives of the Mid-Atlantic’s

²⁷ Swedish preacher, Dr. Charles M. von Wrangel, who had spent several years in America and was very familiar with Methodism, also appealed to Wesley in person, to send over workers. See Wesley, October 14, 1768, Volume III, 346.

masses was significantly impeded by “formalism, a religiously barren intellectualism, and a legalistic moralism . . . [Many clergy] were unsuitable – some ‘incompetent castoffs.’” (Barclay 1949 : 9, 12). Conservative enthusiastic Methodist preachers delivered a breath of fresh spiritual zeal over a cold and dreary religious landscape.

1.3.1 RICHARD BOARDMAN, JOSEPH PILMORE, ROBERT WILLIAMS AND JOHN KING IN 1769

Within three weeks of the 1769 Annual Conference Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmore were packed and ready to leave England. In their last week before departure they sought the counsel of George Whitefield, Charles Wesley and the Society at the Foundry in London. (Pilmore 1969 : 17). A year later John Wesley asked George Whitefield, who had returned to America,²⁸ “to keep a fatherly eye” (Baker 1976 : 26) on the young preachers he sent by “encouraging our preachers as you judge best; who are as yet comparatively young and inexperienced; by giving them such advices as you think proper.” (Wesley Volume XII : 159). Boardman and Pilmore arrived just south of Philadelphia in late October, 1769.²⁹

When we got on shore, we joined in a Doxology and gave praise to God for our deliverance and all the mercies bestowed upon (us) during the passage . . . Having no knowledge of any Society in Philadelphia, we had resolved to hasten forward to N. (New) York as soon as possible, but God had work for us to do that we knew not of. (Pilmore 1969 : 19-20)

The Methodist work in various parts of the colonies was already well established by the time this initial duo arrived, but the work was disjointed and lacked firm Methodist organizational structure and leadership. The arrival of Pilmore and Boardman helped to push Methodism, starting in Philadelphia and New York, toward the widespread unified, powerful body that it fast became and for which it was ubiquitously respected.

Richard Boardman, who had recently become a widower, had been one of Wesley’s itinerant preachers for about six years and was to serve in America as Wesley’s Assistant. (Sweet 1935 : 95; 1953 : 60). Boardman and Pilmore spent much of their four years in America either in

²⁸ Whitefield died in America that same year on September 30, 1770. (Stevens 1864 : 103).

²⁹ According to Pilmore (1969 : 19) they arrived in Philadelphia on October 21, 1769 but the exact date is disputed by many other notable Methodist historians. See Maser - Pilmore’s Journal 1969, 23; Norwood 1974, 70.

New York and Philadelphia or shuttling between the two cities. They also conducted extensive preaching tours with Boardman venturing as far north as Boston and Pilmore going as far south as Georgia, but they favored ministering in the cities as opposed to the rugged countryside. (Sweet 1955 : 53). “Mr. Boardman was a man of respectable talents as a preacher, of great simplicity and godly sincerity, and he entered upon his evangelical labors with a fair prospect of success, the people flocking to hear him with the utmost eagerness and attention.” (Bangs 1838 : 62-63). His poor health was a contributing factor as to why he spent most of his itinerant service in the New York area. (Norwood 1974 : 70).

Boardman returned to Ireland in 1774 where he continued his ministry as a Methodist preacher, dying a few years later. Wesley (Vol. 13 : 512) described Boardman as “a pious, good-natured, sensible man, greatly beloved of all that knew him.” His work in America was solid and productive, but not as widely effective as other workers Wesley sent. Although Boardman was the superior in authority, as bestowed by Wesley, Pilmore proved “to be the more aggressive, effective, and physically durable of the two missionaries.” (Burke 1964 : 82).

Joseph Pilmore was born on October 31, 1739 in Yorkshire, England, into a home of ardent Church of England adherents. He met Wesley when he was just sixteen “and was convinced that this was his kind of calling.” (Cofield 1980 : 5). Pilmore was educated at Wesley’s Kingswood School. He was admitted to the Methodist Conference in 1765 and served several circuits before embarking for America. Pilmore “was tall, with well-knit frame and firm step. He had a profusion of long hair which hung in graceful locks. He possessed a voice whose volume and melody enabled him to address vast multitudes with ease.” (Stanger :1969 : 247). Sweet (1933 : 60) says he “was a man of commanding presence and courage.” Although organized Methodist groups had already been formally meeting in at least three parts of the American Colonies for several years by the time Pilmore arrived, Sweet (1933 : 48) suggests that his sermon shortly after his arrival on North American soil was “the official beginning of American Methodism” since it began with Wesley’s official sanction.

Pilmore seemed to chaff under certain leadership and Boardman’s and Wesley’s were no exception. One of his primary irritations was the frequency with which Boardman wanted the two to switch ministries between New York and Philadelphia. They never stayed more than five months, while Boardman ordered a switch once after just two months. (Burke 1964 : 85). In the grip of the winter of 1771 Boardman, who was in New York, ordered a switch with Pilmore

(1969 : 111) who wrote in his journal on December 9, “I wondered much that he should wish to change in the very depth of winter! But I must submit.” Then as he was bidding the congregation yet another farewell he notes the following on December 22, 1771; “Mr. Boardman wants to be here, and I am obliged to submit. This is rather trying.” (Pilmore 1969 : 112). Despite Pilmore’s complaints about Boardman’s administrative irritants, he was not nearly as strict as Asbury and Rankin would later prove to be.

In 1772 Pilmore set off on a lengthy itinerant journey into southern Virginia and beyond.³⁰ As he made his way along the eastern regions of the mid-Atlantic colonies he found many active and well-established Methodist societies already in operation. In Virginia he and William Watters became acquainted. Pilmore’s work in Virginia was a forerunner for revival in many of that colony’s counties in the mid 1770’s. Pilmore was the first to take the Methodist message into North Carolina after which he traveled into South Carolina and Georgia, visiting the orphanage that Whitfield had started.³¹

Pilmore’s relationship with Wesley had soured (Pilmore 1969 : 206; Stanger 1969 : 243) and he had constantly criticized the practice of frequently moving preachers around, (Pilmore 1969 : 79, 111, 112, 163), a trademark of Methodism, even to this day. He sailed back for England in January 1774 with Richard Boardman, but later returned to America to give distinguished service to the Protestant Episcopal Church for more than 35 years.³² Pilmore’s reconciliation with Methodism and its workers, if one was ever truly warranted, was ably demonstrated because he “frequently and gladly admitted Asbury, Coke and other Methodist preachers to his pulpit . . . and paying an annual subscription to their preachers’ fund:” (Moore 1884 : 46-47).

That he [Pilmore] and Boardman should have appeared so opportunely on the new field of Methodism in America was visibly providential. They cleared a path for its march to its vast continental conquests before the military tempest burst upon the Colonies. The training and propulsion which they gave to American Methodism prepared it in a degree under God to abide and to surmount the long and severe revolutionary ordeal. By their luminous and unctuous preaching, and their faithful and wise pastoral supervision, the embryonic Methodist Church in America was much invigorated and fortified. (Stanger 1969 : 247)

³⁰ Burke (1964 : 86) thinks that this extended itinerant trip of Pilmore’s was in part, due to Asbury’s pressure for the missionaries to do more preaching beyond the comforts of the cities. See “Asbury” below for more details.

³¹ See Cofield 1980, 9; Pilmore 1969, 182; Maser 1969, 204.

³² See Cofield 1980, 10; Pilmore 1969, 206 [June 4, 1773]; Sweet 1935, 106-109.

Robert Williams, who was born in Wales, had served Methodism as a preacher in Ireland for at least three years. He traveled to America in 1769, arriving a month before Boardman and Pilmore. Although not enjoying a full conference appointment until 1770, and relying on friends to pay his passage, Williams did have Wesley's blessing to come to the New World with the understanding that he would work under the direction of Wesley's formally appointed missionaries. (Pilmore Journal 1969 : 25). When he arrived to board his boat Williams was armed with his saddlebags, a bottle of milk, a loaf of bread and an empty purse. (Lee 1810 : 26-27).

In America Williams' first appointment was to assist Embury in service to the congregation at Wesley Chapel, New York. It was here that he issued a Methodist Ticket³³ dated October 1, 1769, "which has been called the first such ticket to be issued in America." (Sweet 1935 : 81). In 1771 he made significant contributions to the revival in the Baltimore area, which greatly impacted the family of Godfrey Watters. During that year Williams must have seen something noteworthy in one of Godfrey's sons, the twenty-year-old, William Watters, because he invited the newly converted Watters to accompany him on a preaching tour of southeast Virginia. Williams had no idea what a considerable gesture the simple invitation was. While with Williams on his first itinerant journey Watters (1806 : 27) said his mentor "made it a point to introduce religious conversation at every convenient opportunity as we rode, sat by the fire side in taverns, and in private houses."

Williams' initiation into preaching in decadent Norfolk, Virginia, and the peoples' initiation into fiery Methodist preaching began with Williams singing from the steps of the town's courthouse. After a sizable crowd had gathered he commenced a sermon that was peppered with words such as hell, damnation and devil. His listeners concluded that he was either swearing or a madman, or maybe both, but "undaunted by the seeming failure, Williams persevered, hearts were touched, homes were opened, the word took root, souls were converted, [and] a society was formed." (Moore 1884 : 49). Williams also formed the first Methodist society in North Carolina. (Moore 1884 : 47).

Williams met Devereux Jarratt, the faithful Anglican friend and supporter of Methodists, while in Virginia. Williams assured Jarratt that the Methodists had no intention of withdrawing

³³ Methodist Tickets were needed for admittance into a Methodist Society. They were issued to those who were committed to living for the Lord under the umbrella of a Methodist Society. See Wesley VIII : 256-257.

from the Church of England. The Methodist itinerants and Jarratt would go on to develop an excellent working relationship that lasted for many years. (Jarratt 1778 : 6). The first fully functioning circuit in Virginia, the Brunswick, which included Jarratt's parish, was formed in 1774 and extended from Petersburg, in south-central Virginia, all the way down into North Carolina. "This region might well be called the cradle of Southern Methodism, and was soon to become the center of the first great Methodist revival movement in America." (Sweet 1935 : 36).

Williams used his initiative and became the first publisher of Methodist/Wesleyan literature in America when he published some of Wesley's writings, but without Wesley's consent. There is no indication that this endeavor was anything but a sincere effort to increase the work of the Gospel and the cause of Methodism. Asbury was concerned that the enterprise was open to abuse. He and Wesley both often reacted negatively when those under their charge showed some initiative that threatened their respective control. As a result of Asbury's disclosure to Wesley about Williams printing activities, Williams was ordered to stop.³⁴ Williams married and settled in the Norfolk area of Virginia where he died in September of 1775 but he never ceased promoting the cause of Methodism. "From the time of his arrival in 1769 to the day of his death in 1775, this intrepid Irishman was indefatigable in his effort to spread 'gospel holiness' throughout the American colonies." (Sweet 1935 : 80).³⁵ In the wake of preaching at his funeral, Asbury (I 1958 : 164) paid Williams the following tribute: "He has been a very useful laborious man, and the Lord gave him many seals to his ministry. Perhaps no one in America has been an instrument of awakening so many souls, as God has awakened by him." Robert Williams is deservedly on the list of significant early Methodist preachers whose work, in part, helped spawn the Virginia revivals of the 1770's.

John King, a doctor by training, was converted under Wesley's preaching. His willingness to go to America was probably fueled by the rejection and disinheritance by his family because of his affiliation with Methodism, which they loathed as staunch Church of England communicants. (Moore 1884 : 51-22). He arrived in the New World in late 1769, shortly after Boardman and Pilmore, but had no license to preach in America. According to Lee (1810 : 28) it was Pilmore who, after the recommendation of those who heard him, gave King

³⁴ This was a 1773 Conference ruling: Number 5. See Asbury Volume I 1958, 46

³⁵ Robert Williams was the first Methodist Missionary in America to publish Methodist literature, the first to marry, the first to locate and the first to die. (See Stevens 1864 : 84).

permission to preach under the Methodist banner.³⁶ He moved from Philadelphia, to Delaware and then into Maryland where, according to Stevens, (1864 : 89) his efforts resulted in Methodism firmly taking root in Baltimore.³⁷ King was evidently excessively enthusiastic in his preaching. Several established churches refused him a pulpit and even Wesley (Volume 12 : 331) admonished him not to scream.

King was a member of the first Methodist Conference in America in 1773, and he and Watters were appointed to New Jersey by the same conference. 1777 was the last year his name appears in the minutes. He married and settled in North Carolina where he practiced medicine, preached and eventually died in 1795. Two of King's sons and one grandson became Methodist preachers. (Sweet 1935 : 83).

1.3.2 FRANCIS ASBURY AND RICHARD WRIGHT IN 1771

Wesley was continually being plied with appeals for more workers to be sent to America. At the 1771 conference held in Bristol he once again appealed to the attendees for volunteers. Several responded but Wesley appointed only two: Francis Asbury and Richard Wright. When they arrived in October 1771 in Philadelphia, American Methodism was functioning, even thriving in parts, but its organization was loose, the discipline was lax and the unity amongst its workers was weak. To Asbury first,³⁸ “belonged the task of tying more firmly the bonds of Methodist organization and discipline.” (Burke 1964 : 96).

Francis “Asbury was destined to never leave America. He was to understand the land of his adoption and its new dynamic life more thoroughly than any other of Wesley's missionaries,” (Burke 1964 : 97) Wesley included. Born in August 1745 near Birmingham England, Asbury was converted while working for a Methodist as a blacksmith apprentice: (Hughes 1984 : 7).

He was only about seventeen years old when he began to hold public meetings . . . eighteen when he began to preach . . . When appointed by Wesley to America he was a young man, about twenty six years of age. He had been in the traveling ministry only about five years. (Stevens 1864 : 115)

³⁶ Barclay (1949 : 33) believes that King was licensed by Wesley to preach.

³⁷ See also Moore, 1884, 52.

³⁸ Asbury was the first astute disciplinarian American Methodism had. Rankin, an even stricter disciplinarian, followed as Wesley's next General Assistant, but Asbury resumed the responsibility after Rankin returned to England and Asbury came out of hiding toward the end of the Revolutionary war.

On September 12, 1771 while on board ship to America, in an introspective moment of reaffirming his commitment to Methodism and missionary service, Asbury (I 1958 : 4) penned the following in his journal:

Whither I am going? To the New World. What to do? To gain honor? No, if I know my own heart. To get money? No: I am going to live to God and to bring others so to do . . . I know my views are upright now. May they never be otherwise.

Within a month of Asbury's arrival his journal entry of November 21, 1771 reveals his frustration with Boardman and Pilmore's contentment with wanting to remain in the cities:

I remain in New York, though unsatisfied . . . I have not yet the thing which I seek-a circulation of preachers . . . I am fixed to the Methodist plan . . . My brethren seem unwilling to leave the cities, but I think I shall show them the way . . . I am come over with an upright intention, and through the grace of God I will make it appear. (I 1958 : 10)

Undeterred by the reluctance of other preachers to work from a saddle, Asbury took the initiative and soon had a "large circuit formed around New York City:" (Sweet 1935 : 111).

The importance of Asbury's influence in setting an example of tireless itinerancy at the very beginning of his American ministry can hardly be overestimated. If Methodism had lost its itinerancy feature at this early period, the whole movement could not have succeeded as it did in America. (Sweet 1933 : 67)

Asbury's insistence on the itinerant Methodist plan for America is one of the key contributing factors to the movement's success. He "deserves credit for moving Methodism into the villages and onto the frontier." (Kirby 1996 : 261). Asbury was convinced that widespread localized preaching was not good for Methodism, even if the preacher got married. Stevens' (1864 : 126) analysis of Asbury's priority in this regard is very pointed:

Supremely important was this disposition. Wesley had rightly estimated his man when he commissioned Asbury for the Western world. For however expedient modifications of the itinerancy might become, in the maturity of the denomination, it was now, as we have seen, the great necessity of the country and the special work of Methodism in it.

Asbury's successful efforts to corral the loosely disciplined Societies through a 16-point plan met with Wesley's approval and a promotion to General Assistant, replacing Boardman. "In Francis Asbury, British Methodism made its supreme contribution to America . . . [he was] the greatest creative force in the development of early American Methodism." (Barclay 1949 : 35; 38). His new position gave him oversight of all of Methodism in the colonies, with the power to

create circuits and move preachers as he saw fit, naturally, still under Wesley's direction. (Asbury I 1958 : 41, 46). Bangs' (1838 : 74) explanation on the nature of Wesley's appointment of Asbury and his subsequent duties is very helpful in this regard:

October 10, 1772, Mr. Asbury says he received a letter from Mr. Wesley, in which he required a strict attention to the general rules, and also appointing him general assistant. To understand his designation it is necessary to observe, that Mr. Wesley, being, under God, the founder of the societies, was considered the head of the whole body, both in Europe and America, and the one having charge of a circuit under him was styled his assistant, and those under this assistant were styled helpers. In appointing, therefore, Mr. Asbury as general assistant, he constituted him the head of all the preachers and societies in America, with power to station the preachers.

When anti-English sentiments in America were at their peak in the mid to late 1770's all English Methodists still in active service chose to return to England except Asbury, who was convinced God had led him to remain in America, albeit in seclusion until hostilities eased.³⁹ After the Revolution Wesley wrote to Asbury (I 1958 : 450), naming him the General Assistant with express instructions to maintain American Methodism on the original plan and doctrine as outlined in Wesley's "Sermons" and "Notes upon the New Testament." (Lee 1810 : 85-86). At the 1784 Christmas Conference Asbury was elected by the American Methodists to serve as their Superintendent, for which he was duly ordained.⁴⁰

Asbury was "destined to become the veritable father of American Methodism." (Norwood 1974 : 73). He died at the age of 70, having served American Methodism with distinction. William Watters (1806 : 107) talks of his high esteem for Asbury, and their strong relationship when he wrote the following:

I have been as long, and as intimately acquainted with him as most men in America, and I must give this testimony. Of all men that I have known he is in my estimation, the clearest of the love of money, and the most free to give away his all, in every sense of the word.

Richard Wright was admitted on trial to Methodist service in England just a year before volunteering to go to America, yet without a regular station, (Baker 1976 : 93) thus he was an appointee of Wesley's and not an official preacher. He accompanied Asbury on their trip over to America, setting sail on September 4, 1771, but "as a missionary he was a short candle, quickly

³⁹ See Chapter Five for more details on Methodism and the Revolution.

⁴⁰ See Chapter Seven for more on the 1784 Conference.

burned out.” (Barclay 1949 : 39). He was present at the first conference where he was appointed to Norfolk and according to the records of Wesley Chapel in New York, he served that congregation for several months in 1772. On May 29, 1774 Asbury’s (I 1958 : 116) mention of Wright in his journal is not very favorable, saying he had “no taste for spiritual subjects” and that his preaching was “empty stuff to please the ear.” In 1774 Wright “returned to England, where, after three years spent in the itinerancy, he ceased to travel, and totally disappeared from the published records of the denomination.” (Stevens 1864 : 119).

1.3.3 **THOMAS RANKIN, GEORGE SHADFORD AND JOSEPH YEABRY IN 1773**

In 1772 while back in England, Captain Thomas Webb, in typical eloquent fashion and probably clad in his military regalia, made an appeal at the conference held in Leeds for more workers to be sent to America. As a result Thomas Rankin, George Shadford and Joseph Yearbry, a volunteer, were sent, arriving together on June 1, 1773. Captain Thomas Webb and his new wife, Grace Gilbert, were also on board this ship. (Rankin 1878 : 185).

Thomas Rankin was born in Scotland in 1736. He served as an itinerant under Wesley for eleven years, “at least seven of them as an Assistant” (Baker 1976 : 94) before he went to America at the age of 37. Wesley appointed Rankin as his Assistant in America above Asbury, even though the latter had already ably served American Methodism for two years. It is evident that Asbury (I 1958 : 82) initially appreciated the leadership of the more experienced and stricter Rankin, who was about ten years older. If the other Methodist preachers found Asbury to be a hard leader, they would strain under Rankin, whom Norwood (1974 : 73) described as “the strictest disciplinarian this side of the Atlantic Ocean.”

Rankin’s (1878 : 191) comments within just a week of arriving betray the disciplined and occasional critical attitude he would have toward American Methodism. “From what I see and hear, and so far as I can judge, if my brethren who first came over had been more attentive to our discipline, there would have been, by this time, a more glorious work in many places of this continent.” Although making significant contributions to the work in America Rankin did not garner the widespread support of his subordinates that long-term leadership success depends

upon. He lacked the capacity to fully identify with the burgeoning free spirit that was sweeping across America.

In time Rankin and Asbury did not get along and both consequently reported the same to Wesley, (Volume 12 : 324) who instructed Rankin to send Asbury back to England. Rankin evidently never delivered the message. One can only speculate as to how American Methodism would have developed had Asbury returned according to Wesley's injunction.

Rankin's difficulty with America and maybe America's with Rankin, coupled with the increasing tensions between the colonists and England and his ardent support of the crown, led him to return to England on March 17, 1778. (Clark I 1958 : 243). Time bore witness to the fact that Asbury was a far better fit for the American culture than Rankin was, yet William Watters never seemed to have a problem with Rankin. Watters (1806 : 35) says "I always thought him [Rankin] qualified to fill his place as general assistant among us . . . [he] was not only a man of grace, but of strong and quick parts."

George Shadford, (1878 : 144) who as a young man, had vowed to serve God if his life would be spared through military service, had four years itinerant experience behind him, when he was challenged with the prospects of missionary labor in America:

I went to the Leeds Conference, where I first saw Captain Webb. When he warmly exhorted preachers to go to America, I felt my spirit stirred within me to go; more especially when I understood that many hundreds of precious souls were perishing through lack of knowledge, scattered up and down in various parts of the woods, and had none to warn them of their danger. (Shadford 1878 : 162)

Wesley (Volume 12 : 457) wrote to Shadford in 1773 and said, "I let you loose, George, on the great continent of America. Publish your message in the open face of the sun, and do all the good you can." Shadford has been heralded as early American Methodism's most successful revivalist. His outstanding work on the Brunswick Circuit in Virginia in the mid 1770's is probably his most significant contribution. Although the names of the Anglican Devereux Jarratt, Robert Williams and William Watters are also associated with the revival in Virginia "the name George Shadford will ever be associated with the great reformation that accompanied the introduction of Methodism into Virginia." (Moore 1884 : 56).

In contrast to the relationship between Rankin and Asbury, Shadford and Asbury developed a deep bond. Toward the end of his tenure in America Asbury tried to persuade Shadford not to leave the continent but to no avail: Shadford could not remain on this side of the

Atlantic and by default, renounce his loyalty to the Crown. (Shadford 1878 : 171-172). Asbury (I 1958 : 262-263, 301) resigned himself to the reality that the English preachers were leaving, but he seems to have taken Shadford's departure in February of 1778 particularly hard. On arrival back in England Shadford resumed his Methodist ministry, living for another productive twenty-eight years.

It was Thomas Webb who persuaded **Joseph Yearbry** "to try his hand at the American itinerancy" (Baker 1976 : 94), but with only minimal results. Yearbry served Methodism as a volunteer for only two years before returning to England with Richard Wright.

1.3.4 MARTIN RODDA, JAMES DEMPSTER AND WILLIAM GLENDINNING IN 1774

In October of 1774, Asbury was informed that three more preachers were arriving from England. They were James Dempster and Martin Rodda, and perhaps William Glendinning.⁴¹ This last batch of workers joined the Methodist ranks in America prior to the Revolution at a very thorny time. Anti British sentiment was rife, with the Methodists often suffering the brunt of it due to their stated allegiance to the Church of England and their ties to Wesley, who was a constant outspoken English loyalist. The trio arrived in November 1774.

Martin Rodda, "who had been an itinerant intermittently for seven years" (Baker 1976 : 98) would prove to be more of a hardship for American Methodism than a blessing. "While on the Kent Circuit, Maryland, in 1777, he took an active part in circulating King George's proclamation," (Burke 1964 : 141) which was in effect, promoting loyalty to the British Crown. By contrast, his fellow American Methodists, who were already suspected of being Tories⁴² and British sympathizers, were working hard to check their own patriotic inclinations to the Colonies in favor of the spread of the Gospel. Rodda's actions helped to fuel and further entrench these already widespread anti Methodist sentiments, which caused him to later flee the country. Lee (1810 : 62) noted that Rodda's actions had caused "many sufferings and much trouble, on the

⁴¹ Clark (I 1958 : 135) says Glendinning "possibly" arrived in 1774 with Rodda and Dempster. Stevens (I 1864 : 264) says the three arrived together in 1774, with Glendinning being a volunteer, however, Carroll (1994 : 70), in his Glendinning biography, has the Scotsman arriving in June of 1767 as an immigrant and only later becoming associated with the Methodists. This is supported by Glendinning's autobiography. (1795 : 5).

⁴² Tories were members of, or at least sympathizers with, the Tory political party in England who displayed deep loyalty to the crown.

Methodist preachers and people.” Rodda returned to England in 1777 where he continued work with Wesley until retirement in 1781. (Burke 1964 : 141). To his credit, Rodda did aid in the recruitment of Freeborn Garrettson, who would prove to be of significant value to American Methodism. (Garrettson, [Bangs (ed.)], 1832 : 44-47).

James Dempster was born in Scotland and arrived with already ten years of Methodist itinerant experience behind him with eight as an Assistant. He served in New York for several years while the Revolutionary War raged on. This is particularly significant because after 1777, conference appointments to New York dropped off due to the British occupying that area, which has led some scholars to think Methodism ceased to exist in those parts during the war: “This was not the case. The work continued throughout the war under the leadership of James Dempster” (Clark I 1958 : 440) and others. Health issues later caused Dempster to retire from itinerant service. He afterward became a local Presbyterian pastor in America: an occupation he held for the rest of his life. (Clark I 1958 : 138).

William Glendinning, a Scotsman, served ably with Shadford and others on the Brunswick Circuit in Virginia in 1775, at the height of the revival there and alongside Asbury at other times. He was appointed to the “Committee of Five”⁴³ prior to the Revolutionary War to aid in steering Methodism through those tumultuous years and later attended the Christmas Conference in 1784. Glendinning seemed to develop some personal emotional and mental difficulties, which concerned Asbury. (I 1958 : 659). Burke (1964 : 142) believed that Glendinning joined the 1792 O’Kelly schism⁴⁴ and then the Unitarians, but these associations are not mentioned in Glendinning’s autobiography, while in fact he (1795 : 106-109) actually strongly criticizes the actions of O’Kelly and his followers.

1.4 **POISED FOR PROMINENCE**

Prior to the Revolutionary War and the independence of Methodism in America, Wesley had sent eight missionaries to America: Boardman, Pilmore, Asbury, Wright, Rankin, Shadford, Dempster and Rodda. Four Methodist volunteers had come, either of their own accord or accompanying Wesley’s missionaries. They were Williams, King, Yearbry and Glendinning.

⁴³ See Chapter Five for more details on this committee.

⁴⁴ James O’Kelly led a “revolt” of Asbury’s authority over the appointing of preachers and subsequently left the church with several preachers in tow. See Burke 1964, 440-452 for an analysis of the effects of the O’Kelly schism.

Four of the above dozen did not return to England. King married and resumed the practice of medicine in North Carolina; Williams died in 1775 after getting married and locating;⁴⁵ Dempster became a pastor in another denomination and Asbury, who remained the only active Methodist preacher, went into hiding only to emerge some two years later to resume his tireless efforts for American Methodism. For the most part these workers gave invaluable service to Methodism and by default, to America as a young nation. Although they worked across the spectrum of the colonies, from New England in the north to Georgia in the south, the majority of productive labor the English and native workers produced for Methodism was south of the Mason-Dixon Line.⁴⁶

It remains the historian's privilege to speculate on whether the departure of the English preachers back to Britain or their escape into hiding hurt or hindered the cause of American Methodism. Had they stayed through the Revolution their loyalties to the Crown may well have hurt their own productivity, further hindered the reputation of Methodism and placed the lives of many of their fellow American Methodists at risk. Conversely, they may have helped Methodism weather the storms of the late 1770's better than it did. The native preachers who, in spite of feeling somewhat orphaned, and lacking in experience, rose to the challenge to soon fill the vacuum the departed preachers left in their ranks.

Back in the summer of 1771 the collective group of English and American Methodists had a small but firm core of leaders and a growing nucleus of followers in a loosely knit structure, but they possessed the heart and desire to launch head long into an uncertain but expectant future. Watters (1806 : 18) says "We had no regular preaching in those days, nor had there ever been but three Methodist preachers in Maryland, Williams, Strobridge [sic], and King." This little band of fervent workers, undaunted by small beginnings and uncertain frontiers, stand in stark contrast to the size and sophistication that American Methodism would grow to become in mere decades.

Methodists were particularly effective in the Maryland and Virginia areas where they drew from a large population of Church of England adherents who had, for a variety of reasons, lost affiliation with the mother church. The Methodists offered a far more lively religion while they

⁴⁵ Locating is the term used to describe when a preacher ceases traveling as an itinerant and settles in one place.

⁴⁶ The border between Maryland and Pennsylvania.

upheld a high moral order, both personal and ecclesiastical, of a kind that was sorely lacking among the Anglican population, clergy included. Their mobile team of itinerants capitalized in weak parishes, where the church could not supply pastoral oversight, or where the resident priest neglected his flock because of indifference, immorality or extreme stoicism. “Methodists, like clever parasites, took from the tradition what they needed, including the relative tolerance with which it was treated, and then established an independent existence by embracing the enthusiasm and populism that Anglicans generally despised.” (Hempton 2005 : 19). They at times broke age-old taboos on territorial claims by daring to preach in parishes over the objection of the resident clergy. Simply put, American Methodism gained where British Anglicanism could not. It was onto this dramatic promising scene that William Watters cautiously strode, and soon took on a significant prominent role for early American Methodism.

CHAPTER TWO

WILLIAM WATTERS: HIS LIFE AND WORK FROM BIRTH TO THE FOURTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE IN 1776

In 1771 American Methodism was in the infancy of what would become the nation's largest denomination and one of its largest organizations. The growth occurred in spite of the external pressures of war and leadership vacuums and internal strife. One of the critical keys was native leadership. William Watters was converted by Methodists in 1771 and would spend the rest of his life in active service to the movement, slowing down only for health reasons. This chapter and the next will chronicle the life and work of America's first native Methodist son: William Watters.

By the middle of the eighteenth century young America was growing, with more and more immigrants flocking to its shores, while those who had already made the land their home were building towns, plowing fields or pushing the frontier ever westward, despite harsh conditions. The frontier was lonely and dangerous; farm life was taxing and towns were always potential vice traps. The state of religion in the middle colonies,¹ which "was the new nation's most complex region" (Andrews 2000 : 8) was deplorable. Devereux Jarratt (1778 : 2) reported the following on the spiritual state of Southern Virginia: "Ignorance of the things of God . . . irreligion then prevailed among all ranks and degrees . . . I doubt if even the form of godliness was to be found, in any one family." The opportunity and need for the inroads of religion into the lives of these freedom-seeking masses who had come to or who were growing up in the New World was extremely favorable, yet the Established Church in much of the middle colonies made little, if any, impact on the majority of the population. Early American Methodist historian Nathan Bangs (1839 : 28, 30-31) offers an assessment of the state of Anglicanism and the need for the Methodist message:

With very few exceptions [the clergy] . . . were far gone from the spirit and practice of their original righteousness . . . therefore a reformation was loudly called for to bring the people under the hallowing influence of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

¹ Historians and geographers generally refer to this region as the Middle Atlantic, which stretches from southern New York State to the Maryland/Virginia area. Many will include Virginia in the South and not Middle Atlantic. See Andrews 2000 : 8, 268.

The desperate need was for a religious experience that could be validated by personal experience, which was propagated in a clear and enthusiastic message, and delivered by an agent that was morally trustworthy. Methodism qualified for the task.

2.1 CHILDHOOD AND FAMILY

William Watters was born into a Church of England family on October 16, 1751 in the American colony of Maryland in Baltimore County.² There may have been a few dissenting churches scattered across the region, but the Church of England dominated as the established church. Smaller denominations of that time, such as the Baptists and Presbyterians, did not make any notable impact on the area. (Smith 1901 : 13). Although the name Watters has Norman origins, William's grandfather, John Watters, had come to America from England. His youngest of five children, Godfrey Watters,³ died in 1754 leaving behind nine children⁴ of his own, the youngest being William Watters, who at the time of his father's death, was only "about two years old" (Watters 1806 : 1).⁵ Financially William's father left the family "not rich; but in comfortable circumstances" (Watters 1806 : 1) and of the spiritual heritage his father bestowed upon the family Watters (1806 : 1) simply says, "in faith and solemn prayer, he committed us to God." Disclosures of some of his other early childhood memories are more forthcoming. Watters (1806 : 2) says he recalls a home where foul language was not tolerated and where his relationship with his mother was bathed in "affection . . . [She was] one of the best of parents." (Watters 1806 : 2). Watters says very little about the impact of his older siblings on his life growing up without a biological father and even less about his mother's second husband.

William was a tender young man who loved his country living. It facilitated him growing up in close quarters with his only parent: his mother. If he ever offended her, he said his gentle spirit "never could be at rest till I had humbled myself and she had shown me tokens of forgiveness." (Watters 1806 : 2). This sensitivity to correction and subsequent resolute attitude

² The area of Baltimore County where Watters was born has been renamed Harford County. (Wrenn 2000 : 73).

³ According to Dennis Alonzo Watters, (1915) whose great-grandfather was the brother of William Watters, and who did extensive research into the Watters family origins, the dates of John Watters' arrival into America or Godfrey Watters' birth is unknown. One contributing factor to the difficulty of researching the Watters family is that many members dropped one 'T' from their name. (D.A. Watters 1915 : 5-9).

⁴ Seven boys and two girls.

⁵ This Chapter and the next will rely heavily on Watters' autobiography.

would later develop into a firm resolve that withstood the most punishing of circumstances.

Watters' great-nephew says the following:

Very early in life his mind was peculiarly susceptible to tender impressions, and it was here upon the farm, in the midst of the delights of vale and forest, of fields and flowing brook, that young Watters developed those sturdy elements of character necessary to him in later years as he went forth as a herald of the cross. By the varied experiences of plantation life, of communion with nature, of careful training on the part of a devoted and loving mother, he was, though unconscious of it, being fitted for his important place in the initial work of the greatest ecclesiastical movement of modern times. (D. A. Watters 1898 : 14)

Watters “had but little education,” (Du Bose 1916 : 590) which he resented because it took him away from his home in the country and the close care of his mother. He subsequently “made but little progress in learning for some time.” (Watters 1806 : 2). His tender temperament that compelled him, in times of strife, to seek peace with his mother whenever he offended her, manifested itself acutely in spiritual matters. As a young boy he (1806 : 2) says; “At about eight or nine years of age I was greatly oppressed day after day with blasphemous thoughts to curse God . . . At other times I was much terrified with thoughts of death and the torments of hell.” That it “was a very rare thing” (Watters 1806 : 2-3) to hear any positive words about religion growing up, is an indication of not only the condition of his own destitute soul, but of the general state of religion throughout the area. Two local ministers were evidently incapable of aiding the spiritually troubled young man because, according to Watters (1806 : 3) they “were both immoral men, and had no gifts for the ministry . . . The blind were evidently leading the blind, and it was the mere mercy of God, that we did not all fall into Hell together.” “The Parish church, to him, was in a dormant condition and was doing nothing to change the course of sin and unbelief, and direct souls to the Lamb of God.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 17). Rev. Devereux Jarratt, (1969 : 21).⁶ an Anglican priest and later a close friend of many Methodists, Watters included, had similar sentiments in his youth about a local church and minister. “There was a church in the parish . . . but I went not once in a year . . . The parish minister was but a poor preacher – very unapt [sic] to teach or even to gain the attention of an audience.” Of the Anglican ministers in Virginia and Maryland during this era, Lee (1810 : 48) said “by far the greatest part of them were destitute of

⁶ Jarratt wrote a series of letters to Rev. John Coleman, a Protestant Episcopal Church minister in Maryland, starting in 1794, in which he detailed his life story. In 1806 Coleman published the letters as Jarratt's autobiography. (Jarrat died in 1801 {Holmes 2001 : 4}). In 1969 the letters were republished. This document will reference the 1969 publication.

religion.” Sweet (1935 : 19) says “The Established Church in Virginia and Maryland was in a decadent condition.”

It is evident from the response the Watters family made to the preaching of the Methodists some twenty years after William’s birth that their loose ties to Anglicanism were based on tradition and loyalty and not on a deep commitment to the message of the church. He (1806 : 3) said, “I had no one to tell me the evil of sin, or to teach me the way of life and salvation.” This reality that William Watters grew up within was typical of thousands of individuals of that time and area. The relevance and power of the Gospel message as commonly understood by the general populous, based on what was taught and practiced by the local priests, was broadly innocuous alongside the abundant opportunities for sin, which many delved into, and under which those with sensitive spirits suffered the consequences:

By the time I was twelve or fourteen, I took great delight in dancing, in card playing, in attending horse racing, and such like pernicious practices, though often terrified with the thoughts of eternity in the midst of them, which would frequently so damp all my momentary joys that I would feel very miserable indeed. (Watters 1806 : 3)

In spite of the obvious obstacles to spiritual advancement for the young man, Watters endeavored to find peace with God the best he could, while waging internal war with typical adolescent temptations:

At sixteen or seventeen I . . . was, of a truth, without God and without a Christian hope in the world, though called one of the most modest youths in the neighborhood, and thought by them (as blind as myself) to be a very good Christian. It was my constant practice to attend the Church with my prayer book, and often read my Bible and other good books, and sometimes attempted to say my prayers. (Watters 1806 : 3-4)

William’s church attendance was bound more by ritualism than it was volitional and was characterized with little, if any, personal affinity or attachment to the institution or the message. His struggle with sin as a youth and the resultant struggle to fully embrace the Methodist message and theology he heard later were exacerbated by these weak ecclesiastical moorings: a scenario that Methodist preachers would later capitalize on as they ministered in feeble Anglican parishes.

2.2 CONVERSION - MAY 1771

“For a year, before I desisted from the Devil’s service, I saw so plainly I was in the way to hell.” (Watters 1806 : 4). His efforts of self-reformation, although multiple and sincere, remained ineffective. His heart was troubled; his soul restless and the way forward out of spiritual bondage was indistinct and leaderless for the young pseudo-Anglican. Victory would forever be illusive under these circumstances: and then Watters heard the Methodists.

In 1770, just a few months before he turned nineteen, William says he “had frequent opportunities of hearing the Methodists preach in the neighborhood where I was brought up.” (Watters 1806 : 5). Those Methodist preachers would have been Robert Strawbridge, Robert Williams and John King, (Watters 1806 : 17) none of whom were formally appointed preachers of Wesley’s. Joseph Pilmore and Richard Boardman, Wesley’s first missionaries to arrive in the New World who had been in the country since October of the previous year, had not yet ventured as far south as Maryland. Both had served for periods in the Philadelphia area, only about one hundred miles from Baltimore, but several days travel for that era. Williams and King were volunteers who had arrived separately in 1769. When Methodism started making headways in the American colonies it was always, as in England, a sect within Anglicanism, and never a separate denomination. This undoubtedly aided some of its growth.

Watters’ oldest brother John, and his wife had already embraced Methodist theology and the religious experience of being born again as articulated by the preachers, which both intrigued and perplexed William. Although theoretically believed in Anglican circles, a personal dynamic religious experience that becomes a habitual way of life was foreign to most preachers and adherents of the Established church. Almost ten years earlier, when the evangelical Anglican preacher, Devereux Jarrat (1778 : 4) arrived in Southern Virginia he said, “My doctrines were quite new to them; and were neither preached nor believed by any other clergyman, so far as I could learn, throughout the Province.” It was a doctrine that Wesley and his followers relentlessly and unapologetically preached, lived and defended, in Britain and America. The confirmation of the new-birth experience evidenced in his brother made a significant impression on the young deep thinking Watters as he struggled to wrap his intellectual mind around the

doctrine. He “could not conceive what they meant by saying, we must be born again . . . utterly confounded . . . I could but say with Nicodemus, ‘How can these things be.’”⁷ (Watters 1806 : 5).

If the “new” Methodist doctrine was perplexing to Watters, so were those who delivered it, yet he was mysteriously drawn to their company. From a distance he was impressed by their lives, he could find no just argument against their ways and he became more and more enticed by their sincere message, which inadvertently began to have an impact on his own moral behavior:

While I was marveling and wondering at these unheard of things that those strange people were spreading wherever they came, and before I was aware, I found my heart inclined to forsake many of my vain practices, and the last place of merriment I ever was at . . . I often found my poor evil heart drawn to them as a people who lived in a manner I never had known any to live before. (Watters 1806 : 5)

In late 1770 and early 1771 Watters’ troubled spirit, which had become magnified by his encounters with the Methodists, exposed his own sinful state. His attempts to still his spiritual restlessness led him, by his own admission, into to Pharisaic ritualism. He began to read his Bible more, attend church whenever possible, to seek out the “company of the pious [and even pray] four or five times a day . . . seeking to be justified by the deeds of the Law, by trusting more or less in the performance of duties.” (Watters 1806 : 7). These self-initiated practices did nothing to heal his distressed inner soul while “for several months [he] lived outwardly as a Christian.” (Watters 1806 : 7). “For a year before his conversion he eagerly longed to overcome sin, but advanced no further than a promise to do better.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 18).

At a Methodist prayer meeting Watters attended with his oldest brother he recognized what was missing in his quest for spiritual peace and assurance of God’s forgiveness in his life: an internal change that only God can perform. He (Watters 1806 : 8) says:

I felt in a manner which I have not words fully to express, that I must be eternally changed-that I must be born again, born of the spirit or never see the face of God in Glory. Without this I was deeply sensible that all I had done, or could do, was vain, and of no account, if not done as the Lord had appointed, in order to obtain this divine change, this new nature.

Watters left the meeting still spiritually destitute but determined to somehow “work out” (Philippians 2: 12)⁸ his salvation. He spent that afternoon in private troubled prayer but he could not find the words or means to acquire the spiritual rest he heard the Methodists preach about, his

⁷ Personal experiential religion would become one of Watters’ most emphasized doctrines.

⁸ See Wesley’s sermon “On Working Out Our Own Salvation.” (Volume VI : 506-513).

brother testify about, and for which his soul ached. For several days Watters (1806 : 9) wrestled between divine conviction and his “rocky heart,” while his prayers were earnest and penitential, his goal was clear and his resolve was strong:

I went home much distressed, and fully determined by the grace of God to seek the salvation of my soul with my whole heart, and never rest till I knew the Lord had blotted out my sins, and shed his love abroad in my heart, by the Holy Ghost . . . Thus was I bowed down and determined to wait at the foot of the cross, while I was stripped of all dependence in outward things, and was well assured that there was ‘no other name under Heaven given among men whereby we must be saved.’” (Watters 1806 : 8, 9)

This dogged determination would stand Watters in good stead for the grueling years of itinerancy that lay ahead.

Watters’ spiritual odyssey as a young man was exacerbated by the fact that he was reared in a theology and ecclesiology void of any notion of instantaneous salvation, a doctrine he would later preach to others with deep conviction. The Methodist message had convinced him, and his brother’s reformation had proved to him, that a ritualistic and liturgical religion was not going to settle his troubled soul. His lack of an evangelical terminology to properly articulate what he was going through coupled with a deficient theological foundation resulted in a heart rendering protracted ordeal. All this while he recognized his need and pressed forward to a solution. He desperately sought to break free into a religion of personal experience and undeniable assurance. Watters’ (1806 : 9-10) own words best describe his state:

The following day I was unfit for any worldly business, and spent that day mostly in private, while Christ on the cross bleeding, and bearing the sins of the whole world in his own body, and dying to make a full atonement for the chief of sinners, that they might not die eternally, was continually before the eyes of my mind; while in the most bitter manner did my soul exclaim, Oh! how have I slighted the bleeding Saviour, and trampled his most precious blood under my unhallowed feet, and have done despite to the Spirit of grace. The thoughts and sight thereof, now through divine mercy made my eyes to run down with tears, while my very heart was ready to burst asunder with sorrow . . . I had no good word or deed, in which I could any longer trust for righteousness, in whole or in part. I saw in a manner which no words can fully express, that I was a sinner -- the chief of sinners -- condemned by the law and worthy of death eternal; and that it was a mercy of mercies, that I was not dead and damned. In this most deplorable state, my sins were a burden too heavy to be borne. I refused to be comforted, but by the Friend of sinners. My cry was day and night, save Lord or I perish. Give me Christ or else I die -- I die eternally. In this state I loved nothing better than weeping, mourning and prayer, it was more than my meat and drink day and night, humbly hoping, waiting, and longing for the coming of the Lord to pluck me as a brand from the everlasting burnings, and to save me with a present salvation.

It would appear that Watters had done all that was required for his spiritual renewal. He had confessed his sins and surrendered his life to the Lord Jesus Christ, yet spiritual peace still eluded him. Evidently there was no one who counseled Watters to simply accept his new spiritual state by faith, to just believe in his new adoption into God's family and to seek for the assurance of the witness of God's Spirit as he grew spiritually. His dilemma increased as others around him rejoiced over and testified about what they had experienced, yet he had not.

An unnamed individual who had recently found peace in Christ offered Watters (1806 : 11) some advice. "I was greatly affected to hear him praise God and tell of his love. He kindly exhorted me to be engaged, and not to doubt but the Lord would be found by all who sincerely sought him in every place." But the weight of Watters' hardened spiritual poverty prompted a defeatist response. "Oh! How did my anxious heart long and pant for the blessing but I was bound down fast in the chains and fetters of my sins and unbelief." (Watters 1806 : 11).

It was May of 1771 that "day and night, Jacob-like, he wrestled with God in prayer. Clouds of anguish and gloom, often bordering on despair, darkened his moral life." (D. A. Watters 1898 : 25). His reflections on Jesus' offer of help to the sick, and not the healthy,⁹ at this juncture in his autobiography may indicate the realization that the Lord he was so vigorously pursuing and the experience he so desperately sought after, was as much an offering to the most vile of sinners as it was for the self-righteous. (Watters 1806 : 13). He vacillated between the two extremes as he continued to press toward peace. A group of friends and family gathered around Watters to pray for him in the same house¹⁰ of his birth more than twenty years earlier. As the group prayed over their troubled friend and brother, Watters (1806 : 14-15) at last had his own Aldersgate:¹¹

My good friends sang with the Spirit, and in faith. The Lord heard, and appeared spiritually in the midst. A divine light beamed through my inmost soul, which in a few minutes encircled me around, surpassing the brightness of the noon-day sun . . . My burden was gone -- my sorrow fled -- my soul and all that was within me rejoiced in hopes of the glory of God: while I beheld such fullness and willingness in the Lord Jesus to save lost sinners, and my soul so rested on him, that I could now for the first time call Jesus Christ, 'Lord, by the Holy Ghost given unto me.'

⁹ Matthew 9:12

¹⁰ "Where I was born a child of wrath, I was also born a child of grace." (Watters 1806 : 17).

¹¹ See page 195 and 215 for an explanation on John Wesley's spiritual experience on Aldersgate Street.

Watter's testimony is refreshing and inspiring. He was at last convinced that God had entered his life and had refreshed his soul: that God does love him and that his sins had been forgiven. After ten months of mentally wrestling with Methodist doctrine and after several weeks of intense inner spiritual turmoil, Watters experienced the break-through power of salvation by faith in Christ. "The change [was] undeniable to all present." (Watters 1806 : 13). One aspect of personal spirituality where the Methodists and the wider Established Church were in stark contrast to each other was prayer. Anglican priests and parishioners used prayer books but many Methodists prayed extemporaneously, which proved very unsettling for those who witnessed it for the first time. Watters (1806 : 18) says that his praying without a prayer book shortly after his conversion was one of the early signs to those around him that his conversion was indeed genuine.

What would be next for Watters? How would the impact of the Methodists on the life and soul of Watters influence the decisions he would make in the days following? His great-nephew sums up Watters' state and the possible future implications of his conversion:

He may not have been able formally to state a single doctrine of Christianity; but he had received the heavenly anointing: he had found Christ in the pardon of his sins after a long and distressing travail of soul. He could sing and interpret the Scriptures by the key of his own unmistakable experience, so sweet, full, and powerful. He had been shaken out of his slumbers, and his soul replenished by a living faith that created in him a lasting desire to see others in possession of the same unspeakable blessing. (D. A. Watters 1898 : 40)

Watters new found spiritual awakening translated into a critical decision of priority. He (1806 : 17) "had but one desire upon earth, which was, to be wholly the Lord's in time and eternity." The resolve of Watters to persevere through the dark days of spiritual uncertainty was now redirected to serve his God in practical service and he chose to do it within the vehicle of American Methodism:

I had never been at a class meeting, nor had I intended ever to become a member amongst them . . . although I had for several months felt a very great attachment to them, believing they were a people much devoted to God: but now having obtained mercy I felt no hesitation in owning the people that God had owned in my conversion, and gladly attended one of their meetings the same day, and thought it a greater blessing to be received a member amongst them than to be made a prince. (Watters 1806 : 18)

This single-minded but double-sided decision of Watters to serve God solely and to throw his lot in with the Methodists would play a key role in preserving the integrity and momentum of early American Methodism through its own days of organizational and spiritual insecurity. Watters grew to not only love the people and theology of Methodism, but in a non-autocratic paternal sense he believed he part-owned the movement that had brought him the good news of his salvation. The simple message that had been planted within him, that had grown to become a life changing experience, would soon ripple outward across his entire family, through his neighborhood and would eventually take him to new people and places.

Within nine months of Watters's oldest brother's conversion, all of his siblings "professed to know the Lord." (Watters 1806 : 21). The Watters family became "leading actors in the Methodist movement" (Andrews 2000 : 33) and one of the most prominent and active Methodist families in the Maryland and northern Virginia area of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Several of the brothers opened their homes as preaching points and served as Methodist trustees for property deals. (Porter 1928 : 375). "The Watters family, in the Church and itinerancy, may be traced as a widening stream." (D. A. Watters 1898 : 41). So outstanding and useful was this family that the fifth annual conference of American Methodism met in Watters' "eldest brother's preaching house." (Watters 1806 : 56). Over the next one hundred years, the Watters family produced more than fifty ministers and missionaries. (D. A. Watters 1915 : 10).

2.3 "WE WERE ALL PREACHERS"

It did not impede the commitment or the vision of the small group of local Methodists in Baltimore that the more experienced traveling preachers were infrequent in their area, because Watters early realized that "in one sense we were all preachers." (Watters 1806 : 18). The lack of Methodist preaching from seasoned preachers spurred Watters to take on the mantle of Christian worker himself. It was this proactive disposition of Watters that would put him in good stead to hold early American Methodism together when it, as a young faith, found itself without older trained leaders:

On the Lord's day we commonly divided into bands, and went out into different neighborhoods, wherever there was a door open to receive us; two, three, or four in

company, and would sing our hymns, pray, read, talk to the people, and some soon began to add a word of exhortation. (Watters 1806 : 19)

D. A. Watters (1898 : 36) says William, in the same year of his conversion, was “at once an exhorter.” Although never a clear and dominant extrovert, Watters soon found his voice as a preacher and defender of the faith, and made adequate use of it. As Richey (1991 : 82) says, “Early Methodists were not afraid of the voice.” There was no thought of waiting for formal invitations to become active or seeking out specialized training before immersing himself into the work. “No sooner were the early converts of Methodism in possession of the blessed assurance of their acceptance with God than they heeded the commission, ‘Go work to-day in my vineyard.’” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 35). When Henry,¹² his second oldest brother, was converted and opened his house for Methodist preaching, the newly converted twenty-year-old William was made the class leader.¹³ Sweet says; (1933 : 42) “The two institutions . . . which more than any others account for the rapid spread of Methodism . . . were the class meeting and lay preaching.” Watters never testifies to a dateable moment of being called to be a preacher. He simply responded to the opportunities and needs that abounded all around him, witnessed the fruit of his efforts, and arrived at the realization that he was indeed called of God to preach. His responsibilities as leader of the small class, in just a few years, morphed into the entire movement.

The confidence his family and friends placed upon his young shoulders was evidently a result of the depth of a maturing spirituality that they detected growing within him. Watters (1806 : 19) recognized that although their group was “weak . . . not full of wisdom . . . and [their] gifts were small,” their efforts would be blessed with an infusion of “a good degree of faith and power.” In addition Watters knew that if he, his co-laborers and even Methodism at large, were to survive adversity, they had to believe that “the Lord greatly owned [their] labours [sic].” (Watters 1806 : 19). This dual idea of ownership often emerged in Watters’ life. He knew that God ultimately owned the

¹² Henry Watters, who William looked up to as a father figure, (Watters 1806 : 19) was almost twenty years older. (D. A. Watters 1915 : 12-13).

¹³ A Methodist Society was a small group of dedicated believers within a congregation or circuit. It was reserved for the seriously devout and was often a private affair. Classes were formed within societies and were separated between male and female and consisted of about fifteen people. Bands of five or six were formed within the classes. There is no evidence that a formal Methodist Society or an established preaching circuit existed in Watters area before this time.

Methodist movement and its people. Yet as a Methodist worker, called by God to areas of responsibility within the movement, Watters saw himself, in a very humble sense, as a human co-owner. “He who volunteers his service in defense of a good cause becomes a factor of the cause itself.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 20). His efforts to save Methodism from crippling injury during the ordinance schism, which will be detailed in Chapter Six, were driven by this notion of ownership.

Watters’ humble spirit was always evident. As a newly converted Methodist he did not think that he had anything of value that he could offer to God, yet the success of his class and the souls who had been saved as a result of his work encouraged him to at least offer what he had. If anything would come of him being a preacher it would be entirely “of the Lord’s own making, as my natural and acquired abilities forbid any thoughts of the kind.” (Watters 1806 : 22). In spite of this sobering assessment of his own limited capabilities Watters “began with fear and trembling once in a while to give a few words of exhortation, but frequently was afraid of running before [being] sent.” (Watters 1806 : 22-23). The fact that people listened and some even responded greatly encouraged the novice preacher, but he was equally, and sometimes easily discouraged when his labors produced little response, however, a deepening conviction to spread the message of free and instantaneous salvation to all who would listen, drove him to press on. “I dare not refrain from declaring his loving kindness to my fellow sinners . . . lest by my backwardness and unfaithfulness in warning sinners, they should die in their sins, and their blood be required at my hands.” (Watters 1806 : 23). For several weeks after Watters’ started sharing his faith “conversions occurred daily, and the work of grace flowed on like a gentle stream, with young Watters as manager and leader.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 40).

When Joseph Pilmore (1969 : 138) arrived in the Maryland area in June 1772, just a few months after Watters had sheepishly begun to preach, he noted that “God has undoubtedly begun a good work in these parts by the Ministry [sic] of Messrs, John King, Robert Williams and Robert Strawbridge.” These men were contemporaries and mentors to the young Watters.

At its highest levels Methodism was led by ordained and experienced churchman, but it was driven on the ground by committed laymen who gave themselves to a Divine cause, not fully realizing that they were pioneering players in the greatest and arguably most creative ecclesiastical drive of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. “No movement has ‘ever called

forth a nobler band of men.” (Sweet 1933 : 46).¹⁴ The growth and “development of indigenous leadership was a part of that mission,” (Norwood 1974 : 70) and would prove to be Methodism’s most noteworthy asset.

2.4 THE CALL TO PREACH

If a strong positive self-image was required to be called into the preaching ministry, Watters would never have dared step in front of a crowd to proclaim God’s Word. His autobiography contains numerous introspective accounts of a sincere, but less than flattering assessment of himself. On the other hand, if a call to preach required a heart for lost sinners and a desire to see them converted, then Watters would have needed nothing else. Throughout his converted life Watters ached for the souls of sinners to be brought into experiential religion. He (1806 : 21-22) simply longed to see the lost found:

From my first finding peace with God I found my mind much affected with a sense of the danger poor sinners were in, and my heart drawn out with fervent desires and prayer for their salvation, and from time to time have thought that nothing was so near or dear but what I would willingly part with to be an instrument of spreading the glorious gospel through the earth, but did not think it possible that I should ever be able to contribute any thing towards this desirable end in a public way; but finding that God had indisputably owned and blest my feeble endeavours in the conversion of several in different neighbourhoods, while the hearts of the people were open to receive me, and many inviting me into their neighbourhoods and houses, and above all felt a continued conviction on my mind that this was the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning me.

By the fall of 1772 American Methodism had half a dozen active British leaders¹⁵ between New York and Virginia, and a few native exhorters who had emerged as a result of Strawbridge’s work. Francis Asbury had already been in the country for a year but had not yet come within ninety miles of Baltimore. King, Strawbridge and Williams were occasional visitors to the area while Watters and others maintained the little Methodist work that was there. They were new in the faith but deeply committed to see others come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

¹⁴ Sweet quoted Jackson, 1872, but offers no page number. This writer was unable to find this quote in Jackson but does not dispute its existence.

¹⁵ Williams, King, Pilmore, Boardman, Asbury and Wright.

2.5 WATTERS' FIRST ITINERANT JOURNEY

At just “twenty-one years of age, having known the Lord seventeen months, and been exhorting five or six” (Watters 1806 : 24) Watters accepted an invitation from Robert Williams, who was the first Methodist to form a circuit in Virginia, (Stevens 1864 : 85) to accompany him on what would be Williams’ second preaching tour of that state.¹⁶ As a child, the youngest of nine and without a father much of his life, Watters had clung to his mother to such an extent that it impeded his formal education. His tie to earthly things was firm, but his commitment to the Lord was stronger. His mother, who had just recently lost her second husband, offered young Watters all her possessions if he would stay with her, but he respectfully refused. “Though my affection for her remained unimpaired . . . I knew my brothers were dutiful children, and that each of them would pay utmost attention to her.” (Watters 1806 : 24).

As a youth Watters was easily swayed by the temptations of the world and the pressures of peers: as a young man, although previously buffeted severely by spiritual turmoil, he now stood strong and resolute in his new found convictions. He was a Christian. He was a Methodist. He would be a preacher. “I found such resignation, and so clear a conviction that my way was of the Lord, that I was enabled to commit them [his mother and siblings] and myself to the care of our heavenly father in humble confidence.” (Watters 1806 : 25). Watters “stood ready to part with every earthly joy that he might assist in spreading the glad news of salvation through-out the world . . . [he] forsook all to become an ambassador for Christ.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 41, 49-50).

Being finally fully persuaded of my call to the ministry; and that it was my duty to go wherever a kind and unerring Providence should point out my way, I cheerfully accepted the invitation of that pious servant of the Lord, Robert Williams, and set out with him, and under his care in October, one thousand seven hundred and seventy-two, for Norfolk, in Virginia. (Watters 1806 : 24)

It is probable that Watters had no idea what such a journey would cost him. There were as yet no long standing itinerant preachers, working regular circuits in his area, from whom Watters could glean insight. He did not know that itinerant preaching, while extremely rewarding, would drain the strength from the most productive years of his life. He must have

¹⁶ Williams had preached through parts of Virginia earlier in the year, and had left small groups of Methodists behind but had not formally started any societies. (Gewehr 1930 : 143-145).

realized it would not be easy: that food would not always be appetizing, shelter would be basic if at all, opposition could often be severe and good human company sporadic. Barclay (1950 : 425) offers some insight into the dedication of the itinerant preachers and the perils they willingly faced:

A part of their duty would be to go to people who did not want to hear them, to communities where people of influence and authority would oppose and harass them. They would be obliged to travel wilderness trails in all kinds of weather, to make long journeys without assurance of food or of a roof over their heads at night. They must take up their cross—if they were to be true to their calling—not in the petty sense in which the phrase is so often used in religious circles in these latter days, but in its original meaning of a life sacrificed. And just this they did. They went forth in the face of all species of difficulty and hardship, often under a sense of threatening danger and impending tragedy but unmoved by every variety of peril and opposition.

Under the tutelage of Robert Williams, on his 21st birthday, (D. A. Watters 1898 : 49), Watters left home and family to preach the gospel under the Methodist banner, thus becoming the first American born Methodist itinerant preacher. They stopped and preached in the town of Baltimore where Watters (1806 : 25) says he “attempted to preach, it being the third time of my speaking from a text,” before moving on to Georgetown, which is now Washington DC, the nation’s capital. When they crossed the Potomac River into Virginia, just a few days into his first itinerant journey, and barely 50 miles from home Watters (1806 : 26) said “I began to think myself far from home; yet felt no wish to return.”

The missionary duo lodged with friends when they could or at local taverns, all the while seeking opportunities to preach and steer conversations to spiritual matters. The journey on route to Norfolk had a double impact on Watters. He was intensely concerned with the widespread lack of the clear evidence of true spirituality among the people. “We found very few in the course of three hundred miles who knew, experimentally, any thing of the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Watters 1806 : 27). This realization made him even more determined to be one of those instruments by which the masses may know the gospel experientially. Watters was also deeply impressed with a thought that was ahead of his times. The pervasive religious ignorance, even in the midst of Anglican parishes, impressed upon Watters a prayer for upright local “pastors after thine own heart, who shall gather them into thy fold, and feed them with the sincere milk of thy word.” (Watters 1806 : 27). Although Asbury later struggled with the tendency of the traveling preachers to settle into one location, at this young but insightful age, Watters recognized the

significant need of such a role, especially in light of the fact that so few Anglican parishes had priests properly spiritually qualified to lead a flock.

Watters and Williams arrived in Norfolk on November 19, 1772, (Pilmore 1969 : 162)¹⁷ having taken a month for the journey. Norfolk, and its neighbor Portsmouth, were both port towns known for their rough ways. D.A. Watters (1898 : 53) said Norfolk was in a “deplorable condition . . . the people were notoriously wicked and depraved, sin of a base and revolting sort abounded.” Watters’ first impression of the local Methodists was not complimentary. The group that Williams had formed earlier in the year were not yet exhibiting the graces that Watters had come to associate as being synonymous with Methodism. His acquaintance with more mature Methodists had instilled within him a high and maybe naïve ideal of what a Methodist ought to be, which he transposed onto all who claimed Methodist affiliation, only to have the notion dashed by what he witnessed in Norfolk:

Our friends in Norfolk received us kindly, but I found very little satisfaction amongst them for some time; their convictions were slight, and their desires faint, and far the greater part of them could hardly be said to have the form of religion.— Such Methodists I never had seen, nor did I suppose there were such upon earth; my experience and warm feelings led me to conclude that all who bore the name must be like those with whom I had been acquainted in the neighborhood I had left. Many hundreds attended preaching, but the most hardened, wild, and ill behaved of any people I had ever beheld in any place. (Watters 1806 : 27-28)

To corroborate his impression of the people of Norfolk, Watters (1806 : 29) makes an interesting reference to a comment Joseph Pilmore once made. Watters had gone to meet Pilmore as he returned to the area by ferry, when they overheard two men using course language, at which Pilmore exclaimed “Well! If I had been brought to this place blindfolded I should have known I was near Norfolk.” Joseph Pilmore¹⁸ had been in the area since late July of the same year, (Pilmore 1969 : 148, 162) where his tireless preaching had culminated in him forming the first Methodist Society in Virginia on November 16, 1772. Pilmore (1969 : 163) tells of an incident just a few days after Watters and Williams’ arrival, which further illustrates the behavior of the people in the area. Robert Williams was preaching “but the people disliked him so that

¹⁷ Pilmore’s journal has the duo arriving on the 16th but Maser, the editor of Pilmore’s journal, says Pilmore had the dates “hopelessly confused” (1969 : 151, 169) from August 20, 1772 until December 14, 1773.

¹⁸ Watters does not mention Pilmore until he is in Norfolk, however, it is assumed that he met Pilmore four months earlier because Pilmore preached at one of the Watters preaching houses on June 29, 1772. Pilmore also preached in the Baltimore, Maryland area for about a month before he headed for Virginia. (Pilmore 1969 : 141). Watters (1806 : 28) references Pilmore in Norfolk as if he had been previously acquainted with him.

they made a most horrible noise, so that I was obliged to go and sit among them to keep them in order; when they saw me, they were ashamed, and behaved very well the rest of the time.”

In mid December, 1772,¹⁹ Pilmore went on a four month preaching tour of the Carolinas and Georgia. A further testament to the perceived maturity and competence of Watters is the fact that he was left to care for the congregations in Norfolk and Portsmouth. His reaction to the charge is typical of his humble state. “I was very incapable of filling his place during his absence, and much rejoiced when he came back,” (Watters 1806 : 28) on April 5, 1773. Pilmore preached his last sermon in Norfolk on May 2, 1773 before heading back to Maryland, Philadelphia, New York and then eventually back to England in early 1774. (Pilmore 1969 : 195).

Growing increasingly despondent with the state of the local Methodists in and around Norfolk, Watters set out for the country to form a circuit “but was soon much discouraged to see the stupid blindness, and the brutal wickedness of the people.” (Watters 1806 : 28). A growing network of friends was on hand to encourage the young itinerate with special mention of William Owen²⁰ who Watters (1806 : 28) refers to as “my great confident [and whose] house was at all times a home for me.” Watters’ first experience at itinerant service during that winter was not an easy one. The difficulty of the cold climate and rough living conditions was exacerbated by the indifference and unruly behavior of many of the locals. The lack of note-worthy success did not help to encourage the novice preacher, yet he stayed true to his clear conviction that he was called to preach, and subsequently could rightly do nothing else, even through serious bouts of illness.

In the spring of 1773 Watters found himself stricken with measles and confined to his “bed for a considerable time . . . in some danger.” (Watters 1806 : 30). This was the first of numerous incidents where illness while on the preaching circuit would force him to become inactive for a period, and which would eventually lead to his location more than ten years later. When he was strong enough to travel again a few weeks later, his weakened physical state was

¹⁹ At this same time, late 1772, Francis Asbury arrived for the first time in the Maryland area where “he found the Methodist cause spreading in all directions, carried on largely by native local preachers and exhorters.” (Sweet 1933 : 67). While in Maryland over that Christmas period Asbury presided over the first Methodist Quarterly Conference to be held in America. Regrettably no formal records of that meeting were ever kept.

²⁰ This is probably the same Mr. Owen in whose home Joseph Pilmore preached to a “pretty congregation” (Pilmore 1969 : 149) while in the Portsmouth area of Virginia, and who Sweet (1955 : 56) credits as being the host of Virginia’s first Methodist “watch-night” service.

given a “fresh spring” (Watters 1806 : 30) when there were several conversions from the town and country.

Within a month or two of recovering from the measles and while still in the Norfolk/Portsmouth area, Watters was sick again to the extent of being bedridden for “between twenty and thirty days.” (Watters 1806 : 32). His friends were very attentive as they nursed him back to health even though at times he said he “had little or no hopes of recovering.” (Watters 1806 : 33). Several thoughts troubled Watters, as he lay ill day after day. He desperately wanted to return home to his mother whom he did not want hurt by his possible death. Arguably more significant was his awareness that he was the first American to have “gone out amongst the Methodists to preach the gospel.” (Watters 1806 : 33). Watters never wore this distinction as a crown to be publicly displayed or honored. He was ever humble and grateful to simply be a fellow laborer amongst the people called Methodists. What troubled Watters so deeply in his first itinerant journey, and in such a sickened state, was that his possible death could very likely discourage other Americans from joining the Methodist itinerancy.

Of far more significance to Watters than his mother’s comfort and the possible negative ramifications of his early demise for early American Methodism, was the three-fold conclusion he arrived at about his own spiritual state and direction as he lay on his self-diagnosed deathbed. “I thirsted to be more holy, to preach the blessed Jesus, and warn poor sinners of their danger . . . The Lord knew that I saw nothing else which was worth living for.” (Watters 1806 : 33). These thoughts encapsulated and characterized the life that Watters gave himself to, whether preaching from a saddle or behind a regular pulpit at a local Methodist preaching point. He wanted nothing more than to serve God as a Methodist worker: to see sinners come to conversion and to share the message of holiness to all who would hear. These are the deep and driving thoughts that possessed Watters, whether in full health, or serious illness. His intense passion about his own spirituality and the spiritual needs of others was at times extreme, but never suffocating. He longed to keep preaching, and was often frustrated when sickness curtailed his activeness.

In the interim Thomas Rankin and George Shadford had arrived in the colonies, shortly after which, the first Methodist Conference in America was held in Philadelphia in June/July of 1773.²¹ In absentia Watters was received into the conference as a preacher and appointed

²¹ Some scholars think that Watters did attend this conference. This writer is convinced he did not. For more on this issue and about the disputed date of the conference see Chapter 4.

to the New Jersey Circuit with John King, (Minutes 1983 : 5-6)²² becoming the first American born preacher to have the honor of being formally appointed to a Methodist Circuit. Due to his health, which the members of the conference may not have been cognizant of, Watters never fulfilled the appointment to New Jersey that year.²³

While Watters remained in the Norfolk area, Robert Williams was on a very successful preaching tour of Petersburg, Virginia,²⁴ which included parts of North Carolina. Whilst there he developed a strong bond with the Anglican Rev. Devereux Jarratt that later embraced wider Methodist endeavors. (Jarratt 1778 : 6). As noted above, Jarratt was a fervent evangelical who was more concerned with the spread of the gospel and the salvation of souls than the growth of any particular religious concern. After successfully seeking ordination in England in the Established Church, he returned to Virginia in July, 1763. He became the priest of the Bath Parish in southern Virginia, a position that required oversight of three churches, which he held until his death in 1801. (Sweet 1935 : 26). The united work of Jarratt and Williams in the region helped to fuel a remarkable revival, of which Watters was to play a part. Jarratt became without a doubt, American Methodism's closest ally in the Established Church, until Methodist independence in 1784.²⁵

Watters' very difficult initiation into Methodist itinerancy in Norfolk was probably of far more benefit to him personally and Methodism at large than he ever realized. He had been through a grueling internship of indifferent people, minimal success and debilitating health, yet he was as determined as ever to pursue what God had clearly led him to. Although he desperately wanted to leave Norfolk, "the most wicked place I had ever set my foot in," (Watters 1806 : 34) and to spend some time with his family back in Maryland, the gold that had been refined over the span of almost a year would take on and endure far more battles, some much more severe, than his induction into preaching ever was. The resolve that was solidified in the young preacher, the deepened commitment and heightened passion to see the lost found, would keep driving Watters

²² American Methodist Conference Minutes from 1773 to 1813 were published in a single volume in 1813. They were republished in 1983. This paper will make use of the 1983 edition and will be referenced in the text as 'Minutes.'

²³ Robert Williams was appointed to Petersburg, which was in south-central Virginia but Pilmore was not appointed. His relationship with Wesley had soured, (See Pilmore's Journal, 1969 : 206, 207) however, the lack of his appointment was probably due to his pending return to England, which took place in early 1774.

²⁴ Williams was the first Methodist to preach in the Petersburg area. (Jarratt 1778 : 6; Watters 1806 : 34).

²⁵ See Chapter Seven for more details.

over the next decades through difficult trials and crippling circumstances long after his body or human reason would have told him to stop or slow down.

Although the people were unruly and the conditions arduous, the work of Watters, Williams and Pilmore in the Norfolk and southern Virginia areas had some immediate successes, but the most significant fruit of their laborers would be reaped by others for years to come. “At the Methodist Conference held in Baltimore in 1776, four new circuits were reported as having been formed during the year in Virginia and North Carolina, and all within the territory of the celebrated tour of Williams and Watters in the year of 1772 and 1773.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 56). In addition, just two years after Williams and Watters tour, George Shadford, “the greatest revivalist of all times,” (Sweet 1933 : 92; Jarratt 1778 : 7) “reaped the most glorious and bountiful harvest, perhaps, ever reported by one man in a single year.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 56). Norwood (1974 : 73) described Shadford’s contribution to the Virginia revival²⁶ as being “spectacular.” In 1778 Jarratt published a detailed report on the revivals in this area that started in the early 1770’s and continued for much of the decade. Today there are numerous Methodist congregations in that region who trace their roots back to early Methodist traveling preachers who labored there in the early part of the 1770’s. What is clear about Watters’ first itinerant journey is that he could endure much, he could preach, and his preaching touched lives. He was “prepared for a wider and more arduous field of labor.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 59).

2.6 A BRIEF SOJOURN AT HOME

In late August or early September²⁷ of 1773, just a few days after Williams had returned to Norfolk, the two sailed for Baltimore where they spent time preaching before one of Watters’ brothers met him with a horse for the last segment of his trip back home. “After being away eleven months; and, through a merciful and kind Providence, found all my relations and friends in health, holding fast their professions, and growing in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Watters 1806 : 34). It was during this time that Watters met Francis Asbury for

²⁶ See Chapter Three for more on the Virginia revival.

²⁷ Watters left for Virginia on his twenty-first birthday, October 16, 1772. He does not give the date of his departure from Norfolk or his arrival back home, but he does say that he had been away for eleven months. (Watters 1806 : 34). This means Watters had to have left Norfolk by late August or early September, 1773, at the latest.

the first time.²⁸ (Watters 1806 : 34). He had been in the area since the middle of July of the same year, but was suffering serious bouts of illness, which kept him bedridden for much of the second half of the year. (Clark I 1958 : 96). Asbury was evidently well enough to have visitors and communicate with friends because Watters (1806 : 35) says he expressed a keen interest in the work Watters had carried out in Virginia. United by their deep passion for the preaching of the gospel and their compelling commitment to the cause of Methodism, a close friendship developed between the two that spanned almost fifty years. Asbury often referred to Watters, who was about five years his junior, in affectionate terms such as “Billy Watters” or “dear old friend, Mr. Watters.” (Asbury II 1958 : 160, 664). A traveling companion of Asbury’s, Henry Boehm, reports of witnessing Asbury and Watters greeting “each other with a ‘holy kiss.’” (Referenced in D. A. Watters 1898 : 57).

A quarterly meeting was held in the area in the first week of November while Watters was at home, and although not mentioned by him, it is probable that he attended. At the 1773 conference in Philadelphia a few months earlier, Watters had been appointed to New Jersey, but due to illness and needed recovery time in southern Virginia, he could not immediately fulfill the obligation at the rise of the conference. D. A. Watters (1898 : 63) says the New Jersey field of Methodist preaching covered New Jersey, Delaware and parts of Maryland. It is feasible that Watters’ appointment would have come up at the quarterly meeting because he was sent to the Kent Circuit, which was on the eastern shore of Maryland. Also while at home Watters met Thomas Rankin for the first time. Rankin, whom Wesley had appointed as his Assistant in the colonies, had chaired the Quarterly Meeting. (Rankin 1878 : 197; Asbury I 1958 : 96). Watters was very impressed with the overall demeanor and professionalism of Rankin and always held him in high esteem. As noted above, Watters (1806 : 35) says Rankin was well “qualified to fill his place as general assistant amongst us . . . he was not only a man of grace, but of strong and quick parts.”

2.7 WATTERS’ FIRST FORMAL APPOINTMENT

After recuperating for a few weeks under the tranquil influence of the parental home, strengthened by maternal affection and counsel, and encouraged by the good

²⁸ Asbury does not mention where he first met Watters. Due to illness Asbury did not make many journal entries in the latter part of 1773.

cheer of his old associates, he set out for his new field of labor, fired with all the courage of a young soldier. (D. A. Watters 1898 : 63)

With less than a year's experience behind him, in November of 1773, Watters left home for the Kent Circuit, which lay between the Delaware and Chesapeake Bays and included parts of Delaware and Maryland.²⁹ Bangs (1838 : 71) says "two private members of the society raised up by Mr. Strawbridge, were the first Methodists who visited Kent county." Williams and Asbury followed them. When "the young itinerant again . . . rode forth on his evangelical adventures" (Stephens 1864 : 187) to Maryland's eastern shore to deliver the gospel it was without the accompaniment of older more seasoned preachers. It was the "first field assigned by a Methodist Conference to an American itinerant. This was the start of the work by the native sons of American Methodism." (D. A. Watters 1898 : 64). On his way to this new charge Watters (1806 : 36) says, "I felt a humiliating sense of my littleness of faith and my unprofitableness [sic] in the Lord's vineyard." One could easily conclude that Watters had a very poor self-image. Conversely, it is more appropriate to believe that he was a very humble man, who felt a great sense of privilege in being drafted into the Lord's service as a Methodist itinerant preacher. The Kent Circuit took two weeks for all the preaching points to be serviced. Watters was by no means a well weathered preacher at just twenty-two years of age, but he rode the circuit for several months with the confidence of a professional as he enjoyed much "freedom, liberty and success in preaching." (Watters 1806 : 36).

Although the early Methodist preachers in America remained committed to the Church of England, as their patriarch, John Wesley was, they endured periodic hardship at the hands of Established clergy. The two groups were often at polar opposites. The Anglican parson tended to only work within his jurisdiction. The Methodist circuit riders went anywhere a preaching point was open or possible. The Anglican was often very formal in his ministry and passively distant to his people. The Methodists were informal in ministry, often excessively enthusiastic by Anglican standards, and were very intentional in their care of the individuals they were charged with. The American Methodists put ministry above king, while the British Anglicans, and many English Methodists for that matter, returned to England during the Revolutionary War. The Methodists sought to work alongside their Anglican counterparts; however, most Anglican

²⁹ Today the region is commonly referred to as the Delmarva Peninsula because parts of Delaware, Maryland and Virginia occupy it.

parsons saw the Methodists as competition and viewed their efforts with skepticism or disdain. The two groups united under a common ecclesiastical umbrella, represented by individual preachers, often disagreed on matters of theology, Biblical interpretation and personal spirituality.

While Watters was very resolute in his spiritual commitment, he was always willing to adjust his ministry to suit the moment, whilst doing whatever possible to ensure that the Word was preached. While on the Kent Circuit, in Queen Anne, Maryland, Watters was invited to preach in a Mr. Fogwell's home. The local Anglican priest threatened the prospective host with criminal prosecution, if the preaching was conducted within the house since it was not licensed as a dissenting preaching point. Watters, ever wanting to keep the peace while upholding his divine responsibilities, responded with the maturity of a veteran; "I thought it best not to expose any person to trouble and expense, and as the weather was mild, proposed preaching out of doors. All readily agreed, and out we went, the parson following close at our heels." (Watters 1806 : 36-37). Watters delivered his sermon with composed dignity and remained so when the parson, who had formed part of the outdoor congregation, proceeded to interrogate Watters (1806 : 38) on his theology, "as though he had been one of the Popes inquisitors." The parson's unstated but clear intention of humiliating and undermining Watters failed. Watters (1806 : 38) says, "I was cautious in my answers, and gave him soft words, and no more than I could well avoid." This incident was clearly a defining moment in the young man's maturation process as a preacher.

"Through the persevering labors of Mr. Asbury and others associated with him, a gracious work was commenced on this peninsula" (Bangs 1838 : 73) but Watters clearly took Methodism to new heights on the Kent Circuit. When he arrived there were only a few preaching points, but "our little number was soon increased" (Watters 1806 : 39) so that the circuit rapidly grew to require two weeks to complete. Before he left, after about five months, the circuit had grown to where it took four weeks to complete and "many were deeply awakened and soundly converted unto the Lord." (Watters 1806 : 39). "On the eastern shore of Maryland, particularly in the county of Kent, there was a considerable revival of religion." (Bangs 1838 : 81).

On his own, amongst people he did not initially know but whom he loved in the Lord and for whom he had a deep desire to see converted, William Watters tasted the fruit of ministry success. It was a very profitable time for the ongoing growth of Methodism and for the young

preacher's self-esteem. He "had grown in favor with the masses, and the doors of welcome flew open to him, more than he could enter." (D. A. Watters DA 1898 : 65).

2.8 HONOR AND GROWTH FOR THE MATURING YOUNG **PREACHER**

In the spring of 1774 Watters returned home to find that his oldest brother John, who was more than twenty years his senior, had passed away just a few weeks earlier. His emotions were justifiably mixed: kin was suddenly lost but "his end was peace . . . his spirit returned to God." (Watters 1806 : 40). Watters then had a brief stint on the Baltimore Circuit that solicited a cacophony of introspective deliberations. He enjoyed working for a brief season amongst familiar settings and personalities but his efforts lacked the "life, power and liberty" (Watters 1806 : 41) that he had experienced on the Kent Circuit. Methodism always received the best Watters had to give. In return he expected corresponding results. When they were not forthcoming he at times took it personally, often questioning his own spirituality, which in this instance was evidenced by his candid disclosure that his "religion was too superficial [and that he] often longed to be sanctified."³⁰ (Watters 1806 : 41).

In May 1774 a privilege of the highest ministerial order was bestowed upon the twenty-two year old Watters. As an indication of the growing respect he was engendering amongst the other older leaders of American Methodism, most of whom were far more experienced; Watters was asked to preach at the second annual American Methodist Conference, which was held in Philadelphia. "I was much edified by the conversation of my elder brethren. I felt some embarrassment in having to preach before the preachers, and so large a congregation, in so large a house and city." (Watters 1806 : 41). The meeting was held at St George's Church, which for many years "was the only Methodist meeting house in America to claim the title 'church.'" (Wrenn 2000 : 75). Of his sermon before the hierarchy of early American Methodism, and numerous other onlookers, the humble young preacher said:

I could not give them anything that was wise, I endeavored to be as simple and childish as possible, and so, out of the fullness of my heart, I gave them a short discourse on the nature, necessity, and happiness of religion. I got through better than I expected, and felt thankful for the little assistance with which I was blessed. (Watters 1806 : 41-42)

³⁰ Watters' yearning for sanctification will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Eight.

The statistical growth of Methodism over the preceding year was impressive. About one thousand converts had been made, almost doubling Methodist membership to 2073.³¹ The conference registered ten circuits and the number of appointed preachers was increased to seventeen, seven of whom were admitted on trial. (Minutes 1983 : 7-8). Edward Dromgoole was one of those admitted on trial: he would play a vital role for Methodism, not only as a dedicated itinerant preacher and great orator, but also as a co-leader with Watters of the movement during the Revolutionary years.³² Rankin's (1878 : 200) assessment of the conference was very positive. "We spoke our minds freely one to another in love; and whatever we thought would further the work, we most cheerfully embraced it . . . We stationed the preachers as well as we could, and all seemed to be satisfied." The quarterly meetings and annual conferences were never just business meetings in early Methodism. They were the crowning gathering of the wider Methodist community and they were always "intensely spiritual." (Richey 1991 : 3). They served as the precursor to the formal ecclesiastical body that American Methodism would become.

In the mean time the threat of war hung heavy in the air. The fledgling nation wanted to spread its wings and seek its own flight path away from the mother goose that Britain was. The Methodists, native or English, found themselves in a quandary: their natural instincts cried for loyalty to their birth country while their higher calling was to God and the propagation of the Methodist doctrine of free salvation to all regardless of who sat in power. The first shots in the brewing battle had not yet rung out as Watters made his way to the Trenton Circuit in New Jersey to fulfill his conference appointment. While there "[John] Hancock and [John] Adams, passed through on their way to the First Congress, in Philadelphia"³³ (Watters 1806 : 43) to make plans for an independent nation:

While the patriots were laying deep the foundations of civil liberty, our young preacher was proving his loyalty to the higher government by faithfully building the higher religious liberty of the gospel, without which the former could scarcely hope to endure. (D. A. Watters 1898 : 79)

³¹ The 1773 Conference had registered 1160 members, ten preachers and six circuits. (Minutes 1983 : 6).

³² See Chapter Five for more details on Edward Dromgoole

³³ The First Continental Congress met in Philadelphia from September 5, 1774, to October 26, 1774. Adams and Hancock were both from Massachusetts. Hancock was the first signature on the Declaration of Independence. Adams became the nation's second president. See Chapter Five for more on Watters' work during the revolution years.

On the Trenton Circuit Watters (1806 : 42) “was most kindly received . . . I felt freedom of spirit, and preached as if every sermon were my last.” An additional indication of the growing respect the Methodist leaders had for Watters and their increasing reliance on his leadership came just shortly after commencing his work in Trenton. An unidentified individual, possibly a lay society leader, had created some problems on the Chester Circuit³⁴ and Thomas Rankin asked Watters to help fix the “considerable division” (Watters 1806 : 43) with the promise that he could return to Trenton, where he was already having substantial success. These frequent moves never bothered Watters as they did some other preachers, for instance, Joseph Pilmore. Instead, when asked to move ‘mid-term,’ his growing maturity and depth of commitment coupled with a pious but humble attitude toward his calling and service as an itinerant Methodist, gave him reason to further reflect on his true purpose in life and why he had dedicated his life to the Methodist cause:

It reminded me that I was a pilgrim -- that here I had no continuing city -- that I was a tenant at will, and ought to be always ready. The parting with my friends and going among perfect strangers, though very painful, was blessed to the weaning me from the love of creatures, and made me determine more than ever to know nothing among ‘men, but Jesus Christ, and him crucified.’” (Watters 1806 : 43)

Watters had a very successful few months on the Chester circuit where he was able to dismiss the troublemaker, who he simply identifies as “A. R-s,” (Watters 1806 : 44) and restored order to the fragmented society. He also preached around the circuit several times. Within a few months he was back on the Trenton Circuit, enjoying the closeness of friends and the success of ministry:

The latter part of the winter, and through the spring, many in the upper end of the circuit were greatly wrought on and our meetings were lively and powerful. The cries of the people for mercy were frequently loud and earnest . . .

I spent nine months out of twelve in this circuit much to my comfort, and through grace I hope with a single eye, and was greatly encouraged to go on my way rejoicing. (Watters 1806 : 44-45)

Having being used to heal where the spiritual enemy had caused division at Chester and after many months of good fruit for his efforts at Trenton, Watters attended the third annual conference in Philadelphia on May 17, 1775 in high spirits. The Revolutionary War between

³⁴ The Chester Circuit had just been added at the preceding conference. It covered parts of Maryland and Eastern Pennsylvania. It was not too far from where Watters was at Trenton.

America and Britain had begun just a month earlier on April 19, 1775, with the Battle of Concord and Lexington in Massachusetts. The war was on almost every one's lips, but the Methodists who huddled in St George's had eternal matters to discuss, and rejoice over.

The conference reported that Methodist membership in all the societies over the previous year had grown by more than fifty percent to 3148; there were nineteen listed preachers and ten circuits. Both the New Jersey area, of which Trenton was a part, and the Chester Circuit, grew in membership. The conference preachers agreed to set aside July 18, 1775, as a day to "fast for the prosperity of the work, and for the peace of America." (Minutes 1983 : 10). Watters reluctantly accepted his next appointment: the Frederick Circuit, which only registered 30 members and covered a wide area:

When William Watters came to Frederick Circuit the next year, he was distressed at first on account of the manners of the people and their way of living . . . Philip Gatch found the circuit "laborious," with long rides between meeting places and only 17 in society, but some of these members were steady and in some places the prospect was good. (Connor 1970 : 33)

Where the Trenton Circuit was joyful to Watters, the early portion of his work on the Frederick Circuit (which covered portions of central Maryland and northern Virginia) led him to feel "exceedingly dejected . . . hardly capable of preaching or conversing to any good purpose." (Watters 1806 : 46). Although these circumstances caused Watters to fleetingly consider the conveniences of another way of life, he "felt no wish to shun the cross, or desert the work of the Lord." (Watters 1806 : 46). Watters was forced to adapt: to be content with his lot, and to press on regardless, which is what he did. His (1806 : 46-47) reflections on whom he ultimately served and where he as a preacher had come from helped his attitude to adjust:

I was deprived of many conveniences, yet he [God] made all up unto me in spirituals, and I was contented to sleep in cabins-to eat a dry morsel-and frequently to retire into the woods to read-to pray and meditate . . . My Lord and Master on earth had no place whereon to lay his head, and shall not I be thankful for the meanest place? He was hated-spit on-condemned-and crucified-and shall such a poor worm as I am look for anything better? . . . May I ever be sensible of the rock from whence I have been hewn, and the hole of the pit from whence I have been dug.

By July, about two months into the circuit, Watters countenance changed after seeing revival in the lower part of the circuit, evidently a spill over of the revival that had already been sweeping through much of southern Virginia for more than six months, and no doubt fuelled by Robert

Strawbridge, who was Watters' co-worker on the circuit. "I spent six months in this circuit, and believe that scores were added to the Lord, of such as were saved from sin. I had infinite cause to praise God that I had not labored in vain, nor spent my strength for nought (sic)." (Watters 1806 : 47).

In November of 1775 the developing fraternal aspect of American Methodism, that Richey extensively details in Early American Methodism (1991), which was still very much in its infancy but showing increasing signs of positive advancement, was further evidenced when Rankin invited Watters to travel with him for a period. The older seasoned leader offered the young but very promising preacher some quality time to share, bolster and grow together. It was not uncommon for circuit riders to partner with other preachers, but Watters (1806 : 47) brief mention of this gesture of Rankin's betrays an attitude of much appreciation and kinship with Methodism and its leaders. Watters followed with a few very successful months on the Fairfax Circuit that covered much of northern Virginia. The work on the circuit grew so rapidly that it required three preachers, (Wrenn 2000 : 76) and soon accounted for more than one hundred conversions. One of the significant trophies of Watters' (1806 : 48) work on the Fairfax Circuit was the conversion of Nelson Reed³⁵ "who in a short time became a preacher." At the time of Reed's death in 1840, at eighty-nine, he was the oldest Methodist preacher. (Wrenn 2000 : 75). It was while working on this circuit, according to Russell, (1998 : 27) that Watters was influential in the decision that the William and Ann Adams family made to join a Methodist society. The Adams family would have a prominent role to play in Watters' personal life and Methodism in general. Early in 1776 Watters returned to serve on the Frederick Circuit, with more successes than negative distractions this time.

While "wars and rumours [sic] of wars were all around" (Watters 1806 : 48) Watters had an interesting encounter with an Anglican priest on the Frederick Circuit over their alleged loyalty to the British crown. Watters' (1806 : 49) consistent attitude when faced with conflict was to "forget all smaller differences, and to unite in seeking the common interest" but not at all costs. When the integrity of Methodism was questioned and the work of the Lord threatened Watters bravely went on the attack in an effort to set the records straight and to maintain the momentum of the work. Watters was not alone in this experience: the American Methodists were constantly attempting to justify their loyalty to John Wesley, initially a clear opponent of the

³⁵ The Lovely Lane Museum holds parts of Reed's journal that has no use for this particular research.

American cause, and their affiliation with the Church of England, with their patriotism to America. These were difficult times for all, but because of American Methodist preachers who were determined to be more concerned with the preaching of the gospel and the salvation of souls than with the affairs of state, the work kept growing.

Shortly after the encounter with the priest mentioned above, which will be covered in more detail in Chapter Five, Watters headed for the 1776, fourth annual Conference held this time in Baltimore. The war was spreading, but so was Methodism. The nation was fighting for its rightful place under God's sky as Methodism simply went about its right to reform where they could. Watters was not going to let a squabble between nations impede his contribution to the cause of the gospel just as he would refuse to sit idly by as Methodism faced its own internal squabble. Chapter Three will detail these aspects of Methodism as the narrative of Watters' life continues, concluding with his death in 1827.

CHAPTER THREE

WATTERS' LIFE AND WORK: FROM THE 1776 CONFERENCE OF AMERICAN METHODISM TO HIS LATER LIFE

Speculation as to the actual date or event of American Methodism's formal commencement will always remain the historian's privilege. In the mid 1760's Irish immigrant Methodists began meetings in New York and Maryland. In 1769 Wesley's first formally appointed workers arrived. In 1773 the first annual Methodist Conference met. Any one of these milestones could arguably qualify as Methodism's induction into America. A far simpler conclusion to arrive at is how well American Methodism was doing as they gathered for their fourth Conference in May 1776. Twenty-four preachers on twelve circuits¹ in seven colonies² were caring for 4921 members. (Minutes 1983 : 11-12). The work was clearly taking on significant proportions. At the same time America's efforts for self-determination were well advanced. The war for liberty from Britain was in its second year. A formal united Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia was just two months away as the city buzzed with war talk and the activities of the Second Continental Congress that had already been in session for more than a year.³ Concurrent with American Methodism's toddler-hood, and its host nation fast approaching its own formal birth, was the unmistakable rise of William Watters as a leading exponent of Methodism in the New World. As he concluded his fifth year of itinerant service he remained steadfast to his divine calling, and as resolute as ever not to entangle himself with the affairs of state. He obviously had no inclination that he would be drawn into the fray of ecclesiastical wrangling within the very movement he sought to keep untarnished by the political conflict that was captivating the colonies. This chapter will continue the narrative of Watters' life as he moves from successful preaching tours to being the most prominent American born Methodist, charged with playing critical roles in Methodism's survival. The chapter will also detail Watters' humble and willing

¹ A Circuit consisted of several societies or preaching points over many miles that one or more circuit preachers would visit for the purpose of preaching, nurture and discipline. Some circuits were so big that it took a preacher several weeks to just make one round. The conditions were often hard and thankless. Provisions were never assured.

² New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Virginia, North Carolina.

³ The Second Continental Congress was in session from May 10, 1775 to March 1, 1781. Philadelphia was one of several cities it met in.

retreat from leadership when Asbury emerged from exile and his very difficult decision to cease traveling due to failing health.

3.1 **“IT IS MUCH MORE DESIRABLE TO WEAR OUT THAN TO RUST OUT.”⁴**

Conference opened on the twenty-first of May (1776), in Baltimore Town for the first time. This year Philadelphia was out of the question as a meeting place, crowded as it was with representatives of all the Colonies, gathered there for the Continental Congress. (Connor 1970 : 59)

The Conference experience for Watters was always a very refreshing time. The mechanics of the work was dealt with efficiently and professionally, but the needs of the soul were never neglected. Spiritual renewal was persistently a vital component of these corporate gatherings. The 1776 Conference had an added significant dimension for Watters in that his older brother, Nicholas, entered the Methodist “itinerancy and continued in the work for more than a quarter of a century.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 97). William was appointed to resume work on the Fairfax Circuit, which he undertook with typical zeal, yet his body seemed not as positive.

After just five years as a circuit preacher, and still just a young man of twenty-five years old, Watters’ body was already paying the price for the grueling work he willingly gave himself to. The early Methodist workers frequently preached several times a day. They often rode many miles between appointments, through some of the worst elements. They endured ridicule and at times outright persecution. They seldom knew where the next meal or place to sleep would come from, and when these natural necessities were not forthcoming, they improvised and made do with what ever it was that God had blessed them with. Watters gladly endured these hardships knowing that his Lord had suffered worse. The work required ardent fervor and a determined will: Watters freely gave both. His great-nephew elaborates further:

Accompanied by much disagreeable exposure and other hardships peculiar to his day and work. Seldom was it that he slept in the same house two nights in succession, or ate at the same table more than a day at a time.

Such were the vicissitudes of the traveling preacher, that it was necessary that there should be coupled with a free heart and sound mind a constitution capable of enduring hardships.

⁴ Watters 1806 : 55.

The years of repeated and rigid test began to lay hold of his hitherto rugged frame and shake it, as if eager to discover the weakest spot. (D. A. Watters 1898 : 101)

Watters often weighed the difficult matter of not wanting to lose his effectiveness to idle 'rust' while recognizing the irresponsibility of excessive exertion in weakened states, thus running the risk of not being usable at all through 'self-murder:'

By continual labors I was often much worn down, and at this time I was greatly afflicted with a cough that was hard to be removed, and thought I was dying a sure, though lingering death, and although I have feared hastening my dissolution by an ill-judged zeal, yet I have long desired not to live to be useless. It is much more desirable to wear out than to rust out. My merciful God! keep me from offering unto thee the sacrifice of self-murder. (Watters 1806 : 55)

In the winter of 1776 Watters moved to the Frederick Circuit where he had served the year before, but without much success. The Circuit's "roads were difficult, the settlements very scattered, the habitations mostly log cabins, without conveniences for the sojourners." (Stevens 1864 : 344). Philip Gatch⁵ (1854 : 30) says he "found the circuit to be laborious; some of the rides were quite long." Yet Watters' time there was a blessed experience. He reports:

Preaching to very large and attentive congregations . . . with several very encouraging circumstances . . . This tour through different neighborhoods, and among all sorts of people, was much blessed to my soul. I had many powerful seasons in public and private, and labored day and night, while the people came from all quarters to hear the words of eternal life. (Watters 1806 : 54)

Thanks in part to his own persistent hard work; this circuit was a far more rewarding experience for Watters than it was some eighteen months earlier. "The members of this circuit are happy in being of one heart and mind. Disputes are seldom heard of. Few fall off. The most appear to be growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour [sic] Jesus Christ." (Watters 1806 : 56).

Overall Watters was having significant success. "Wherever he went, the revival fire began to burn, whether in summer or in winter; for to him all seasons were harvest times for the garnering of immortal souls." (D. A. Watters 1898 : 83). In the four years since Watters took

⁵ Gatch and Watters had much in common. They were both from Maryland and converted indirectly as a result of the work of Strawbridge. Both were born, converted and began preaching in the same years. Gatch (1954 : 20-22) went on a brief preaching trip to Pennsylvania in November or December of 1772, a month or two before Watters left for Virginia. Gatch did not become an actual itinerant preacher until 1773.

charge of his first formal appointment he emerged as a respected, much loved, and sought after Methodist preacher: the first true American born Methodist revivalist.

3.2 REVIVAL IN SOUTHERN VIRGINIA⁶

The 1777 Conference, which began on May 20, met at Watters' (1806 : 56) "eldest brothers preaching house, [in] Deer Creek," Maryland, which was "northeast of Baltimore." (Wrenn 2000 : 76). Watters, along with Freeborn Garretson and John Tunnell,⁷ were appointed to the Brunswick Circuit, which was at the heart of an ongoing revival. By the time of Watters' appointment, the revival was already showing signs of tapering off. The circuit, which was "the most important field in the connection," (Moore 1884 : 133) stretched into parts of North Carolina where a young vibrant Methodist, Jesse Lee, was appointed as a class-leader at the age of twenty.⁸ Watters' inaugural preaching tour with Robert Williams back in 1772 into Southern Virginia, coupled with the work of Joseph Pilmore at that time, contributed greatly to the setting of the stage for the revival that erupted just a year or two later.

Although "Strawbridge gave to Maryland the finest type of American Methodism," (Porter 1928 : 371), and is deservedly credited with much of Methodism's early growth in the Virginia-Maryland areas, Sweet (1935 : 19-20) correctly points out that the general decadent state of the Anglican Church and the work of a few of its evangelical preachers, particularly Devereux Jarratt and Archibald McRoberts,⁹ are contributing factors that created a setting that was conducive to a revival of experiential religion as preached and lived out by the Methodists:

The most important single historic fact in the early history of Methodism in Virginia was the cooperative relationship which developed between the early Methodist preachers ... with the devout evangelical Anglican clergyman of Bath Parish in Dinwiddie County, Devereux Jarrat. (Sweet 1955 : 60)

⁶ Although Watters did not contribute to the revival at its height, his work in Virginia preceding the revival and toward its end, were significant factors. This writer believes the following brief details of the revival warrant mention.

⁷ This was Tunnell's first Methodist appointment. He continued to serve in various places before moving to the West Indies for a brief period, after which he returned to America to serve Methodism in various capacities until his death in 1789. (Moore 1884 : 134)

⁸ Two years after commencing Methodist service Lee was drafted to serve in the American army. Because he refused to bear arms he was given the responsibility of wagon driver. He took every opportunity he could to preach to his fellow soldiers. He labored for many years as a Methodist preacher in New England and is affectionately referred to as Methodism's Apostle to New England.

⁹ Stevens (1864 : 347) says McRoberts left the Anglican Church because of its poor spiritual condition and became a Presbyterian.

The Rev. Devereux Jarratt wrote one of the preeminent, if not the best, contemporary accounts of the revival in the form of a series of letters, which was published in 1778. Jarratt was a fellow exhorter of the form of experiential religion the Methodists held to and was arguably the most ardent Anglican supporter of the Methodist itinerant movement. He served the Methodists communion whenever needed, officiated at their baptisms, offered his facilities as Methodist preaching points and often shared their pulpits. His insistence on the essential elements of the Christian gospel, especially the need for a personal born again experience, was met with “no small outcry” (Jarratt 1778 : 4) from some members of his community, but he persisted just as the Methodists did. Jarratt’s (1778 : 5-6, 9) chronological account of the revival includes the following:

In the years 1770 and 1771, we had a more considerable out-pouring of the Spirit . . . In the year 1772, the revival was more considerable, and extended itself in some places, for fifty or sixty miles around . . . In spring, 1774, it was more remarkable than ever . . . [From 1775 to January 1776] we have had a time of refreshing indeed: a revival of religion, as great as perhaps ever was known . . . [by mid 1776 the revival covered a] circumference of between four and five hundred miles.

Jarratt’s (1778 : 9-10) account of the Quarterly Meeting at Boisseau’s Chapel in May 1776, is an example of how the revival was spreading ever wider:

The outpouring of the Spirit which began here, soon extended itself, more or less, through most of the circuit, which is regularly attended by the travelling [sic] preachers, [Methodists] and which takes in a circumference of between four and five hundred miles. And the work went on, with a pleasing progress, till the beginning of May, when they held a quarterly meeting at Boisseau's chapel, in my parish . . . At this meeting, one might truly say, the windows of heaven were opened, and the rain of Divine influence poured down for more than forty days. The work now became more deep than ever, extended wider, and was swifter in its operations. Many were savingly converted to God, and in a very short time, not only in my parish, but through several parts of Brunswick, Sussex, Prince George, Lunenburg, Mecklenburg, and Amelia counties.

Although Jarratt was a primary catalyst for what the Methodists accomplished in Virginia in the 1770’s, Gewehr (1930 : 143) correctly points out that “the phenomenal spread of Jarratt’s revival after 1773 was due to the fact that it really became a part of the great Methodist awakening. In Fact, it lost its identity and Jarratt merely became a colleague, although an invaluable one, of the Wesleyan itinerants.” Jarratt’s (1778 : 31-32) inclusion in his reporting on the revival, of a letter by Thomas Rankin to John Wesley, illustrates the critical role the Methodists had in the revival, even in Jarratt’s eyes. On Sunday July 7, 1776, Rankin wrote:

I intended to preach near the house, under the shade of some large trees. But the rain made it impracticable. The house was greatly crowded, and four or five hundred stood at the doors and windows . . . there was a great shaking. I was obliged to stop again and again, and beg of the people to compose themselves. But they could not: Some on their knees, and some on their faces, were crying mightily to God all the time I was preaching. Hundreds of Negroes were among them . . . every day the ensuing week I preached to large and attentive congregations.

Rankin also spoke of revival at meetings in Leesburg, Virginia, some two hundred miles from the revival's epicenter in Brunswick County. On Sunday June 30, 1776, with George Shadford in company Rankin (1878 : 207-208) wrote:

I scarce had spoken two sentences, while under this amazing influence, before the very house seemed to shake, and all the people were overcome with the presence of the Lord God of Israel. Such a scene my eyes saw, and ears heard, as I never was witness to before . . . Soon very soon my voice was drowned amidst the pleasing sounds of prayer and praise. Husbands were inviting their wives to go to heaven with them and parents calling upon their children to come to the Lord Jesus . . . For upwards of two hours the mighty outpouring of the Spirit of God continued upon the congregation.

Of the Methodists, Jarratt (1778 : 6) says they did the bulk of the preaching in the Sussex and Brunswick counties, where they also took care of already established societies. Gewehr (1930 : 141-142) says "Jarratt saw in the Methodists an instrument for reviving religion in the church of his faith:"

A great part of Virginia is still in a very dark and deplorable condition. This province contains sixty-two counties; and the late work has reached only seven or eight of them. Nor has it been universal even in these, but chiefly in the circuits, which is regularly visited by the [Methodist] preachers. (Jarratt 1778 : 26)

Interestingly Holmes (2001 : 3) argues that the Anglican Church had already experienced many movements to try and revive its declining spiritual health. This writer would suggest that by the time of the Methodist movement Anglicanism had already arrived at a position of cold apathy toward personal piety and experiential spirituality, and thus had created a condition within its own ranks that was in desperate need of a spiritual awakening. Strawbridge in Maryland and later Pilmore, Shadford, Williams and Watters in Virginia all opportunistically reaped a harvest that they, for the most part, had not planted.

Of the Methodists who worked in the Virginia revival field, and who subsequently gain credit for its success, Robert Williams deserves a significant share of the accolades. He was the

first Methodist preacher in southern Virginia and when he and Watters traveled to the region in 1772, Williams formed the first Methodist circuit in the very area that would soon erupt into revival. Williams “had planted Methodism permanently in Virginia. His simple and sincere devotion and earnest evangelical preaching had stirred many.” (Gewehr 1930 : 145). And to think, Williams was not even a formal appointee of Wesley’s.

Philip Gatch, who was also an American born Methodist, served the revival area as well. He offers insight into the effectiveness of the revival’s most noted worker; George Shadford:

Mr. Shadford had spent the principle part of his time for two years on this circuit. His ministry had been owned by the Lord. Great numbers had embraced religion; some professed sanctification, and the societies were comfortably established in the Gospel of their salvation. (Gatch 1854 : 53)

Shadford, (1878 : 169) who was appointed to Brunswick in 1775 and 1776, said “I was amazed when I first began to preach in Virginia! For I seldom preached a sermon but some were convinced and converted, often three or four at a time.”

At the 1775 Conference Asbury was assigned to the Norfolk area in far southeastern Virginia. As other preachers before him, his labor strained in the wicked environment of Norfolk and nearby Portsmouth. His strong yet consistent disciplinarian hand soon purged the little Society at Portsmouth, reducing it from thirty-seven to fourteen. (Asbury I 1958 : 159, 165). When Asbury heard of the revival sweeping the Brunswick area just about one hundred miles to the west, he hurried over, arriving on November 2, 1775. His (I 1958 : 166) journal records his first impressions; “God is at work in this part of the country; and my soul catches the holy fire already.”

The revival was not only adding souls to the Kingdom and swelling Methodist ranks, but communities were being socially impacted. In the same letter to John Wesley, mentioned above and referenced by Jarratt (1778 : 33), Rankin reports on the account of a Mr. Smith, a justice of the peace, and his positive observations that the Methodist revival was having on his community. “Before the Methodists came into these parts . . . there was nothing but drunkenness, cursing, swearing, and fighting . . . whereas now nothing is heard but prayer and praise, and conversing about God, and the things of God.” “No man, woman, or child was so ignorant, miserable and forsaken, or so sinful and degraded as to be beneath their [The Methodist’s] notice.” (Barclay 1959 : 3).

The following year-by-year breakdown illustrates the pace of growth the revival was producing. (Minutes 1983 : 7-14).¹⁰ Membership totals are in parentheses.

- In 1774 there were two circuits in Virginia – Brunswick (218) and Norfolk (73).
- In 1775 there were three Virginia circuits - Brunswick (800), Norfolk (125) and Fairfax (30).
- In 1776 there were five circuits in Virginia and North Carolina - Brunswick alone accounted for 1,611 members. Several scholars conclude that the revival reached its peak some time in the winter of 1776 or spring of 1777. (Gewehr 1930 : 149; Sweet 1955 : 67).
- In 1777, with six circuits, Virginia had a total membership of 3,449 and North Carolina had 930 members. The total Methodist membership in all the circuits in all the colonies was around 6,968. Virginia accounted for half.

Although “sporadic revivals continued to occur in Brunswick, Sussex and Amelia circuits during 1777” (Gewehr 1930 : 157) the war was taking its toll and the work of the Methodists became increasingly difficult, for preachers and general members alike. It was understandably a dangerous thing to declare affiliation with Methodism in some parts of the region.

While en route to the Brunswick Circuit in 1777, Watters suffered with a throat and voice affliction and was relieved to arrive at the home of Jarratt, who was ever willing to care for ailing Methodist preachers when needed. Watters (1806 : 58) comments:

I at last came to the house of Mr. Jarratt, with whom I stayed a night, as I did every time I came round my circuit. His barn, well fitted up with seats and a pulpit, was one of our preaching places, and I found him very friendly and attentive to me while I stayed in the parts.

Jarratt, who had “great love for the itinerants” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 108), “received the itinerant [Watters] as a brother, beloved not only in the faith, but in its apostleship. (Stevens 1864 : 347). Several years later, at the conference of 1782, a special resolution was made acknowledging the support and friendship the Methodists had received from Devereux Jarratt. He had “helped them to gain a foothold and become what they were.” (Smith 1901 : 21). Hughes (1973 : 4) referred to Jarratt as the “friend of early American Methodists.” Philip Gatch referred to Jarratt as the “nursing father of Methodist preachers.” (Gatch 1854 : 53).

¹⁰ See also William Sweet 1955 : 70.

The Brunswick Circuit covered fourteen counties in Virginia and two in North Carolina. (Moore 1884 : 78). D. A. Watters (1898 : 107) says it was “the most prolific field in all of Methodism of America.” It took Watters six weeks to serve the entire circuit just once.

3.3 ALLEGIANCE TO GOD AND COUNTRY

The August 1777 quarterly meeting on the Brunswick Circuit had an unexpected guest. A local Magistrate, knowing or suspecting that preachers from another colony were present, required that they take the oath of allegiance, pay a fine or go to jail. Watters (1806 : 60) had no hesitation in taking the oath but others in the group could not. Fortunately the Magistrate was satisfied with Waters and one other’s act of allegiance, and promptly left the meeting. Watters was then sent to the Pittsylvania Circuit, which was just west of the Brunswick Circuit. Physically he (1806 : 61-62) felt “generally weak and much oppressed with my hoarseness” yet those months in mid and late 1777 “was a good and profitable time” for Watters.

“After resting for several weeks, only preaching occasionally” Watters (1806 : 63) moved east to the Sussex Circuit in early 1778. In neighboring Dinwiddie County Devereux Jarratt (1778 : 5-6) had reported extensively on the outbreak of revivals, which were still blazing. The Sussex Circuit was no exception. “The windows of Heaven were opened, and the Lord poured out such a blessing as our hearts were not able to contain . . . the most glorious work that ever I beheld was in this circuit among believers. Scores professed to be sanctified unto the Lord.” (Watters 1806 : 63, 67). “An anomaly of the war period was the fact that . . . the Methodist Societies were making phenomenal advance” (Barclay 1949 : 59) while other denominations were retreating, in spite of the fact that the Americans were left without any of their seasoned leaders.

Watters always took note of and rejoiced over the spiritual experiences of others, and never shied away from sharing his own. This was a vital part of the success of early American Methodist preachers. Personal spiritual victories and milestones were celebrated, shared and recorded as a means of encouragement and a tool of evangelism. The experiential component of Methodism was critical. They made “frequent reference[s] to their own personal faith and experience . . . their skill in the use of it has never been surpassed.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 115). The most significant personal aspect of Watters’ service on the Sussex Circuit, and the resultant

revival, was his own assurance of sanctification. For several years Watters had sensed, and wrestled with the fact that God wanted to deepen the spiritual work he had begun with his conversion back in May of 1771. After several days of heightened awareness to his own need for a deeper work from God, Watters (1806 : 66) “felt greater confidence that the Lord had graciously deepened his work.”¹¹

3.4 A DIFFICULT PARTING

American Methodism was already paying the price of a war in its midst, because it was justifiably viewed as a British entity. In 1776 “New-York City was abandoned by the Americans and taken possession of by the British army,”¹² (Wakeley 1858 : 105) although records from the Methodist chapel there shows constant pulpit supply and support for Methodist preachers. Evidently, in a reversed twist of fortunes, the British had taken over most of New York’s churches for their own use, but had spared the Methodist meeting house because of its ties to the Church of England. (Stevens 1864 : 417-418). Elsewhere, “many preaching places previously occupied were not visited at all by our preachers this year [1777]. Norfolk Circuit, Virginia, had been abandoned, and from this year no preacher was sent to New York until 1783.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 105).

The fifth annual conference of American Methodism began on May 20, 1777, at Watters’ (1806 : 56) “eldest brother’s preaching house” in Deer Creek, Maryland, northeast of the town of Baltimore. The country setting was probably chosen because of the unsettling nature of the war, especially with America’s major cities being prime targets for British occupation. Critical issues were discussed at the conference: the leadership of the American Methodist movement if all the English leaders returned home and the ordinance issue were the two most noteworthy. Several factors worked in tandem to make the ordinance issue an increasing concern: the spiritual quality of many of the Anglican priests who were often called upon to provide Methodists the ordinances; the growing distrust between the established preachers and the Methodist preachers; the widening of the Methodist cloak over more and more of the countryside; and the fact that many of the English ministers, were returning to England in fear of their own safety. After much discussion, any possible resolution to the matter was not clearly evident at the time, so it was

¹¹ Watters’ personal experience of sanctification will be covered in more detail in Chapter Eight.

¹² New York would not appear in the minutes again until 1883

tabled for consideration at the next conference. Although the Conference was positive and Watters sensed the Lord's gracious presence, decisions pertaining to the future of the last remaining British preachers who had bravely given invaluable service to American Methodism thus far, moderated any spiritual warmth the preachers felt from each other's company and the positive reports of widespread growth in the circuits.

To deal with the inevitable vacuum of leadership that would be left in the wake of the departing British preachers, Watters was appointed to a committee of five along with "Daniel Ruff . . . and Philip Gatch-together with two British immigrants who had fully thrown in their lot with America-Edward Dromgoole and William Glendenning," (Baker 1976 : 100) to give leadership to American Methodism. Asbury decided that he should withdraw to safer settings where oaths of allegiance were not required and where he could find refuge on the estate of friends. He opted for Judge Thomas White's residence in the Delaware country.

There were little alternatives for the British preachers. One by one each colony enacted it's own legislation to deal with foreigners. They either had to take an oath, spend time in jail or leave:

Up to the time of the Deer Creek Conference the Methodist preachers had been fortunate in their freedom to come and go without legal restraint. In this very month of May, 1777, however, the Virginia Assembly passed an Act that would concern every preacher sent there, and Maryland would follow soon with a similar Act. (Connor 1970 : 78)

Every male would be required to renounce any allegiance to the British monarch and to swear allegiance to the colony in which he resides or into which he was entering. In some instances they had to be willing to bear arms if called upon to do so. Watters had no problem taking the oath while other American born Methodist preachers would not: Freeborn Garretson being one of them. He claimed it was too restrictive on his conscience and that he had never made an oath before. (Bangs 1829 : 56-57). Under these circumstances the parting of company was obviously difficult:

I never saw so affecting a scene at the parting of the preachers before. Our hearts were knit together, as the hearts of David and Jonathan, and we were obliged to use great violence to our feelings in tearing ourselves asunder. This was the last time I ever saw my very worthy friends and fathers, Rankin and Shadford.¹³ (Watters 1806 : 57)

¹³ Rankin's and Shadford's departure will be covered in more detail in Chapter Five.

Francis Asbury's (I 1958 : 239) account of the concluding moments of the 1777 Conference reveals a pastoral heart much affected by the imminent departure of fellow workers and the abdication of responsibilities for an undetermined season:

But when the time of parting came, many wept as if they had lost their first-born sons. They appeared to be in the deepest distress, thinking, as I suppose, they should not see the faces of the English preachers any more. This was such a parting as I never saw before.

3.5 ORPHANED BUT NOT ABANDONED

“Mr. Rankin and Mr. Shadford, had left the continent and returned home . . . Mr. Asbury had stopped traveling.” (Watters 1806 : 68). Asbury was the only one of Wesley's original active missionaries who chose not to return to England. For almost two years Asbury's home was Judge White's outbuildings or nearby swamps in the Delaware countryside because it did not require a pledge of allegiance as Maryland did. The movement of British subjects remained unsafe.¹⁴

The year between the fifth and sixth annual Conferences saw Watters experience a range of life impacting events. As discussed above, he contributed significantly to the tail end of the Virginia revival and enjoyed a great harvest from his labors on the Sussex Circuit. The quarterly meetings were typical times of spiritual renewal and rekindling of friendships. Watters also suffered from health problems but received the blessings of sanctification after an extended period of deep introspection.

Watters left the Sussex Circuit and made his way to Leesburg, Virginia for the sixth annual conference, which started on May 19th, 1778. The fact that “Philadelphia was still in the hands of the British¹⁵ and conditions in Baltimore were unsettled,” (Connor 1970 : 97) probably contributed to the decision to use Leesburg. With no older seasoned preachers in their midst the young American Methodists faced a vacuum of leadership, but one that they were not going to leave unfilled. Watters only offers a brief account of the conference, but in typical humble fashion, he does not report that he was the presiding member, having been chosen to do so by his

¹⁴ Asbury remained in Maryland until early 1778 before crossing into Delaware where he remained until April 1780, with the exception of a few brief excursions into Maryland. In May 1780 Asbury returned to Virginia for the first time in about three years.

¹⁵ The British had entered Philadelphia in September 1777 and left in June 1778.

colleagues. Connors (1970 : 97) says Watters was elected to chair the meeting since he was the “senior native itinerant” present.¹⁶

By action of the previous conference the growing dilemma surrounding the ordinance issue was discussed. The matter was not going to be resolved easily and unless some agreeable resolution was soon reached it was destined to be momentarily divisive. The conference members were understandably ill-equipped to deal adequately with such a concern. Watters (1806 : 68) does not give specific details of their discussion, only to say that the issuing of ordinances “found many advocates [but that they had], with considerable difficulty” laid it over for the next conference, but the issue would soon take on a life of its own, as will be seen below.

The conference reported the abandonment of five old circuits and the formation of six new ones, with a total of fifteen operational. D. A. Watters (1898 : 120) reports that overall membership was down, which could be due to disruptions from the war and poor reporting from areas where circuits had become dormant. The amount of preachers also declined from thirty-six in 1777 to twenty-nine. Norwood (1974 : 79) blamed the decline in preachers on Rankin’s autocratic leadership style. “The result was, on the one hand, a remarkably committed body of men who spent their lives in uttermost service of their ministry, and on the other hand, a large erosion of the forces, which took many out who could not stand the pace.” This decline in preachers should not be attributed to Rankin’s heavy hand in leadership alone. The war and the heavy toll of itinerant service were also to blame.

Considering the circumstances Methodism was faring remarkably well under such young leadership. A significant new addition to the line of preachers made at this conference was that of James O’Kelly, who later led a challenge of Asbury’s authority in the 1790’s resulting in American Methodism’s first permanent split.

Watters was appointed to the Fairfax Circuit which could have been by his own choosing with ulterior romantic motives in mind. “It is generally assumed that Watters, who presided at the 1778 conference, chose his own appointment to Fairfax with marriage in mind; the wedding was just six weeks after the conference adjourned.” (Wrenn : 2000 77).

On June 6th, 1778 Watters married Sarah Adams. He had evidently made a significant impression on the Adams family while working the Fairfax Circuit back in 1775. “I considered her as given me by the Lord, and believed she would approve herself a true help meet in the Lord

¹⁶ See also Wrenn 2000 : 77; Russell 1998 : 27.

Jesus.” (Watters 1806 : 69). The Adams family was prominent in early American Methodism, particularly in the area of northern Virginia. “They were among the first Methodist converts in Northern Virginia, and their home was a favorite stopping place for Methodist preachers, Francis Asbury chief among them.”¹⁷ (Wrenn 2000 : 77). The Adams home was “constantly a preaching house” (Watters 1806 : 112) until the Methodists could construct separate buildings. “As the Watters home had been a focal point in early Maryland Methodism so the home of William and Ann Adams in Fairfax County became a Methodist center in Northern Virginia.” (Blakemore 1951 : 3). Of the ten children in the Adams family, three became Methodist preachers and two married Methodist preachers. (Wrenn 2000 : 79). One of Sarah’s brothers, William Adams, on at least one occasion, rode a circuit with Watters.¹⁸ Sarah Adams proved to be an excellent choice in wife for Watters since he served preaching circuits so extensively, while also dealing with growing health problems. Watters often left Sarah in the care of his relatives while he was away for months at a time tending to the calling that God had placed on his life. They never had children.

Asbury often struggled with the tendency of the traveling preachers to marry and cease working the circuits. Asbury saw marriage and location of his preachers as one of the major threats to the itinerant system that he was so committed to. (Kirby 1996 : 3). Rather than strain against what seemed like inevitability, in 1780 Asbury and others deliberated over possible means of accommodating preachers’ wives while they rode the circuits:

We spoke of a plan for building houses in every circuit for preachers' wives, and the society to supply their families [sic] with bread and meat; so the preachers should travel from place to place, as when single: for unless something of the kind be done, we shall have no preachers but young ones, in a few years; they will marry and stop. (Asbury I : 356)

The example Asbury set to remain unmarried did not have the ubiquitous affect over American Methodism he may have desired. “While the Methodist Conference did not actually demand celibacy of its early preachers, the opinion prevailed that it was not ‘proper’ for an itinerant preacher to be encumbered with a family.” (Connor 1970 : 86).

The work progressed rather well during the war, and even grew in parts. In 1779 American Methodism’s first schism occurred over the issue of ordinances. Due to the

¹⁷ See Watters (1806 : 111-112) for a detailed account of the Adams family.

¹⁸ In 1782 Watters published a 34-page account of the life and death of William Adams. See the Introduction of this paper for more details on the value of Watters’ account of his brother-in-law for this research.

exacerbated problem of not having ordained ministers amongst them who could administer baptism and communion, the preachers from Virginia and the Carolinas decided to ordain each other and subsequently qualify themselves to then administer the sacraments. The preachers north of Virginia disagreed, and as a result two separate conferences were held in 1779.¹⁹

Both conferences appointed Watters to the Baltimore Circuit. His resolve to continue on the path of a Methodist preacher was as resolute as it ever was. “I never went to my appointment under a more clear conviction, that my way was prepared of the Lord, and that I should not labour [sic] in vain, nor run uncertainly.” (Watters 1806 : 74). His wife, who had been staying with her father for the past year, moved with him to the Baltimore area where they lived with Watters’ eldest brother, whom he says (1806 : 74), “was as a Father and Brother to her in my absence.” Watters (1806 : 74-75) experienced much satisfaction working through the Baltimore Circuit:

The first time I went round the circuit, I met with much encouragement, my brethren received me with affection . . . Many poor sinners were cut to the heart and humbled in the dust before the Judge of all the earth, and were happily brought out of darkness into the glorious light of the gospel. There was a general move, and quickening among the members of society . . . We sweetly pulled together, and were of one heart and mind; while the ungodly in many places, and in many instances stood astonished, and could but acknowledge the arm of the Lord was visibly revealed . . . I never traveled any circuit with more satisfaction and profit, to my own spiritual interest; and could have willingly stayed longer where the Lord was so powerfully working, and where there were so many strong in the Lord and in the power of his might.

On a negative note, on January 1, 1780, Watters preached at the funeral of his late brother-in-law, William Adams, alongside whom he had worked on the Baltimore Circuit. Adams had been serving as a Methodist preacher for less than a year and was only twenty-years old when he became ill and died on December 3, 1779. “Many had expected that he was to be a very useful man in the vineyard.” (Watters 1806 : 77). After the last quarterly meeting of the 1779-1780 ‘church year’ Watters served the Frederick Circuit for the third time.

¹⁹ The Revolutionary years will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter Five and the ordinance issue will be dealt with in Chapter Six.

3.6 CHALLENGES AND CHANGES

The 1780 Methodist Conference was once again divided, with one of the sessions meeting in Baltimore on April 24th, 1780. The most significant action taken at this conference involved a delegation, of which Watters was a principle part, being sent to the southern Methodists in the hope of restoring unity and possibly resolving the ordinance issue: they succeeded. With the breach healed and the ordinance issue resolved for a time, Watters (1806 : 82) “returned back to Frederick circuit greatly refreshed with the success of our conference.” With Francis Asbury out of hiding and once again clutching the reigns of American Methodism, Watters was able to focus entirely on the work of preaching through his circuit. Although significant results accompanied his efforts, Watters had reason to note that many who heard him preach stubbornly refused to embrace the one he advocated. “The people were considerably affected under the word, but I am seriously afraid that many of them are determined to put off the evil day as long as possible. Lord what a stupid creature man is:” (Watters 1806 : 83).

That the Circuit preachers’ weekday meetings always brought crowds of people together is, however, a mistaken idea . . . Frequently, also, preachers had to contend against apathy and spiritual deadness. Many times they were tempted to succumb to discouragement because their most earnest efforts seemed only to be met by indifferences. (Barclay 1950 : 325)

While his mind was ever alert to new prospects for preaching and his spirit desired to save as many souls as possible, Watters’ body was beginning to show the inevitable marks of fulltime itinerant preaching. “Year after year they found shelter in dirty cabins, slept in comfortless beds, and shared the meager fare of the poorest of the poor.” (Barclay 1950 : 3). In early September 1780, Watters, at the age of 28, became seriously ill. He does not specify or describe what was ailing him, other than to say he was “taken with a puking” (Watters 1806 : 84) and was running a fever. He consequently missed some appointments but was determined not to miss many, so with much effort, after being sick for three days, he attempted to get to a meeting, only to arrive at a friends home “sick as unto death.” (Watters 1806 : 84). Watters claimed that he, and those around him, were so concerned about his condition that they questioned if he would survive to the morning. His wife was sent for and after traveling the forty miles on horseback, she and “the friend that went for her . . . expected to find me [Watters] a corpse.” (Watters 1806 : 85). It was not until two weeks had passed, that Watters was well enough to

return home. He (1806 : 86) says he was received home “as one from the dead.” In fact, there were some rumors circulating that Watters had actually died.

The frustration of not being able to be as efficient as he wished while convalescing caused Watters to attempt a return long before he was physically ready. He was often guilty of “taxing his strength beyond the limit of endurance.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 55). After the Fall Quarterly Meeting he (1806 : 86) returned to the Fairfax Circuit “but in a very poor state of health; yet for the most part able to fill my appointments.” “Several times during this year he was taken ill almost unto death, and a few times almost as suddenly restored.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 132).

Six months later, in March of 1781, not fully recovered, Watters (1806 : 87) was preparing “to preach to a large congregation” when he once again was “struck with a sudden back pain . . . a sick stomach and an uneasiness in my bowels.” This episode lasted several weeks. On Friday, March 24th, while in Calvert County, Maryland, filling some preaching appointments in his weakened state, Watters (1806 : 88) arrived at a friend's home “perfectly broke down.” He was able to preach several times over the following few days though it left him (1806 : 89) feeling “feeble and very weak” On April 17th, 1781, while still very sickly, he preached his last sermon on the circuit to many hundreds of people before heading back to Fairfax.

Through extreme ailments Watters exhibited a tenacious spirit and a solid fortitude, unwilling to waver from his course. He was determined, at least for the time being, not to let illness keep him from traveling. Likewise, he would not let threats of physical violence keep him from preaching, (Watters 1806 : 88-89) just as he would not let the country, fractured by war, prevent him from doing all he could to keep Methodism united and on track.

Even though not fully restored to full health, Watters persisted with a very vigorous preaching and traveling schedule through the winter and early spring only to become once again violently ill as he made his way to the annual Conference in Baltimore in April 1781. Fortunately, his poor health was not indicative of the state of Methodism. Over the preceding year the movement had grown by more than two thousand members and twelve preachers had been added, no doubt thanks in no small part due to his own leadership during the war, which was by this time coming to a close, and his efforts to keep Methodism from a permanent fracture

over the ordinance issue. D. A. Watters (1898 : 135) offers a parallel assessment of the war and Methodism:

While the year [1781] was made famous in the history of our country, in the capture of Cornwallis²⁰ and his army at Yorktown, the victories of the itinerants were scarcely less renowned in the capture of more than two thousand of the enemy of the kingdom of Christ, and their complete transformation into acceptable subjects of the new kingdom. The important interests of Church and State have since run parallel in their growth and philanthropic methods, the one establishing the liberty of civil government, the other the liberty of sins forgiven.

Watters (1806 : 92) arrived at the conference on Tuesday April 24, “Faint and exceedingly debilitated, yet able to sit.” After the extended dispute over the ordinances and the fact that for the past two years American Methodism had held separate annual conferences, the “1781 Conference reunited the movement.” (Richey 2001 : 27). Regrettably, Watters’ poor health kept him from enjoying the full delight of sitting through the entire united Conference:

Wednesday, my affliction is greatly increased, and I am entirely confined to my bed in a high rheumatic fever, unable to turn, or lift a foot, or, hand; yet not in much misery, unless I am moved . . . On the latter end of the week the conference being risen, my brethren, before they left town, called to take their leave of me. Few, if any of them, expected to see me again, till we met in a better world where death and parting are no more. (Watters 1806 : 92-93)

Watters stayed with friends in Baltimore for the next two weeks as he slowly recovered. He (1806 : 94) said this illness marked the third time “within the last nine months, that all around me have expected that my days were nearly at an end.”

In June of 1781 Watters (1806 : 94-95) bemoaned the fact that he was not strong enough to preach as often as he would have liked to. “For six weeks past I have preached only three times; but I bless God it has been for the want of strength, and not for the want of a willing mind.” His concerns included the many local societies under his charge, whose needs he was not fully meeting. This attitude displays a growing pastoral heart in Watters. It is possible that his illness was facilitating thoughts of locating to a stationed preaching point rather than continuing the arduous task of circuit preaching. The appointment of preachers to a ‘city church’ was “called ‘station’ because the preacher was stationary, living among the people.” (Wrenn 1977 : 9).

²⁰ See footnote number 18 in Chapter 6.

In the spring of 1782, after a year of this weakening condition, Watters (1806 : 96-97) was well enough to take a cautious trip to Philadelphia and New Jersey. “I moved slowly . . . for my ague and fever attended me as constantly as the day. After my return, I only preached occasionally till the following conference.”

Watters attended the next annual conference, which was held in Baltimore in May 1782. For the first time in ten years of unquestionable service to Methodism, Watters reacted negatively to the charge given him. He felt frustrated that he was appointed to the Fluvanna Circuit in Virginia, which was difficult for him to fill in his state, and so far from home:

I found myself very much exhausted in riding ninety miles in two days to get into my circuit. I felt exceedingly at parting with my wife in so poor a state of health, and was very much dissatisfied with the conference for giving me a station so difficult to fill and so far from home. I had my doubts whether I ought not to stay at home; but in all doubtful cases I concluded if I did err, it was best to err on the safe side. Therefore with my life in my hand, and trusting in the kind providence of God, I took up my cross and once more left all to preach the gospel. (Watters 1806 : 97)

Following Fluvanna Watters (1806 : 98) was appointed to the Hanover Circuit, which was “as far from home, and nearly as laborious.” It was at this time that Watters (1806 : 98) first seriously considered the need to locate. “My long affliction and the difficulties that I met with in those two circuits, made me first think of locating, for I was fully convinced that unless I could be indulged, I must finally sink under the fatigue which attended my going so far from home.” “He suffered all the year from ague, and had a growing conviction that the itinerancy was prematurely wearing away his life.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 139). This was “amongst the unhappiest circumstances of” (Watters 1806 : 98) his life.

Watters wanted so desperately to give of his best for the cause of the Gospel, while being careful not to squander years of productive service through foolish neglect of his health. He continued to struggle with finding a balance between wasting out for the Gospel due to hard work and rusting out due to laziness. (Watters 1806 : 55). Not even a casual reader of Watters’ life would ever come to the conclusion that the man was in any danger of the latter. “Not being able to travel nor even to preach” (Watters 1806 : 94) was not easy for the driven preacher to deal with. “I often longed to be able to go to my appointments, deliberately believing traveling and preaching, to be the most desirable life on earth.” (Watters 1806 : 94).

3.7 LOCATED BUT NOT IMMOBILE

There was a constant pull between the hardships and rugged romance of itinerant ministry and the comforts of a stationed preacher working within a set community. Asbury often spoke of the issue as a dread that ever tugged at the emotions of his preachers and his own organizational responsibilities. While some view this unbending attitude of Asbury's as one of the keys to early American Methodist success, others consider it a failing. Moore (1884 : 81-82) was of the opinion that Asbury erred when he failed to adequately recognize the value of local preachers:

We cannot but regret the course pursued by the leaders of Methodism in its infancy in regard to ministerial support—a course which drove from the regular work such men . . . and deprived the Church in great measure of the services of some of her most gifted preachers. Bishop Asbury's position on this matter is well known. While a truly good and great man, ever ready to divide his own money with his suffering preachers, he made a grievous mistake just here. Following the erroneous opinion that his preachers would be more pious, more faithful, and more useful as single men, and that a life of the most abject poverty was best calculated to develop the deepest humility and turn the minds of the preachers from the perishing treasures of earth to the enduring riches of heaven, he discouraged every effort looking to an adequate and comfortable ministerial support, and would sometimes in his public devotions pray "that the preachers might be kept poor." Late in life he expressed himself as cherishing the opinion that if so many of his preachers had not located, the Methodists would by that time have taken the continent. Yet he never seems to have seen the mistake in his own course in regard to the matter. But though reduced to the necessity" of locating in order to support their families, these men were by no means idle, and among the local ranks were to be found some of the Church's most useful workmen . . . They continued to travel when they could, assisting in public meetings, laying the foundations for new circuits, building new churches, organizing new societies, and setting a good example to the rest of the members by liberally contributing of their means to the enterprises of the Church.

In almost callused indifference Asbury (II 1958 : 631) made the following observation of some of the preachers under his charge. "I found the poor preachers indifferently clad, with emaciated bodies, and subject to hard fare; yet I hope they are rich in faith." The truth is that Asbury did deeply care for the welfare of his preachers, but he also expected them to be willing to endure extreme hardship for the cause of the Gospel, bachelorhood included.

By 1783 Watters had given American Methodism eleven years of devoted but taxing service as an itinerant preacher. His commitment to the Gospel and loyalty to Methodism has never been disputed. "I have never, since I first knew the Lord seen anything in this world worth living an hour for, but to prepare and assist others to prepare, for, that glorious kingdom, which

shall be revealed at the appearing of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (Watters 1806 : 100-101).

In the spring of 1783 Watters bought a piece of land in Fairfax County, Virginia from his father-in-law, (Wrenn : 2000 79) where he built a modest two-room home, with an extension later added to please his wife who was accustomed to more spacious living quarters. Those who dismantled the home in 1960 described it as having “one story . . . a loft and a chimney . . . two rooms . . . built with squared logs.” (Marr 1999 : 1, 6). His decision to locate was not made in haste nor was it taken lightly. Du Bose (1916 : 590) incorrectly suggests that Watters location and subsequent business dealings²¹ was over money when he says, “the burdens of his family so increased that he was no longer able to support them on the meager salary of an itinerant.” Watters (1806 : 100) said “I never had a thought of settling to get riches, or anything that the world can afford, and had it pleased God to have continued my health, and no other impediment had arisen, I should have continued.” While located Watters offered his home as a stop over and replenishing point for traveling preachers. Asbury mentions on several occasions how he stopped at the Watters house for rest, to spend a night or simply for quiet time to read. (Asbury II 1958 : 192, 331, 431, 566). Watters became a considerable benefactor of the cause he loved, constantly endeavoring to support Methodism financially while his heart yearned to be back on the circuits preaching the Gospel. “Although I have been under the necessity of paying more attention to worldly matters than before I settled . . . yet it has been my cross so to do, lamenting that I have not been more employed in spirituals.” (Watters 1806 : 101-102).

The annual conference of 1783 appointed Watters to the Calvert Circuit where he (1806 : 99) “labored with considerable satisfaction and success.” By the fall of that year Watters had moved his wife, who had lived with relatives while he was preaching on the circuits since they married five years earlier, into their new home:

Down to the end of 1783 he continued to travel in Maryland and Virginia with a zeal that knew no abatement, and success hardly excelled by any evangelist of the denomination; often in new circuits in mountain regions, his lodging in log cabins, his chapels barns, his health broken so much that, three or four times his brethren expected to bury him, a martyr to his work." (Stevens 1864 : 351)

²¹ Some of Watters’ business dealings included farming, running a fish stand, owning shares in a local bank and owning at least two houses, besides the one he lived in. See Marr 1999 : 2.

In early 1784, with his wife located in their new home, Watters was far from stationary, in spite of not being in full health. Just one preacher serviced the circuit that included his home so Watters often took it upon himself to help out. He served as the local pastor to the Methodists in the area “between the infrequent visits of the traveling preachers.” (Wrenn 1977 : 9). “Though I was just beginning the world as a house-keeper, I rode, I believe, for a considerable part of the year, as much in the circuit as the preacher who was appointed to it.” (Watters 1806 : 99-100).

At the end of 1784, with Watters still located, the Methodists met in a conference in Baltimore with a delegation of three sent by, and representing, John Wesley. The leader of the trio was Dr. Thomas Coke, the other two being Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey. Back in England Wesley had pondered the plight of the American Methodists; especially with regard to their inability to have the ordinances served to them as often as was needed. Wesley had come to the conclusion that it was within his power as an ordained Anglican priest to ordain others. A further conclusion of Wesley’s was since America was an independent nation, so the church should be also. Wesley sent authority and instructions for the ordination of American Methodist leaders and the formation of an independent church. Watters (1806 : 102) reports:

On the twenty-fifth of December, one thousand seven hundred and eighty-four, our conference met in Baltimore, to consider the plan of church government, which the doctor brought over recommended by Mr. Wesley. It was adopted, and unanimously agreed to with great satisfaction, and we became instead of a religious society, a separate church under the name of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

This change gave great satisfaction through all our societies in America, and the more so, as it met with the approbation of our European brethren, and particularly to those who had some time past thought it their duty to administer the ordinances, but had desisted therefrom, [sic] rather than rend the flock of Christ.

This conference that essentially gave birth to the Methodist Episcopal Church has affectionately become known as The Christmas Conference.²²

After more than two years in location, and having “recovered from my long debilitating state of health,” Watters (1806 : 108) decided that he was once again ready for itinerant work. In the spring of 1786, being 34 years old, he left his wife in the care of one of his brothers and attended the annual conference in Abingdon, Maryland where he was appointed to the Berkley Circuit in Virginia. The resumption of work as a travelling preacher started well with Watters (1806 : 108) reporting that he had “considerable success among a loving, humble people, and

²² See Chapter Seven for more details.

many all round the circuit came out and appeared well exercised.” Watters (1806 : 108) long term expectation was equally as positive: “The prospect was very flattering and I began to hope I should see good days and be a means of leading many to the Lord Jesus Christ.” Unfortunately Watters’ work on the circuit came to an abrupt end when his brother suddenly left their town on a business venture, which forced Watters to return home, his wife not being in good health. On his return home Watters visited Richard Owen, a friend, who was on his deathbed. Watters (1806 : 108) mentioned that Owen “was the first American Methodist preacher” to serve a local preaching point, he himself being the first American itinerant preacher. Watters, for the second time, reluctantly took up local duties in the fall of 1786:

Although a traveling ministry is in my estimation one of the greatest blessings with which a people can be blessed, and to be commissioned to go to the ends of the earth, to deliver the glad tidings of the gospel salvation to saints and sinners, is the greatest honor ever conferred on mortal man. Yet, a local ministry has undoubtedly its use. (Watters 1806 : 117)

With Watters coming to terms with the work of a stationary preacher he was able to objectively consider the benefits and difficulties of both traveling and located ministry. He recognized that where the traveling preacher generally saw people at their best as he passed through, the located preacher saw people as they really were. He said, (1806 : 116) “the local preacher who resides among them has an opportunity of taking into view the whole of their conduct.” Watters also concluded that the immense difficulties associated with being a preacher, local and traveling, has a particular beneficial means of “purging our ministry” (Watters 1806 : 119) of those preachers who were not fully committed to the cause. For the latter part of the 1780’s and all of the 1790’s Watters served in various capacities as a layperson, keeping close to home for health reasons

Ever eager to be of some use to Methodism, in 1789, Watters and six others, commenced service as trustees for the purchase of property and the construction and maintenance of a new church in Alexandria, Virginia. The congregation that grew from this building became the Trinity United Methodist Church, still in operation today and one of the oldest Methodist churches in Virginia. Watters later served as trustee for the Fairfax Chapel in 1818. (Marr 1999 : 3). Both of these churches grew out of the Adam’s family home being used as a Methodist-preaching house. (Wrenn 1977 : 8).

In May 1801, close to fifty years old, Watters attended the annual conference that was held in Pipe Creek, Frederick County, Maryland. He was appointed to the preaching point at Alexandria, just twelve miles from his home, but far enough that Watters could not be present with his flock on a constant basis. This reality raised some concerns in his mind. Watters (1806 : 133-134) was concerned that the local people would not be content with him only “going once or twice a week . . . since they had for many years been accustomed to their preacher being constantly with them.” Watters’ pessimism was evidently ill founded because he reports having a very good term of service amongst people he considered to be friends. He (1806 : 134) went on to say; “I never preached to any people with more freedom and comfort in any part of my life. I never felt more gratitude to God for any station.”

At the following conference, held in Baltimore in May of 1802, Watters was appointed to a station in Georgetown,²³ which was half the distance from his home than was the post in Alexandria. (Wrenn : 2000 80). This too was a positive experience for Watters: (1806 : 136).

This was a year of great peace and consolation to me - I enjoyed good health and great enlargement of heart for the ingathering of souls to the Lord's Kingdom, with considerable life and liberty in all the ordinances of his house, but in none more than in dispensing the words of eternal life.

In spite of the fact that some of Watters’ friends had expressed reservations of him being comfortable in a local preaching station, Watters displays an increasing affinity with such a work, something he had also previously shared several negative thoughts on. “I have considered the two last years among the happiest years of my pilgrimage, and hope the Lord hath greater blessings in store for me, though I am unworthy of the least.” (Watters 1806 : 136-137).

At the rise of the 1803 Conference in Baltimore Watters was once again appointed to Alexandria. Revival had been sweeping through the Methodist society there for two years. The following annual conference also appointed Watters to Alexandria, which he accepted with some reservations, sensing that his usefulness at that location had run its course. Watters (1806 : 138) says that, “there were several discouraging and disagreeable circumstances in the course of the year ... [he] was glad at the expiration of the year to commit them to God and the word of his grace in the confidence that they would be better provided for.” Watters does not offer any details of the possible problems in the church, but his distant relative by marriage and Methodist

²³ Georgetown was later incorporated into Washington DC.

historian, Raymond Wrenn, referenced a history of this particular congregation published in 1974, and says that at the time of Watters' third year of service in Alexandria a schism had occurred in the congregation that, in part, later led to the formation of an independent Methodist congregation. (Wrenn : 2000 : 80).

From 1801 to 1806 Watters served "three of Methodism's most strategic churches." (Wrenn 1977 : 9). In 1806 he was appointed to Washington City but he also served the Georgetown congregation on alternating Sundays. This was Watters' last official appointment and the last place of actual service to Methodism that he personally reports on, but not the last that he gave.

3.8 LATER LIFE

In 1806 Watters located for the third and last time but he did not cease service to Methodism. Even in his old and failing life Watters was often called upon to carry out the duties of a seasoned and highly esteemed minister of the Gospel:

His place in the affections of the older Methodists, as he himself grew old, is indeed notable. They would arrange with him for their funeral obsequies. He would be called to their bedside to comfort and cheer them in their dying hour. Frequently they would hold him, by the hand, and pathetically address him as their "spiritual father," "father in Christ," " God-father," and " the good old veteran that had long been in the field." For miles around, the people for many years considered his home the center of their religious interests, and William Watters as their leader and chief adviser. (D. A. Watters 1898 : 171)

Watters' work had been widespread, influential and substantial. He had served on about 15 different circuits, some of them numerous different times, and he was "associated with at least 15 churches in the northern Virginia area." (Marr 1999 : 3). "Watters served every Methodist society in existence in his time of service, from the Hudson River to the Virginia-Carolina line, excepting only the city of Philadelphia and the Amelia Circuit in south-central Virginia." (Wrenn 2000 : 72). Over the thirty years of Watters' life covered in this chapter thus far, "Methodism in America grew from fewer than 5,000 members in 1776 to more than 130,000 members in 1806." (Case 2004 : 13). Watters does not deserve all the credit, but his preaching and leadership accounted for many of the souls that were blessed by Methodism in these three decades.

In 1812 Richard Tydings was appointed to the Fairfax Circuit, of which Watters was a member. He expressed embarrassment at having to preach to and lead in class such a “venerable man.” (Blakemore 1951 : 10). “William Watters was a man of tender conscience, sterling integrity, pure life, and singleness of purpose.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 170). “He continued to preach for many years, filling appointments in every direction from his home, his house being the place of weekly meetings to the day of his death, and for many years after.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 148).

Watters lived another twenty-one years after his last official appointment in 1806, the last ten in almost total blindness. He “gradually diminished his activity, but never really stopped.” (Marr 1999 : 3). William Watters died on March 29, 1827 at the age of 75. His wife outlived him by eighteen years.

Records of Fairfax County, Virginia offer insight into Watters’ business dealings and wealth at the time of his death. On his farm, which had grown from four acres, which he bought from his father-in-law, to fifty-four acres as a result of his wife’s inheritance, Watters raised various produce and kept some animals. He bought and operated two fish catching and selling enterprises, had modest shares in a local bank and owned two houses in Georgetown. His cash on hand at the time of his death was only \$40, (Marr 1999 : 2, 6), which is a possible testimony to his benevolent spirit. Watters left his furniture, books and family silverware to the Methodist Church in Alexandria, now Trinity United Methodist. There is no trace of the books and furniture, but his silverware is still treasured by the Trinity congregation. (Marr 1999 : 3).

American Methodism would have survived the Revolutionary War and the ordinance schism would have eventually been breached if Watters had not taken such decisive and proactive roles, but how well the movement would have survived and how soon the breach healed without William Watters is unquantifiable. His great-nephew said “we seek not to create a hero of our subject,” (D.A. Watters 1898 : 5) however, this writer is of the opinion that the life and efforts of William Watters deserves hero status. The fact that this is the first substantial account of Watters’ life in over one hundred years and the only detailed scholarly account of his life that has ever been written, betrays the fact that many others in the Church History community are either of the opinion that his life does not warrant the effort or he remains mostly unknown and subsequently remains, “a neglected hero of the cross.” (Corkran 1928 : 383). It is possible that

this writer is making more of Watters' life than is deserved, however, as succeeding chapters offer a more detailed treatment of specific areas of Watters' work as the first American born itinerant preacher, his deserved elevation from obscurity to vital prominence will become exceedingly clear.

CHAPTER FOUR

WATTERS' SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTIONS TO AMERICAN METHODISM

In October 1772, William Watters set out on his first Methodist itinerant expedition under the tutelage of Robert Williams, becoming the first American born Methodist to do so. They stopped and preached in the town of Baltimore before moving on to Georgetown. Russell (1998 : 27) believes Watters “preached the first Methodist sermon in Georgetown,” however Watters’ (1806 : 26) own account of that particular day has Williams preaching and not himself. More significant than priority being established as to who preached the first Methodist message in Georgetown is the fact that the Gospel as preached by the Methodists had reached what would become the nation’s capital, for the first time, and young Watters was an active participant. The level of Methodism in Maryland and Virginia in late 1772, when Watters set out with Williams, lent itself to the achievement of many ‘firsts’ for Methodism, regardless of who the preacher was, simply because so little of Methodism existed at that time. Watters would never have appreciated his work and name being trumpeted simply because he happened to be the first individual to do something. He always sought to uplift God and to promote Methodism, never himself. The fact remains that Watters did accomplish much for early American Methodism with his native born birthright making his efforts that much more noteworthy. This chapter is not going to trivialize early American Methodism nor the work of Watters by listing every step the young preacher took into un-reached territory as the first for Methodism, but it will make mention of the most significant pioneering contributions he made, even if he may not have been the first to do so.

4.1 THE FIRST AMERICAN BORN METHODIST CLASS LEADER

In the fall of 1771 a second brother of Watters had opened his home as a Methodist preaching point. The work was so successful that before long several neighbors were reached with the Gospel and a small class was formed with William (1806 : 20) being appointed as the leader. He was just twenty years old and had been converted only a few months. Watters (1806 : 20) found the task of leading this class “hard toiling . . . exceedingly discouraging” but he prevailed, prayed

and with the help of his brother the little society soon produced fruit for their labors. “Our meetings, both private and public, became lively and well attended to, and one and another were daily obtaining the blessing.” (Watters 1806 : 20).

For a young man of his age and background, and being a new believer, Watters exhibited significant depth of leadership and displayed a pastoral heart that felt the physical and spiritual needs of those under his charge. Watters obviously took his ministry labors extremely seriously:

For several weeks I could do little more than attend to our meetings and the families that were setting out for the kingdom. I often found great enlargement of heart for the salvation of my fellow creatures, and considerable assistance in striving in my weak way for their reformation. (Watters 1806 : 20)

As significant as these early Methodist classes were for the movement, Watters was not the first American born Methodist to lead a class. John Evans, a convert of Robert Strawbridge, was a class leader in the Sam’s Creek area of Maryland, as early as 1768, (Porter 1928 : 379), and kept that responsibility for more than forty years. Apparently his daughter, who later in life became Mrs. Sarah Porter informed her current pastor then, John Bowen, that Strawbridge had started a society in her father’s house back in 1764. (Porter 1928 : 379). There is no record that this writer is aware of, which lists an earlier American born class leader in the New York area. Until such data is discovered, if it ever exists, American Methodism’s first native born class leader will be John Evans of Maryland, with Watters being one of the earliest.

4.2 THE FIRST AMERICAN BORN METHODIST PREACHER

Just as a baby takes its first breath and then proceeds to announce to the world its glorious presence, so Watters, shortly after his first spiritually re-birthed breath was taken, felt compelled to announce the good news to all who would listen. With the regular preachers in the area only visiting the Watters’ neighborhood on rare and sporadic occasions, the responsibility to propagate what Watters and his brothers now enjoyed had to be assumed by someone or they were all in danger of experiencing some measure of spiritual atrophy. With the conviction that “in some sense we were all preachers” (Watters 1806 : 18) Watters led his group to divide into small bands on Sundays and were sent to preach in various neighborhoods, wherever a door was open to them. These evangelistic efforts led by American born Methodists, could very well be

the first of its kind, although this is not absolutely certain. What is certain is that Watters was not the first American born Methodist preacher.

In 1740, on one of his early preaching tours of the American Colonies, George Whitefield was instrumental in the conversion of Edward Evans, who later joined the Moravians. Evans eventually parted company with the Moravians to carry out some independent part-time evangelistic work while never leaving his trade of shoemaking. (Maser 1969 : 33; Maser 1983 : 63). Shortly after Joseph Pilmore and Richard Boardman arrived in 1769¹ Evans associated himself with them and American Methodism. Baker (1976 : 32) says Evans was a founding member of the St. George's Methodist congregation in Philadelphia. He died sometime in late 1771 after working and preaching in New Jersey for a period. (Pilmore 1969 : 24, 105). Maser (1983 : 63) states that because of Pilmore's references to Evans, some may label him the first American itinerant preacher, however, as Maser correctly explains, the distinction is not valid since Evans never joined a Methodist Conference nor did he ever make preaching his sole life endeavor. Noted early historians of American Methodism such as Bangs, Lee and Stevens make no mention of Edward Evans nor is he mentioned in the journals of Asbury, Rankin, Shadford or Watters. In fact, Maser says little is known of Evans other than what Pilmore states in his journal, (Maser 1969 : 114) and Atkinson (1896 : 145) suggests that if it were not for Pilmore's journal Evans would remain, "almost unknown to history." What is also not clear is if Evans was native born or an immigrant, although Atkinson (1896 : 431) states "there is no evidence that Evans was not an American by birth."

Watters (1806 : 108) says that Richard Owen,² "my old friend and fellow laborer [was] the first American [born] Methodist Preacher, though for many years he acted only as a local preacher."³ According to Watters, Owen was converted under the ministry of Strawbridge. Watters (1806 : 109-110) describes him as "a man of a respectable family, of good natural parts, and of considerable utterance . . . he had kept himself unspotted from the world . . . plain in his manners-industrious and frugal."

Edward Evans can probably be credited with being the first longstanding lay preacher in America who eventually banded with the Methodists in the Philadelphia area in 1769, and if he

¹ See also Clark I 1958 : 7.

² Sometimes spelt Owings. See Baker 1976 : 37.

³ See also Stevens 1864 : 74; Burke 1964 : 76.

was indeed native born, he would be the first American to hold that distinction. Richard Owen is considered to be the first American born local preacher who later became an itinerant preacher. William Watters was certainly one of the first American preachers, although unlike Owens, he started out in the itinerancy before becoming a local preacher.

4.3 THE FIRST AMERICAN BORN ITINERANT PREACHER

“I was the first American who had gone out amongst the Methodists to preach the Gospel” were Watters’ (1806 : 23) words in his autobiography. He reflected on this thought, as he lay desperately ill in Virginia in the spring/summer of 1773, having already spent several months on his first itinerant journey, which had commenced the previous October. At that time Watters was deeply concerned that if he died on the trip, or got so ill that he would have to cease preaching, that it might discourage other Americans from also throwing their lot in with the Methodists. Later that summer he was recovered well enough to return home for a short while before undertaking a second itinerant appointment, this time alone, with many more that followed. Watters went on to give American Methodism more than ten years itinerant service and more than thirty years of active ministry in total, while serving in various auxiliary functions in a lay capacity for several years after retirement.

No noted historian, to this writer’s knowledge, disputes Watters’ claim that he was indeed the first American born itinerant preacher. Following is a brief compilation of Methodist historians who attest to Watters’ claim.

Jesse Lee (1810 : 45) said, “William Waters of the Western shore of Maryland . . . was the first traveling preacher that was raised up among the Methodists in America.” Lee’s history of American Methodism was published just four years after Watters published his autobiography and about seventeen years before Watters died. Lee is arguably the most noted contemporary Methodist historian of Watters’ era.

When commenting on the 1773 Conference, Bangs (1838 : 80) says, “In the above stations we find the name of William Watters, who was the first American preacher who joined the itinerancy, and he continued a laborious and successful laborer in his Master's work until the day of his death.” Abel Stevens (1864 : 154) simply refers to Watters as “the first native itinerant.” Frank Baker (1976 : 36) also just refers to Watters as “the first native itinerant,” but

Baker then immediately qualifies the statement with “at least after Edward Evans of Philadelphia.” This apparent dispute over Watters’ status in this regard has already been considered above. Wesley Gewehr (1930 : 140) merely refers to Watters as “one of the earliest Methodist itinerants.” Wade Barclay (1950 : 419) says Watters was “the first American-born Traveling Preacher.”⁴

Being the first to do anything does not in itself qualify someone to be an expert, a leader or a champion at the discipline they represented when they had the initiative to take those first steps for which they will forever be remembered. What makes someone’s efforts worthy of accolades and the scrutiny of historians is the life the person led after they took those first steps. Being the first American itinerant preacher is not what made Watters who he was. “It is not where a man is but rather what he is able to do that counts. Watters was a builder of Methodism and not of self.” (Corkran 1928 : 384). Watters exemplary service to American Methodism; his untarnished character during trying times; his proactive leadership when he would much rather have been a follower, and his gracious benevolent spirit, is what places Watters in the ranks of early American Methodism’s most noteworthy champions. Watters just happened to be the first American to take on the difficult yet noble task of being a circuit rider. Du Bose (1916 : 590) correctly points out that, “the exceptional distinction of this man is permanently in the procession of that mighty multitude of native American itinerants which, under God, he was given the honor to head.”

4.4 THE FIRST AMERICAN METHODIST CONFERENCE: JULY 14-16, 1773

Up until 1773 no formal annual Methodist Conference in America had been held although some Quarterly meetings had been convened. On June 1, 1773 Wesley’s new leader of American Methodism, Thomas Rankin (1878 : 185) arrived and soon after called for a conference to meet, which was held at Saint Georges’s in Philadelphia.

Saint George’s is sometimes referred to by early American Methodists as “the Cathedral.” (Du Bose 1916 : 589). According to the Minutes (1983 : 5), and Watters (1806 : 30) the Conference was held in June, but it seems unrealistic that they could summon the preachers

⁴ Capitalization of “Traveling Preacher” the authors.

to a conference so soon after Rankin's arrival. Rankin's (1878 : 193) journal has the Conference meeting in July on a Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, but it is not date specific. Asbury's (I 1958 : 85) and Pilmore's (1969 : 210) journals concurred and are more explicit with regards the dates,⁵ with the Conference meeting on July 14, 15 and 16; Wednesday through Friday. It is possible that the Minutes got the month wrong since they were first published in 1785, twelve years after the fact. (Lee 1810 : 45). Watters, whose autobiography was published more than thirty years after the Conference, may have got the month wrong by consulting the minutes. Burke (1964 : 120) concludes that "the word 'June' in the 1773 Minutes is undoubtedly an error."

The Conference had several purposes: the scattered Methodist operations that stretched from New York in the north to Virginia in the south had to be unified and structured. A firmer hand to bring a measure of Wesleyan styled discipline was needed, particularly as the result of two irregularities: Strawbridge's administering of the ordinances and Robert Williams who was printing and selling some of Wesley's works.⁶ Asbury, although still just in his twenties, had introduced some semblance of order to the various societies where Boardman and Pilmore before him, had made little effort. Thomas Rankin, as Wesley's newest transplant to the New World "understood his charge and purpose as safeguarding Methodist discipline." (Kirby 1996 : 68). Wesley's seal of authority on Rankin to act as Assistant, mixed with his own personal autocratic style, quickly helped to move American Methodism closer to a mirror-image of their British counterpart, yet never achieving full likeness. The free and liberty-seeking American spirit permeated all that reached its shores. Religion was no exception. Most significantly at this Conference, John Wesley, as the highest authoritative figure in Methodism, even for the Americas, was confirmed and preachers were examined, licensed and stationed according to his will and direction, being actively enforced through his Assistant.

⁵ Barclay (1949 : 53) offers several authoritative sources for various possible dates on the Conference but settles with the dates offered by Asbury as being July 14-16. (See also Sweet 1933 : 68)

⁶ Williams was told to sell what he had on hand and to print no more without the consent of Wesley. The Strawbridge issue will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter Six.

4.5 THE FIRST AMERICAN BORN APPOINTEE BY A METHODIST CONFERENCE

None of the references cited above (Minutes, Asbury, Pilmore, Rankin or Watters) offer a complete listing of all those who were actually present at the Conference. An attempt to establish this will be made below, but what is significant is that Watters identifies the attendees' national origins. He (1806 : 30) says the conference "consisted of eight preachers, all Europeans; to whom were added A. W.⁷ an Englishman by birth, and myself." By stating that he and Whitworth "were added" does not mean that they were necessarily present at the Conference. They were added to the list as Conference appointees. With Watters stating that the eight Conference attendees were all European, which would have been synonymous with them being English, and then adding that Whitworth was also English, makes himself the only American born listed amongst them.

The Minutes (1983 : 5) lists ten appointees and the circuits they were assigned to by action of the Conference. They are Thomas Rankin (New York), George Shadford (Philadelphia), John King and William Watters (New Jersey), Francis Asbury, Robert Strawbridge, Abraham Whitworth and Joseph Yearbry (Baltimore), Richard Wright (Norfolk), and Robert Williams (Petersburg). This makes Watters, the only American listed, as the first American to be appointed by a Methodist Conference. Du Bose (1916 : 590) says, "Ten preachers were assigned to work. With a single exception, these were all natives of the British Isles. The exception was William Watters, a youth who had not yet reached his twenty second year." Baker (1976 : 96-97) says:

By the time of the first American Conference in 1773 there had been a trickle of British and native local preachers into the full-time itinerancy. The 1773 *Minutes* list ten preachers stationed in six circuits. Of these men four were British itinerants- Rankin, Shadford, Asbury and Wright. Five were British immigrants, all apparently local preachers in their homeland-King, Strawbridge, Yerbury, Williams and Abraham Whitworth. Only one was a native American-William Watters, a promising young man of twenty-one, a product of Baltimore, Maryland. (Italics Bakers)

D. A. Watters (1898 : 64) proudly states that the 1773 Conference appointment of his Great Uncle was the "first field assigned by a Methodist Conference to an American itinerant.

⁷ Abraham Whitworth. Wrenn (2000 : 74) says Whitworth was the first Methodist preacher in America to be expelled, due to drunkenness.

Sweet (1935 : 132) concurred when he wrote, “William Watters was the first native American preacher to receive assignment to a regular circuit. This was the start of the work by the native sons of American Methodism.” At just 22 years of age Watters felt extremely humbled with the honor of being listed amongst the distinguished leaders of American Methodism at their first ever annual conference: leaders who had personally known and who had been personally sent by John Wesley. “I felt I was unworthy of a name and place amongst the servants of God and trembled lest I should disgrace that cause, which I felt such inexpressible desires to promote.” (Watters 1806 : 31). Watters unfortunately could not fulfill his appointment to New Jersey due to illness.

4.6 THE FIRST AMERICAN TO ATTEND A METHODIST CONFERENCE

From available data it is impossible to conclusively ascertain who was in attendance at the 1773 Conference. Joseph Pilmore (1969 : 210) clearly puts himself, Boardman and Rankin at the meeting and mentions that two preachers were a day late, but does not name them. Asbury (I 1958 : 85) also places himself at the Conference but names none of the other attendees, although he does state that he arrived on Thursday, making him one of those who was late. Rankin (1878 : 185) specifically states “there were seven preachers, besides Boardman and Pilmore” making it a total of nine present. Lee (1810 : 45) says “there were six or seven traveling preachers at it.” Lee (1810 : 45) further suggests that Watters was at the Conference when he says the following; “There were six or seven traveling preachers at it, *most of whom were Europeans*.⁸ William Waters of the Western shore of Maryland began to travel this year; and he was the first traveling preacher that was raised up among the Methodists in America.” Corkran (1928 : 383-384) explicitly concludes that Watters was indeed at the Conference:

The probability of his being present is strengthened by the fact that he joined at the conference of 1773. It is extremely doubtful that they would have received one so little known to them, as Watters must have been, had he not been present. Therefore, my conclusion is that William Watters was present at the first Conference in 1773.

Several other Methodist scholars agree with Corkran. Simpson (1876 : 903) definitively says Watters was at the Conference. Barclay (1949 : 54) also believes Watters was at the conference

⁸ Italics added.

by his own confession, yet Tees (1940 : 141) says such a “claim arises from a hasty reading or a misunderstanding of Watters’ autobiography.” Sweet (1933 : 68) says that “none of the native American preachers were present, with the possible exception of Williams Watters.” Wrenn (1977 : 7) believes that Watters did attend this conference saying, “the following summer, 1773, he [Watters] went to Philadelphia to the first Methodist Conference in America, and was there admitted to the traveling connection.” Yet in a subsequent article published in the same journal, Wrenn (1981 : 5) concludes that Watters was not at the 1773 conference. Buckley (1898 : 186) emphatically says that Watters was not at the Conference and later actually names those who did attend: “Rankin, Boardman, Pilmoor, Asbury, Wright, Shadford, Webb, King, Whitworth and Yearby.”⁹ (Buckley 1912 : 16). Watters, Strawbridge and Williams, who were appointees of the Conference, are omitted from Buckley’s list.

It is this writer’s conclusion that Watters was definitely not at the first Methodist conference that was held in America. As stated above, when Watters (1806 : 30) says that he and Whitworth “were added” to the Europeans who were at the conference, he is not explicitly saying that he was in attendance. He could merely be pointing out that he was added to their numbers as an appointee of the Conference. Five other factors help ascertain that Watters was not at the Conference.

First, Watters loved the gathering of the Methodists. He often wrote about his deep affection for his colleagues, the joy of being in their presence and his devotion to the Methodist cause. As he wrote of his life’s work in 1806 Watters specifically makes mention of the conferences from 1774 onwards that he did attend, yet he does not clearly state that he attended the 1773 Conference.

Secondly Watters (1806 : 32) says that he became ill in August of 1773 just “a little before I intended setting off home” from Virginia. Why would he still be in Virginia a month after the Conference if his appointment was to New Jersey, which was virtually in the opposite direction of Philadelphia? It was customary for preachers to arrive at the annual conferences with ties to their previous appointment already severed, able to immediately proceed to their next assignment. Since the 1773 Conference was the first of its kind in America, it could be argued that Watters did not attend the Conference expecting to receive an appointment, however, his

⁹ Atkinson (1896 : 430) also lists these individuals as the attendees of the Conference and also clearly states Watters was not present.

mentor Robert Williams, who had previously served as a Methodist preacher in Ireland for three years and with whom Watters returned home, would have expected that he and Watters could very possibly receive an appointment. But even if Watters did attend the Conference not expecting the appointment, it does not seem logical that after receiving the appointment that he would then return to Norfolk, two hundred and seventy miles away, for just one month, to conclude whatever business he had in the town, which he (1806 : 34) considered to be “the most wicked place I had ever set my foot in.” It is more probable that Watters had not left Virginia at all, from his arrival in late 1772, until the late summer-early fall of 1773.

A very plausible third reason as to why Watters was not at the Conference was because he (1806 : 30) was in very poor health throughout the spring and summer of 1773. “The Spring following [the winter of 1772-73] I was taken with the measles . . . was confined to my bed for a considerable time, and I was thought to be in some danger.” Watters then states that he recovered well enough to continue preaching. In the following two paragraphs of his (1806 : 31) book he mentions the above account of the Conference and his struggles with his “unsanctified nature.” In the very next paragraph he (1806 : 32) says, “about the first of August, a little before I intended setting off home, I was taken with the nervous fever, and lay dangerously ill between twenty and thirty days, before there was any visible alteration. I expected to die.” It is extremely unlikely that Watters would have made the arduous journey from southeastern Virginia to Philadelphia, some two hundred and seventy miles away, in poor health.

As a result of his health Watters did not fulfill the 1773 Conference appointment to New Jersey. Instead he accepted an appointment from a subsequent Quarterly meeting to Kent Circuit. Connor (1970 : 26) explains:

In early November 1773 a Quarterly meeting was held at the home of John Watters. Gatch was appointed to New Jersey where Watters should have been as of the rise of the Annual Conference but he could not because of illness. In the autumn of 1772 he had gone to Virginia; after a busy and difficult winter in Norfolk, he had an attack of measles; following this, he was prostrated for weeks with a nervous fever and was still weak when he reached home in September (1773). By the time of the Quarterly Meeting at his brother's he was sufficiently recovered to take Kent circuit on the Eastern Shore of Maryland.

The fourth reason why it is believed that Watters did not attend the first Methodist Conference in America is because he does not visit his mother while on route to or from the Conference. Watters clearly states that when he eventually returned home after his recuperation in Virginia, he had been away from home for the duration of the time. He (1806 : 34) says “I

returned home, after being away eleven months; and, through a merciful and kind Providence, found all my relations and friends in health, holding fast their professions, and growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” If Watters had been to the Conference in Philadelphia he would have passed in close proximity to his home. It seems extremely unlikely that having been so deathly ill with the measles and having not seen his mother for several months, that he would not stop in to see her on his way to or from the conference, and then not record such a significant event. He would also not have recorded that he had been away from home for eleven months if he had spent time at home on his way to or from the Conference.

The above four reasons for concluding that Watters did not attend the 1773 Conference are all speculative. The fifth reason offers irrefutable evidence. Francis Asbury and Thomas Rankin both attest to the fact that they were in attendance at the July 1773 Conference. After Watters (1806 : 34) returned home from Virginia in late August or September he met Asbury, he says for “the first time.” While still at home Watters (1806 : 35) then says he “first met with Rankin.” Watters clearly says that the first time he ever met Asbury and Rankin was in late 1773, several months after the Conference. Since there were less than ten preachers present at the Conference it is impossible to conclude that Watters would not have met Rankin or Asbury over the course of the three days of meetings. These two disclosures of Watters alone are sufficient to conclude that he was not in attendance at the first Methodist Conference to be held in America.¹⁰ D. A. Watters (1898 : 75) agrees: “Although he was made a member of the first Conference, he was not present at its deliberations, but was busy preaching in Southern Virginia.” It is also safe to conclude, based on who were appointed at the Conference, that all those who were present were of English descent. Watters was not at the 1773 Conference yet he was present the following year, which does still not make him the first American to do so since he was not the only American born preacher present at the Conference of 1774.

4.7 THE FIRST AMERICAN TO CHAIR A METHODIST CONFERENCE – MAY 1778

The presiding elder or leader of the Methodist conferences in the early years of the American movement was responsible for directing the business of the meeting, for ensuring that all

¹⁰ See also Tees 1940 : 141.

members were adequately approved for service and for the allocation of appointments, all the while recognizing that they and their charge were answerable to John Wesley. Thomas Rankin, as Wesley's designated Assistant, presided over the first Methodist Conference held in America in 1773, just as he did in succeeding years. Over the next several years the tensions in the country had risen to such a pitch that the English preachers could no longer safely and freely move within the Colonies or between them, without taking the oath of allegiance. At the May 20, 1777, Conference "Rankin presided and evidently made final announcement of his approaching departure" (Barclay 1949 : 57) from America. Asbury, the next logical individual in the line of leadership was himself contemplating a period away from active service to American Methodism, but not away from America. As a result neither Rankin nor Asbury were given appointments at the 1777 Conference.

Rankin did some traveling and preaching over the next few months before wintering in Philadelphia. He had hoped to lend some support to the Methodists in New York, whose work he thought had been disrupted by the war, but he could not safely make the trip. He left America on March 17, 1778. (Clark I 1958 : 243). Asbury spent the rest of the year traveling and preaching mostly in Maryland before starting a twenty-month period in 1778, of limited public exposure in Delaware. "For the greater part of the time he was ceaselessly active," (Barclay 1949 : 58) although often in danger. On April 7, 1778, while on one of his somewhat reckless crossings into Maryland Asbury (I 1958 : 265-266) wrote, "At night a report was spread which inclined me to think it would be most prudent for me to move the next day. Accordingly I set out after dinner, and lay in a swamp till about sunset."

Watters, along with four others (Dromgoole, Gatch, Glendinning and Ruff), were appointed to serve on a committee to oversee the work during the time of social unrest and uncertainty and whilst Asbury's activities were more localized. Barclay (1949 : 57) seems to suggest that Watters was made chairman of the committee from the rise of the 1777 conference, which would be an erroneous conclusion to arrive at. Indications are that the five were elected as joint bearers of the work, with no designated leader. Of this committee Asbury (I 1958 : 239) simply says "It was judged necessary that a committee should be appointed to superintend the whole," and Watters¹¹ offers no indication as to priority amongst the members of the committee.

¹¹ For more on this Committee see Watters (1806 : 56-57) and Chapter Five.

Although Asbury was in exile in Delaware he was not unreachable by those who needed his counsel. As a result D. A. Watters (1898 : 107) suggests that “the Committee for General Assistant was never needed,” which may be an accurate assumption, but it did nonetheless operate, most notably at the next annual conference:

The 1778 Conference met on May 19, in Leesburg, Virginia.

Mr. Rankin and Mr. Shadford, had left the continent and returned home . . . Mr. Asbury had stopped traveling . . . Having no old preachers with us, we were as orphans bereft of our spiritual parents, and though young and inexperienced to transact the business of conference, yet the Lord looked graciously upon us, and had the uppermost seats in all our hearts, and of course in our meeting. (Watters 1806 : 68)

Watters fails to mention that he presided over the 1778 Conference but several scholars do. Bangs (1838 : 129) says “Mr. William Watters, being the oldest American preacher, was called upon to preside.” D. A. Watters (1898 : 120) said “so to him also belongs the credit of being the first of his class of preachers to preside, in the absence of the general assistant, at an Annual Conference.” Wrenn (1977 : 8; 1981 : 6) says, “it was Watters who presided” and that he was the first native born American to do so. Du Bose (1916 : 590) offers the following assessment of Watters’ leadership at this juncture:

His genuineness of character, his soundness of judgment, and his unquestioned devotion to the cause of Christ, put him at the head of the itinerancy when, some years later, the affairs of the Conference fell wholly to the hands of the native-born American preachers. It was no doubt through the advice, and perhaps through the planning, of Rankin that he [Watters] was named first on the Advisory Committee appointed to administer the affairs of the Conference.

4.8 THE REVOLUTION AND THE ORDINANCE SCHISM

The impact of America’s War of Independence on American Methodism and Watters’ thoughts and actions on the matter will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five. The growing controversy over the administration of the ordinances of baptism and communion, the dilemma that many American Methodists found themselves in as a result, particularly in the more rural areas of the land, the efforts of some Methodist preachers to remedy the situation, and Watters’ efforts to keep the movement from fragmenting will be dealt with in Chapter Six.

There are some who set out to be the first in line, or simply to do great things so that others in return, can consider them great. Many in history have done just that, some at the expense of others. Then there are those who set out simply to serve their world: they work hard, give sacrificially, aspire to be no more than who God made them to be, while doing it all to the best of their ability. The Christian who lives by these dictates is driven by the added passion of seeking the pleasure and blessing of God. William Watters was such a man. His willingness to lead when Methodism was leaderless and his deep-seated passion to prevent Methodism from splitting, are two of the most noteworthy aspects of his service as a Methodist preacher. Each will be discussed separately in successive chapters.

CHAPTER FIVE

AMERICA'S WAR OF INDEPENDENCE, METHODISM AND WILLIAM WATTERS

American Methodist preachers faced an array of obstacles simply because of the message they preached and the affiliations they held. Often maligned by association they were repeatedly required to defend their loyalties, endure the public scrutiny of detractors and even at times bear the brunt of a persecutor's rod. Yet, as Watters (1806 : 61) says, the Methodist preachers were in fact "conscientious men, and not unfriendly to our country."

In May of 1775 the fledgling American government-in-waiting commenced business in its Second Continental Congress. The war to rid the Colonies of the controlling British shackles had started a month earlier on April 19, 1775 with the Battle of Concord and Lexington in Massachusetts. American leaders had previously appealed to Britain to cease taxation without representation, but were not satisfied with the response that came from London. "Communities, institutions and even families were divided" (Bates 1975 : 18) in their loyalties: do they support Britain as the Colonial power and seat of the Monarchy, or America, their home? D. A. Watters' (1898 : 85) perspective on the growing conflict, the plight of the English preachers and the consequences for native Methodist preachers sums up the intent of this chapter:

The mutterings of war were now heard in every direction, and the dark cloud of impending death hung heavy over the fair land of the Colonies. The terrific conflict was now known to be inevitable. The result no man could surely predict. The patriots' cause was rapidly gathering strength from many sources. Men were everywhere mustering for the field. Armies were marching and counter-marching.

Every lover of his country was decrying the mother-land for her cruel oppressions, and was supremely demonstrative in his support of the movement to resist them to the end.

Silence was often construed for disloyalty . . . Englishmen . . . either entered the English army or returned to their native country. The clergymen of the Church of England deserted their posts in great numbers. Our own preachers, who were English-men, refused to take the oath, as they were subjects of the crown, and all except Bishop Asbury returned home . . . So we perceive, then, how the care of the infant Church was intrusted [sic] to the hands of the native preachers.

5.1 JOHN WESLEY AND THE REVOLUTION

Just six weeks before those infamous first shots rang out, John Wesley (XII : 324) addressed a letter to Thomas Rankin and the Methodist preachers on March 1, 1775, as the atmosphere in the Colonies grew increasingly expectant with the prospects of war. To Rankin Wesley optimistically offered hope that peace would still be restored between the two sides: “It is not unlikely that peace will be re-established between England and the colonies.” Then Wesley added a word of council to the preachers when he said:

You were never in your lives in so critical a situation as you are at this time. It is your part to be peace-makers; to be loving and tender to all, but to addict yourselves to no party . . . say not one word against one or other side. Keep yourselves pure . . . see that you act in full union with each other.

Although Wesley advocated a spirit of neutrality for his preachers, he was never one to hold his tongue when a civic matter needed addressing. As a result “Wesley himself was faced with a painful dilemma . . . his affection for America and his interests in the Methodist work there came into conflict with his own political philosophy.” (Burke 1964 : 162). Wesley (IV : 62) had initially favored some measure of self-determination for the Americans when he supported “the exclusive right of the colonies to tax themselves.” Wesley (XII : 330) also urged James Dempster, one of his missionaries who had arrived in 1774, in a letter dated May 19, 1775, to remain neutral and “by every possible means . . . oppose a party spirit.” Under the circumstances Wesley’s advice to Dempster was extremely wise. Regrettably for the cause of American Methodism, Wesley himself did not follow his own counsel. Wesley came across a pamphlet by Samuel Johnson, which argued for the right of a nation to tax its citizens and for the obligation of said citizens to remain loyal to their country. As a result Wesley’s formerly favorable position for the Americans to tax themselves and to seek self-determination was reversed. In this regard he (IV : 62) wrote; “but I am now of another mind.” Had Wesley kept his change of heart to himself or restricted his comments to verbal interchanges with his close personal associates, America would have been none the wiser, and American Methodism would have been better off, but, using the material from Johnson’s pamphlet, Wesley put his thoughts to paper. He (XI : 80-90) published thousands of copies of “A Calm Address To Our American Colonies.” Godbold (1965 : 8) summed up the gist of Wesley’s thoughts as follows:

The colonies ought not to rebel against England, because the British government had the right to tax the colonists whether or not they had representation in parliament, and the right even to dispose of their property, liberty, and lives without their consent! The publication did not have a calming effect on the Americans.

In this “Calm Address,” which he openly says is largely borrowed material; Wesley masterfully argues against the general assertion by American political leaders that their existence as tax paying subjects of the British Crown is tantamount to slavery. The Americans argued this point since they had no voice in Parliament and subsequently, no hope of changing what they considered to be, oppressive and unjust laws. The American Patriots further asserted that it was their right to seek liberty on their terms. In response Wesley (XI : 81) said, “I have no representative in Parliament; but I am taxed; yet I am no slave. Yea, nine in ten throughout England have no representative, no vote; yet they are no slaves; they enjoy both civil and religious liberty to the utmost extent.” Wesley (XI : 81) then insultingly suggests that if the Americans wished to observe genuine examples of humans being subjected to slavery, they ought to look within their own ranks:

“Who then is a slave?” Look into America, and you may easily see. See that Negro, fainting under the load, bleeding under the lash! He is a slave. And is there “no difference” between him and his master? Yes; the one is screaming, “Murder! Slavery!” the other silently bleeds and dies!

“But wherein then consists the difference between liberty and slavery?” Herein: You and I, and the English in general, go where we will, and enjoy the fruit of our labors: This is liberty. The Negro does not: This is slavery.

Is not then all this outcry about liberty and slavery mere rant, and playing upon words?

The document further argues that the ancestors of English subjects, now living in the colonies, willingly gave up certain rights by virtue of their emigration. “You have exactly what your ancestors left you; not a vote in making laws, nor in choosing legislators; but the happiness of being protected by laws, and the duty of obeying them.” (Wesley XI : 84).¹

In his journal, on November 27, 1775, Wesley (IV : 59-60) copied a letter he had published in a local British newspaper offering justification for his ‘Calm Address.’ In the article he states, “I contributed my mite toward putting out the flame which rages all over the land.” He

¹ Wesley apparently produced at least five other pamphlets that dealt with the American scene. See Sweet 1935 : 125-126.

goes on to say that the British government is not “cruelly or unjustly” using the Americans and that they have “liberty . . . in its full extent, both civil and religious . . . but what they contend for, is, the illegal privilege of being exempt from parliamentary taxation.” In a letter to his brother Charles, John (XII : 144) says, “I find a danger now of a new kind: A danger of losing my love for the Americans: I mean, for their miserable leaders.”

Politically, John Wesley and the leaders of the burgeoning American government were polar-opposites. As Collins (1999 : 123) points out, Wesley was being a typical eighteenth-century English Tory by marrying his devotion to God to his allegiance to the King. Wesley (XI : 87) deplored the prospect of the American’s creating a Republican form of government, and contrary to one of the pillars of early American politics, Wesley believed a state’s power emanated not from the people, but from God. In his essay ‘Observations On Liberty,’ Wesley (XI : 105) stated his conviction that under a Monarchy, a nation can enjoy its greatest freedom, yet under a totally civil government, there will be “less liberty, either civil or religious.” Subsequently, Wesley believed the American plea for freedom from British rule, according to Heitzenrater (1995 : 262) “held no moral or legal weight and that their cries for liberty were . . . irresponsible.”

Americans, and even many English living in America, understandably took exception to Wesley’s thoughts, while Tories must have been overjoyed. Asbury (I 1958 : 181) lamented, “that the venerable man ever dipped into the politics of America” and was probably accurate when he (I 1958 : 181) surmised that had Wesley “been a subject of America, no doubt but he would have been as zealous an advocate of the American cause.” As Wesley’s opinions quickly spread throughout the Colonies, so antagonism toward the Methodists grew.

5.2 THE ENGLISH PREACHERS

Under the growing circumstances one would be hard pressed to find legitimate fault with the desire of the British born preachers to return to England, few of whom considered their labors in America to be their life-long calling. For their own safety and in an effort to dim the spotlight that at times glared heavily down on all Methodists because of their association with the English preachers, returning home seemed to be the most prudent course of action. “The unfortunate interference of Wesley, in the American question on the English side, had made it almost

impossible for the Methodist ministers, natives of England, to obtain a favorable hearing; and in various sections they were subject to . . . personal insults, and arrest.” (Tees 1940 : 22).

Regrettably, Wesley was not the only Methodist who contributed to the growing strain under which the American preachers found themselves. “What made the matter worse than it would otherwise have been was, our head preachers were all from England and some of them were imprudent in speaking freely against the proceedings of the Americans.” (Lee 1810 : 60). Connor (1970 : 39) says, “with increasing tension, anyone with British connections was apt to be under suspicion. Because of their relations with John Wesley, the loyalties of the American Methodists were already often in question, those of the preachers especially.” Blakemore (1951 : 4) said, “The position of the English Methodist preachers had become untenable due to the American Revolution. They were labeled pro-British by the Americans and pro-American by the British.” By the time of the 1777 Conference, only five of Wesley’s original twelve missionaries and volunteers remained in active service in the colonies: Glendinning, Rodda, Rankin, Shadford, and Asbury. (Minutes 1983 : 13).

5.2.1 GLENDINNING² AND RODDA

William Glendinning had earlier decided to remain in America, to declare loyalty to his adopted country, and to continue in service to American Methodism, which he did until the mid 1790’s. He will be discussed in more detail below as a member of the Committee of Five. Martin Rodda, as detailed in Chapter One, deliberately attempted to bring harm to the American cause when he circulated anti-American literature, which by default hurt the very cause for which he should have been giving all his passions and energies to: American Methodism. He fled the country in 1777.

5.2.2 RANKIN

As early as November of 1774, Rankin (1878 : 203-204) was already predicting the prospects of a bloody confrontation between America and Britain:

² Glendinning spells his name as stated here. Watters (1806 : 57) spells it Glendining and most early Methodists, and subsequent Methodist historians, spell it Glendenning. Glendinning will be the spelling used in this paper unless in a quote.

For some time past my mind has been much affected, and my spirit not a little pressed down at the prospect of public affairs in this country. Matters look extremely gloomy and what the end of these things will be, who can tell? This I am fully certain of, that, to all human appearance, this land will become a field of blood.

After the May 1775 Conference in Philadelphia Rankin (1878 : 204) said, “our joy in God would have been abundantly more, had it not been for the preparations of war that now rung throughout this city.”

Rather than steer clear of the political fray, Rankin chose on several occasions, to use his sermons as a platform to question the rational and moral legitimacy of the Revolution by incorporating the slavery issue, just as Wesley had done. On July 20, 1775, a day set by Congress for a general fast, Rankin “preached to a numerous congregation [and said] the sins of Great Britain and her colonies had long called aloud for vengeance; and in a peculiar manner the dreadful sin of buying and selling the souls and bodies of the poor Africans.” (Rankin 1878 : 205). Norwood (1982 : 49) quotes Rankin as saying, “I could not help telling many of them, what a farce it was for them to contend for liberty, when they themselves kept some hundreds of thousands of poor blacks in most cruel bondage.” More than a year later Rankin (1878 : 210) appears less dogmatic on his views. “It is not my intention to give details, or my judgment, of these matters: suffice it to say, that the business belongs to the historian.”

Rankin remained in the Philadelphia-New Jersey area for almost a year following the 1777 Conference before departing for England on March 17, 1778. On his return Rankin apparently did not represent Asbury very well to Wesley, who had previously suggested that Asbury should return to England. As a result, and probably due to his feelings on the war, it would be five years before Wesley renamed Asbury as his assistant in America. (Godbold 1965 : 4).

5.2.3 SHADFORD

Shadford and Asbury had developed a close bond, which tore at Asbury when his friend could no longer remain in America. Shadford struggled with the growing call for renunciation of loyalty to the King of England by all residents of the colonies. Shortly after concluding his term of service in Virginia, in early 1777, he (1878 : 171) wrote, “the spirit of the people began now to be agitated with regard to politics. They threatened me with imprisonment when I prayed for the

king . . . and pressed me to take the test-oath to renounce him for ever.” Over the course of the next several months Shadford served in Maryland where the oath was also introduced. He (1878 : 172) wrote of the dilemma he faced:

As the test-oath must take place there also, I was brought to a strait. I had sworn allegiance to the king twice, and could not swear to renounce him forever. I dare not play with fast-and-loose oaths, and swallow them in such a manner. We could not travel safe without a pass, nor have a pass without taking the oaths.

Just as Shadford was not willing to swear any allegiance to America, he was also not prepared to use his position as a Methodist preacher, to attempt to subversively influence the political landscape. “We could not beat the political drum in the pulpit, preaching bloody sermons because we considered ourselves messengers of peace, [we were] called to preach the Gospel of peace.” (Shadford 1878 : 173).

Shadford and Asbury’s deep friendship was strained due to the predicament forced upon them by the war and their determination not to take any oaths of allegiance to America. With the prospect of having to leave the country they agreed to spend a day in fasting and prayer for guidance about their circumstances. Shadford (1878 : 172-173) later said, “I told him [Asbury] I could not stay, as I believed I had done my work here at present; and that it was as much impressed upon my mind to go home now as it had been to come over to America.” Since Asbury believed that he was guided by God to remain, he thought one of them had to be in error. ““Not so; I may have a call to go, and you to stay;” was Shadford’s response. He further stated, “I believed we both obeyed the call of Providence. We saw we must part, though we loved as David and Jonathan.” Much to Asbury’s displeasure Shadford left for England in February 1778.

5.2.4 ASBURY

Although Asbury felt akin to Shadford he clearly believed his friend’s decision to return to England was an abdication of responsibility. He (I 1958 : 234) explains:

I received a letter from brother Shadford, intimating that, according to rule, the time was drawing near for us to return. But St. Paul’s rule is, that our spiritual children should be in our hearts, to live and die with them. (2 Cor. vii, 3.) Then, doubtless, we should be willing to suffer affliction with them. May the Lord give me wisdom sufficient to direct me in this and every intricate case!

When Asbury heard of Rankin's intention to leave America he "exploded with righteous indignation" (Godbold 1965 : 14) and displayed a depth of devotion to the American people and their need to hear the Gospel that would carry him through the war years and beyond, for decades to come.

I can by no means agree to leave such a field for gathering souls to Christ, as we have in America. It would be an eternal dishonour [sic] to the Methodists, that we should all leave three thousand souls, who desire to commit themselves to our care; neither is it the part of a good shepherd to leave his flock in time of danger: therefore, I am determined, by the grace of God, not to leave them, let the consequence be what it may. Our friends here appeared to be distressed above measure, at the thoughts of being forsaken by the preachers. (Asbury I 1958 : 161-162)

Asbury (I 1958 : 228, 235) "resolved not to depart from the work on any consideration . . . as long as I could stay and preach without injuring my conscience, it appeared as my duty to abide with the flock." He "stayed through the Revolution in spite of loneliness, misunderstanding, abuse and persecution." (Godbold 1965 : 3). In his journal on August 13 and 14, 1775 Asbury wrote; "My own soul was enlarged in preaching, but the people were too little affected . . . I spoke both morning and evening; but we were interrupted by the clamour [sic] of arms, and preparations of war. My business is, to be more intensely devoted to God."

God and conscience always came first for Asbury. He (I 1958 : 184) had already observed that some Methodists were getting too caught up in the war and had thus "imbibed a martial spirit [and] that they had lost the spirit of pure and undefiled religion." He was determined to set a precedent for the junior preachers under his charge and avoid entangling himself in the affairs that were tearing at the country. His primary function was to preach the Gospel and to lead others who were like-minded. This did not mean that Asbury and American Methodism at large were ignoring any civil or spiritual responsibility to speak to the issues at hand. It simply meant that they had established clear priorities for their lives and their calling, and meddling in politics was not high on the list.

Because Asbury refused to take the oath of allegiance to the new American government or to leave the country, he retreated to Delaware, where he found refuge on the estate of a prominent Methodist judge named Thomas White of Kent County. Judge White's "influential family early espoused the cause of Methodism and gave it standing and its itinerants protection."

(Clark I 1958 : 253). The moderate political stance in Delaware enabled Asbury to remain at or close to the White residence for almost two years, until the overall political climate changed.

Asbury's state of semi-seclusion to the general population did not mean that he sat idly by. Many preachers could reach him for counsel when needed, he engrossed himself in reading³ and even found time and courage to "steal out at night, and proclaim to dying souls the word of life." (Moore 1884 : 24). A contributing factor to Asbury being able to move around as much as he did had to do with a letter he had sent to Thomas Rankin in 1777 in which he spoke very positively of the Colonists. American officials apparently intercepted the letter and eventually the contents became known to the Governor, Caesar Rodney, who in return spoke positively of Asbury and the Methodists and thus much of the suspicion against them was eased, but not totally erased.

One of Asbury's most difficult periods while in hiding was during Judge White's own arrest and incarceration for about five weeks, which caused Asbury to flee to the security of a nearby swamp. He at times understandably shared melancholy thoughts as he contemplated his lot. The following journal entries were penned from Friday, March 13, to March 27, 1778: (I 1958 : 263-265).

I was under some heaviness of mind. But it was no wonder: three thousand miles from home—my friends have left me—I am considered by some as an enemy of the country—every day liable to be seized by violence, and abused . . . My temptations were very heavy . . . It requires great resignation for a man to be willing to be laid aside as a broken instrument . . . I have frequently been under powerful temptations: but at other times my soul has been serene and comfortable. Much of my time is spent in study. And my desire is, to glorify God in all I do . . . The grace of God is a sufficient support, while I bear the reproach of men, and am rewarded with evil for all the good which I have done, and desired to do for mankind. I want for no temporal convenience, and endeavour [sic] to improve my time by devotion and study.

In spite of the extended and occasionally very taxing trial, Asbury (I 1958 : 264) constantly exhibited the correct perspective. "All this is but a trifle to suffer for Christ, and the salvation of souls. Lord, stand by me!" As tensions eventually eased across the region Asbury's countenance became more positive. On Sunday 9 and Monday 10 of April 1780, he (I 1958 : 344) began his journal entry with the words "I have peace" and then two days later he (I 1958 : 344) simply wrote, "I am going from my home, Thomas White's." Overall Tipple (1916 : 129-

³ See Asbury's journal entries of March 2, 16 and April 9, 10, 22, 24, 1778, for a list of some of the material he was reading while in seclusion.

130) says that “the period of retirement was . . . valuable” for Asbury and that about eighteen hundred souls had been added to Methodist ranks in Delaware alone over the period, in large part because Asbury refused to allow the circumstances to completely muzzle his message.

Soon after his emergence most of the preachers immediately recognized and confirmed Asbury as their leader regardless of Wesley’s sentiment. It is to him; “the Englishman who remained, that the Methodist Church in America owes the greatest debt.” (Burke 1964 : 159). Asbury went on to lead American Methodism to unparalleled significance amongst American religious organizations for decades to come, but first he faced another crisis: American Methodism was effectively split over the ordinance issue.⁴

5.3 AMERICAN METHODISTS

When the Revolutionary War broke out, “all things English were suddenly unpopular.” (Mariner 2001 : 1). This obviously included the Methodists. Their ties to the Church of England and John Wesley coupled with the irresponsible efforts of some of their own created a setting where the American Methodists unjustifiably came under widespread scrutiny. “Wesley’s explicit anti-American stance added more strain to the tenuous political position of his Methodist followers in America. Many of them were consequently suspected, by association, of having Loyalist sympathies.” (Heitzenrater 1995 : 264). At times their own words to the contrary meant little. If a person was determined to cry ‘loyalist’ amidst a mob, a Methodist preacher had to either stand his ground and take the abuse, sometimes physical, or retreat. “Anyone who wished to raise the wind of persecution against a Methodist preacher, need only shout ‘Tory,’ and his wish was accomplished.” (Bangs 1838 : 139). “These things occasioned jealousies and suspicions to arise among many, that the Methodists were, politically a dangerous people.” (Tees 1940 :146).

It would appear as if Methodism in America was destined for hardship, if not all out failure. Its leaders had retreated, the number of the native preachers had diminished and the accusing eyes of their fellow Patriots were constantly on them, eager to pounce at the slightest misstep in word or deed, that confirmed certain suspicions that all Methodists were British sympathizers. The fact that some Methodists refused to take the oath of allegiance, or to take up arms when drafted, further engendered the wrath of many Patriots.

⁴ See Chapter Six for more details.

5.4 PERSECUTION

The Methodists were not widely and severely persecuted at the hands of American Patriots but some did suffer for their cause, mostly at the hands of unruly mobs. “Some were whipped, some were fined, some imprisoned; others were sent home, and many were much persecuted.” (Lee 1810 : 72). Connor (1970 : 39-40) said, “In places where the temper of the people was uncertain, they sometimes, even before the beginning of war, flared into actual physical violence.” Watters had little to complain about when it came to the treatment he endured because of his Methodist affiliation, in part due to his wisdom in dealing with unruly people and also because he had no hesitation in taking the prescribed oaths. “Though wars and rumors of wars were all around us, we were permitted to dwell in peace . . . it is true we sometimes were charged with being deceivers, false prophets, enthusiasts, and even with being enemies to our country; but we seldom suffered either in person or property.” (Watters 1806 : 48-49).

Some Methodists were not as fortunate. Gatch (1854 : 43-44) said “persecution raged in some places on the [Frederick] circuit . . . [and] generally where the work of God prospered most persecution raged with the most violence.” On one occasion in the Baltimore area, near Bladensburg, Gatch was assaulted by a mob whose leader repeatedly smeared Gatch’s face with tar. “The last stroke made with the paddle with which the tar was applied, was drawn across the naked eyeball, which caused severe pain, from which I never entirely recovered.” (Gatch 1854 : 46). The years of pain and discomfort that followed had some benefit since “the man who put on the tar and several others of the mob were afterwards converted.” (Gatch 1854 : 47). The day following the tar attack Gatch was warned of a mob who lay in ambush for him and who threatened to “tie him to a tree, and whip him until he promises to preach no more.” (Gatch 1854 : 48). His friends helped him to evade the would-be attackers. Connor (1970 : 50-51) offers the following perspective on Gatch’s ordeals:

Some of his friends found it difficult to account for the persecution of Philip Gatch . . . In his case, however, the reasons for persecution were probably not personal. He was without doubt a young man of conviction, and having accepted Methodism, preached it fearlessly . . . His wish was to carry the Gospel into places where there was little religion . . . When the mob assailed him near Bladensburg, they probably attacked him as a symbol of Methodism, which they thought they hated and wished to destroy . . . Such a display of cool courage may well have been an instrument in their conversion.

Freeborn Garretson⁵ also suffered at the hands of assailants ignorant of the true political loyalties of the vast majority of American Methodists. In May 1778, while in the eastern side of Maryland and Delaware he wrote that somebody had, “circulated through the country that the Methodists were enemies to the American cause.” (Garretson 1984 : 68). Shortly thereafter Garretson (1984 : 69-70) describes how he was beaten and almost put in jail. His assailant “taking a large stick that lay in the way, for some time beat me with it over the head and shoulders . . . [he then] struck at me with all his might . . . I fell with force upon the ground.” He was then taken before a Justice-of-the-Peace who threatened to imprison him. “The grand crime was preaching the gospel of our dear Lord and Saviour, [sic] Jesus Christ, in which I greatly rejoiced.” (Garretson 1984 : 70). In July of 1778 Garretson was once again beaten; in September he was threatened with lynching and in October he was almost shot by a lady wielding a pistol while he preached at a funeral. In February 1780 Garretson (1984 : 100) was imprisoned for the “crime of preaching the gospel.” Much of his sixteen days in jail were spent reading, writing, conversing and praying for people who visited him at the windows of his cell. He (1984 : 171) said “I think I never spent 16 days happier in all my life.” In short, Garretson was accused of being a British spy, his meetings were disrupted in Virginia and he was severely beaten and imprisoned in Maryland and Delaware. (Norwood 1974 : 88).

There were other American Methodist preachers, by virtue of their association with the Church of England and the calling they answered, who suffered at the hands of their fellow countrymen. On June 20, 1776 Asbury (I 1958 : 190) was fined five pounds for preaching in Maryland and his chaise was shot at on April 16, 1777. (Asbury I 1958 : 236). Jesse Lee was drafted and imprisoned because he would not bear arms. He was later given the responsibility of wagon driver, which he often used as a license to preach. Joseph Hartley was fined, beaten and imprisoned for preaching. Caleb Pedicord was beaten.⁶ In Maryland in 1775 a local Magistrate warned John Littlejohn to terminate his association with Methodists because they “were Wesley’s agents, sent out for the express purpose of fighting the revolutionary cause under the shield of passive nonresistance.” (Burke 1964 : 165-166). In 1780 the British had invaded Virginia and attempted a conscription that was not very successful partly because so many Methodists claimed to be pacifists. Lee (1810 : 77) said “no threatenings [sic] could compel them

⁵ Kirby (1996 : 300) erroneously suggests that Garretson “managed the connection” during Asbury’s inactivity, however he is correct in stating that Garretson had a role to play in the settling of the ordinance issue.

⁶ See Stevens (1864 280-281), Tipple (1916 : 128-129) and Barclay (1949 : 48).

to bear arms.” As a result some Methodists were subjected to fines, beatings and/or imprisonment. Yet these men continued on: in the midst of a war, bereft of older seasoned leaders, facing persecution, abuse or the possibility of being drafted to fight or imprisonment, they preached the Gospel message wherever and whenever they could:

Gatch and his fellow itinerants were no cowards; they gathered courage from their trials; and though they followed the Scripture precept, when persecuted in one city to flee to another, yet it was their policy to return in due time to the scene of hostilities, and never finally succumb. (Stevens 1864 : 378)

5.5 THE COMMITTEE OF FIVE

Before his retreat Asbury and some other preachers met in what appears to have been an irregular caucus, without the presence of Rankin as presiding leader, just a few days prior to the 1777 Conference. It was there “judged necessary that a committee should be appointed to superintend the whole” (Asbury I 1958 : 239) since the English preachers could no longer fill that role. The Conference that followed continued the discussion of the need for a committee. Question Eleven in the Minutes dealt with the preservation of American Methodism, as it was then constituted:

Can anything be done in order to lay a foundation for a future union, supposing the old preachers should be, by the times, constrained to return to Great Britain? Would it not be well for all who are willing to sign some articles of agreement, and strictly adhere to the same till other preachers are sent by Mr. Wesley and the brethren in conference? . . . To choose a committee of Assistants to transact the business that is now done by the General Assistant and the old preachers who came from Britain. (Baker 1976 : 99-100)⁷

All those present, English and American, were determined to continue with Methodism in America in its present form: as close to the British model as possible, with John Wesley as the head. The committee that was appointed to carry this task “consisted of three native Americans—Daniel Ruff, William Watters, and Philip Gatch—together with two British immigrants who had fully thrown in their lot with America—Edward Dromgoole and William Glendenning [sic].” (Baker 1976 : 100). If any steering rules were agreed upon at the Conference, none have been documented with the exception that the committee as a unit would act in place of Wesley’s General Assistant. That Asbury’s name was omitted from the committee is proof of “the

⁷ Question Eleven does not appear in the printed minutes.

unpopularity of the English preachers” (Tees 1940 : 21) amongst the general populous and in keeping with his intentions of withdrawing from public service. Watters (1806 : 56-57) offers his perspective:

There appearing no probability of the contests ending shortly, between this country and Great Britain; several of our European preachers, thought if an opportunity should offer, they would return to their relations and homes in the course of the year; and to provide against such an event, five of us, Gatch, Dromgoole, Ruff, Glendining [sic] and myself, were appointed as a committee, to act in the place of the general Assistant, in case they should all go before next conference.

It is true, as was the case with most Methodist preaches of that era, that these men who constituted the Committee of Five were not well educated or greatly experienced in Christian ministry in general, yet they took on the added strain of itinerancy among some very rough rural folk, who themselves were mostly uneducated. Some outsiders had previously criticized the general lack of training amongst the Methodist preachers and their rudimentary ways. Pilmore (1969 : 138) had previously criticized King, Williams and Strawbridge for their “heated imagination” and their lack of knowledge in “the word of God.” He claims to have constantly corrected the “wildness, shouting, and confusion, in the worship of God” even referring to the preachers as “ignorant fiery men.” Yet these brave and willing American souls, born or transplanted, did what they could, the best they could, educating themselves as they went, with remarkable results. “The American preachers entered the vacuum of power and took over . . . Methodism had become a thoroughly American Movement as a result of the necessities imposed by revolutionary conditions.” (Norwood 1974 : 88). A brief sketch of each committee member follows.

5.5.1 EDWARD DROMGOOLE

Edward Dromgoole came to America from Ireland in 1770 at the age of 19. A convert of Robert Strawbridge (Porter 1928 : 376), he was one of the earliest converts to Methodism in the city of Baltimore, (Moore 1884 : 77) and it was through his efforts that Strawbridge introduced Methodism to the Fredericktown community of Maryland. (Maser 1966 : 10). Dromgoole’s first appointment was to the Baltimore Circuit. In 1775, along with Shadford, Williams, Glendinning

and Lindsay, Dromgoole was appointed to the Brunswick Circuit which then doubled in membership from around eight hundred to over sixteen hundred.

In 1776 Dromgoole, along with two others, was sent to the newly formed Carolina Circuit, which boasted a membership of almost seven hundred. By the next conference they had over nine hundred in membership. Dromgoole was “possessed in a remarkable degree of the gift of oratory.” (Moore 1884 : 77). He continued to serve on various circuits in 1777 and 1778 but his name disappears from the minutes for five years, probably because he got married on March 7, 1777 to Miss. Walton, a convert of the revival on the Brunswick Circuit in 1775. In 1783 Dromgoole and Jesse Lee had a very successful period of ministry on a circuit in the northeastern region of North Carolina. (Moore 1884 : 78). Dromgoole continued to serve other circuits until 1786, when the minutes listed his name alongside those “who desist from traveling.” (Minutes 1983 : 58). This was the last time his name appeared in Methodist minutes. (Moore 1884 : 79).

The Dromgoole home was always hospitable to traveling preachers and Dromgoole, although located, often ventured into the surrounding area for occasional preaching appointments. Moore (1884 : 81) says “he was universally beloved by his contemporaries, and described by them as a strong preacher . . . He was the bosom friend of Bishop Asbury and Jesse Lee, and they always alluded to him in terms of the most endearing relation.”

Asbury made the following comments about Dromgoole. On June 8, 1780 he (I 1958 : 356) said, “Edward Dromgoole is a good preacher, but entangled with a family.” On July 2, 1780 Asbury (I 1958 : 363) said “Edward Dromgoole is hearty in good old Methodism; we have had great union.” Dromgoole fully embraced the American cause and gave many years of service to Methodism, while preaching circuits or being stationed with a family:

He died in 1836, leaving many descendants. His youngest son was a distinguished orator and political leader, and was for many years a leading member of Congress from Virginia. A grandson, Rev. Edward Dromgoole Sims, A.M., was for several years a professor in Randolph-Macon College, and in La Grange College, and in the University of Alabama. (Moore 1884 : 82)⁸

⁸ The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill proudly holds “The Dromgoole Papers” that consists of 1350 items from Edward Dromgoole, many other family members and associates.

5.5.2 **PHILIP GATCH**

American born Philip Gatch was admitted to the conference in 1774 and shared many parallels with William Watters in their early service to American Methodism. They came from the same general area of Maryland, were born in the same year, and were also converted in the same year. They began preaching within a few months of each other and at the 1774 Conference their joint presence represented the enormous yet untapped potential of American involvement in the cause of Methodism.

Gatch was converted under the ministry of Nathan Perigau, a convert of Strawbridge. (Burke 1984 : 140). He had on going health problems and seemed to have suffered an inordinate amount during the Revolution. He was married in January 1778, which, coupled with his health, was probably the reason for him eventually locating. He remained very active as a local preacher and became a successful farmer.⁹ He later served as a judge in Ohio for more than two decades. (Barclay 1949 : 64). When the southern Methodists chose separation due to the ordinance issue Philip Gatch was amongst “the most influential preachers in that separation in favor of the ordinances.” (Lee 1810 : 73). Gatch was later ordained and continued to serve Methodism in various capacities. Stevens (1864 : 380) offers the following summation of Gatch’s later life:

Gatch located his family on a humble farm in Powhattan County, Virginia, but continued to labor in the ministry as his health would allow. One of his friends, referring to this period of his retirement, records that "He generally preached twice on the Sabbath, sometimes from ten to fifteen miles distant, attended many funerals, frequently administered the ordinance of baptism and matrimony. Many became convicted and were converted through his instrumentality. His house was a retreat for Methodist preachers, and his company much desired by them. He stood high as a preacher among ministers of other denominations, as well as those of his own Church, and was beloved by all Christians."

5.5.3 **WILLIAM GLENDINNING**

William Glendinning immigrated to America and thus joined the American cause by remaining in the country through the war, contributing in some measure to Methodism, which began with his admittance to the itinerancy in 1775. He attended the famous Christmas Conference of 1784 but never received ordination. From the mid 1780’s Glendinning’s association with Methodism

⁹ Watters also suffered from health issues, was married, located and did some farming.

is a troubled one, in large part because Glendinning himself became a troubled individual. Asbury's journal and Clark's editorial comments of Asbury's journal offer a glimpse into the growing concerns associated with Glendinning's developing behavior.

In 1780 Asbury (I 1958 : 387) referred to Glendinning as a "good little man." At the regular 1784 Conference¹⁰ Glendinning apparently questioned Asbury's authority. "Our conference began, all in peace. William Glendenning [sic] had been devising a plan to lay me aside, or at least to abridge my powers. Mr. Wesley's letter settled the point, and all was happy." (Asbury I 1958 : 460). Then in 1790 Asbury's (I 1958 : 659) journal entry suggests that Glendinning had been developing some significant emotional and mental problems. "I had a large congregation at Newcastle, to whom I spoke . . . William Glendenning [sic] spoke after me: I am clear he is not right in his head or heart, and am therefore resolved he shall speak no more at my appointments." Clark (I 1958 : 345) says, "Glendenning [sic] . . . gradually grew more disputatious and erratic" and "William Glendenning [sic] had been one of the early preachers but had become a recalcitrant who later made severe attacks on Asbury and the episcopacy." (Clark I 1958 : 658).

In 1795 Glendinning published his autobiography where he is very candid on his mental and emotional problems, which seemed to have been initiated by various religious books he read that questioned the Trinity, God's origins and that promoted deistic theology. He says (1795 : 12) "my mind got more and more darkened, and I lost sight of my reconciled God, and all spiritual comforts departed from me. Thus darkened in my understanding, I became wretched in my soul." Glendinning (1795 : 22) claims to have been hounded by actual physical manifestations of the devil, which he described in the following way:

He appeared upward of five feet high, -round the top of his head there seemed a ridge; - some distance under the top of his head, there seemed a bulk, like a body, but bigger than any person; about 15 or 18 inches from the ground, there appeared something like legs, and, under them, feet; but no arms or thighs. The whole as black as any coal; only his mouth and eyes as red as blood. When he moved, it was as an armful of chains rattling together.

Bangs (1838 : 255) offers the following about Glendinning:

It seems that when a proposal was made for preachers to go to Nova Scotia, he was requested to volunteer in this service, to which, as he himself acknowledges, he objected with improper warmth, and thereby, as he supposed, grieved the Spirit, and soon fell into

¹⁰ Not to be confused with the Christmas Conference that took place later that same year.

a state of mental darkness, and finally into an alienation of mind . . . in 1792, he wrote to the conference, requesting to be readmitted into the traveling ministry but his request was not granted, because it was believed that he labored under mental derangement.

According to the Minutes (1983 : 58) Glendinning ceased traveling as an itinerant in 1786. There is no indication from Watters' writings, other early journals or the works of historians that Glendinning's service on the Committee of Five was problematic. His personal problems evidently developed after the period of the Committee's usefulness.

5.5.4 DANIEL RUFF

American born Daniel Ruff was admitted to the Methodist itinerancy at the conference in 1774. Asbury recorded in his journal how excited and determined Ruff was one evening as they shared a room together, when Ruff arrived at the realization that God had called him to preach. Asbury (I 1958 : 93) says, "so exceedingly was he agitated, that the bed shook under him, while he was relating the exercises of his mind." Wakeley (1858 : 104) says Ruff proved to be "wonderfully successful at winning souls to Christ." It was Ruff who later influenced Garrettson to become an itinerant preacher.

Of Ruff's work in Baltimore in 1774, Asbury (I 1958 : 109) said, "Honest, simple Daniel Ruff has been made a great blessing to these people. Such is the wisdom and power of God, that he hath wrought marvelously by this plain man, that no flesh may glory in his presence." Asbury (I 1958 : 115) again refers to Ruff as 'simple' when complementing his work in Maryland. "Simple Daniel Ruff has been an instrument of real and great good to the people in these parts." Asbury's use of the word simple when referring to Ruff could be a reference to his simple ways or his lack of education. Regardless, he was an effective preacher. Stevens (1864 : 206) referred to Ruff as "a man of sterling integrity, great simplicity, and remarkable usefulness." Ruff later became "the first American preacher appointed to Wesley Chapel"¹¹ (Wakeley 1858 : 104) in New York. Ruff desisted from traveling in 1781.

¹¹ At times referred to as the John Street Church.

5.5.5 WILLIAM WATTERS

The records do not indicate that Watters was specifically named to chair the Committee of Five, nor was its functions detailed. The five were charged to maintain the Methodist work the best they could. They were evidently expected to forge ahead, creating their own methodology when and where needed. They had no field operations manual to go by and Asbury's counsel was not always easily accessible. Though the historic data indicates that the committee as such did little corporate work, the preservation of the work during the war, even to the extent of growing in parts, is sufficient evidence that those charged with the said task, Watters especially, took their responsibility seriously and kept the movement steered in the right direction.

As has already been stated above, several of the colonies, in some fashion, required individuals to swear an allegiance to the colony and the country, or else leave the colony or face jail. In August of 1777, after his appointment to the Committee of Five, Watters was about to chair a quarterly meeting on the Brunswick Circuit when a magistrate interrupted their proceedings and required that those present from out-of-state swear allegiance. Watters had no qualms about taking the oath, nor did his Virginian co-worker, Andrew Yeargan, however, several Methodists present did sense a conviction against the oath. "As it respected myself, I had no hesitation in taking it; but the difficulty was, several of my brethren could not, and my taking it would make them the more suspected . . . I concluded that if I was to take the oath, he [the Magistrate] would overlook the others present," (Watters 1806 : 60-61), which in fact happened. This action of Watters satisfied the magistrate who promptly left the meeting, ignoring those who had not taken the oath.

The Revolutionary War was a nuisance that Watters and his colleagues simply had to deal with, which in fact turned out to be the catalyst that drew from Watters some of his most noteworthy characteristics. "Young Watters was . . . abundant in labors and patient in trials during this troubled period." (Stevens 1864 : 344). Still just in his mid twenties Watters did not hesitate to take a stand, or rise to a challenge, when the need presented itself. At times he showed himself to be a leader when confronted by civic officials. At other times he defended his right to preach and the accuracy of his theology when challenged by supposed seasoned and educated Anglican clergy. Then, when wisdom got the better of

valor, there were times when Watters simply retreated from confrontation. His cause was the Gospel of Christ and the Methodist movement: never himself and never his own rights.

Watters did not ignore the war, but he also did not get mired in it. His (1806 : 43) first mention of the conflict was while he was preaching on the Trenton Circuit in 1774. “The dreadful cloud that had been hanging over us continued to gather thicker and thicker, so that I was often bowed down before the God of the whole earth, fearing the evils which were coming on our sinful land.” Throughout he maintained the correct perspective on the issues the country faced, which he balanced with the task God had called him to. Where there was a need for judgment, Watters gave it. He (1806 : 50) once referred to the British as “unnatural oppressors” having a “cruel power.” One particular incident that Watters records, where he was forced to defend Methodism in light of a public attack by an Anglican minister, is indicative of what many of the preachers faced, particularly throughout the war.

In early 1776 Congress had called for a day of fasting on May 17 to be observed throughout the Colonies. Local legislatures backed the initiative, as did respective leaders. Clergy used the opportunity as a means of soliciting hearers, reiterating positions or seeking common ground with others. Watters endeavored to bridge the divide that existed between the Methodists and many Established clergy by attending a local Parson’s service. In this regard Watters exhibited a high degree of maturity and good will:

Congress having appointed a fast (as they frequently did during the war)¹² to implore the divine protection in our unhappy struggles with our mother country. I had appointed to preach on the occasion, and finding that the parson of the parish had an appointment at the same hour, I thought it better with the congregation, to attend his appointment, intending nothing thereby but friendship, and thinking that on the present occasion it became us to forget all smaller differences, and to unite in seeking the common interest. (Watters 1806 : 49)

Evidently the Parson was not as forthcoming. He took his text from the well-known passage on civil authority: Romans 13, and proceeded to launch an attack on all Methodists characterizing them as being subversive instruments of the British Crown. Lyerly (1998 : 21) described the Parson’s sermon as a “patriotic frenzy.” Watters (1806 : 49-50) explains:

His [the Parson’s] discourse consisted of two parts. First, of what he called an explanation of the text. Secondly, an attack on the Methodists. This was to me more unexpected, as I never had heard of his saying a word about us in public . . . We were all

¹² This note in parenthesis belongs to the author.

in general, and the preachers in particular, declared to be a set of Tories, under a cloak of religion. He said that the preachers were sent here by the English ministry to preach up passive obedience and non-resistance, that they pretended their desire for the salvation of the people, led them to travel and preach through the country; but money in his opinion was their real object. He concluded this part of his subject by declaring that he would, if at the helm of our national affairs, make our nasty stinking carcasses pay for our pretended scruples of conscience.

Commenting on the Parson's sermon, Lyerly (1998 : 22) said, "Perhaps under some suspicion himself as part of the king's church, and certainly under pressure because of Methodist successes, this parson appealed to popular opinion by raising the specter of English conspiracy." Determined not to ignore the inaccuracies Watters (1806 : 49) says, "I was glad I happened to be present to speak for myself." The young man then bravely stepped forward to take the opportunity to preach next, as the parson looked on. Watters (1806 : 51) offered the following justification for being willing to take on the Parson in such a public forum:

I observed, that in all accusations particularly those of a public nature, where there was no proof offered, (and that the parson had not pretended to offer any of any sort) they deserved no answer, except by silent contempt; yet as the present assertions were of so extraordinary a nature, I hoped I should be excused on the present occasion in acting in a different manner.

Watters thus proceeded to defend the movement he loved so dearly. First, Watters asserted that he was not a Tory and he challenged the parson to offer proof to the contrary. Watters then denied that the Methodists ever preached passive obedience to the Crown nor had they been sent by British officials to spread such ideas amongst the Americans. He (1806 : 52) said, "I do in the most unequivocal manner deny knowing anything about the Methodist preachers being sent by anyone but Jesus Christ, who hath said 'go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.'" Watters' final negation of the Parsons assertions was over money, to which Watters (1806 : 52) said, "The parson has also told you, 'that we preached for money.' Then I venture to say we preach for what we don't get. I cannot tell what could induce him to assert this, unless it is from his own motive in preaching." Lyerly (1998 : 22) says the Parson's accusation in this regard was "patently untrue and indicates a good deal of dissimulation on his part, considering how well off Anglican ministers were in comparison to their Wesleyan foes."

Watters (1806 : 52) concluded his sermon with a treatise on ministers and warfare that could have been the sentiment of most American Methodists of the time:

I concluded by observing, that though I did not think politics ought to be introduced into the sacred pulpit on any occasion, yet I did most seriously deny that there was one drop of Tory blood flowing through my veins. I firmly believed my business was to preach the gospel, and not to meddle with those public affairs, which were in much better hands, and in my opinion was unbecoming men of my profession.

“While he possessed a most gentle, affable, and forbearing spirit, he stood ever ready to defend the doctrines he preached and the people he served, and made wise and ready reply to every false accusation against Methodism.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 88). Watters and his fellow preachers were determined to preserve the organization, integrity and message of Methodism, after-all, they had been called to preach holiness and to reform the nation in the spiritual realm, not to take up arms in the physical realm.

5.6 A SINGLE FOCUS

Under the trying circumstances of attempting to lead a fledgling movement, enduring continual false accusations, suffering occasional bodily persecution, being constantly scrutinized by opponents and lacking more experienced leadership, some onlookers might very well have written the American Methodist movement off. Because of the departure or withdrawal of Wesley’s official representatives and the efforts by many American Methodists to distance themselves from some of Wesley’s ideology, Andrews (2000 : 55) observes that “by all appearances, the Wesleyan connection had ceased to exist in America.” Likewise, Hempton (2005 : 92) also speculates that to the observer, the prospects of Methodism surviving were not strong. He says, “trusted neither by Anglicans because of their enthusiasm and irregularities nor by American patriots because of Wesley’s well-published writings against the American colonial cause, American Methodists seemed to be a species in danger of extinction.”

If American Methodism’s survival was solely dependent on the close oversight of Wesley or his licensed appointees, then it would be accurate to suggest that the “Wesleyan connection” had ceased to exist. If, on the other hand, American Methodism during the Revolutionary War was a movement with ecclesiastical and paternal allegiance to John Wesley regardless of the proximity of either him or his appointees, the Wesleyan Connection was still very much alive,

even thriving in some parts of the troubled Eastern Atlantic Seaboard. This writer would argue that at no stage of the embryonic journey of early American Methodism, with the American preachers who had stepped forward to take the helm, was the movement in any danger of becoming extinct.

In the midst of the war, along with all of its accompanying hardships, the preachers were still preaching, sinners were still seeking and the flames of revival continued to burn in some areas of the land. Jarratt (1778 : 11) suggests that in some parts of Virginia where talk of war mingled with revival fervor, the revival won out. “The unhappy disputes between England and her colonies, which just before had ingrossed [sic] all our conversation, seemed now in most companies to be forgot, while things of far greater importance lay so near the heart.”

The Methodists marched and preached to a different drum: one that rang out with the Good News of eternal rewards and consequences, regardless of the outcome of earthly battles. Lyerly (1998 : 18) suggests that at times they used revolutionary fervor and “appropriated its rhetoric without coupling their movement to the rebellion” yet Watters (1806 : 70) said, “though a friend to my country, I left politics to those better qualified to defend and discuss them. Preaching was my business: to teach men how to live and to be prepared to die.” This reality is evidenced by what many Methodists did not say in their journals and letters. Details of even major events of the American War of Independence are conspicuously lacking. This is not because they did not care. They just preached and wrote about a different message. Watters and Asbury are typical in this regard and Lyerly (1998 : 193) says “In [Nelson] Reed’s journal the war rarely intrudes.” Hempton’s (2005 : 92-3) perspective on the role of the native preachers, the obstacles they faced, and the positive results they achieved is worth noting:

A new generation of predominantly native-born preachers . . . mostly from the Middle Atlantic states, gave the movement surprising impetus in the most unpromising of circumstances. During the war Methodist itinerant and local preachers were constantly under surveillance and were subject to official and popular harassment. Some were arrested and imprisoned for noncompliance with militia drafts, others were imprisoned or fined for refusing to take oaths of allegiance to newly formed state legislatures. Preachers were beaten, roughed up, tarred and feathered, and jeered for being unpatriotic and cowardly . . . The Methodist mission, deprived of leadership, exposed to ridicule, branded as unpatriotic, portrayed as unmanly, and hounded by officials, ought to have emerged from the war in a similar weakened position as the Episcopal Church from which it came. Yet something approaching the reverse was the case. The number of Methodist members enrolled in societies almost doubled, from around six thousand in 1778 to around twelve thousand near the end of the war in 1782.

“For some colonists, Methodist indifference to the [American] cause was a form of treason.” (Lyerly 1998 : 19). For the Methodists it was a matter of priorities. “Instead of preaching against monarchy or for the continental army, Methodists continued to preach of the need for salvation and holy living . . . they had a higher calling.” (Lyerly 1998 : 19). The native preachers did not hold to the same allegiances that their English leaders held to. Although they shared loyalty to the cause of Christ and to the Methodist movement as the vehicle for that cause, the American born preacher’s loyalties to the State, to Anglicanism, or even to Wesley for that matter, were not life adjusting pulls. The unbending pull was toward the Gospel of Christ, and nothing was going to dissuade them from it, King, country or Patriarch. Watters (1806 : 43) had said, “The Lord be praised for Christian friends; but keep me, O my God!-from suffering any to draw my heart from thee.”

5.7 LEADERSHIP AND EXPANSION

D. A. Watters (1898 : 107) suggests that since Asbury was “always where the preachers could reach him for advice ... the Committee for General Assistant was never needed” yet it did nonetheless operate, most notably at the 1778 Annual Conference, and in other capacities until Asbury reemerged. “With none of Wesley’s English preachers present, the men participating in the meeting felt their youth. Even William Watters and Philip Gatch, who had been appointed at Deer Creek to the Committee of Superintendence, were only twenty-seven years old.” (Connor 1970 : 97). Watters (1806 : 68-69) only offers a brief account of the conference and in typical humble fashion, he does not report that he was the presiding member, having been chosen to do so by his colleagues. Once again Watters’ (1806 : 68) mature perspective and determined focus is evident. “Having no old preachers with us, we were as orphans bereft of our spiritual parents, and though young and inexperienced to transact the business of conference, yet the Lord looked graciously upon us, and had the uppermost seats in all our hearts, and of course in our meeting.”

In addition to administering the regular business of the Conference, the most significant issue to be discussed had to do with the ordinances. Strawbridge had taken it upon himself more than ten years earlier to administer the ordinances, in spite of his lacking ordination. With the growing tensions between the Methodists and the Established Church the issue was becoming

more critical. The Deer Creek Conference in 1777 had laid over the issue a year for further discussion, which may have been an unwise abdication of responsibility on the part of the English preachers, since they knew that in all likelihood, they would not be present to help steer the discussion. The matter was too weighty and the potential ramifications too broad for the young members of the 1778 Conference to adequately deal with. Watters (1806 : 68-69) reports that the need for them to offer the sacraments “found many advocates. It was with considerable difficulty that a large majority was prevailed on to lay it over again, till the next conference, hoping that we should by then be able to see our way more clear in so important a change.”

The fact that the native preachers effectively convened the Conference in 1778 under Watters’ Chairmanship, and that they discussed, debated and stated their respective positions on the ordinance issue, yet were able to maturely seek the preservation of the movement over their own inclinations, is a testament to the fact that they took their charge extremely seriously. An unintended consequence of the nature of their deliberations was that John Wesley’s Episcopal hold on American Methodism, in some measure, was slipping away. The local preachers, who in a sense now owned American Methodism, and who “emerged rapidly as competent leaders” (Burke 1964 : 159) were increasingly determined to fashion the movement in a way that best suited the American scene rather than parrot the British plan. Barclay (1949 : 58) says, “the Conference marked a turning point in the history of American Methodism – the beginning of the end for Wesley’s administrative dominance.” Wesley had not sent any new missionaries to America in four years. His primary representatives had already returned to England. The next in line to represent Wesley to the Americans, Asbury, was in hiding. Wesley had no voice for the time being. American Methodism took a monumental step forward and proceeded without any of the above, and did it admirably with “William Watters . . . the administrative head of the Societies.” (Barclay 1949 : 58).

The war had clearly made the work of the Methodists “hazardous but not impossible.” (Andrews 2000 : 55). Under the leadership of Watters and his fellow committee members the work progressed rather well during the war and even grew in parts. In the fall of 1778 Watters exercised his responsibilities and undertook to investigate territory for the formation of new circuits. “I took a tour in company with my dear friend C. P____d¹³ through Prince William, Stafford, King George, Spottsylvania, and part of Hanover Counties, to see what prospect there

¹³ Caleb Pedicord

was of forming a circuit, or circuits through them.” (Watters 1806 : 70). Watters (1806 : 70) also reports on how the work was actually growing during the war years. “Yet it is not more astonishing than true, that the work continued to spread, in all those parts where we had preachers to labor, and I doubt whether, at any time before or since, the work has been more genuine among us, than it was through the war.” Watters’ leadership also required that he officiate at several Quarterly Meetings, which he willingly undertook to do, despite the harsh weather. “The severity of the Winter¹⁴ with the vast quantity of snow, and my having several quarterly meetings besides my own to attend, I was more exposed, and suffered more with the cold than ever I did any winter since:” (Watters 1806 : 78).

It is evident that, during the years of Mr. Asbury’s retirement, William Watters was foremost among the itinerants in opening up new territory and laying the foundations of the new ecclesiastical order, so soon to become the leading factor in American evangelism . . . being left alone with such helpers of his own countrymen as followed him in the itinerancy, he went heroically to the conquest, sustaining the movement in its most aggressive form. (D. A. Watters 1898 : 121-122)

Membership in the Methodist societies increased during this period in North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland and Delaware, but it decreased in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. (Norwood 1974 : 74). The lack of hold that the Anglicans failed to secure in the southern states helped to make the fields ripe for the Methodist harvest, particularly in Virginia, Delaware and Maryland. Key players in this southern growth are clearly Strawbridge, Pilmore, Shadford, Jarratt and Watters. Smith (1981 : 13) refers to the growth during the war as Methodism’s “burst of Revolutionary growth.” In fact, from the Methodist conference in 1775, until the conference of 1783, which was the year the peace treaty was signed between America and England, the membership in Methodist societies quadrupled.

By 1784 formal Methodists numbered around fifteen thousand, but as Barclay (1949 : 71) points out, this membership was very narrowly defined, only accounting for those who were in close connection with formal Methodist Societies. It does not account for the thousands of individuals who attended Methodist-preaching points and who ordinarily would have referred to themselves as Methodists in more peaceful times.

“By the end of the Revolution the native preachers were abundantly capable of carrying forward the work of Methodism in America:” (Sweet 1935 : 143).

¹⁴ Capitalization of Winter the authors.

Much greater credit is due this class of noble and self-sacrificing heroes, who bore aloft the banner of Christ during the years of fierce conflict for national independence, than the history of the Church has yet accorded them. But for them, all previously gained might have been lost. Through all, William Watters was instant in season and out of season, carrying with him the unmistakable evidence of his loyalty to the great cause of human redemption and to the cause of American independence also . . . so that the cause was not only saved from the havoc of war, but a most creditable advance made. (D. A. Watters 1898 : 85-86)

According to Burke (1964 : 169), Asbury viewed Watters as a man of “solid dependability.” His efforts through the war, although not momentous when compared to the greater heights that Methodism would rise to in successive years, were none the less, a significant factor that held American Methodism on course.

Alongside the growth, the war was also producing hardships amongst Methodist constituents. Watters (1806 : 69-70) mentioned that the war often checked the flame of revival and that uppermost on many people’s minds was the prospect that they or their loved ones “might be drafted, and sent into distant parts with other hardships that are concomitants of war and slaughter.” He (1806 : 70) also said that some of their “preachers and people were called to suffer in their persons, or property; but such instances were comparatively few, and their sufferings short.”

5.8 THE WAR’S END

News of the end of the war swept through the colonies in early 1783. Asbury reflected on the news with a sober realization that the end of hostilities between the two countries could be good for American Methodism: affording easier movement for the preachers and the lifting of antagonism toward Methodists. But Asbury (I 1958 : 440) also believed that the peace could tempt many of the preachers to abandon their callings and to seek a more comfortable life in “trade, and acquiring wealth.” Lee (1810 : 84) recounts how the years immediately following the war were very advantageous for Methodism:

We could go into all parts of the country without fear; and we soon began to enlarge our borders, and to preach in many places where we had not been before . . . during the war . . . many of the members of our societies had, through fear, necessity, or choice, moved into the back settlements, and into new parts of the country . . . they solicited us to come

among them . . . they were ready to receive us with open hands and willing hearts . . . the work greatly revived, and the heavenly flame of religion spread far and wide.

The war, rather than being American Methodism's downfall, actually helped to refine and shape the movement into what it became. The inexperience and youth of the American preachers was not a distraction. The new American nation, along with its spreading borders beyond the frontier, was their parish, and they were determined to shape it according to their perspective. Wesley's leadership and counsel would still be sought, but to some extent, it would prove to be incidental:

A generation of nervous apologists, made so by their founder's opposition to their country's cause and by his advocacy of passive nonresistance, emerged from the war determined to conquer a continent . . . If the Revolutionary War freed America from British control, it also cleansed Methodism from the trace elements of Anglican paternalism that would have hampered its progress in the New World. (Hempton 2005 : 93-94)

Back in April 1779, while the war raged on and while Asbury's movement and subsequent leadership was still mostly restricted to Delaware, "several of the preachers met with Asbury in the house of Judge Thomas White, Kent County, Delaware, and declared that Asbury should act as Wesley's assistant in America." (Godbold 1965 : 4). This meeting so constituted represented an irregular Conference since the regular Conference had not yet met, and was designated for a different location. Watters took it upon himself to attend the meeting, though he was not specifically invited to do so. His mission was to convince Asbury to attend the regularly appointed Annual Conference in Fluvanna, Virginia, or at the least, to attempt to ward off more harm being done to American Methodism than the Revolution ever did. The new conflict facing the movement was an internal one. Several preachers in the South were planning to assume the role of ordained preachers and potentially split the work. No other Methodist of the time, Asbury included, did as much as Watters did to prevent the internal revolution of ideology and practice from causing permanent damage to American Methodism. The Ordinance Schism will be dealt with next.

CHAPTER SIX

PEACEMAKER DURING THE ORDINANCE¹ SCHISM

Movements begin beyond public action in the inner life of people who are ill at ease with the way in which institutions and elites have affected their lives. Movements begin when uneasiness becomes a subjective revolution that cuts ties to the past and sets people free to create selves and institutions anew. (Richey 1993 : 17)

American Methodism in the late 1770's was clearly "ill at ease" with the status quo as it related to the administration of the sacraments. "It was not probable that things would continue long in such a disordered state" was Asbury's (I 1958 : 239) comment in 1777 because of the growing need for Methodists of all ranks to have better access to sacraments. The Methodist movement could not sustain the pace of growth they had achieved over the preceding ten years and expect to continue to rely on a dwindling Anglican clergy base, both numerically and relationally, to provide their thousands of members with baptism and the Lord's Supper. If Wesley, with his administrative genius, could not fix the problem, the spirited American preachers, somewhat infatuated with an air of inventive independent zeal, would certainly attempt to address it themselves. The potential effects of the Revolutionary War, with all of its accompanying challenges for American Methodism, paled in comparison with what the controversy over the sacraments threatened to do to the movement. In the midst of this turmoil rose an individual possessed with a determination to hold together what others were seemingly tearing apart: William Watters. This chapter will trace the origin of the sacrament problem back to Wesley's position on union with the Church of England, how Robert Strawbridge responded to the problem in America, and how American Methodist preachers eventually took sides on the issue, effectively splitting the movement. The chapter will then detail how Watters went to great lengths to serve as a peacemaker in his attempts to keep American Methodism together.

¹ Protestants understand sacraments to be 'means of grace' by which God ministers grace to His children through their participatory action in the sacrament and in return the Christian vows faithfulness, obedience and commitment to God. (Wiley 1943 : 155). Protestants generally recognize two Sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The term 'ordinances' cover a wider spectrum of church and personal activities through which God also administers His grace including; worship, preaching, teaching, prayer, fasting, Scripture reading and the sacraments. (Taylor 1983 : 376; See also Lee 1810 : 33, 36). When discussing the "ordinance schism" of 1779-1780, early Methodists used the terms sacrament and ordinance interchangeably, with the term ordinance most dominant. In like fashion, the two terms will be used interchangeably in this chapter.

6.1 WESLEY AND THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

John Wesley was determined not to create an independent ecclesiastical body separate from the Church of England: his brother Charles was even more adamant. The Minutes (Wesley VIII : 280) of the first Methodist Conference² in Britain, held in 1744, clearly set the priority that Wesley and those with him, were committed to unity with the Church of England. Because Wesley's lay "preachers were not ordained by the king's church, members were supposed to turn to the Anglican clergy for communion, baptism and marriages." (Lyerly 1998 : 17). In late 1745, in response to a challenge to "renounce the Church of England," (Wesley II : 4-6) Wesley felt compelled to defend the Methodist structure and polity, their use of lay preachers and their avowed position not to separate from the Mother-church. At the 1756 British Conference held in Bristol, with about fifty present, the union of the Methodists with the Anglicans was again confirmed, as it was on many other occasions. Wesley (II : 385) reports; "We then largely considered the necessity of keeping in the Church, and using the Clergy with tenderness; and there was no dissenting voice. God gave us all to be of one mind and of one judgment." "Methodism was a movement within the Established Church and Wesley continually reminded his preachers of that fact and of their dependence upon the Established Church ministers for the sacraments." (Sweet 1933 : 66). American Methodists followed the same plan.

Wesley had a dual litmus test for remaining tethered to the Anglican Church: if God continued to bless the Methodist work while they were so associated (VII : 175), and if no "sinful terms of communion were imposed upon them [by the church], we rejoice to continue therein." (VII : 208). Wesley later clarified what the above "sinful terms" could include: a Parish minister being wicked or if he preaches false doctrines. (VIII : 322). On repeated occasions through the years Wesley was obliged to either defend Methodism's determination to remain in union with the Anglican Church, or deny that they were not inevitably moving closer to separation.³ Within Wesley's ranks there were those who continually challenged him on both fronts. In 1769 Wesley (XIII : 241) once again stated that no separation would occur in his lifetime, but he also realized that such a separation may indeed occur after his death.⁴

² It could be said that English Methodism, although begun rudimentarily in the Halls of Oxford University in the 1720's, had its official beginning at the first official Conference in 1744.

³ See also Wesley XIII : 232-257.

⁴ See also Wesley XIII : 272-274.

6.2 AMERICAN METHODISM

Methodists in America endured similar scrutiny and accusations to those Wesley had in England, and they countered them with similar arguments. They were not a splinter group of Anglicanism, nor were they planning to eventually separate. They were merely a society within the church, desperately endeavoring to maintain the Gospel message of personal faith, salvation and holiness. Officially the Methodist societies were no more than “spiritual life groups within the Anglican Church.” (Hughes 1979 : 5). Supporting Anglican activities and relying on their parsons for the ordinances of baptism and communion was a clear sign to the general public that the Methodists were indeed associated with them. For the most part American Methodists patterned themselves after their older English counterpart: “sacraments in parish churches at the hands of priests of the Church of England and preaching and discipline in the Methodist societies.” (Smith 1981 : 14). The viability of such a relationship was, however, growing increasingly problematic.

It could be argued that Wesley, by default, actually created the situation his American children eventually faced in the late 1770’s. They were required to keep to the Methodist plan but the feasibility of it working as well as it had in England was growing more and more tenuous.

The inability for many American Methodists to receive the sacraments was compounded on many fronts. The Methodist preachers were not ordained, and therefore could not legitimately administer the sacraments themselves; as a result they relied on Anglican clergy to assist them. The war had caused many Anglican ministers to return to England. Those who remained were divided in their perspectives on Methodism. Most viewed the Methodists with disdain and subsequently would not assist them, while the minority who were sympathetic to the Methodists were also divided, but from the Methodist standpoint. Many Anglican clergy were, in the eyes of most Methodists, spiritually bankrupt and thereby not worthy to administer the ordinances. Subsequently the Methodists would not go to these individuals for assistance. “The open and shameful corruptions in the clergy of the Established Church had caused the people to refuse to receive the sacraments at their hands.” (Moore 1884 : 26). Burke (1964 : 177) agrees when he says, “many Methodists considered the lives and conversation of clergymen too worldly for them to be proper priests at the altar.” Those Anglican ministers who remained in America; who

were willing to help the Methodists; and to whom the Methodists were willing to go for assistance, were few and far between. The rapidly growing movement and the dangers the war imposed made an already difficult situation even harder to manage.

The best friend the Methodists had among Anglican priests was without doubt, the conservative and evangelical Devereux Jarratt. The common ground they found was not just their kinship in the church, but more significantly, their passion to preach salvation by faith and to offer sinners instantaneous conversion if they would simply repent and call on the Lord. Jarratt and the Methodists had for years cooperated marvellously in the Virginia revivals and many of the Methodists spoke fondly of him in their journals. Jarratt often went out of his way to assist the Methodists. “In order to remedy the complaint of the want of ordinances . . . I took long rides through several circuits, to baptize their children, administer the sacraments, etc. All which I did without fee or reward, and I continued so to do as long as the Methodists stood to their profession.” (Jarratt 1969 : 114). The ‘profession’ Jarratt alluded to was the intention of the Methodists to remain within the Anglican fold. “The rite of ordination, properly bestowed, was the seal of a preacher’s authority to administer the ordinances. Any infraction of this principle would constitute a serious breach of Methodist discipline” (Burke 1964 : 123) and it would gravely impact the relationships that existed between Methodists and cooperative Anglican clergy.

Despite his best efforts, it was impossible for Jarratt to service thousands of Methodists spread across the entire mid-Atlantic Seaboard. Almost everywhere the Methodist preachers went “they heard the cry ‘when will you give us the ordinances.’” (Connor 1970 : 100). From the outset of his very controversial service to Methodism, one maverick lay preacher heard the cry and proceeded to do something about it.

6.3 ROBERT STRAWBRIDGE

As was detailed in Chapter One, Strawbridge, a lay Methodist preacher from Ireland, settled in the Maryland area some time in the late 1750’s or early 1760’s, and soon began preaching, which is not out of the ordinary for transplant Methodists. His initiatives were rewarded with astounding success. The result of his work, and long-term benefit for American Methodism, cannot be over stated. Strawbridge’s reach was wide, and many who responded to his message

also followed him into the preaching ministry. The Strawbridge network of loyal Methodists spread rapidly across much of Maryland and Northern Virginia. Significant early American Methodists who were converted as a result of Strawbridge's work, direct or indirect, include William Watters, Freeborn Garrettson, Philip Gatch and Nelson Reed, to name but a few. For many years Strawbridge was the most significant figure in Maryland Methodist life.

The one aspect of Strawbridge's life that was not normative for Methodists was that he took it upon himself to administer the sacraments, in spite of not being ordained. Strawbridge, who left no personal records of his life or work, probably reasoned that since God had called him to preach and that his labours were producing significant results, then surely it was his duty to provide his followers with the sacraments, without the sanction of church or leader. Burke (1964 : 124) said "the right to administer the sacraments became a positive obsession to Strawbridge," and Baker (1976 : 38) said he "had no patience for red tape . . . and his concern for sacramental worship was far greater than his concern for ecclesiastical propriety:"

Robert Strawbridge was the central figure in an epochal spiritual work in the southern states of America before Wesley's itinerant preachers arrived, and that he remained the focal point of that movement long afterwards. In the process such strong personal loyalties were forged among his followers that when the English itinerants sought to bring Strawbridge into line with Wesley's practices they found themselves up against huge obstacles, and even reluctant compromises did not remove the danger of a major split between the northern conservative loyalists, led by Asbury, and the southern radical independents, led by Strawbridge. (Baker 1976 : 37-38)

Wesley's itinerants endeavored to persuade Strawbridge to desist from administering the sacraments while he in turn urged them to follow his lead, "Church or no Church, Wesley or no Wesley." (Baker 1976 : 38). In his defense, he served in areas where ordained clergy were many miles apart and for those eager for the ordinances at the hands of one equally as eager to offer them, "a man's ordination had little weight." (Burke 1964 : 123).

In spite of Strawbridge's apparent defiance of authority over the ordinance issue he considered himself a Methodist, and operated as one. He wanted to be a part of the Methodist movement and had contributed more to it in the late 1760's and early 1770's than any other single Methodist had done, for hundreds of miles. "For him the things that mattered were preaching the gospel, organizing Methodist societies, administering the sacraments to the people, and enlisting young men in the Methodist itinerancy." (Maser 1966 : 3). Clear evidence of his alliance with American Methodism was the fact that the meeting-houses he and his followers

erected were never intended for their exclusive use. They built them for Methodism, to be used by Methodists in perpetuity. Porter (1928 : 374) says Strawbridge and his followers “deeded [the buildings] to trustees to hold for John and Charles Wesley, and such persons as shall be ‘appointed at the yearly conference of the people called Methodists in England.’” Strawbridge was a committed Methodist, albeit an irregular one.

6.4 STRAWBRIDGE VERSUS ASBURY

Francis Asbury was always displeased by irregularity among the Methodist preachers or laity. He insisted on discipline in the conferences and in the societies. He expected the preachers to accept the rules adopted by the conference and to follow the instructions of their superiors. As Wesley’s newly appointed Assistant in the early 1770’s, charged with enforcing Wesleyan discipline, Asbury was determined to uphold the position of no-ordination-no-ordinance whereas his predecessor, Richard Boardman, had not. Boardman failed to rein Strawbridge in; as a result Asbury was handicapped from the outset. His first recorded challenge in this regard came at a quarterly meeting held on December 23, 1772. Barclay (1949 : 52) says this was the first business meeting of American Methodism of which any notable record exists. The meeting took place at the home of Joseph Presbury, a Strawbridge convert. Asbury’s struggle with the ordinance issue was compounded by the army of loyal supporters Strawbridge had. In typical Wesleyan style, questions were asked and answered. On the question of sacraments, Strawbridge and others pleaded for their continuance. Since Boardman had been willing to turn a blind eye, Asbury did not feel inclined to demand any different. He (I 1958 : 60) wrote, since “Boardman had given them their way at the quarterly meeting held here before . . . I was obliged to connive at some things for the sake of peace.”

The issue surfaced again at the first Conference in 1773, as it did many times thereafter. Asbury (I 1958 : 83) recorded their commitment not to administer the sacraments, coupled with a special dispensation allowed for Strawbridge alone, since he and his followers had been accustomed to the practice for so long. “No preacher in our connexion [sic] shall be permitted to administer the ordinances at this time; except Mr. Strawbridge, and he under the particular direction of the assistant.” At a Quarterly meeting later in 1773, Asbury (I 1958 : 88) noted the following; “After our temporal business was done, I read a part of our minutes, to see if brother

Strawbridge would conform; but he appeared to be inflexible.” On June 24, 1774, Asbury (I 1958 : 120) wrote the following in his Journal; "Mr. Strawbridge was very officious in administering the ordinances. What strange infatuation attends that man! Why will he run before Providence?" A year later, at the Quarterly meeting held at Mill Creek, Norfolk County, it appears as if Asbury's (I 1958 : 163) longsuffering is shortening: "Mr. Strawbridge discovered his independent principles, in objecting to our disciplines . . . it is likely self-sufficiency is the spring of all this." Asbury tried on other occasions to reason with Strawbridge and to dissuade him from his chosen course of action, but to no avail. "While Asbury was concerned about the authority and discipline of the church, Strawbridge was moved to direct action by the needs of the people." (Maser 1966 : 19).

Strawbridge was not appointed to a circuit in 1774, but was appointed to one for the last time in 1775, after which his name disappears from the minutes. If organized Methodism could not accommodate Strawbridge, he ministered where people would. "For about five years Strawbridge had asserted his customary independence by taking charge of the societies on Sam's Creek and at Bush Forest without recognizing any authority," (Clark I 1958 : 411) before dying in the summer of 1781 at the age of forty-eight. Asbury concluded that Strawbridge's death was an act of God's mercy since Strawbridge was destined, according to Asbury, to hurt the Gospel with his independent ways. He (I 1958 : 411) offered the following terse comments on September 3, 1781:

I visited the Bush chapel. The people here once left us to follow another:⁵ time was when the labours [sic] of their leader were made a blessing to them; but pride is a *busy* sin. He is now no more: upon the whole, I am inclined to think the Lord took him away in judgment, because he was in a way to do hurt to his cause; and that he saved him in mercy.

Strawbridge believed that his duty to administer the ordinances came from the people's need to receive them, coupled with the absence of those who were supposedly qualified to do so. It is therefore not clear if his "deep satisfaction" (Burke 1964 : 124) in administering the ordinances came from the actual service he rendered to the people or the authority he superseded:

There is no record that Strawbridge lost his temper or that he berated Rankin or Asbury; he simply went on administering the sacraments to the people as he had always done . . .

⁵ Meaning Strawbridge.

he purposed to follow his own conscience or judgment; he would not be subject to any restrictions by Wesley's assistants in regard to the administration of the ordinances . . . Strawbridge was greatly beloved both by the preachers and by his people. All the itinerants of the time who mention his name refer to him in the highest terms. (Maser 1966 : 17)

Some might argue that Strawbridge was driven by an inner compulsion to buck authority, with the ordinance issue merely serving as a convenient conduit. It needs to be noted that his non-normative practice began not in defiance of authority, but in the absence of it, long before any authoritative spokesperson for Methodism was in the area. When organized Methodism arrived in his neighborhood Strawbridge was not compelled to unite with it. The fact that he did indicates a willing submissive spirit, at least in some measure. "It is said that Strawbridge resented authority . . . In reality, Strawbridge was ahead of his time. He realized early what John Wesley came to see later; namely, that by some method the sacraments must be provided for the American Methodist." (Maser 1965 : 24). Kirby (1996 : 67) suggests that this initiative of Strawbridge's was the beginning of a "culture that would pervade American Methodism, in contrast to the English plan."

When the ordinance issue surfaced again within the ranks of Methodist preachers, it was amongst the Southerners. In contrast to the Strawbridge⁶ precedent, the Southern preachers from Virginia and North Carolina recognized the need for the ordinances to be administered by ordained clergy, however, in keeping with the Strawbridge example, they proceeded to circumvent normal channels for procedure and authority, and engineered their own circumstances that would justify the administration of the sacraments at their own hands.

6.5 THE GROWING PROBLEM IN THE SOUTH

In early April, 1780, Freeborn Garretson⁷ (1984 : 104) described the condition of Methodists as being, "in a great measure destitute of the ordinances." Who could and who could not administer the ordinances in the Methodist societies was the pressing issue. Wesley, Asbury and others said no one except those who had been officially ordained by an officially ordained Bishop could do

⁶ During the period of the Ordinance Schism Strawbridge was outside of formal Methodist activities as determined by the Annual Conference but he remained very active as a preacher until his death. See Maser 1983 : 49.

⁷ Garretson published part of his life story in 1791. It was republished in 1984 with editorial comments by R. D. Simpson. Quotations from Garretson are taken from the 1984 publication.

so. Some preachers, particularly in Virginia and Carolina disagreed. Jesse Lee, (1810 : 69) in his Short History of the Methodists, wrote; “Many of the traveling preachers . . . concluded, that if God had called them to preach, he had called them also to administer the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.” Lee (1810 : 69) also recognized why the Wesleyan plan of waiting on Anglican priests for the ordinances was not a practical solution on the American scene: “there being but few church ministers in that part of the country, and most part of them strangers to heart-felt religion.”

Norwood (1974 : 91) interestingly points out how the Methodists justifiably could have once again felt a sense of abandonment: first the English preachers left them, then their Patriarch, John Wesley, opposed their political struggle for self-determination, and then “the collapse of the Church of England,” particularly in Virginia and North Carolina, truly left the Methodists to fend for themselves. As a result American Methodists drew their battle lines over the issue and organized their camps. “The one advised that, until political affairs became more settled, nothing should be changed until Wesley could act. The other insisted that in the critical circumstances American Methodists should take action themselves to provide sacramental ordinances.” (Norwood 1974 : 91). The die for a serious conflict had been cast.

David Hempton (2005 : 8, 14) has a thought provoking perspective on what was possibly fueling the ordinance debate, or at least compounding its severity. The Methodist message was egalitarian in nature: sin had infected everyone, and therefore everyone was in need of salvation. In addition, Methodists preached a ‘priesthood-of-all-believers’ theology, which under girded their egalitarian message. In reaction many members of the upper class, particularly in Britain, resented the insinuation that they were equal in God’s eyes, to poor illiterate Methodists. Niebuhr (1929 : 61) says the rich found these egalitarian Methodist doctrines to be "repulsive . . . perpetually endeavouring [sic] to level all ranks.” In addition, the insistence on an autocratic leadership style, particularly in the Colonies, was in constant tension to both Methodist theology and the American spirit. Hempton (2005 : 8) says “discord within Methodism . . . was [in part] a product of an egalitarian message and an authoritarian ecclesiology.” He (2005 : 14) goes on to say “this tension between authoritarianism and religious conservatism on the one hand, and something approaching egalitarianism and religious radicalism on the other was evident wherever Methodism took root.” If all Methodists are equal in the eyes of God, and if all Methodists carry the responsibility laid upon them by virtue of the ‘priesthood-of-all-believers’

theology, then surely the next logical step is to exercise said authority by administering the sacraments. Wesleyan theology, by default, planted the seed that the American circumstances watered, and eventually nurtured until full-bloom:

So the issue of the ordinances became more and more intense among Methodist people and preachers. There were many among them who felt that there was no good reason why their own Methodist preachers, even though no hand of ordination had been laid upon them by a bishop, were not as worthy to administer the ordinances as the clergy of the Anglican Church. (Hughes 1979 : 6)

The issue was seriously discussed at the fifth annual Conference, which was held on May 20, 1777, at the preaching house of William Watters' eldest brother at Deer Creek, Maryland. Watters (1806 : 57) recorded some of the discussion:

It was also submitted to the consideration of this conference, whether in our present situation, of having but, few ministers left in many of our Parishes, to administer the ordinances of Baptism, and the Lord's supper, we should not administer them ourselves, for as yet we had not the ordinances among us, but were dependent on other denominations for them. Some received them from and communed with the Presbyterians, but the greater part with the Church of England. In fact we considered ourselves at this time as belonging to the Church of England . . . after much conversation on the subject, it was unanimously agreed to lay it over for the determination of the next conference, to be held in Leesburg.

Smith (1968 : 4) says, "Thomas Rankin persuaded them to delay action." The matter surfaced again at the Leesburg Conference in 1778 where the administration of the ordinances at the hands of the Methodist preachers "found many advocates" (Watters 1806 : 68) but the conference decided, "with considerable difficulty," (Watters 1806 : 68) to table the matter once again. Those who argued in favor of offering and administering the rites of baptism and communion to their constituencies were growing. "They also saw no reason why they should not have ordination. Matters were rapidly coming to a head." (Smith 1968 : 4).

6.6 THE SCHISM

"During 1778 the patience of Virginia Methodists had been running out. They had waited long for action that would make available to them the sacraments of the church." (Barclay 1949 : 62). Sympathetic ordained Anglican priests such as Devereux Jarratt could not keep up with the demand for ordinances by the rapidly growing Methodists. Many Anglican churches were

themselves without priests and consequently were also without the sacraments. The issue demanded a resolution. Methodism's founder and leader, John Wesley, was thousands of miles away, besides being somewhat emotionally and administratively detached from American Methodism because of the war. Asbury, Wesley's next in line, was restricted to the northern mid-Atlantic area. As a result, the Southern preachers took matters into their own hands. If America as a nation could cut its English apron strings and forge ahead, then why could the local Methodists not do the same? Armstrong (1907 : 45) refers to what followed as "the severest test" for early American Methodism.

6.6.1 THE NORTHERN CONFERENCE

The 1779 conference had been scheduled the year before to meet on May 18, at the Brokenback Church in Fluvanna County, Virginia. Although largely confined to Delaware since early 1778, Asbury was not out of touch with the state of the Societies in the south. He had strong suspicions that the Methodist preachers from Virginia and North Carolina were intent on resolving the ordinance problem themselves. For apparent safety reasons, but more in response to the Southern initiative, Asbury called a special conference to convene on April 28, 1779, at the home of Judge White, where he was stationed. In a controversial move, Asbury's conference was by invitation only.

Opinions are varied as to the legality of the Conference. In possible sarcasm Watters (1806 : 73) referred to the meeting as a "little conference."⁸ Lee (1810 : 67) kindly calls it a "preparatory conference." Bangs (1838 : 128) concluded that it was the regular Conference and that "their acts and doings are to be considered valid" simply because Asbury presided over it. In contrast Buckley (1912 : 25) said "no one had any legal right to call that Conference." D. A. Watters (1898 : 123) saw the Conference as "an opposition conference." Norwood (1974 : 91) believed that the Northern Conference was in fact the irregular conference but that its convening was understandable because the war prevented many preachers from traveling. Richey (2001 : 24) understood that the Northern Conference, although supposedly convened for Asbury's safety and convenience, was "in a number of respects . . . the schismatic affair." Watters (1806 : 73)

⁸ It needs to be noted that Rankin also often referred to the Conferences as "little," so Watters comments may not have been intended to be a slight.

reported that many of the Southern preachers felt the Northern Conference “had been an illegal conference” and that the true motive for it being called was “to keep as many of the Northern preachers from [the Southern] conference as possible, lest they should join with them in adopting the ordinances.” Baker (1976 : 102) agrees when he stated that the Southerners saw the Northern Conference “as a conspiracy to defeat their position on the sacramental issue.”

It is perplexing why Asbury did not invite Watters, the current leader of American Methodism and the chairman of the previous year’s conference. It is possible that Asbury had concluded Watters had thrown his lot in with the Southern preachers and was one with them ideologically on the ordinance issue. This conclusion, however, does not hold up because when Asbury addressed the Southern leaders on this issue he excluded Watters. (Asbury I 1958 : 300). Watters was perceived by many as being either neutral on the issue, or wanting to possibly play both sides. These erroneous judgments of Watters’ intentions, the apparent effort to exclude him from the Northern Conference and ongoing health problems did not deter Watters’ determination to do all he could to hold together that which he had committed his life to promote. As a result, Watters decided to attend the Northern Conference. His (1806 : 72-73) circumstances at the time and his main objective are clear:

I had no notice sent me, and was in a very weak state of health from a bowel complaint, with which I had, for two months been afflicted. Yet I determined if possible to get there. One of my objects in attending this meeting was to get Mr. Asbury to attend the regularly appointed conference to be held the 18th May, 1779, at the Brokenback Church, Fluvanna County, Virginia.

William Watters . . . was fully satisfied that a number of them [Southern preachers] were determined to adopt a plan for administering the sacraments, and that a division would take place if this plan was adopted . . . Because he felt so deeply on the subject, he resolved to use every means in his power to prevent division. (Connor 1970 : 100)

The Conference conducted business as usual, which included the examination and stationing of preachers and the commitment to continue in the current plan, which meant the ordinance issue remained unresolved. In addition, the collective preachers formally acknowledged Asbury as their leader. Most significantly from Watters perspective was his inability to persuade Asbury to attend the Southern Conference.

The severity that a possible split represented for Methodism was not lost on Asbury, although his musings in his journal do not initially reflect deep concern over the issue. At the

conclusion of the Northern Conference, on April 28, 1779, Asbury (I 1958 : 300) simply wrote “we had great reason to fear that our brethren to the southward were in danger of separating from us . . . the consequences may be bad.”

Neither Asbury, nor any of the other preachers who attended the Northern Conference, agreed to attend the regularly scheduled Conference in Virginia. Watters does not condemn Asbury’s decision, sighting the tensions of war and the danger of Asbury traveling into Virginia as the primary reason, in spite of the fact, according to Connor, (1970 : 104), the “out-of-the-way place [for the conference] was probably chosen because of the dangers of war nearer the coast.”⁹

On a somewhat positive note, and as a clear statement of the Northern preachers’ confidence in the mature peacemaking abilities of Watters, they asked him to represent them at the Southern Conference and to deliver to their leaders letters from Asbury, in which they made it clear that they were unbending in their commitment to the original plan. There had been no Southern preachers at the Northern Conference.

6.6.2 THE SOUTHERN CONFERENCE

The regularly scheduled Conference was probably presided over by Philip Gatch.¹⁰ Burke (1964 : 125) referred to Gatch as “one of Strawbridge’s finest young leaders.” The Conference convened at the time and place determined previously, where Watters presented to them Asbury’s letters and the collective urging of the Northerners for the Southerners not to take it upon themselves to administer the ordinances. Watters also “entreated them to delay their decision for more mature deliberation, because of the disastrous consequences of a final separation.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 124). Evidently Asbury’s (I 1958 : 300) “soft, healing epistle” and Watters imploring did not suffice. The Southerners refused to hold off on their plans to remedy the ordinance problem. In addition, Baker (1976 : 102) states they also “refused to endorse the Northern proposition that, in succession to Rankin, Asbury should be regarded as ‘General Assistant in America.’” Watters (1806 : 73) sadly reported the decision and

⁹ Fluvanna County is virtually in the middle of the state of Virginia: About ninety miles from the coast and about seventy miles south-west of Washington D.C. It would have been out of the way of much of the battles in the area, but understandably not totally isolated from them.

¹⁰ See Barclay (1949 : 64) and Norwood (1974 : 91) for opinion on Gatch presiding at the Southern Conference.

actions taken by the Southerners: “After much loving talk on the subject all but a few determined on appointing a committee to ordain each other and then all the rest.”

The deed was done. In contrast to the normative order for ordination as being Episcopal, through a duly ordained and appointed bishop, the preachers formed a committee, or Presbytery. They then proceed to ordain themselves and then others, thereby supposedly qualifying themselves to administer the sacraments, and thus solving the problem. After years of being told to tow the traditional Methodist line, the Southern preachers set their own course. The obvious consequence was that American Methodism was fragmented with a segment of the once united body essentially becoming an independent self-perpetuating ecclesiastical entity, albeit unconventionally. Smith (1981 : 15-16) says “the preachers in Virginia and North Carolina determined upon a novel solution to their difficulty . . . The decision precipitated a virtual schism in American Methodism.”

Gatch (1854 : 67-68) offered the understandable justification for the action of the conference with the following:

What are our reasons for taking up the administration of the ordinances among us?
 Answer. Because the Episcopal Establishment is now dissolved, and therefore in almost all our circuits the members are without the ordinances.¹¹

The dissolving of the “Episcopal Establishment” in America, as Gatch saw it, created the existence of several negative factors, that all worked in tandem to compound the dilemma they faced. They were cut off from the leadership of Wesley and Asbury; all other Methodist English preachers had left; the Anglican preachers who remained were mostly “irregular in their lives and not evangelical in their preaching;” (Connor 1970 : 105), subsequently untold Methodists were not baptized and remained “destitute of the Lord's Supper.” (Connor 1970 : 105). Moreover, as Connor points out and the preachers at that Conference reasoned, since God had already used them in the saving of a multitude of souls, then surely He has also given to them the authority to administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Even if these preachers were offered ordination through regular channels within the Church of England, they would not have accepted it, because it would have required them, by British law, to swear allegiance to the King. After the Revolution this prospect became a moot point.

¹¹ The official minutes do not include this Question

Historian of early American Methodism, Russell Richey (2001 : 25), offers the following perspective on the significance of the Southern action:

Recognizing the Episcopal Establishment as dissolved by the Revolution, it adopted measures through and by which the necessary rites and offices of a Christian church might be provided for the Methodist faithful. In particular, it conferred to a committee of four, elected by the preachers and listed by name, the authority that had been vested in Wesley or his general assistant—legislative and administrative authority — including presumably Wesley's power to appoint. To a presbytery, similarly constituted and composed of the same four individuals, it transmitted the right to administer the sacraments, to ordain, and to determine who else should receive sacramental authority. The preachers undertook these acts, of course, without the confirming episcopal touch or that of any regularly ordained person. It was, so to speak, a fresh start of the Christian church, contravening Wesley's wish and precept and implicitly discounting the historic succession.

Richey (2001 : 24) also says that historians have generally characterized the actions of the Southern preachers as a “precipitous declaration of independence and impatience with John Wesley’s inaction on American requests for enabling recognition.” Norwood (1974 : 91) believed that the Southern Conference, although regular in their assembly, was irregular in their business, while other historians have concluded that the Southerners did what they believed was necessary under the circumstances and were therefore justified in their actions. The accusation that they were guilty of purposely orchestrating a schism would therefore appear to be unwarranted. Buckley (1912 : 31) says “the more closely this situation is studied the more clearly it appears that those brethren are entitled to an exalted place in the pantheon of Methodist history.”

Naturally those from other ecclesiastical bodies who had endeavored to support the Methodists were offended at the actions of the Southerners. “Jarratt was strongly opposed to the administration of the sacraments by the unordained Methodist preachers, and when at the Fluvanna Conference, in 1779, they determined to assume that function, Jarratt was alienated.” (Sweet 1935 : 42).

At the conclusion of business in Virginia, having failed to convince the Southerners to refrain from continuing in their predetermined course of action, Watters left the conference, but not alone. He (1806 : 73) reports that a “few who did not agree to what was done, who were not confined by families, came in company with me, and took their stations more to the north.” Du Bose (1916 : 590) mistakenly believes that Watters “separated himself from the Virginia preachers when they insisted on the administration of the sacraments. Aligning himself with

Asbury in the ‘little’ or protesting Conference in 1779.” This is not true. Watters did not purposely separate himself from either of the factions. He endeavored to remain in unity with both groups, with the intent to serve as a bridge between the two polarized parties, in the hope that his actions would lead not only to a resolution, but also to full reconciliation. As to the split in American Methodism, it seems evident that Watters did not approve of the Southerners’ initiative, but with regards to the ordinances, he had no strong opinion on either front, not because he lacked the courage to take a particular stand or because he mentally failed to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion on the issue: Watters favored the unity of Methodism above his personal conviction about who could and who could not administer the ordinances. He was fully determined to accommodate himself to either view, if unity could be maintained. Watters (1806 : 81) later said that if all “agreed to the administering the ordinances, I should have had no objection.” This bipartisan attitude of Watters and his considerable efforts to maintain peace are evident in the fact that he was the only individual to attend both conferences in 1779 and the only preacher to be formally appointed by both Conferences.

“Watters went away with a heavy heart, deeply disturbed at” (Barclay 1949 : 65) what he had witnessed at both conferences. Watters’ (1806 : 73) reflections on the schism may be betraying the heart of an idealist when he felt the Southern preachers were “little concerned, at appearance, at what to me was one of the greatest matters in the world.” If Asbury was equally as disturbed at these proceedings as Watters was, he did not show it. His (I 1958 : 304) reflection about the issue shows somewhat of a nonchalant attitude: “I received the minutes of the Virginia Conference, by which I learned the preachers there have been effecting a lame separation from the Episcopal Church, that will last about one year. I pity them: Satan has a desire to have us, that he may sift us like wheat.”

“In the year that followed they [The Southerners] went to their assigned parishes and administered the sacraments to their own people,” (Hughes 1979 : 8), but not all Methodists in the South warmed to the new and irregular status of their preachers, even though it meant they could now receive the sacraments more frequently. Buckley (1912 : 26) points out that there was “a division of sentiment even in the South, for some of those who had been Methodists from the beginning and had been trained to regard themselves as members of the Church of England, would not commune with them.” When the Minutes of the Fluvanna Conference were eventually

published, Connor (1970 : 109) says, “they were not complete — all portions dealing with the sacramental controversy were carefully deleted.”

6.7 WILLIAM WATTERS’ SPIRIT

Watters had a firm but tender spirit. He could not be easily swayed or intimidated by popular opinion, while he consistently responded to his detractors with grace and calm. Maybe his disposition was too serious at times, even thinking that laughing and joking was not becoming a Christian, especially not a preacher: “I do confess that lightness and trifling on any occasion ill-becomes a Christian, and especially a preacher of the gospel. Let others plead the innocence or usefulness of levity: I cannot.” (Watters 1806 : 41).

Watters stood alone as peacemaker recognizing the magnitude of what had taken place. “At this early juncture, when the Methodist movement was still in infancy, not yet even an organized church, a division was taking place which might be irreparable.” (Norwood 1974 : 92). The Northern group rigidly held to the original plan inexorably awaiting a possible resolution which to all concerned, was yet unknown. The Southerners had, in the face of very challenging unalterable circumstances, bent the rules to resolve a critical dilemma. “Between the two [groups] stood William Watters concentrating on the all-important matter of unity.” (Blakemore 1951 : 7).

It is beneficial at this stage to attempt a glimpse into the heart of Watters so that a fuller understanding of his deep conviction on the ordinance issue, and how heavily it weighed on his thoughts, can be better appreciated. His (1806 : 71-72) reflections follow:

From my particular knowledge of all the preachers, I foresaw what would be the consequences of the subject of the ordinances which had been so warmly debated the two preceding conferences, and which I was fully satisfied a number of them were determined to adopt at the ensuing conference, though it were at the expense of an entire division. My great concern was not whether we should or should not adopt them; but on account of the division that I was satisfied would take place at their being adopted. I could freely and without hesitation have agreed either way to have prevented what I considered one of the greatest evils that could befall us. This important matter lay with solemn weight day and night on my mind and caused me many sleepless hours. Nothing to me, appeared more formidable, and leading to more terrible consequences than introducing unscriptural doctrines into, or dividing, the Church of Christ. I finally came to a determination to endeavor by every means in my power to prevent a division: or if that could not be done, to stand in the gap as long as possible. I had no sooner come to this determination than

the peace and witness I felt within fully satisfied me that I was on the ground on which the Lord set me, and that through his grace neither friends nor foes, rough nor smooth usage, should prevent me from endeavoring to hold those together, whom God had joined.

Standing in the gap of the two factions inevitably meant that Watters raised the suspicions of members from either side. “I had by several leading characters, on both sides been suspected of leaning to the opposite,” (1806 : 81), but, as Harmon (1974 : 2471) states, “on the whole he kept the good will of both groups.” D. A. Watters (1898 : 169) rightly points out that “perhaps the chief element of his character was that of peacemaker. He could not endure the thought of strife and divisions among his brethren.”

Watters’ peacemaking skills and maturity were obviously evident to the Methodist leadership early in his service as an itinerant. As noted in Chapter Two, just two years after commencing service for Methodism, Rankin moved Watters from the Trenton Circuit to the Chester Circuit to bring some order to “a considerable division in one of our societies.” (Watters 1806 : 43). Watters (1806 : 43-44) refers to the unidentified perpetrator of the division, as “A. R—s” and as “blundering . . . an impostor . . . poor deluded.” Within just a short period, and with obvious success, Watters reported that several members of the society “who had broken off returned.” (1806 : 44).

There are obviously inherent risks for those who take on the mantle of peacemaker. History has borne witness to some disastrous examples where efforts at maintaining peace were made at virtually all cost. Neville Chamberlain and the rise of Nazism in Europe is just one example. In writing on the inability of early Methodists to collectively oppose slavery Stein (1984 : 37) says the Methodists “chose instead, like so many before and after them, to make church unity and growth higher goals than a sharp confrontation of entrenched evil.” Was this Watters’ attitude? Were the intentions and actions of the Southern Methodists an example of ‘entrenched evil,’ which Watters was willing to overlook in favor of the ‘higher goal’ of unity? Was Watters more concerned with unity than obedience and purity? Was Watters endeavoring to seek peace at all costs?

Watters was very obviously a determined peacemaker who hoped that peace would prevail as much as possible. Yet Watters has also clearly demonstrated that he never sought peace at all costs. His exchange with the Anglican Parson, as detailed in Chapter Five, is an

example in point. If conflict was necessary to ensure that justice and righteousness prevailed, then Watters was prepared to deal with it. If an issue was of such a nature that compromise could be reached and conflict avoided, Watters would likewise seek such an end. Wisdom demanded that Watters be able to recognize the difference. To Watters the ordinance issue was not a ‘hell or heaven’ matter. To him the greater need was peace and unity. The schism that had been created was not so wide that reasoning, prayer and patience could not be employed in an attempt to bridge the gap. Watters could not and would not be a passive or apathetic observer.

It perplexed Watters immeasurably, to the point of emotional pain, how it was that, from all appearances, he was the only one bearing the weight of the schism. He (1806 : 73) says; “I . . . could not but wonder at seeing some of the best men that I ever knew so little concerned, to appearance, at what to me was one of the greatest matters in the world.” Methodism to Watters was one of the most significant aspects of his life. As a young man he had joined the movement as a lifetime pursuit. He had early forsaken all, even a widowed mother twice over, to travel under the umbrella of Methodism and to give his life for the cause. His body was already showing serious signs of neglect because of the physical hardship he was enduring, in the name of Methodism. Watters had no other life. He wanted no other life. He could not, with a clear conscience before God or his fellow Circuit Riders, fully embrace either side, nor could he ignore the division that had resulted. “The gentle forbearing and peace-loving characteristics of . . . Watters are marked traits of his life.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 67).

6.8 THE 1780 CONFERENCES

In April of 1780, with the war still raging and Asbury¹² still in semi-isolation, two of the preachers from the Southern faction, Philip Gatch and Reuben Ellis, with an ‘olive branch’ in hand, attended the Northern Baltimore Conference. They were hoping “to see if any thing could be done to prevent a total disunion, for they did not wish that to be the case.” (Watters 1806 : 79). Asbury was also preparing an attempt at mending the division. Two days before the conference met he (I 1958 : 346) wrote that he “spent some time in private, and prepared some

¹² Clark (I 1958 : 346) notes that Asbury had taken Delaware citizenship in July 1779, which would have obviously eased his movement within the Colony, but not necessarily in Maryland or Virginia.

conditions for a partial reconciliation, in hopes to bring on a real one in Virginia . . . I hope things will be made easy.”

The Conference commenced on April 25 and continued for three days. Watters and Asbury both offer specifics on the deliberations. The Virginia delegation presented a letter of recommendation, which was rejected. The Southerners also noted that Watters was the only preacher not from their area, who had “treated them with affection and tenderness.” (Watters 1806 : 79). Asbury (I 1958 : 347) offered the Southerners a five-fold proposal aimed at union.

- I. That they should ordain no more.
- II. That they should come no farther than Hanover circuit.¹³
- III. We should have our delegates in their conference.
- IV. That they should not presume to administer the ordinances where there is a decent Episcopal minister.¹⁴
- V. To have a union conference.

Asbury says his conditions were not acceptable to Gatch and Ellis and that a lengthy debate ensued, after which Asbury (I 1958 : 347) offered another proposal: “A suspension of the ordinances for one year, and so cancel all our grievances, and be one.” The Southerners warmed to this proposal and agreed to take it to their Conference, which Watters, Garretson¹⁵ and Asbury were appointed to attend.¹⁶ Watters (1806 : 80) believed that the trip “would be of little consequence” if the Southerners refused to desist from administering the ordinances. Just five days before the Southern Conference began Asbury (I 1958 : 348) wrote; “I go with a heavy heart . . . Lord give me wisdom.” Three days later, while still en route, Asbury (I 1958 : 349) wrote; “I have prepared some papers for the conference, and expect trouble, but grace is almighty; hitherto hath the Lord helped me.”

The preachers met in the evening of May 8, 1780 at Manakintown, Powhatan County, Virginia, but according to Asbury’s (I 1958 : 349) account, the Conference did not formally start until the following day. During the evening fellowship on May 8, Asbury, Garretson and Watters were all individually in conversation with members of the Southern group. Asbury (I 1958 : 349) recorded that John Dickins, who was one of the leaders of the Southern Methodists, was opposed

¹³ This may have been a harsh condition since Hanover was far south of the Virginia-Maryland border.

¹⁴ This was obviously a compromise from forbidding the ordinances entirely.

¹⁵ That Garretson had “played a key role in mediating a dispute regarding the administration of the sacraments” (Kirby 1996 : 300) may be an overstatement but his presence and involvement was certainly a significantly positive factor.

¹⁶ Edward Dromgoole joined the Northern delegation on the way. (Hughes 1979 : 9).

to American Methodism remaining tied to the Episcopal Church and that the men Garretson and Watters spoke to were “inflexible.”

As the Conference got on its way, Asbury was accorded due respect with an opportunity to present his case followed by an invitation to preach, and although the conference deliberations with the Southern Methodists was cordial, both sides were unmoved in their stance. Both sides desired what was best for the cause of the Gospel and both believed they pursued it, yet their paths were taking diverging courses. It is evident that hearts from both sides ached with the long-term prospects of what further division would mean. Garretson (1984 : 104) said “on both sides it was painful to part.” “The breach widens, and the danger becomes more threatening. Like a brittle thread, the strained relation existing between the two parties seems ready to break.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 125-126).

The Southerners had evidently conferred amongst themselves about Asbury’s counter proposal at the Baltimore Conference, and had decided not to accept it. Watters (1806 : 80) says, “we had a great deal of loving conversation with many tears; but I saw no bitterness, no shyness, no judging each other. We wept, and prayed, and sobbed, but neither would agree to the other's terms.” Watters (1806 : 80) also adds that an additional argument used by the Southerners was that the Lord had greatly blessed their ministries over the past year. They seemed to equate their success while administering the ordinances as a divine sanction on their actions.

After extended debate and some private maneuvering, Asbury’s proposals were once again rejected. The Northern delegates, with very heavy hearts, prepared to leave the following morning, having accomplished nothing. Asbury says this episode was “the heaviest cloud I ever felt in America.” (I 1958 : 350).

6.9 PRAYER AND REASON PREVAIL

During the night of May 10, 1780, Watters and Garretson had spent a season in prayer in the very room where the conference had met that day. Likewise, Asbury (I 1958 : 350) had “been praying, as with a broken heart, in the house we went to lodge at.” The following morning, while attempting to bid the Conference farewell the Northerners were presented with a proposal. Asbury with obvious joy simply states that a resolution had been reached. Watters’ (1806 : 80-81) account is most revealing:

After waiting two days, and all hopes failing of any accommodation taking place, we had fixed on starting back early in the morning but late in the evening it was proposed by one of their own party in conference, (none of the others being present) that there should be a suspension of the ordinances for the present year, and that our circumstances should be laid before Mr. Wesley¹⁷ and his advice solicited in the business; also that Mr. Asbury should be requested to ride through the different circuits and superintend the work at large. The proposal in a few minutes took with all but a few. In the morning instead of coming off in despair of any remedy, we were invited to take our seats again in conference, where with great rejoicings and praises to God, we on both sides heartily agreed to the above accommodation.

Jesse Lee (1810 : 74) says that some of the Southern preachers gave up their ordination reluctantly. After the proposal was accepted Watters was invited to preach, thus being the first preacher to address the newly united body of American Methodism in such a fashion. This action of the unified brethren further illustrates the high respect that Watters commanded amongst his colleagues, even in dispute. "It is clear that Mr. Watters acted as peacemaker in this unpleasant affair; and that a union was effected and peace restored a little later was very largely due to his unceasing efforts, and could scarcely have been effected without him." (D. A. Watters 1898 : 125). Watters' "interpretation [of the ordinance issue] was statesmanlike and Christian. One cannot but compare the patient, careful, wise and Christian manner in which he proceeded with that of others," (Blakemore 1951 : 5). Asbury (I 1958 : 350) recorded the following:

Surely the hand of God has been greatly seen in all this: there might have been twenty promising preachers, and three thousand people, seriously affected by this separation; but the Lord would not suffer this; we then had preaching by brother Watters on, "Come thou with us, and we will do thee good;" afterward we had a love feast; preachers and people wept, prayed, and talked, so that the spirit of dissension was powerfully weakened, and I hoped it would never take place again.

"The tears and rejoicing that followed showed how deeply everyone had feared the possibility of a division within their ranks." (Hughes 1979 : 9). "The breach was healed, and the Conference adjourned with great rejoicing to meet together as a united band a year later." (Barclay 1949 : 68). Watters (1806 : 81) recorded his elation at the outcome in the following way:

¹⁷ Garretson (1984 : 104) confirms that the parties agreed to seek a resolution from Wesley. He states that the Southerners agreed to a suspension of the ordinances, "till the founder of our society, Mr John Wesley, could be consulted."

I could not but say it is of the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes. I knew of nothing upon earth that could have given me more real consolation, and could not but be heartily thankful for the stand I had taken, and the part I had acted during the whole contest . . . We now had every reason to believe that every thing would end well: that the evils which had actually attended our partial division, would make us more cautious how we should entertain one thought of taking any step that should have the least tendency to so great an evil.

“Thus happily ended the first great threat to American Methodist unity . . . if it had not been healed at the time, it would doubtless have created a permanent division and seriously weakened the impact Methodists have made on America.” (Sweet 1955 : 85).

For years to come Watters reflected on the pain the schism caused, the significant threat that a prolonged separation had posed and the joy of union, knowing that he had done all within his power to keep American Methodism from irreparable damage. A year after unity was restored; in April 1781, several preachers who had been part of the Southern splinter group attended a quarterly meeting of the Fairfax Circuit. Watters (1806 : 91) reported on the positive spirit in the meeting and the joy of seeing them in a united formal gathering:

Many of our preachers from below were with us . . . It was a great and good time. We had lively, and excellent preaching, it appeared the more so perhaps to us, in these parts, as our brethren all came up with the Olive Branch of Peace. The dividing spirit being intirely [sic] banished from among them.

Then at the 1781 Annual Conference Watters (1806 : 92) again reported on the prevailing spirit of unity: “I . . . was not a little comforted in finding all so united, in the bonds of the peaceable gospel of Jesus Christ. We rejoiced together that the Lord had broken the snare of the devil, and our disputes were all at an end.” That year the conference recorded 10,539 (Minutes 1983 : 32) members and appointed forty-four preachers. Considering the recent split in their ranks and the raging War of Independence that was so heavily concentrated in the heartland of Methodism, the increase in members and appointed preachers is exceptional.

Had Watters sought leadership and prominence, and had he been consumed with developing his own legacy, this issue could very well have ended differently. At times his own position impressed and encouraged his fellow laborers while at other times they questioned it. And when the issue was resolved, and when Asbury resumed full leadership, Watters, in typical humility quietly stepped aside, accepted his next appointment and went on with the business for which his heart truly yearned: the saving of souls for Methodism and the Kingdom of God.

“William Watters, the dominant figure, in those early and trying days of Methodism is to be everlastingly commended for his profound Christian character.” (Corkran 1928 : 387).

6.10 ECCLESIASTICAL INDEPENDENCE LOOMS

Although the 1781 conference reunited the two Methodist factions, the entire movement had taken on a new and refreshing ecclesiastical dimension that would not be easily eradicated. The powerful independent American spirit that had vented through the end of a rifle on a national scale, had driven the Southern preachers locally. “The spirit and style of Fluvanna lived on. Later that year Asbury encountered Virginia preachers [still] eager for the ordinances.” (Richey 2001 : 27). Barclay (1949 : 69) says “the lack of the ordinances continued to cause complaint by both lay people and preachers – not without cause – since there were many within the Societies who were not within reach of an Episcopal church.”

Within six months of the 1781 unifying Conference, the British General Cornwallis surrendered¹⁸ at Yorktown, Virginia, which in effect, ended the Revolution, securing America’s sovereign union and independence from Britain. The future also looked bright for American Methodism, but with her organizational moorings still very tightly secured with Wesley in England, and the need to have ordinances available to thousands of committed Methodists on sovereign American soil still a critical issue, the need for a self-governing Methodist body, complete with ordained clergy of their own, seemed like a logical next step, which is exactly what Wesley wrestled with over the next three years.

The ordinance schism was over. The loyalty of Asbury to his English leader and the loyalty of Watters to his basic ideals of Methodism prevented a permanent internal split between the brethren, but the way ahead had been laid for an eventual maternal split from the Church of England and a paternal split from John Wesley. It would be another four years from the end of the ordinance schism before the creation of the independent Methodist Episcopal Church in America. The 1784 Christmas Conference “achieved the ecclesial transformation that Fluvanna had sought.” (Richey 2001 : 27). Watters had worked for peace within Methodism, with or without the ordinances. When the movement became a church he was certainly supportive, yet

¹⁸ Cornwallis surrendered on October 19, 1781. The Treaty of Paris was signed on September 3, 1783.

he offers only a few brief comments on the monumental occurrence. Although Watters' attendance at the Christmas Conference is uncertain, some historians do refer to him as Reverend, yet this writer has not found a single secondary source that offers any legitimacy for such a title. The birth of an independent Methodist body in America at the Christmas Conference, Watters' possible attendance, and his ordination will be dealt with in Chapter Seven.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AMERICAN METHODIST INDEPENDENCE, THE FIRST ORDINATION SERVICE AND WILLIAM WATTERS

When John Wesley dared to take the very unorthodox move of preaching in the open fields around the coal mining communities of Bristol in 1739, and his subsequent management of the Methodist revivals, he had no intention of moving out from under the cloak of Anglicanism. The Methodists were deeply committed to preaching holiness across the land and reforming the Church of England from within. Many of them were denied access to Anglican pulpits because of their ‘enthusiastic’ preaching. The hostility they endured from the Mother church could have been sufficient reason for them to separate; yet Wesley and his followers chose not to. Until his dying breath Wesley was determined to remain an Anglican, at least in theory. Although the intent of American Methodists were, by and large, as resolute as their British counterparts with regards to affiliation with the Anglican Church, their situation was significantly different. The political, social and ecclesiastical landscape of America was vastly different from England, where tradition often triumphed over innovation; where Anglican clergy abounded and where the Apostolic Succession for ordination was not only entrenched in their ecclesiology, it was cherished and defended by all. None of these factors existed to any significant degree in America. As a result, Wesley had to rethink his intentions for the Americans. After years of suffering depredation, conflict and division over the administration of the sacraments of baptism and communion, American Methodism gained full independence at the 1784 Christmas Conference, with all necessary ecclesiastical rites and authority to administer the sacraments at the hands of ordained Methodist clergy. Surprisingly, William Watters only makes a brief reference to the Conference and offers no clues as to his own attendance at the event, or if he ever was ordained. Several scholars have speculated on Watters’ attendance and at least two writers refer to him as an ordained Methodist. This writer has come to strong conclusions on both issues. This chapter will briefly trace the circumstances that led up to the Conference; it will present a snapshot of the Conference itself, and it will detail arguments surrounding Watters’ supposed attendance at the Conference and his ordination.

7.1 AMERICAN METHODISM PRIOR TO 1784

“None of the official Methodist missionaries sent over by John Wesley and none of the native-born preachers prior to the Christmas Conference in 1784 were ordained clergymen.” (Maser 1966 : 14). The band of preachers that constituted the ‘clergy’ of early American Methodism were uneducated volunteer laymen whose passion for their cause was significantly greater than any supposed impediment that the lack of a formal education in Divinity presented them. They were circuit riders, not priests, who were determined to contribute to the cause of Methodism and the Kingdom of God, albeit at times under primitive conditions. But circumstances in the late 1770’s and early 1780’s were evolving to the point where the preachers could sense that Providence was nudging them toward a new beginning.

The success of the American national leaders who moved their young nation away from British control inevitably contributed to a growing sense of self-determination amongst many of the native Methodists, yet the American Methodists did not hasten to cut ties to English Anglicanism with the victory of their military counterparts. The success of the Revolution coupled with the ordinance issue suggested to the American Methodists that their own organizational independence was more than just a remote possibility: it became a necessity, and some believed an inevitability.

Andrews (2000 : 241) says American Methodism was an “evangelical force coming to maturity in tandem, often awkwardly, with the political maturation of the nation.” The American preachers did not surrender their free American Spirit or their independent ideals when they willingly gave of themselves to the cause of Methodism and Wesley’s authority. From the earliest stages of American Methodism these local preachers along with a few irregular transplants from abroad, notably Robert Strawbridge, intentionally or unintentionally subtly pushed Methodism toward inevitable independence. Initially “it was undoubtedly the growing independence of these native colonial leaders which disturbed Wesley’s assistants.” (Sweet 1933 : 69).

By the late 1770’s, the collective years of frustration that revolved around the lack of qualified individuals to serve the Methodists the ordinances contributed to an air of restlessness amongst them. The ordinance schism had illustrated how vulnerable the movement was, but their ability to resolve the matter and their fortitude to survive the war bolstered their belief that they

were more than capable of shaping and steering their own future. It was only their strong ties to the history of their movement and their commitment to Wesley's authority that kept them tethered to the Church of England. This meant American Methodism had to patiently wait for a virtual miracle that would one day assure that all of them, even those in the remotest of places, would receive regular ordinances at the hands of rightfully qualified Methodist preachers.

Thomas Ware believed that the lack of ordained clergy amongst the American Methodists was actually keeping them from even greater success. He (1839 : 104-105) wrote; "The want of orders had a tendency to paralyze our efforts. Many, very many, who had been brought to the knowledge of God through our instrumentality were kept from uniting with us because we could not administer to them all the ordinances." It is not surprising therefore, that Wesley was continually plied with requests for ordained Methodists to actively serve in America, administering the sacraments. Asbury had addressed the issue to Wesley numerous times¹ and Watters at least once. Wesley's only recourse at that time was to instruct the Americans to continue as they had, until further notice. In the interim Wesley, "had asked the English bishops to ordain one of his preachers for America. They had refused." (Stein 1894 : 27). Had the Anglican Bishops agreed to ordain a Methodist for America, the makeup of America Methodism, particularly in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, would have appeared quite different.

In the wake of the ordinance schism, on September 3, 1780, Asbury (III 1958 : 24) once again implored Wesley to remedy their situation. "This is the fourth letter I have written to you within the space of six months, . . . I must say our people are under great disadvantages." Watters (1806 : 104) says the American Methodists "had craved his [Wesley's] advice on the subject." Shortly after the Southern Conference in 1780, Freeborn Garretson (1984 : 104) referenced one of the letters sent to Wesley and his subsequent response:

A circumstantial letter was written to that venerable apostle of the age, which moved his bowels of compassion toward us: and he was fully convinced, some time after, that he was in duty bound, for the prosperity of the connection in America, to do that thing, which he once but little expected-I speak with respect to his sending over a power of ordination, with his approbation of our becoming a separate, though Episcopal-church. Which he did as soon as the way was open: and it has proved the rising glory of the connection.

¹ See Asbury I 1958 : 350, 378

7.2 WESLEY'S INITIATIVE

Those opposed to the eventual independence of Methodism in America can never argue that the arrangement was hatched hastily or under misguided counsel:

Over many years Wesley had given much thought to the broad question of his authority as leader of the People Called Methodists and to the specific question of administration of sacraments by his preachers . . . Wesley had already thought out the historical, theological, and ecclesiastical issues and now was confronted with the argument of necessity. He *had* to do something about the provision of sacraments for American Methodists. Since he was opposed to lay administration, this meant providing some form of ordination . . . Wesley had avoided acting on his authority as long as possible, but the problem was now acute.” (Norwood 1974 : 96)

Long before 1784 Wesley had already concluded that his position as an ordained Anglican priest and now head of a vast group of believers, placed him on a par authoritatively with that of a Bishop, with full rights to ordain as and when he saw fit. He had also concluded that Bishops and Presbyters were one and the same. In spite of this, Wesley had resisted the temptation to ordain his own workers, for the sake of unity and peace with the Church of England. Wesley's (XIII 251-252) letter dated September 10, 1784, outlines some of the reasoning that led him to the historic decision of organizing the independence of American Methodism:

By a very uncommon train of providences, many of the provinces of North America are totally disjoined from their mother-country . . . The English Government has no authority over them, either civil or ecclesiastical . . . no one either exercises or claims any ecclesiastical authority at all. In this peculiar situation some thousands of the inhabitants of these States' desire my advice; and in compliance with their desire, I have drawn up a little sketch.

Lord King's "Account of the Primitive Church" convinced me many years ago, that Bishops and Presbyters are the same order, and consequently have the same right to ordain. For many years I have been importuned, from time to time, to exercise this right, by ordaining part of our Travelling [sic] Preachers. But I have still refused, not only for peace' sake, but because I was determined as little as possible to violate the established order of the national Church to which I belonged.

But the case is widely different between England and North America. Here there are Bishops who have a legal jurisdiction: In America there are none, neither any parish Ministers. So that for some hundred miles together, there is none, either to baptize, or to administer the Lord's supper. Here, therefore, my scruples are at an end; and I conceive myself at full liberty, as I violate no order, and invade no man's right, by appointing and sending labourers [sic] into the harvest.

Early in September 1784 “Wesley placed his hands on Thomas Coke, setting him apart as General Superintendent for America.” (Smith 1968 : 5). Coke had already faithfully served British Methodism for several years and had risen in the ranks to be one of Wesley’s most trusted workers. “His zeal, learning, piety, and native ability, manifested in abundant labors throughout England and Ireland, showed him to be the most suitable person among all the Methodists to undertake the momentous task proposed.” (Candler 1923 : 47-48). Wesley’s² aim was that Coke³ and two others, who were also duly ordained, Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey,⁴ would journey to America bearing with them, “a power of ordination.” (Garretson 1984 : 122). Their purpose was to ordain Asbury and other American leaders and thus create a self-perpetuating Methodist ecclesiastical body that can administer the ordinances to its constituency.

The documents Wesley sent with Coke to America (Circular letter, Ordination Certificates, Liturgy and Articles of Religion)⁵ clearly showed two important factors about Wesley as the leader of Methodism. First, he was not going to easily surrender control of American Methodism to anyone: Asbury, Coke or anyone else. Secondly, Wesley was not going to let ecclesiastical tradition or structures stifle what he was convinced God was doing. Wesley placed “mission above church structure. He would not be bound by historical precedent that was unable to meet the spiritual needs of thousands of people.” (Stein 1984 : 28). By producing a distinctly Methodist theology and liturgy, Wesley gave to American Methodism “ecclesial, sacramental, episcopal realities that he had always sought for Methodism through the established church.” (Richey 1991 : 86).

Coke, Whatcoat and Vasey, who carried with them the future of American Methodism, arrived in New York⁶ on November 3, 1784. Coke hurriedly made his way to the Methodist

² See Wesley Vol. VI : 288.

³ Coke was born in Wales in 1747. He was a lawyer turned Anglican Priest, turned Methodist preacher and one of Wesley’s most significant assistants. He was the presiding elder at the Christmas Conference. Although appointed as joint Superintendent with Asbury over the work in America, his role was arguably secondary to that of Asbury’s, in part because of his extensive missionary travels. He died on one of his missionary voyages. (See Hughes 1984 : 8).

⁴ Vasey later returned to England but Whatcoat stayed to serve the newly established church as an itinerant preacher. He was elected Bishop in 1800 and died in 1806.

⁵ See Candler (1923 : 73) for a detailed list on how these differed with those of the Church of England.

⁶ Coke made nine separate visits to America, this first one being the longest.

preaching house where he found John Dickens,⁷ who had been a leader of the Southern ordinance initiative a few years earlier, but who was at that time stationed in New York. On the day of his arrival Coke (2005 : 31) recorded the following in his journal,⁸ “I have opened Mr. Wesley's plan to Brother Dickens,⁹ [sic] the traveling preacher stationed at this place, and he heartily approves of it; says that all the preachers most earnestly long for such a reformation, and that Mr. Asbury, he is sure, will consent to it.”¹⁰

After being hosted in New York by John Dickens for a few days, and doing some preaching, Coke set off for Philadelphia by stagecoach. In the evening of November 7th, while preaching at St. George’s, Coke “made the first public announcement of Wesley’s plan.” (Smith 1968 : 6). It was not until the following Sunday that Coke and Whatcoat met Asbury, at Barratt’s Chapel¹¹ near Dover, Delaware.

7.3 ASBURY’S PREREQUISITE

Asbury (I 1958 : 471) said “I came to Barratt’s Chapel: here, to my great joy, I met these dear men of God, Dr. Coke¹² and Richard Whatcoat.” Unaware that Wesley had ordained Whatcoat, yet suspecting that the trio from England carried with them significant directives from Wesley, Asbury records surprise at seeing Whatcoat assist with the administering of the sacrament since he had known him in England as an un-ordained Methodist worker.¹³

After dinner that evening Coke gave to Asbury, and other preachers present, the details of Wesley’s plan. Asbury (I 1958 : 471-472) “was shocked when first informed of the intention of those my brethren in coming to this country: it may be of God.” The plan as authorized by Wesley and outlined by Coke did not entirely sit well with Asbury. He

⁷ Dickens was originally from England and became a Methodist preacher in 1777. He had arrived in America several years earlier. He was very close to Asbury, even naming his son after his leader. He was the first book agent; he prepared the first American discipline; and he organized the first American Methodist publications. (See Hughes 1984 : 8-9).

⁸ Coke’s journal was first published in America in 1789 apparently without his consent. (See Vickers 2005 : 23-24). He later published it in 1790. John Vickers republished Coke’s works in 2005, and added many editorial comments. This paper makes reference of the 2005 publication of Coke’s journal.

⁹ Coke misspelled Dickens with an ‘e.’

¹⁰ This statement is worded slightly differently in the first printing of Coke’s journal, stating, “Asbury is most respectfully to be consulted.” (Candler 1923 : 53).

¹¹ Barratt’s Chapel was the first Methodist-preaching house in Delaware. It was “where the whole movement for the organization of a Methodist Church in America got started.” (Hughes 1984 : 7).

¹² Coke (2005 : 34) described Asbury as being “a plain, robust man.”

¹³ See Asbury (I 1958 : 471) and Candler (1923 : 59).

was an American now, who had come to be possessed by the same free and independent spirit that had shaped his adopted country. Asbury was determined to not allow Wesley, from England, or Coke, a new comer, to have absolute sway over the makeup or future of American Methodism. In a move that was clearly contrary to normative Wesleyan practice and a “significant alteration of Wesley's ecclesiastical blueprint for America,” (Godbold 1965 : 7) Asbury insisted that the preachers he led have a voice in any new developments. He proposed that a Conference be called where the preachers can democratically approve his position as Superintendent: the structure of Methodism had never been organized in such a way before.

The Conference was scheduled to meet at the Lovely Lane chapel in Baltimore at Christmas, just six weeks away. Asbury (I 1958 : 471) said; “My answer then was, if the preachers unanimously choose me, I shall not act in the capacity I have hitherto done by Mr. Wesley's appointment . . . it was agreed to call a general conference, to meet at Baltimore the ensuing Christmas.”

Richey's (2001 : 27) perspective on this ‘tussle’ between what Wesley had ordered, what Asbury demanded and what Coke agreed to is worth noting:

Coke symbolized and guaranteed Wesleyan and ecclesial integrity. He wore Mr. Wesley's mantle. Asbury countered, we have been told, by insisting on the convening of a conference and the election of any to be recognized as superintendent, himself most particularly. By that plebiscite Asbury regained a good measure of the authority “lost” in the presence of Coke. He eventually took control through making appointments, effectively leaving Coke with symbolism and little power. Coke might have a Wesley style. Asbury would settle for the substance. He would be the operative guarantor of Wesleyan and ecclesial integrity and the American counterpart of Mr. Wesley, if not the symbol.

At the time of Asbury's insistence on the democratic affirmation of his ascension to Superintendent he probably had no inkling on the magnitude of the decision. By so doing Asbury made one of his most significant contributions to the American Methodist church. When he insisted that the plan be approved by a vote of the collective preachers, he inadvertently made the Methodist Conference, and not Wesley, the highest governing body of the church, thus further cementing the independence of American Methodism.¹⁴ Asbury wanted the American church to

¹⁴ See Sweet 1955 : 48

be American. He did not know Coke or Whatcoat, but he had known Rankin in earlier years: an English transplant of Wesley's that Asbury was obliged to work with, and under whose leadership his preachers had strained. Asbury would not have another leader imposed on the American Methodist scene from Wesley, without the consultation of the workers. Asbury's advantage was that he knew the land, he knew the workers, and he knew the respect they bore for him. Asbury wanted the Americans to be the deciding factors and not Wesley or his emissaries. Numerous scholars concur regarding the significance of Asbury's move.

"Asbury never showed more wisdom, foresight, and prudence in the whole of his life than when he declined to accept the appointment tendered him by Mr. Wesley until he should be duly elected to the office by his brethren." (Moore 1884 : 114).

"Asbury saw clearly, as Wesley, Coke and some others did not, that the American Methodists would not submit to control from England." (Godbold 1965 : 11).

"It was quite clear that the conference would determine for itself who and what the Methodists henceforth would be in America." (Stein 1984 : 30).

"Refusing to accept the ordination which Wesley offered through Coke without the approval of his fellow preachers in conference, he effectively shifted power to the body of preachers and established himself as their leader, independent of John Wesley." (Kirby 1996 : 261).

7.4 THE CHRISTMAS CONFERENCE

Freeborn Garretson was sent to call the scattered preachers in the South to Conference, but his passion to preach whenever possible caused him to not cover as much territory as was hoped, consequently only about "sixty preachers were present at this conference, out of a total of eighty¹⁵ or more." (Clark I 1958 : 474). Coke and Asbury met a few days prior to the Conference to discuss and plan the agenda. (Clark I 1958 : 473).

The Conference, which Candler (1923 : 64) describes as being "one of the most momentous convocations in the history of Christianity in America" began on Christmas Eve¹⁶ with Thomas Coke presiding. An ordained German minister and a friend of Asbury's, Philip

¹⁵ Coke (2005 : 42) says there were eighty stationed preachers at the time.

¹⁶ Buckley (1912 : 43) reveals a minor historical discrepancy on the date of the start of Conference but relies on Coke's and Asbury's journal of December 24.

Otterbein, also attended, further strengthening the legitimacy of the ordinations that were to come. Three significant events occurred at the Christmas Conference.

First, American Methodism became an independent church. After Coke presented Wesley's plan for ordination, John Dickins proposed its adoption, and the Conference agreed to separate into an independent church. It is not clear if Wesley intended for them to take his plan to complete church independence.¹⁷ Asbury (I 1958 : 474-475) had made it clear that he wanted an Episcopal form of church structure. John Dickens suggested the name,¹⁸ Methodist Episcopal Church, which was agreed upon. Asbury (I 1958 : 474) wrote, "It was agreed to form ourselves into an Episcopal Church." Lee (1810 : 107) says; "The Methodists were pretty generally pleased at our becoming a church, and heartily united together in the plan which the conference had adopted." The movement became a "vigorous new denomination, tautly disciplined and closely organized, yet at the same time flexible enough to grasp every evangelical opportunity presented by the American frontier." (Baker 1976 : 86).

Second, Asbury was ordained deacon on December 25 and then elder on December 26. The following day, after the Conference unanimously approved, Asbury was ordained Superintendent¹⁹ of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, to serve jointly with Coke, when he was in the country. Baker (1976 : 162) says Coke and Asbury were "technically equal in authority, but far from equal in the allegiance of their colleagues."²⁰ Wesley did not intend, in his true autocratic style, for his plans to be carried out by the will of the American Methodists as a group. Wesley intended for his three representatives to ordain Asbury and then for them to ordain other duly qualified preachers. It was Asbury's sensitivity to the newly independent Americans, and his own independent spirit, coupled with a desire to truly be a leader of the people more than simply an appointee, that led him to initiate the Christmas Conference and his subsequent election as their Superintendent. "Thus, the mantle of leadership shifted from John Wesley's appointment to the selection of superintendents by the clergy themselves, meeting in conference. The episcopacy of the United Methodist Church was thus born at the Christmas Conference." (Stein 1984 : 30).

¹⁷ Andrews (2000 : 68-69) speculates that it was Coke who may have suggested the establishment of a separate church, which was supported by the Americans, but Burke (1964 : 203) believed that it was Wesley's intention from the start.

¹⁸ See also Ware 1839 : 106 and Smith 1968 : 17.

¹⁹ The title of Superintendent was later changed to Bishop, much to Wesley's consternation.

²⁰ Coke never did truly superintend the work in America alongside Asbury. At best, his position was ceremonial and symbolic.

Third, several other preachers, by recommendation and election of the Conference, were also ordained. Asbury (I 1958 : 476) said everything was done “by a majority of votes.” Coke, (2005 : 42) not being very familiar with the democratic process working in tandem with church governance, was very impressed with how the Americans went about electing those for ordination: “The spirit in which they conducted themselves in chusing [sic] the Elders, was most pleasing. I believe they acted without being at all influenced either by friendship, resentment, or prejudice, both in chusing [sic] and rejecting.” Asbury (I 1958 : 474) says that twelve other preachers were ordained Elders without naming them, but Coke (2005 : 42) does name them.²¹ Watters was not amongst those ordained but one of Watters’ converts, Nelson Reed, was.

The Conference met for another week discussing various issues of governance and religion. Bangs (1838 : 167-218) devoted fifty pages to cover much of what was agreed to. Watters (1806 : 102-103) noted the following about the Conference:

In the autumn following Doctor Coke, came over with two preachers, and with Mr. Wesley’s advice respecting the administering of ordinances, which we had laid before him and on which he had delayed giving his opinion until now. He had viewed the subject as very weighty one, and was unwilling to say any thing one way or the other, till he had deliberately and fully made up his mind.

On the twenty-fifth of December, one thousand seven hundred and eighty-four, our conference met in Baltimore, to consider the plan of church government, which the Doctor brought over recommended by Mr. Wesley. It was adopted, and unanimously agreed to with great satisfaction, and we became instead of a religious society, a separate Church under the name of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

This change gave great satisfaction through all our societies in America, and the more so, as it met with the approbation of our European brethren, and particularly to those who had some time past thought it their duty to administer the ordinances, but had desisted therefrom, [sic] rather than rend the flock of Christ.

After years of faithfully adhering to the English Methodist plan, surviving potential devastation from external wars and internal strife, American Methodism became a separate autonomous church. “The Christmas Conference of 1784 gave American Methodists independence, a name, two superintendents or bishops (three if Wesley is included), an ordained clergy, and the basic documents of ecclesiastical organization.” (Smith 1981 : 20). Baker (1976 : 17) says American Methodism had become “a self-perpetuating body in complete charge of the Methodist Societies, subject to no oversight by any Anglican bishop or court.” Thomas Ware,

²¹ Lee (1810 :94-95) and Bangs (1838 : 158) also lists those who were ordained.

(1839 : 102) an attendee of the Conference said, “it was the most solemn convocation I ever saw.”

In a final act of asserting their independence, the Methodists in America eventually dropped Wesley’s name from their minutes.²² Baker (1976 : 162) says; “In 1784 the Methodist Episcopal Church secured its own national leadership, its own power to perpetuate a ministry, its own ecclesiastical organization, and also took an immense step forward in creating its own ethos.”

7.4.1 DISSENTION

With more than eighty traveling preachers, numerous located preachers and thousands of members, it is understandable that there would be some dissenters to Wesley’s plan and the proceedings at the Conference; however, there is no documented evidence of significant disagreement from within Methodist ranks. One of the most noted, but tempered concerns on record came from Thomas Haskins.²³

Two days prior to the beginning of Conference Haskins and an undisclosed number of other preachers met in fellowship and discussed the upcoming events. Haskins (1960 : 45) was not entirely pleased with what was being proposed and stated “my brethren and myself did not agree in sentiment fully respecting the plan.”²⁴ He then read to them a prepared letter in which he detailed his concerns.²⁵ Haskins (1960 : 46) believed that the plan for independence was being adopted too quickly and that although he had high “reverence and esteem” for Mr. Wesley and that he “is a great, good, judicious and sensible man,” Haskins noted that Wesley was “not infallible, particularly with respect to the political, civil and religious affairs of America.”²⁶

Haskins believed that a decision on creating a new independent church should be postponed until

²² Wesley’s name appears in the Minutes up until 1785. It disappears from 1786 to 1788, and then reappears in 1789. It is dropped in 1790. See Minutes 1983 : 56-86.

²³ Haskins gave up studying law in Dover, Delaware to become a preacher under the ministry of Freeborn Garretson. He was an itinerant from 1782-1786, after which he became a local preacher and businessman. (See Clark I 1958 : 392).

²⁴ The United States Library of Congress holds Haskins’ original journal. Louise Stahl transcribed the journal in 1960, with several libraries now in possession of copies. This writer gratefully obtained a copy from Drew University and will make use of it for references in this paper.

²⁵ It is not clear if Haskins ever shared this letter at the Conference or gave it to any of the leaders. Coke and Asbury make no mention of Haskins’ concerns.

²⁶ Haskins supported this claim with reference to the erroneous position Wesley had taken on the Revolution.

the scheduled Conference in June and that since they were in actuality a part of the Anglican Church, that some of their clergy ought to be consulted.

During the ten day Conference Haskins (1960 : 47) wrote “I fear haste will make waste if we don’t take care.” Haskins was nominated for the office of Deacon, but he asked for time to consider. On January 1, 1785, Haskins (1960 : 48) wrote, “Our conference ended. I feel myself uneasy, oh how tottering I see Methodism now . . . keep us from dissention among ourselves, here our danger lies.” There are no records that indicate that Haskins actually voiced these concerns at the Conference. Haskins did not make a big issue out of his cautious approach to Methodist independence, and to his credit, he went on to serve the new church faithfully for many years.

Watters (1806 : 104) says, “there was not one dissenting voice” present, with Thomas Ware (1839 : 102) agreeing when he said; “there was not, I verily believe, on the conference floor or in private, an unkind word spoken, or an unbrotherly emotion felt. Christian love predominated.” Samuel Drew (1818 : 96) noted that there was some dissatisfaction at the Conference with the process of nominating and electing some to be ordained but that it “was of a transient nature . . . [and] quickly dispersed.” No other notable historian makes mention of any protracted problems at the Conference, but there were understandably, some from outside of Methodism, who had strong contrary feelings.

Andrews (2000 : 70) reported that leaders of the Anglican Church knew what the Methodists were planning so they sent a delegation to Coke prior to the Conference to plead with him not to proceed, even offering him an Anglican Bishopric, but Coke declined. Devereux Jarratt, who was undoubtedly American Methodism’s strongest ally in the Church of England in America, was obviously devastated when his trusted Methodist friends separated from the church they had vowed to remain a part of. Years earlier he had made the following observation about the Methodists:

The Methodists were true members of the church (sic) of England — that their design was to build up and not divide the church — that the preachers did not assume the office of priests, administered neither the ordinance of baptism nor the Lord’s Supper, but looked to the parish ministers in all places for these. (Jarratt 1969 : 108).

Jarratt had befriended the Methodists so dearly and supported the movement so strongly because he took them at their word: that they would not separate from the Church of England. In

light of the actions taken at the Conference, Jarratt (1969 : 119) wrote; “the whole body of Methodists broke off from the Church at a single stroke . . . their old mother, to whom they had avowed so much duty and fidelity, was discarded, and violently opposed.”

Regrettably Jarratt and some Methodists, Coke included, exchanged harsh words over the separation of the Methodists from the Anglicans. Attempts at reconciliation were made from both sides in the years that followed but with only moderate success. It is surprising, at least to this writer, that there was no greater fall-out as a result of Wesley’s move and the wholehearted way in which the Americans embraced it.

7.4.2 ATTENDANCE

Attendance at the Conference was limited to active preachers at that time. “The conferences that had been held since 1773 had included only preachers, so it was quite natural that no laymen were asked to take part.” (Hughes 1984 : 6). Asbury and Coke only produced perfunctory records of the conference. Neither men, nor any other preacher of that time who kept journals, or who wrote histories shortly thereafter, including Lee, Bangs or Stevens, produced a complete list of all the attendees.

Coke, (2005 : 42) who was thirty-seven years old at the time, simply noted that most of the preachers were young. Without naming them, Stein (1984 : 25) details some interesting characteristics of those who attended the Conference:

Most of the participants at the conference were distinguished in neither learning nor experience. Only a few . . . could read the Scriptures in the original languages . . . only seven of these men had itinerated as much as eight years. Forty of them had traveled under four years and were probably under twenty-five years of age . . . Their leaders were thirty-seven-year-old Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, who was two years older.

7.5 WILLIAM WATTERS AT THE CHRISTMAS CONFERENCE

John Lednum, (1859 : 413) in his History of the Rise of Methodism in America, offers a partial list of those he was sure attended the Conference. In 1984 United Methodist Bishop and historian, Harold Hughes, published an article in the Virginia United Methodist Heritage

journal²⁷ entitled “Who Attended The Christmas Conference,” in which he attempts to ascertain who attended the Conference. Both Lednum and Hughes omit Watters. Smith (1968 : 20-21) offers three lists of names pertaining to the Conference. He lists those ordained, those who “in all likelihood . . . were present” and “others who may have been present,” also omitting Watters.

William Watters was 33 years old at the time of the Christmas Conference and had more than ten years ministry experience behind him but he had ceased itinerating. In early 1784, in poor health and bearing the responsibilities of a wife, Watters entered his first year of location, yet he maintained a very busy schedule as he helped out on the circuit where he lived and at nearby preaching points:

The following year one thousand seven hundred and eighty-four, we had but one preacher appointed to our circuit, and though I was just beginning the world as a house-keeper, I rode, I believe, for a considerable part of the year, as much in the circuit as the preacher who was appointed to it . . . and though I was much fatigued in so doing, being still in a weak state of health, yet I found the Lord's service to be perfect freedom, and feared living to no good purpose. (Watters 1806 : 99-100)

As noted above, Watters only briefly mentioned the Conference in his autobiography and does not specifically state if he did or did not attend. Sweet (1935 : 175-176) listed Edward Dromgoole as the longest serving American Methodist, besides Asbury, in attendance at the conference. Since Dromgoole started traveling as a Methodist preacher in 1774 and Watters had started in 1773, Sweet therefore eliminates Watters as a Conference attendee. Marr (1999 : 2) speculated that Watters did attend the conference and Candler, (1923 : 72) refers to Watters as “one of the leading and influential members of the Conference.” Neither Marr nor Candler offers documentary support for their assumptions. John Atkinson (1884 : 47-48) in Centennial History of American Methodism, is the only scholar this writer is aware of who actually sets forth a reasoned argument in favor of Watters’ attendance at the Conference. Atkinson has two main points.

To Atkinson, the language and tone Watters uses when describing the events of the Conference suggest that he was a participant, particularly when he uses words like “we” and “us” in the following ways. “And we became . . . a separate church . . . this change was proposed to us . . . adopted by us.” (Watters 1806 : 102, 104). Atkinson (1884 : 48) says, “this appears like the account of one who participated in the scenes he describes.” Atkinson’s more convincing, but not

²⁷ Fall 1984, Volume 12, Number 2.

conclusive, argument in support of Watters' attendance comes from documented evidence by way of an associate of Watters: Alexander M'Caine.

M'Caine had grown to become very dissatisfied with the establishment of the church and its hierarchy. In 1827, in the same year that Watters died, M'Caine published a book entitled The History and Mystery of Methodist Episcopacy.²⁸ In a footnote on page seventy-six M'Caine includes Watters in a list of several preachers "who were members of the Conference in 1784," but offers no documentary evidence. Atkinson argues that had M'Caine's assertion been false, Watters' wife, who lived another eighteen years after M'Caine's publication, or others who knew Watters, would have disputed it. Since, as Atkinson (1884 : 47) reasons, M'Caine's assertion of Watters' attendance "seems never to have been called in question, it must be accepted as true." It is possible that no one refuted M'Caine's individual claim about Watters attendance at the Conference, because so many Methodists hotly disputed the entire premise of M'Caine's book. This writer believes that Atkinson's conclusion in this regard lacks credibility. There is however, a factual problem inherent in M'Caine's book as it relates to Watters attendance at the Conference, which will be discussed below.

At thirty-three years of age and with more than ten years experience, Watters would have been one of the senior members of the Conference, but it is this writer's opinion that Watters did not attend the Christmas Conference, for the following reasons.

First and most significantly, it is believed that Watters did not attend the Conference because he was not a regular traveling preacher at the time, which was a criterion for attendance. M'Caine (1827 : 75) clearly acknowledged this ruling when he stated the Conference "denied the right of local ministers and lay ministers, to be represented." Since Watters had been located for almost a year at the time of the Conference, he was obviously, by rule, not entitled to attend. M'Caine's footnote on page seventy-six stating that Watters had attended, creates a contradiction of historical procedure and fact. M'Caine either did not know that Watters was located at the time and therefore believed he did attend, or he knew of Watters' location and believed he attended nonetheless. In either case, M'Caine's assertion is groundless, and in all likelihood, erroneous. Watters himself believed that conferences were for traveling preachers who were actively contributing to the work. He (1806 : 106-107) explains:

²⁸ This writer has an original copy of this book, in which M'Caine argues that the Episcopacy of the Church was erroneously established. He was later suspended for his actions and eventually joined the Methodist Protestant Church.

As for my own part, I am so fearful of seeing the travelling [sic] connection clogged, with the local preachers, that I never wish a seat in conference, as a member, unless I can fill some proper station. They can do well enough without my weak counsel, while I withhold my labors whether I do it willingly or through necessity.

Even if he was invited to attend, which this writer doubts, based on the above comments, Watters would have declined.

Second, Watters always seemed to be intentional in noting when he did or did not attend a major gathering of the people and movement he loved. It seems inconceivable that had he attended such a historic Conference, that he would not then clearly state so in his autobiography.

The third reason it is believed Watters did not attend the Conference was because of his health. Watters had been confined to bed for lengthy periods at various times over the preceding years. It would not be until 1786 that Watters would be well enough to resume work as a travelling preacher. Although Watters was actively helping with the work on his circuit, he may not have been well enough to travel to and then sit through a ten-day conference.

It is possible that Watters did not even know of the Conference until close to its convening or, even after the fact. Garretson had been sent to alert preachers in, Virginia²⁹ and North Carolina about the Conference but we know that he did not reach everyone. Time, travel and communication being what they were two hundred years ago, it could have taken weeks for news about the Conference to filter down to where Watters was. Some might argue that Watters did indeed know of the pending Conference since, according to Haskins, (1960 : 42) he (Haskins) had met “Dr. Coke at Mr. Watters” on November 19, 1784, more than a month before the Conference began. If this were the case, Coke and Watters would have undoubtedly discussed the Conference, however, it is clear that Haskins was not referring to William Watters in the above statement. Haskins was serving on the Somerset Circuit at the time, which was on the Delmarva Peninsula, far from where William Watters lived in Virginia. Burke (1964 : 210) says Coke’s “familiarization tour” was almost entirely restricted to the Delmarva Peninsula. The “Mr. Watters” Haskins referred to had to have been one of Williams’ older brothers, probably Nicholas.

²⁹ Watters was located in Fairfax County, Virginia, which is in Northern Virginia, on the Maryland border.

7.6 WATTERS' ORDINATION

Even if Watters did attend the Christmas Conference and thereby witness the first ordination service of American Methodism, it is abundantly clear that he was not ordained at that event. The list of those who were ordained, which has been noted by various writers,³⁰ did not include Watters, however, he was at some time ordained. Corkran (1928 : 382) referred to Watters as Rev. Watters, yet he offers no supporting evidence as to when Watters may have been ordained.

In 1792, the dear Anglican friend of Watters, and all American Methodists prior to December 1784, Devereux Jarratt, penned a letter³¹ to Watters, encouraging him to seek ordination in the Anglican Church. Jarratt's motives could have been based on friendship and genuine concern for Watters, or it was simply an attempt to attract quality workers into the Anglican fold. At the time, Jarratt said to Watters; "our church stands in need of pious labourers, [sic] men who have the love of God and the Power³² of religion in their souls." (Sweet 1955 : 115). The Anglican Church in Virginia had fallen on hard times with the resident Bishop "so discouraged that he practically ceased functioning as a Bishop." (Sweet 1955 : 116). Jarratt was obviously recruiting Watters in an effort to bolster the weakened Anglican work in Virginia, but Watters declined.

Two years after the Christmas Conference Watters once again entered active service, which was duly noted in the Minutes (1983 : 57, 59), but he soon relocated again. His name then dropped from the Minutes for several years. He continued for the next several years serving in various capacities, from a local church trustee, to serving several local church pastorates. On October 29, 1793, Asbury (III 1958 : 122-123) sent Watters a letter urging him to re-enter the traveling ministry, with a promise of ordination:

I should be well pleased if your wife was in some town where she would be safe, and you could enter again, and die in the good cause. It would please me if you would superintend Lancaster, Stafford, and Fairfax³³ as a presiding elder, next year. I want some older heads in our ministry.

Watters evidently also declined this offer, but one of his brothers remained active. In 1798, Williams' older brother Nicholas, was listed as a deacon (Minutes 1983 : 201) and then in 1799

³⁰ See Coke (2005 : 42), Lee (1810 : 94), and Bangs (1838 : 158).

³¹ This letter exists in the Dromgoole Collection held by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

³² Capitalized Power, the authors.

³³ These are counties in Virginia.

he was listed as an Elder, (Minutes 1983 : 218) yet the date and place of Williams' ordination is not clearly documented.

On April 30, 1801, at a Conference in Maryland, Asbury (II 1958 : 294) listed William Watters in a group of "elders" but says nothing else about Watters' ordination. The Minutes (1983 : 252) for 1801 lists William Watters amongst those preachers who that year had been ordained, but there is no mention of where or when the ordination occurred. Records at the Lovely Lane Museum in Baltimore, where the Christmas Conference was held, which today serves as one of the preeminent centers for early American Methodist history, has no records as to when exactly in 1801 Watters was ordained. Watters (1806 : 133) does state that he attended the 1801 Conference in Maryland that Asbury mentioned above, so it is probable that he was ordained at that meeting. Abel Stevens answers the question: talking about the 1801 Conference Stevens (1867 : 289) says; "At this Conference William Watters re-entered the work--having been local for some years--and was ordained elder." At the rise of the 1801 Conference, Watters accepted an appointment to serve as a local pastor in Alexandria, close to where he lived. Evidently, ordination was now being bestowed upon located preachers, and not just traveling ones.

Watters indirectly referenced his own status as an ordained Methodist when he referred to himself as a "minister," a word he used only five times in his autobiography. On one occasion he (1806 : 103) used the word as a verb, referring to the work of the ministry. Three times Watters (1806 : 29, 36, 58) used the word minister as a noun referring to Anglican priests, who would naturally have been ordained. He therefore seems to equate the word "minister" with ordination. The only other time he used the word minister was again as a noun and again referring to the office of a minister, this time referring to himself. Watters (1806 : 139) wrote that he was "a minister among the Methodists."

In 1784 the Methodists in America became a separate and self-governing body. With properly ordained and well-qualified leaders, the prospects for the denomination were extremely bright. "Optimism prevailed as the newborn church breathed, stirred vigorously, and started a rapid and phenomenal growth. (Smith 1968 : 24). For the role he played in the church's early development, survival and on going growth Watters received official recognition by way of ordination. Although he was constantly battling the ever-present temptation to ignore the very

evident signs of his fatigued body, and to once more climb into his saddle and ride the very punishing circuits, wisdom prevailed. As he penned his autobiography in 1806, Watters knew full well that his days as a traveling preacher were over, but his years of usefulness to the Lord and Methodism were certainly not. With no formal higher education other than experience, the intermittent instruction of fellow preachers and the writings of Wesley to study, Watters grew to be a theologian in his own right and a clear exponent and defender of Wesleyan theology. An analysis of the theology of William Watters will be dealt with next.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE THEOLOGY OF WILLIAM WATTERS

Early American Methodist itinerants knew how they had arrived at their particular place in church history, and were clearly cognizant of the significance of their work. They knew what was required of them as Methodists, how and why they were a separate entity within mainstream Anglicanism, and where they stood on critical doctrinal issues that differed with other Christian viewpoints, particularly Calvinist. Generally, these overworked and often underappreciated servants of Methodism easily held their own when discussing the intricacies of their faith with ordained clergy, this in spite of the fact that, according to Thomas Ware, (1839 : 104) they were often “denounced from the pulpit as illiterate.” A remarkable fact in this regard is that the vast majority of them were not formally educated in any aspect of their chosen vocation, including theology, ecclesiology or the writings of early church fathers, yet they were far from ignorant or illiterate. Their learning did not come through crash-courses between circuit appointments nor were they offered seminars at quarterly or annual conferences. The academic training that the Circuit Riders acquired was self-directed, courtesy of their leader, John Wesley, via their saddlebags. As one of the pre-eminent Protestant theologians of the eighteenth century, Wesley was a deep and invaluable wellspring of knowledge that his followers enthusiastically drank from, regardless of where they were in the world, yet Wesley himself never produced a systematic theology. His theology was detailed in his various writings such as sermons, his Bible notes, his musings in his journal and his various books. Wesley’s Notes on the New Testament, his sermons and the Minutes from Methodist conferences in Britain became the primary teaching tools for most early Methodist preachers. Copies of these volumes would have flanked the early preacher’s Bible’s in their saddlebags as they travelled their circuits. William Watters was no exception. As a young boy he had resented the few years he had in formal education because it took him away from his mother. When Watters agreed to ride with Robert Williams to Virginia in 1772 he had had no formal ministerial training or instruction, and would never acquire any, yet he too, as a Methodist preacher in the Wesleyan tradition, knew what he believed and why he believed it. Watters and his co-workers were avid readers, often studying Wesley’s works in the saddle while their horses navigated the circuit trails. This chapter is going to focus on the

theology of Watters, which he would have acquired, for the most part, via his saddlebag library. First the foundation of Watters' theology will be constructed, detailing how and why Watters believed what he did. Second, a detailed systematic analysis of his theology will be presented. Two primary documents will be referenced: Watters' autobiography published in 1806 and his brief, yet theology rich, pamphlet on the life and death of his brother-in-law, William Adams, published in 1782.¹ The works of Wesley and Asbury will also be referenced for supportive and comparative purposes.²

8.1 THE FOUNDATION OF WATTERS' THEOLOGY

Although Watters was the first American born itinerant preacher and the movement in America was less than ten years old at the time of Watters' first appointment, he did not step into a literary or theological vacuum. Watters soon discovered that Methodists were particular about what they believed, and that they expected their fellow workers to be of like mind, which suited his own disposition. New volunteer Methodist preachers quickly went about equipping themselves mentally and physically for the task that lay ahead of them, as they relied on the Holy Spirit for spiritual sustenance. The opportunities for learning the doctrinal nuances of their adopted movement did not abound, but they were available, particularly for the diligent preacher. Watters does not detail many specifics of how and where he acquired the learning that ushered him into the ranks of Wesleyan theologians, but there is no mistaking his capacity in that regard. The foundation upon which Watters would have developed his theology warrants some discussion before an analysis of his particular theology commences.

¹ This writer has a duplicate copy of Watters' 1782 publication. A recent database search revealed only three institutions worldwide that own an original copy of this book, and eight who have microfilm copies. This writer is thankful for the copy provided by the University of Minnesota. The only other published words of Watters that this writer is aware of appear in the 1805 Minutes, (See Minutes 1983 : 338-339) which were in loving memory of his brother and fellow Methodist preacher Nicholas who died that same year.

² Barclay (1950 : 373-389) offers a very useful outline of the "general characteristics" (Barclay 1950 : 373) of the theology of early American Methodist preachers. The outline in this chapter is not taken from Barclay, but this writer acknowledges the value of Barclay's work as this Chapter was formulated.

8.1.1 PRINTED RESROUCES

The vast rural areas of the American Colonies and the ever-expanding frontier obviously lacked stores that teamed with suitable reading material for travelling preachers who needed to upgrade their very rudimentary education, while they maintained a very demanding preaching schedule. The settled towns were not much better off, however, needed resources were not impossible to come by. Methodists recognized the value of printing and distributing their beliefs, something they inherited from Wesley himself, who wrote numerous books and published thousands of copies, many of which reached American shores.

Ware (1839 : 112) correctly points out, when reflecting on the fact that many early Methodist preachers had no formal education, “that learning and piety had no necessary connection,” yet he does not negate the value of education. He (1839 : 112) goes on to say, “when learning and piety are united, they are mutually beneficial in promoting the best interests of man.” The lack of a formal education never seemed to have impeded Watters or his Methodist colleagues because they were committed to reading and learning whenever possible, with Wesley providing abundant material.

In the early 1770’s Robert Williams published many of Wesley’s works in America and in 1789 the Methodist Book Concern was organized, with John Dickins as its first agent and editor. The Concern’s mission was to put suitable books into the hands of the preachers and their constituencies, since both preachers and regular members were constantly encouraged to read.³ Richey (1991 : 119) said the American General Conference in 1796 decreed that, “the propagation of religious knowledge by the means of the press, is next in importance to the preaching of the gospel.” By seeking to place reading material into the hands of the laity, “all Methodist travelling preachers were book agents,” (Sweet 1933 : 150), which was a duty mandated by the 1796 Conference. In fact, Sweet (1933 : 150) says the Methodists had a significant advantage over other churches of that time when it came to self-produced literature and Richey (1991 : 93) said that as a publishing force, “the movement distinguished itself and sold its wares in the free enterprise of American Protestantism.”

³ The Book Concern was located in Philadelphia. It reprinted some issues of Wesley’s Arminian Magazine which Wesley started in 1778 (Bangs 1838 : 306) and whose express purpose it was to propagate Wesleyan/Arminian doctrine.

As was stated above, the three standard resources preachers used to learn Methodist theology, and to help keep them on track doctrinally were Wesley's Notes on the New Testament, his Four Volumes of Sermons and The Large Minutes. In a letter to his American brethren, dated Oct., 1783, Wesley made it clear where he expected Methodists to learn their doctrine and theology from: "Let all of you be determined to abide by the Methodist doctrine and discipline, published in the four volumes of Sermons, and the Notes upon the New Testament, together with the large minutes of conference." (Asbury III 1958 : 31). The American preachers "agreed that they would preach the old Methodist doctrine, and enforce the discipline which was contained in the Notes, sermons and Minutes published by Mr. Wesley." (Lee 1810 : 75). Richey (1991 : 86) says "the preachers had a stipulated duty to transmit" the doctrines contained in these documents. Watters never mentioned these works but "an inventory of his property, included a large family Bible . . . multiple volumes of Wesley's Notes on the New Testament, his Sermons, Journal, and his work on Natural Philosophy." (Marr 1999 : 3).⁴

8.1.1.1 WESLEY'S NOTES ON THE NEW TESTAMENT

On October 23, 1755 Wesley (II : 345) noted in his journal that he had "a little leisure to sit still, and finish the 'Notes on the New Testament.'" These notes would become one of the standard bearers of Methodist and Wesleyan theology for decades to come, regardless of where Methodism took root in the world.

The members of the Christmas Conference agreed that all their preachers ought to read their Bible daily along with Wesley's notes: "Reading; constantly, some part of every day, regularly, all the Bible in order: carefully, with Mr. Wesley's notes: seriously, with prayer before and after: fruitfully, immediately practicing what you learn there." (Bangs 1838 : 187). The Conference also recommended the following for preachers who were not currently traveling their circuits: "From four to five in the morning, and from five to six in the evening, to meditate, pray, and read the Scriptures, with Mr. Wesley's Notes." (Bangs 1838 : 195). Asbury clearly set the example. He often notes in his journal the times he read from Wesley's notes. On April 10, 1778 he (I 1958 : 266) said, "My practice is, to keep close to God in prayer, and spend a part of every

⁴ Other books in Watters' library included "two lives of Wesley, one by Brown and the other by Coke and Moore; a Methodist Discipline; a concordance; and several multi-volume works on church and biblical history." (Marr 1999 : 3).

hour, when awake, in that exercise. I have lately begun to read Mr. Wesley's Notes again; and have always found both them and his Sermons to be made an especial blessing to my soul.”⁵

8.1.1.2 FOUR VOLUMES OF SERMONS⁶

Methodists regarded the preaching and receiving of God’s Word to be the most significant act they could corporately participate in. It was the sermon that conveyed the Gospel, that contained the explained truth of God’s Word and that ensured the maintenance of correct Methodist doctrine and practise. Methodists believed that God moved, albeit not exclusively, through the preaching of the Word.

Watters expressed no greater pleasure than to preach God’s Word and lead sinners to God’s saving grace. He began preaching shortly after his conversion at the tender age of nineteen and soon recognized that “in one sense we were all preachers.” (Watters 1806 : 18). His longstanding passion to preach is clearly illustrated by the very difficult decision he made after the Conference of 1782. Watters was frustrated that he had been appointed to a circuit so far from home, having been married just a few years, and in poor health, but whenever humanly possible, preaching the Gospel always triumphed in his life. As was referenced in Chapter Three, Watters (1806 : 97) resolved to fulfill his calling and to abide by the wishes of the Conference, “and trusting in the kind providence of God, I took up my cross and once more left all to preach the gospel.” Later in his life Watters (1806 : 139-140) was so deeply appreciative of the privilege that God had bestowed upon him, by not only calling him to preach the Gospel, but to do it amongst the people called Methodists: “I confidently believed that God had not only called me to preach, but to preach among 'them' [the Methodists] the unsearchable riches of his grace.”

Wesley’s one hundred and forty-one sermons contained in the “Four Volumes” were an invaluable resource to the preachers. They covered a wide variety of subjects that include Salvation by Faith (Number I), a series from the Sermon on the Mount (XXI – XXXIII), Original Sin (XLIV), Hell (LXXIII) and Perfection (XL and LXXVI). Wesley also covered many

⁵ For additional references in Asbury’s Journal to Wesley’s notes see, February 9, 1772; May 25, 1777; April 20, 1778; April 22, 1778; April 26, 1778, May 3, 1778, March 8, 1780 and many more.

⁶ Wesley’s “Four Volumes of Sermons” appear in the 1979 Jackson edition of Wesley’s Works in Volumes V, VI and VII.

practical topics such as The Use of Money (L), Schisms (LXXV), Dress (LXXXVIII) and Obedience to Parents (XCVI).

Within themselves these sermons contained a wealth of reading, study, devotional and sermon material for the early Methodist travelling preacher. Their significance was illustrated by a proposal made by the Christmas Conference that catered for a congregation whose preacher was absent from the pulpit: “If preachers and exhorters cannot attend, let some person of ability be appointed in every society to sing, pray, and read one of Mr. Wesley's sermons.” (Bangs 1838 : 194). On October 12, 1772, while in New York, Asbury (I 1958 : 46) “read one of Mr. Wesley's sermons to the people, and believe some felt it reproving them for evil speaking.”

Asbury made many more references to Wesley’s sermons which were a “peculiar blessing,” (I 1958 : 292) and a source of “great instruction.” (I 1958 : 336). On October 18, 1781 Asbury (I 1958 : 413) noted that the American Methodists had “come to a conclusion to print the four volumes of Mr. Wesley's Sermons.” Asbury does not explain the circumstances or the aims of this conclusion. One can only surmise, just one year after the Ordinance Schism and still three years before their independence, that they were desirous of ensuring that the doctrines they held so strongly to, would be accurately accepted and conveyed to all who wished to call themselves a Methodist.

8.1.1.3 THE LARGE MINUTES⁷

From the first formal Conference of Methodism in Britain in 1744, Minutes of Wesley’s annual meetings were printed and circulated as one of the approved sources of Methodist belief and practise. “The Large Minutes,” (Wesley VIII : 299-338) which underwent its final revision in 1789, were reworked “to suit American conditions” (Richey 1991 : 47), consisting of about two thirds of the Large Minutes. (Baker 1976 : 163). This task of reworking Wesley’s Minutes was undertaken by the members of the 1784 Christmas Conference, which resulted in the publishing of the first American Discipline in 1785 under the title; “Minutes of several conversations between the Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D., the Rev. Francis Asbury and others.” This document continuously underwent revisions and updating as the church grew.

⁷ Officially known as “Minutes of Several Conversations Between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others; From the Year 1744, to the Year 1789.”

Wesley's diligence and vision to get his thoughts published and widely circulated, coupled with the strong administrative structures in both Britain and America, ensured that the preachers were always well armed. If they heeded the admonition and followed the example of their leaders to read whenever possible, they would eventually become well versed in Methodist practise and Wesleyan theology, and so would their hearers. Abel Stevens (1855 : 121) said "whosoever heard an ordinary Methodist sermon, however casually, thenceforward knew most, if not all, of the doctrine of grace."

The above three detailed works of Wesley's served as the "texts" for early Methodism's informal seminary, but they were not the primary printed resources of Methodism: the Bible always trumped any man-produced document.

8.1.1.4 THE BIBLE⁸

Wesley, as a man of one book, "enjoined his followers to be men of one book, an injunction which they conscientiously followed." (Barclay 1950 : 377). Wesley's works were of vital importance to early Methodism, but they were never equated with Scripture. The way the Methodists handled the Bible always made it abundantly clear to all who knew them, that the Bible was always their ultimate authority. If there ever was a discrepancy between the Bible and what the early Methodist learned and believed from tradition, reason or experience, the Bible always won in both thought and practice.⁹ Watters does not offer any definitive statements on the primacy of the Bible in his theology, but his treatment of the Bible and his numerous references to it, leaves no doubt that he, along with Wesley, was a man of one book.

As a youth, attempting to work his way into the graces of God, Watters says, "it was my constant practice to attend the Church with my prayer book, and often read my bible." (1806 : 4). Before he surrendered his will to God in full repentance Watters (1806 : 5) said he was often inclined to swear on his Bible that he would never sin again, but with little success. He (1806 : 7) also wrote the following:

I began to delight in the company of the pious, and shunned the company of others. I read my bible with seriousness and attention, and began to be uniform and earnest in private

⁸ In reverence this writer capitalizes the nouns Bible, Scripture and Word, when referring to the Christian Bible. This writer also capitalizes all pronouns for God.

⁹ See Outler (1991 : 21-37) for an explanation on what he (Outler) called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (Scripture, reason, tradition and experience) and the primacy of Scripture in Wesley's theology.

prayer, and gladly embraced every opportunity of hearing God's word declared without regarding by what denomination, and for several months lived outwardly as a Christian.

It was by the standard of the Scriptures that Watters judged the lives and testimonies of those he knew. Even the Methodist movement itself, and its accompanying standards, did not escape the scrutiny of Watters' inquiring mind as he constantly attempted to ascertain the validity of what he was doing in life, with the direction and help of God's Word.

Watters believed the Bible had a mystical, dynamic power to it that was driven by God Himself. If handled correctly the Bible, or the 'Word' as Watters liked to refer to it, could convict hardened sinners, illuminate the ignorant and calm the anxious. He (1806 : 23) said, "The word of the Lord would be as fire in my bones," and that he (1806 : 35) "was taught . . . by the word of truth." While preaching on the Alexandria Circuit Watters (1806 : 48) said, "so gloriously did the word of the Lord prevail," and while at a quarterly meeting in Virginia in 1777 the Word being preached was so powerful that it "was like a 'hammer and fire, -- that breaks the rocks in pieces.'"¹⁰ (1806 : 61).¹¹

One of Watters' favorite ways to refer to the Bible is as 'the word of his grace.' To Watters the Bible and its author, God, were inseparably linked. God empowered the Bible. He directed its preaching and blessed its handling. When heard by a needy individual, God used the received Word to accomplish His purpose. Watters confidently relied on the work of God through His Word to achieve the desired results that his (Watters') preaching intended. Watters' job was to simply execute his faithful acts of service, and God and His Word produced the results. When leaving the Chester Circuit in 1774 Watters (1806 : 44) bade the folk farewell and "recommended them to God and to the word of his grace."¹² When Watters (1806 : 54) reflected back on seven years of preaching he believed that God "bore witness to the word of his grace, and gave me seals to my ministry." In 1781 Watters (1806 : 86) says he "was praying that the word of his grace, might have its desired effect on saints and sinners" as God moved amongst those who would hear His Word.

¹⁰ A reference to Jeremiah 23:29. This writer acknowledges the editorial comments of Raymond Wrenn in the 2000 publication of Watters' autobiography for the identification of some of the Scriptural references used by Watters.

¹¹ See also Watters 1806 : 67, 89, 128, 140 for additional references to Watters' treatment of the Word.

¹² On two other occasions Watters (1806 : 98, 138) commits people to God and the "word of his grace." See also Watters 1782 : 15.

Watters' heavy reliance on the Bible, his conviction of its God empowered qualities, and the respect and allegiance that he and other Methodists of his time gave to the Bible, inevitably meant that they would take exception with those who did not hold to similar standards. In some respects all Methodists were very inclusive in their practice, but when it came to the fundamentals of their faith and the authority for their claims with regards to those fundamentals, the Methodists proved to be very exclusive.

8.1.2 AN EXCLUSIVE THEOLOGY

Methodism was never intended to be an exclusive institution, however, the deeper one moves into the organizational and leadership structures of particular groups, as is the case with most Christian denominations, the more exclusive membership becomes. Early Methodist gatherings were open to anyone, but society meetings were restricted to card-carrying members who had to meet certain criteria. Wesley (VIII : 301) was adamant that as a general rule, no strangers should be admitted to Society meetings. At one of the first Quarterly Meetings held in America, and the first for which minutes exist,¹³ Asbury (I 1958 : 60) asked; "Shall we be strict in our society meetings and not admit strangers? Agreed." Barclay (1950 : 303) says that "one and only one condition was required of those who sought admission to the Methodist Societies:" an acute desire to walk personally with God and to seek deliverance from sins. In Wesley's (VIII : 270) words it was: "To flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins." Although such an experience was the goal, a clear testimony of having attained such a level of personal spirituality was not always a prerequisite for admission, but a life that evidenced such a state was required for continued membership: "It is therefore expected of all who continued therein, that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation." (Wesley VIII : 270). Wesley went on to detail what these 'evidences' were in three lengthy paragraphs, thus establishing a very clear standard expected of those who call themselves Methodists.

Conferences were also not open to the general public, or even to regular Methodist attendees. They were initially restricted to active preachers only. Ordination was also reserved for certain preachers, who evidenced a deep level of commitment and who had a proven track record of faithful service. Likewise, the upper echelons of leadership were also available to only

¹³ See Clark Vol. I 1958 : 59.

a few. Although unique in many respects, there was nothing out of the ordinary or inherently faulty with how Methodism operated or how it was structured. The same applied to Methodist theology.

John Wesley, who was Anglican by affiliation and Arminian¹⁴ by theology, began his outdoor preaching ministry at the invitation of his friend George Whitefield, who happened to be a Calvinist. Although the two had some unfortunate public disagreements over theology, Wesley often suggested that Methodism was not theologically exclusive. He and other Methodist leaders went to great lengths to not allow theological differences to hinder inter ecclesial fellowship and cooperation. In his sermon entitled “Catholic Spirit” Wesley (V : 499) said, “May every Christian say . . . ‘thy heart is right, as my heart is with thy heart . . . if it be, give me thy hand.’” Burke (1964 : 11) said; “The *thought* (or theology) of Wesleyan Methodism was never a set of required beliefs in themselves but rather was intended always to be, everywhere and by all, an attempt to think clearly concerning how to live the Christian life.”¹⁵ Regardless of their good intentions in that regard, and what they purported to believe, early Methodism definitely did operate as a theologically exclusive movement in many respects.

In a letter to Asbury, (III 1958 : 31-32) dated October 3, 1783, Wesley was very firm on his thoughts about taking in preachers who did not line up with his theology:

Beware of preachers coming from Great Britain or Ireland without a full recommendation from me. Three of our traveling preachers here eagerly desired to go to America; but I could not approve of it by any means; because I am not satisfied that they thoroughly like either our discipline or our doctrine . . . Undoubtedly, the greatest danger to the work of God in America is likely to arise either from preachers coming from Europe, or from such as will arise from among yourselves, speaking perverse things, or bringing in among you new doctrines, particularly Calvinian. [sic]

The 1784 Spring Conference agreed with Wesley that a preacher’s beliefs ought to be evaluated before admission to the connection. (Minutes 1813 : 48). Likewise, the deed to the John Street Church in New York stated that the chapel could only be used by those who would “preach no other doctrine than is contained in . . . John Wesley’s Notes upon the New Testament and his four volumes of sermons.” (Wakeley 1858 : 26). The Minutes of the 1773 Methodist Conference in America made it clear that they were particular about what they believed and what those who

¹⁴ Jacob Arminius, (1560-1609) a Dutch pastor and university professor, disagreed with many tenets of Calvinist theology, as a result, Arminian theology developed. See Douglas (1978 : 70) for a brief list of the major differences between Calvinist (also referred to as Reformed) theology and Arminian theology.

¹⁵ Italics the original authors.

associated with them believed: “Ought not the doctrine and Discipline of the Methodists, as contained in the Minutes, to be the sole rule of our conduct, who labor in the connection with Mr. Wesley in America? Ans. Yes.” (Minutes 1813 : 5).

There was no mistaking the doctrines of the Methodist preachers: they were clearly Wesleyan. Even though the Americans would successfully de-claw Wesley’s organizational control over them, they unapologetically perpetuated his theology and expected those who joined them to do the same. Contrary to this, Heitzenrater (Richey [ed.] 1993 : 68) argues that “no American Methodist candidate for ministry was required to make any positive doctrinal subscription, either to the Articles, to Wesley’s *Sermons* and *Notes*, or to any other documents.” This seems to contradict what Wesley’s intent was in the letter he sent Asbury, referenced above. If Heitzenrater is correct in saying that Methodist preachers did not have to formally subscribe to the doctrines contained in Wesley’s works, this writer is convinced that at a minimum, they were expected to. Heitzenrater (Richey [ed.] 1993 : 68) further suggests that Wesley’s *Sermons*, *Notes*, and the Articles of Religion were intended to serve as “minimal norms or standards by which to measure the orthodoxy (not necessarily the adequacy) of doctrine held and preached by the Methodists.” More than a century earlier Abel Stevens (1865 : 137) noted that the Articles were more of an “indicatory rather than an obligatory dogmatic symbol.” This writer is convinced that William Watters did not stand alone amongst early American Methodists when he evidenced no ambivalence concerning his commitment to believing, preaching and living by Wesleyan theology, and his clear expectation that other Methodists ought to do the same.¹⁶

As a youth Watters was very impressed with the message and piety of the Methodists, whom he clearly held in high esteem as opposed to his impressions of other local clergy. Watters, although not naturally judgmental by disposition, was not reserved in declaring where he saw serious fault. Even before his conversion, for example, Watters (1806 : 3) recognized that the two local ministers with whom he was acquainted, “were both immoral men.” Watters was adamant that there were clear lines both morally and theologically that separated those who he believed were correct in faith and practice and those who he believed were in error.

¹⁶ In the article referenced above Heitzenrater (Richey [ed.] 1993 : 70) goes on to show how a motion at the 1808 American General Conference, aimed at establishing that Wesley’s *Notes* and *Sermons*, among other works, were indeed the doctrinal standards of Methodism, failed. The American Methodists were evidently further cementing their independence of Wesley, first organizationally, then doctrinally.

In July, 1770, when Watters (1806 : 5) first heard the Methodists proclaiming the prerequisite for salvation as being a personal born again experience, he was puzzled at the thought, but never once questioned its exclusive nature. Watters never leans toward an all-roads-lead-to-heaven theology. On the contrary, as a devout Methodist, Watters devoted his entire life to the propagation and defense of its clear message and strong organization. When threatened by outside attacks or internal strife, it was Watters who rose, at times alone, to defend the movement and its theology.

When Watters began preaching shortly after his conversion, and later when he commenced itinerant service, he never believed that Methodism was the only keeper of correct theology. He did, however, believe that their particular call for personal heart religion was correct, and that those who disagreed on that point, were in error. In this regard Watters was, along with most other Methodists of the time, unapologetically exclusive.

Within a few days of his first itinerant journey with Robert Williams, Watters (1806 : 26) noted meeting a man who was “utterly a stranger” to the quality of personal spirituality Watters had come to expect from people who claimed, or appeared, to be religious. Then, when he and Williams arrived in southern Virginia, Watters’ (1806 : 27) somewhat naïve expectation of all Methodists was sorely challenged by the graceless and rowdy congregation who dared call themselves Methodist. Later, Watters’ verbal duel with an Anglican parson on just his second itinerant journey illustrated how intentional Watters was in defending Methodist theology. Watters (1806 : 36-39) had preached a sermon that clearly laid out the very narrow path seekers were expected to take if they desired acceptance from God, and the consequences if the path was not followed. The local parson in the area, who had been listening to Watters’ outdoor sermon, quickly responded with a litany of objections, questioning Watters’ theology. Watters (1806 : 38) noted how previously the parson had claimed that he knew nothing of personal heart religion that assures one of their faith in God, but that all he and others could ever have spiritually, with any assurance, is “a hope . . . of being saved.” Conversely, Watters led believers into an experience where they became convinced of their accepted status as children of God. Three years later Watters (1806 : 49-52) again had to defend Methodism publicly, in response to a local parson’s verbal attacks, but this time it was over Methodist practice, and not so much theology. Whether defending his theology or practice, Watters was always up to the task.

When reporting on the death of his mother-in-law, Ann Adams, Watters was very clear that he believed that Methodists and Anglicans, by-and-large, preached different doctrines, and that it was the Methodist doctrine that would consistently lead someone to saving faith. Watters (1806 : 111) had said that Mrs. Adams, who was a member of the Anglican Church, had for a long time sensed that there was a problem with the church's teaching and that it was only when she heard the Methodists preach that she was "convinced and converted."

When reflecting on Methodism late in his life, Watters felt a deep sense of fulfillment that he had joined so noble a movement, which he was convinced, was theologically sound and undoubtedly blessed by God. His rather nostalgic overview of Methodism in the last few pages of his autobiography, and the part he had played in it, portrays a view that is not absolutely exclusive, yet he clearly believed the organization was amongst the best in existence. In spite of some evidence in his words of an ecumenical spirit, which this writer believes were genuine, there is no doubting where Watters' allegiance lay. The following thoughts of Watters (1806 : 139-141) demonstrates his deep love for Methodism and his view on the movement's significance:

I shall further observe, that as a Christian and a member of the Methodist Church, when I first cast in my lot among them, I had no doubt of their being the people of God, and that for Christian experience, and holy, humble walking in all simplicity before God and man, I know of no denomination to be compared to them. This is precisely my opinion still, however, I may and do think well of many individuals among other denominations.

As a minister among the Methodists, I never joined them for the loaves and fishes; but purely because I confidently believed that God had not only called me to preach, but to preach among 'them' the unsearchable riches of his grace. I have still the same conviction alive on my mind, that there is no other people with whom I could be so happy, nor with whom I could do as much good.

As to the doctrines held and espoused by the Methodists, I have not only embraced them all, but to the present day continue established in them. Yet I feel the greatest cheerfulness in wishing every man the liberty of thinking for himself, as every one must give an account to God or himself in the day of the Lord Jesus.

As to the discipline of the Methodist Church, though I have no doubt but it has its defects, yet I do think that it is by far the most scriptural and the most primitive of any I have ever seen, and the best calculated to spread the genuine gospel, and to keep up the life and power of godliness in the Church of Christ . . .

I have never found an obstacle in my way in readily believing well of, and heartily wishing the best for, all of every denomination, who have evidenced their faith by a pious life, however differently they have thought from me. Why should not anyone do the same? when so many holy and wise men in almost all ages of the Church have differed so widely in the less essential parts of their religious sentiments. However well established and assured anyone may be in his orthodoxy, yet must the best and wisest of

men know that they see but darkly, as through a veil. There are more truths, and of much more importance, in which we perfectly agree, than those smaller points in which we differ.

Watters was a Christian theologian: a member of the universal Church of Jesus Christ, but he was also a Methodist, and proudly so, almost to a fault. The final basis of his theology that warrants some detailing is the aspect of personal experiential religion: again, a cornerstone of Wesleyanism.

8.1.3 PERSONAL EXPERIENTIAL RELIGION

A significant defining characteristic of early Methodist belief and practice was their emphasis on personal experiential religion, which was realized in an encounter and an ongoing relationship with Jesus the redeeming Saviour. This was at the centre of much of their preaching, which they taught was not only possible, but was required for salvation. God in the form of Jesus could be experienced: He could forgive sin, change any life and empower anyone for service. This experiential faith, although preached and written about, was not acquired through book learning, but through one's own personal plunge into the saving arms of Jesus Christ. The Methodists often considered anyone suspect, who could not testify to having experienced their faith on a personal level, which, as an idiosyncratic aspect of their faith, brought them into much conflict with their Anglican brethren. When commenting on the state of Anglican clergy Bangs (1838 : 76) said, "most of the clergy in the southern provinces were destitute of experimental godliness." In contrast, in 1777, while preaching on the Brunswick Circuit in southern Virginia, Watters (1806 : 58) had the rare distinction of hearing an Anglican preach, whose theology was actually compatible with his own: "I had the pleasure of hearing Mr. McRoberts¹⁷ preach Christ, and him crucified to a listening multitude. He was the first minister of the church of England, that ever I heard preach Christian experience."

It was this considerable difference between the Methodists and many Anglicans that fueled much of Methodist success: Methodists offered God on a very personal level, regardless of where the individual was spiritually and regardless of the presence or absence of buildings, liturgy or ordained clergy. Stein (1984 : 33) says that the Methodists promoted more a theology

¹⁷ McRoberts often helped and worked with Methodists. He was a close associate of Jarratt.

of experience than a theology formalized by creeds. Personal experience was a cornerstone of the Methodist preacher's theology: the anthem to their sermons.

This unapologetic emphasis on personal experiential religion is what added to the ammunition of Methodist detractors who labelled the Methodists enthusiasts: an intended slur that never seemed to faze them:

The charge preferred against us was not hypocrisy, but enthusiasm. Our opposers [sic] did not blame us for not living up to our profession outwardly, but for professing too much-more than is the privilege of man in this life, in speaking with Christian confidence of the knowledge of a present salvation by the forgiveness of sins and the witness of the Spirit. (Ware 1839 : 104)

Wesley himself had to often endure ridicule because of his enthusiastic and extemporaneous ways. Wesley clearly “preferred religious excitement to complete indifference” (Hempton 2005 : 34) yet he himself never gave himself in abandonment to enthusiasm and was always careful to examine such accounts to ensure that they were genuine religious experiences and not just hype. As Hempton (2005 : 34) also states; “Wesley sympathized with enthusiasm, but was never carried away by it.” It was his encounter on board the ship to Georgia in late 1735 and early 1736, with Moravian Christians who demonstrated experiential religion amidst a fierce storm that “convinced John Wesley that these simple-hearted Moravians possessed a secret he had not yet discovered.” (Sweet 1933 : 33). Wesley's own experience on Aldersgate Street in May of 1738 confirmed for him what he had seen in the Moravians two years earlier; what his father had encouraged him to seek, and what he so desperately wanted for himself: a personal faith that was undeniably experiential.¹⁸ It could be argued that what Wesley personally experienced gave birth to that aspect of Methodist theology: experiential religion.

It was this enthusiastic experiential aspect of Methodist faith and theology that initially puzzled and subsequently drew Watters to the Methodists. It would become one of the defining qualities of his theology. The title of his autobiography: “A Short Account of the **Christian Experience**¹⁹ and Ministerial Labors of William Watters,” clearly suggested to his readers where his emphasis would lie. About his early impressions of experiential religion Watters (1806 : 5-6) wrote the following:

¹⁸ See Wesley's Journal, Volume I : 21-22, 98-104

¹⁹ Emphasis this writers'.

Some time in July, 1770, I had frequent opportunities of hearing the Methodists preach in the neighborhood where I was brought up, but could not conceive what they meant by saying, we must be born again, and, though I thought but little of all I heard for some time, yet dared not despise and revile them as many then did. By frequently being in company with several of my old acquaintances, who had embraced and professed Methodism, among whom was my eldest brother and his wife, (who I thought equal to any religious people in the world) and hearing them all declare as with one voice, that they knew nothing of heart religion, the religion of the Bible, till since [after] they heard the Methodists preach, utterly confounded me; and I could but say with Nicodemus, "How can these things be"? While I was marveling and wondering at these unheard of things that those strange people were spreading wherever they came, before I was aware, I found my heart inclined to forsake many of my vain practices.

When Watters (1806 : 16) did eventually experience what the Methodists had preached and testified about he was able to explain in vivid language how experiential the moment was for him: "So sensible was my change from darkness to light – from death to life – from the Devil and sin to Christ and grace, that I felt the importance of our Saviour's [sic] assertion- 'My Kingdom is within you.'" Watters went on to explain that those who had never personally experienced the change that God brings about in a penitent believer's life, would find it hard to comprehend what he was talking about. He (1806 : 16-17) said it would appear, "strange and enthusiastic . . . to those who have not experienced any thing of the sort."

About his very personal conversion and the role the Methodists played, Watters (1806 : 17) said he "never met with, or heard of any other people who preached up or professed to know anything of what I now enjoyed." On his first itinerant journey Watters noted several times that he (1806 : 26-27) and Williams came across so many people who had "great ignorance of experiential religion . . . [and they] found very few in the course of three hundred miles who knew, experientially, anything of the Lord Jesus Christ, or the power of his grace." Watters and his fellow Methodist preachers used the reality of their experience as one of their main selling tools when presenting the truth of the gospel to others. Later in life Watters (1806 17-18) said "I . . . doubt this day whether there are any (as a sect) who enjoy experimental religion in its native life and power, as the Methodists do."

As a Methodist Watters believed he had encountered and experienced the truth about religion and was subsequently propelled to lead others to the same. While spending some recuperation time with his family and friends after his first itinerant journey in 1773 Watters says he (1806 : 35) "was taught by experience, as well as by the word of truth." Truth and experience

were linked in Watters' spiritual journey and theology. This dual nature of Watter's theology was further illustrated in late 1779 while describing a revival like atmosphere at a quarterly meeting. About the sermon that dealt with deliverance from inbred sin, Watters (1806 : 75-76) said, "Many were the witnesses present who set their seals to those divine truths, knowing them not barely from the hearing of the ear; but from blessed experience:"

No element of the Wesleyan heritage was more wholeheartedly accepted and more faithfully declared than the emphasis on religion as experience. It was this that gave the untrained itinerant preachers confidence and boldness, that clothed their message with power, and that constituted the secret of their hold upon the masses. It made religion a tangible thing, readily understandable by all, that could be put to the test of daily living. (Barclay 1950 : 301-2)

The preachers were always calling their hearers to test and experience for themselves the validity of what they were preaching and they wanted their new converts to own the message for themselves: to experience it. The preachers could testify, and often did, of their own personal journeys that resulted in these very personal experiential conversions. They preached what they were living, with much success.

Throughout his years in ministry Watters (1806 : 5, 26) pressed his hearers to experience this "heart religion" that he had first seen in Methodists, then his older brothers, before enjoying and proving it for himself. He was not bashful in declaring that religion, in order to be valid and beneficial, had to be experienced on a personal level. The onus was on the sinner to accept from God this offer of salvation as an act of their free will, and then to allow God to bring about the inner change that was required and expected, and which they looked for in those who testified to the experience.²⁰ Watters (1806 : 18) said it was the reality of this visible change perceived by so many, that he and other preachers used to persuade their listeners to seek God's saving and changing grace. It was a message that Watters carried into all aspects of his theology, particularly salvation and sanctification.

²⁰ Shortly after his conversion Watters (1806 : 18) said that his ability to pray extemporaneously was considered as one of the proofs of his spiritual change: "Praying in a short time after without a book, which, to some, appeared proof that there was a notable miracle wrought on me indeed."

8.2 A SYSTEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE THEOLOGY OF WILLIAM WATTERS

Watters did not purposely detail his theology for the analysis of those who would come after him, nor did he ever write a lengthy treatise in defence of any particular theological view that he held. He was primarily a preacher, not a writer or a theologian, yet in his own right, he was a theologian, with deep insights into the character, activity and redemptive purpose of God. As with much of Wesley's works, Watters' theology is gleaned from the pages of his writings as he recorded his life's experiences, his interactions with colleagues and detractors, and his reports on the faithful work of others. As a result there is no systematic order to Watters' theological views, yet the historian is able to quickly ascertain those views that Watters believed in most fervently and clung to most dearly: most noteworthy, Watters emphasized an almighty, merciful yet firm God, incarnate in a loving sacrificial saviour, operating in the Holy Spirit, a practical experiential faith, the very real possibility of instantaneous salvation, freedom from the guilt and chains of sin through God's work of sanctification, and the bright prospects of an eternal reward. Watters was a true Wesleyan, theoretically and experientially.

The rest of this chapter will be devoted to a systematic analysis of Watters' theology. This writer gratefully acknowledges the use of Orton Wiley's²¹ broad outline of Christian Theology, which he published in three volumes, in the middle of the last century.

8.2.1 GOD

The words 'trinity' or 'Godhead' do not explicitly appear in Watters' writings, but this does not suggest that Watters did not have any clear understanding or beliefs about the character and operation of God. It needs to be remembered that Watters intended to record the events of his life and the life of his brother-in-law, not necessarily his theology; however, his writings clearly reveal a very deep and complex understanding of God and His purpose in the world.

Watters' appreciation for the operation of the Godhead is evident in a few instances where he mentions the Godhead separately yet working in unison. While commentating on his pre-conversion spiritual agony, Watters was aware that God controlled his eternal destiny; that

²¹ Wiley was one of the preeminent Nazarene theologians of the twentieth century.

the Holy Spirit was the force working in him, drawing him to the point of full surrender, and that it was the Lordship of Jesus that he would have to submit to: “In Hell I was sure I should clear God of willing my damnation.²² My God! how little do sinners know what they are doing, while resisting the Holy Spirit, and refusing to have Christ to reign over them.” (Watters 1806 : 12).²³ Similarly, when Watters described his impressions soon after his conversion, in a single sentence he spoke of the glory of God, the work of Jesus saving lost sinners, and the operation of the Holy Spirit as an indwelling power within believers:

My burden was gone -- my sorrow fled -- my soul and all that was within me rejoiced in hopes of the glory of God: while I beheld such fullness and willingness in the Lord Jesus to save lost sinners, and my soul so rested on him, that I could now for the first time call Jesus Christ, “Lord, by the Holy Ghost given unto me.”²⁴ (Watters 1806 : 15)

Watters’ concept of God was not complicated, while at the same time it was not simplistic. Watters knew God. He stood and worked in reverent fear and awe of God yet God was also Watters’ ever-present companion, whom he loved and whom he loved to serve. Watters also knew that God loved him. Following are several brief but varied snapshots of Watters’ understanding of God.

8.2.1.1 THE GLORY OF GOD

There is no ground for any reader of Watters’ works, or the works of his contemporaries, to conclude that they were seekers after self-edification. For Watters the promotion of and the reverence of the ‘Glory of God’ was paramount. God was not to be trifled with and any endeavor of the believer in the name of God, had to ultimately be seeking the glory of God and not self. In the introduction to his autobiography Watters (1806)²⁵ wrote; “For I do assure you that I have no other design than to promote your salvation and the glory of God.” This would be an attitude that was evidenced throughout his life. Watters served Almighty God constantly and respectfully, as he sought to promote the Glory of God. At his salvation Watters (1806 : 15) “rejoiced in hopes of the glory of God.” In late 1779, Watters (1806 : 76) prayed; “May the Lord be as a wall of fire

²² Watters’ use of this statement is hypothetical.

²³ Asbury (I 1958 : 651) referred to the Trinity as “eternal Father, coequal Son, and everlasting Spirit.” See also Asbury II 1958 : 324, 756.

²⁴ A possible paraphrase of Romans 5:5.

²⁵ No page numbers are listed in the introduction.

around us and the glory of God in the midst.” Later in his life, in a possible effort to warn younger preachers who would come after him, Watters (1806 : 118) said; “if the preacher has any object in view but the glory of God in the salvation of souls, he can hardly stand his ground long.”

Watters’ life demonstrated, and his writings concurred, that he labored, suffered and was ultimately willing to die for the glory of God.

8.2.1.2 GOD THE FATHER

Watters uses the word ‘God’ over two hundred times in his autobiography²⁶ but only a half dozen times does he connect the words father and God. Watters’ own father died when he was a toddler and although he had a stepfather who also died before William reached adulthood, we are not told what impact this had on him. He (1806 : 19) does tell us that one of his brothers was more of a father figure to him than anyone else was in his life. Watters’ references to God as his heavenly father are pointed, but they do not reveal an overly sensitive attitude to this aspect of God’s character because of his own childhood deficiencies.

Watters’ references to God as ‘Father’ are often descriptive in nature of God’s operation in the world, and not so much an attempt to portray God as a fatherly figure. Watters’ (1806 : 7, 62-63) repeatedly separates the operational work of God the Father from that of God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. In one example, when Watters was seeking the blessing of sanctification, he (1806 : 66) cried out; “Father glorify thy name -- pour out thy Spirit.” Watters’ clearest example of a description of God as a Father in the human sense portrayed God as the watchful and sustaining presence over his life and that of his family’s. As he set off on a life of itinerant service Watters confidently committed the wellbeing of his family into the care of his heavenly Father when he (1806 : 25) said, “I found such resignation, and so clear a conviction that my way was of the Lord, that I was enabled to commit them and myself to the care of our heavenly father in humble confidence.”²⁷

²⁶ This statistic, and others like it in this paper, were gleaned from the 1998 electronic reproduction of Watters’ autobiography by Duane Maxey of Holiness Data Ministries.

²⁷ See also Watters 1806 : 65-66 for additional references to God as Father.

8.2.1.3 SIN AGAINST A HOLY GOD

In Watters' theology he recognized very early what David²⁸ had confessed to when confronted with his sin: that all sin is against God, and Watters was ever intentional of not wanting to sin, or even offend God, if at all possible. He (1806 : 4) wrote, "Many times when I had been sinning against God, I felt much inward uneasiness, and often, on reflection, felt a hell within." When still wrestling with what social activities he should refrain from as a young man Watters (1806 : 4) said he "left the dancing room to pray to God that he might not be offended with me." About two years after his conversion Watters (1806 : 31) was deeply aware that certain aspects of his life were displeasing to Holy God, which motivated him to seek a deeper and a more faithful walk with God: "For several months I was very much affected, with a deep sense, not only of my unfaithfulness but more especially of the many evils of my unsanctified nature and daily imperfections before a holy God."

Watters was certainly not sinlessly perfect but he did strive to be so, or at least, as righteous as possible, with the help of God. His primary motivating factor was that he served a sinless God who called His people to a life of righteousness.

8.2.1.4 JUDGE AND KING

A reading of Watters' conversion experience shows his understanding of God as one who sought justice for wrongs: it was a need for justice that had to be appeased. Technically, Watters believed that Christ was the propitiation for God's need for justice. As a young man Watters had attempted to provide this propitiation himself, but failed only to realize that God, who required the propitiation, also provided the means in the form of Jesus.

²⁸ II Samuel 12 : 13.

Watters, (1782 : 6) and his brother-in-law William Adams,²⁹ had a clear “sense of the wrath of an angry God,” that needed to be appeased. They “warned . . . sinners . . . to flee from the wrath to come, which . . . was every moment hanging over their heads, while they were out of the ark of safety.” (Watters 1782 : 21). Watters believed that God would punish those steeped in sin. Asbury had similar sentiments. While yellow fever was devastating the West Indies in 1794, Asbury (II 1958 : 27) said that God may allow the disease to spread to America, and thus “punish us for our sins.” Yet God was also love, and as such He had lovingly provided the means for acquiring the justice He sought so that sinners would not be punished if they responded to God’s provision. Although Watters wrestled over his conversion for an extended period, he did not play with God. One gets the sense that Watters wanted to enter into a relationship with God correctly to avoid His wrath, or not at all: “I saw in a manner which no words can fully express, that I was a sinner -- the chief of sinners -- condemned by the law and worthy of death eternal.” (Watters 1806 : 10).

Coupled with his impressions of God’s justice, Watters knew that God had to be feared, although his reverential fear of God is often linked to his love of God and his acknowledgment of God’s wonderful majesty, which reveals a very healthy understanding of God: God’s need for justice, which at times solicited fear from His worshipers, should not be debilitating, but should propel His people to serve God as earthly servants serve their king.

Before his conversion Watters suspected that his attendance at certain social events was not pleasing to God, yet he (1806 : 6) said; “I had not that degree of the fear of God to leave the place as I might have done.” Then about seven years later, after having gained significant spiritual growth and maturity, while serving on the Sussex Circuit in early 1778, Watters (1806 : 63) says he and others “were so filled with the love of God, and over-awed with his Divine

²⁹ William Adams, the brother-in-law of William Watters, died on December 3, 1779 at the age of twenty: “Many had expected that he was to be a very useful man in the vineyard” (Watters 1806 : 77), but he served as a Methodist preacher for less than a year, a few months of which were with Watters on the Baltimore Circuit. Watters preached Adams’ funeral sermon on January 1, 1780 and proceeded to write a thirty-four-page account of his life and death. Thinking that no one outside the Adams circle would be interested, Watters showed what he had written to close family and friends only. Watters (1782 : 2) said that many who read his account “soon were of the opinion, it might do real extensive service if made more public.” He proceeded to have three thousand copies printed in 1782. Watters referenced Adams’ death and his pamphlet on Adams’ life three times in his 1806 publication. (Pages 77, 96, 113). One of William Adams’ dying wishes to his mother was “that Christ may become all the world to me, and all my heart to be love.” (Watters 1782 : 23). Stukenbroeker (1974 : 61) is the only other historian this writer has come across who has made any reference to this 1782 publication of William Watters, yet Stukenbroeker does not quote from it.

Majesty, that we lay prostrate at his footstool, scarcely able to rise from our knees for a considerable time.”

Watters knew that God had deeper blessings for him and his hearers to experience, and that they had to fearfully wait on a sovereign God to act in His timing, rather than some how orchestrate their own blessings.

8.2.1.5 THE MERCY OF GOD

Watters uses the word ‘mercy’ almost thirty times in his autobiography. To Watters God’s mercy was something that he could surrender to and rely upon as a resource for his daily life. It was only through God’s mercy that he and anyone else on this earth were ever converted. William Adams believed that if he was to ever find “favour [sic] with God, it must be through his amazing mercy in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Watters 1782 : 8). God’s mercy operated as an invisible, driving and directing force that often helped Watters and his associates steer clear of many of the devil’s pitfalls.

God’s mercy, regardless of where a sinner or a believer was on life’s journey, was always potentially accessible, yet not solely because the people prayed for it, but because God Himself was merciful. According to Watters, (1806 : 8, 20) it was God’s mercy that he surrendered to at conversion and it was God’s mercy that the members of their young society cried for as they sought God’s forgiveness. Later on the Trenton Circuit, Watters (1806 : 45) says, “the cries of the people for mercy were frequently loud and earnest,” so much so, that the words of his sermons were often drowned out. These outbursts that were directed at God’s mercy were motivational factors in Watters’ ministry because the end result was what he sought: peace with God, a product of His mercy.

In Watters’ theology, God’s mercy operated even when it was not cried out for or imminently expected, simply because God, in His sovereignty and mercy, chose to extend it to those who needed it. When God’s mercy became evident, it often seemed to catch Watters by surprise but never as an unwilling recipient of it. It was only through the mercy of God, according to Watters, (1806 : 3) that his entire neighborhood did not perish in hell under the leadership of their two local parsons who were ignorant of true experiential religion. When Watters (1806 : 36) set off for only his second itinerant journey at the tender age of twenty-two

he joyfully reported that “through [God’s] infinite mercy I felt a divine evidence within that He would be with me.”

While leader of American Methodism during the Revolutionary War, as he took care of his own circuit and attended the Quarterly Meetings on several other circuits, amidst a blistering winter, Watters recognized that he was a blessed man, being cared for by a merciful God. He said, (1806 : 78) “Through infinite mercy I was preserved from many dangers.”

Watters could have ascribed his good fortune at times to his own wisdom, his fortitude, or his determination, yet he never does. He always recognized that he was God’s, and that all he was blessed with was simply because of God’s bountiful mercy.

8.2.1.6 GOD’S INSTRUMENT IN HIS REDEMPTIVE PLAN

A natural product of Watters realizing that his blessings were a result of God’s mercy was his lifelong passion to do nothing else but to serve His God. Watters believed that the redemptive mission of God on earth was exactly that: God’s, and that he was merely an instrument of God’s work, called, equipped and watched over, but still just an instrument. Amidst the revival on the Brunswick Circuit in 1777 Watters (1806 : 58) said; “We all appeared to breath the same spirit, and I verily believe our sole desire, in leaving our little all, was that we might be instrumental in the hands of God, in bringing lost sinners into the fold of Christ.”

Watters recognized that he was God’s instrument, to be used when and how God saw fit, with the ultimate goal of seeing sinners brought into the arms of a merciful saving God. In this sense God used humans to exact His will on earth, but one never gets the sense from Watters that he is doing God a favor. As sovereign, God did not need Watters, yet He chose to use him. Watters humbly appreciated this aspect of God’s character and redemptive plan.

In the introduction to his autobiography Watters (1806) prayed for “God to stretch forth his arm everywhere and save sinners,” believing that it was God who did the saving, and not individuals themselves. Shortly after his own conversion Watters (1806 : 22) acknowledged that it was God’s work through him, that resulted in conversions: “I found that God had indisputably owned and blessed my feeble endeavors in the conversion of several in different neighborhoods.”

At various times Watters expressed his desire to be God’s lifelong instrument in the ministry: “My only wish was for the will of God to be done in and by me.” (1806 : 85). “I awoke

with my mind, stayed on God, and much drawn out with desires to do and suffer his righteous will.” (1806 : 86). “I am, my gracious God, in thy hand. I am, through thy grace, willing to live or die.” (1806 : 93).

At times the reader of Watters’ autobiography is impressed with the sense that Watters had a very poor self-image: that he often felt too poorly of himself, in spite of his evident success and the positive reports of others about his service. These negative personal assessments of himself lessen with time. Watters’ sentiments become most positive when he is conscious of the blessings of God in his life as an instrument of the Lord’s. He ultimately desired nothing more. “God knows I never had any other end in view, in preaching to you the gospel of his grace.” (Watters 1806).³⁰

8.2.1.7 THE PRESENCE, POWER AND WORK OF GOD

As God’s instrument, recognizing that his work would be in vain if God never manifested Himself in their meetings, Watters relished the times that he experienced the powerful moving of God. As such, in Watters’ theology, God was never distant, or unapproachable, particularly when a congregation, with one heart and mind, were both singing praises to God and crying out for His blessings. Late in 1775, amidst the tensions of war, Watters (1806 : 48) reported having “several very astonishing instances of the mighty power of God, in the conviction and conversion of several respectable persons.” A little while later, while in the Baltimore area, Watters (1806 : 55-56) said; “We had been often uncommonly blessed at such times, with the presence and power of the most high God.” Then in 1777, about God’s work at a Quarterly meeting, Watters (1806 : 61) had the following to report: “The God of Daniel was in the midst, and many on both days of our meeting shouted aloud the praises of our Immanuel. We parted filled with zeal, and more than ever determined to follow the Lord fully.”

As a result of the moving of God, much was accomplished: Watters and others matured spiritually; they were emboldened for service, they were equipped to carry out the duties assigned to them and they were empowered to take on any and all forces, in the name of God and Methodism, that would stand in their way. This is what God did in and through them. It was

³⁰ This statement is found in the introduction to his bibliography where no page numbers are listed.

never, according to Watters' theology, what he and the Methodists were ever able to do for themselves.

A prayer of Watters (1806 : 76) in late 1779 sums up his impressions of God's work in his service, the need they all had for God to move in such a way, and the ultimate end that Watters and his co-workers envisaged: "May the Lord be as a wall of fire around us and the glory of God in the midst, until all our days are numbered. Until then may we watch and toil to make the blessed shore."

8.2.1.8 THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

The knowledge of God is infinite. As such, God is willing and able to explore an individual's deepest thoughts, and even expose them so that His will can be realized, albeit painful at times.

Watters seemed to wrestle with the omniscience of God at times, only to rest in it at other times. Asbury (I 1958 : 191) believed that "secret things belong to God," some of which are revealed to the obedient. It is this aspect of Watters' concept of God's knowledge and the realization of his own sin that occasionally did battle in Watters' soul and mind. As a young man in his pre-conversion state, Watters (1806 : 2, 7) believed that "God knew my heart [and that] God knows I was sincere in all that I did." As an adult while wrestling with the problem of lingering sin in his life, Watters (1806 : 41) was fully cognizant of the fact that God knew his state and that God would even allow Watters to remain in a state of anxiety over his sin until God chose to draw him into a deeper experience. Later in life, while in extreme poor health and in a melancholy moment, Watters (1806 : 84) said; "God knows that I saw myself unworthy and unprofitable," of the privilege of being a preacher, although he did consider the work, the best vocation he could have ever chosen.

Watters never exhibits the spirit of one who has become overly complacent with his knowledge of God, or God's knowledge of him. The potential of sin would always keep him vigilant since God knew his heart more intimately than he knew it himself.

8.2.2 SIN

Sin was a serious issue to Watters, which warranted his mentioning the word, or its derivatives, over one hundred times in his autobiography. Watters knew that he was a sinner and he was not

ashamed of stating so because through the grace of God, he did not remain in a state of habitual sin all of his life. Watters believed that sin had separated him from God, but that through God, the gap could be victoriously traversed.

Watters is very candid in describing his youthful tussles with sin, his salvation from sin and his subsequent victory over the long-lasting and potentially debilitating grip of sin. Watters clearly understood that sin was the major obstacle that could keep a believer from a close union with Christ. He also believed that the acts of sin were not only forgivable, but that God could set a believer free from the hold that sin has on people. Further, Watters believed that humans are born into a state of sin, rather than acquiring the capacity to sin as one grows. Watters (1806 : 17) said he was “born a child of wrath.” Wesley (IX : 456) referred to it as “a total apostasy and universal corruption of man.”

Although not terribly wicked in his youth, in fact many thought him to be a Christian because of his lifestyle, Watters was convinced that he was a sinner, in danger of the fire of hell if he remained on his present course. The following comments about his youthful state of sin also reveal much about his theology.

“I thought myself, at such times, one of the vilest sinners on earth, and was frequently afraid that all who saw me would know how wicked I was.” (1806 : 2).

“The divine Spirit did, both with and without means, mightily strive with me, a poor sinner.” (1806 : 6).

“I saw in a manner which no words can fully express, that I was a sinner-the chief of sinners.” (1806 : 10).

“O wretched sinner that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death.”³¹ (1806 : 10).

Watters felt deeply that his sin was displeasing to God and that every act of sin was in fact a sin against God. It was this realization that eventually drove him to his knees in repentance; however, Watters did not believe that his ill-at-ease feelings about sin were moments of self-induced guilt. He knew that it was God Himself who laid on him the guilt and remorse he felt over sin. Watters (1806 : 9) said, “The Lord again smote my rocky heart, and caused it to gush out with penitential sorrow for my many sins against Him.”

³¹ A paraphrase reference to Romans 7:24.

Watters was convinced that in his own strength he could do nothing about his sinful state. Reading his Bible, avoiding places of vice or even consulting with local established religious leaders would not help. Consequently Watters (1806 : 3) says; “I was held in the chains of my sins, too often a willing captive of the devil:”

For a year before I desisted from the Devil's service, I saw so plainly I was in the way to hell, that I was often driven to make great promises to do better, and thought I would give the world (if mine) that I could overcome every sin. And when my corruptions would betray me into secret but most crying evils, I have been at various times on the very point of taking my Bible, and in the most solemn manner swearing that I would never be guilty of the like again, and nothing kept me from so doing, but a fear that even then I should break through, and that there would remain no more mercy for such a poor wretch, who had added perjury to the black list of his innumerable offenses. (Watters 1806 : 4-5)

Throughout his life Watters exhibited a strong disposition to persist in the most trying of times. This trait was clearly evident when he struggled over sin as a youth. After a prolonged period of agonizing, with his brothers and others praying with him, Watters (1806 : 8) said; “I went home much distressed, and fully determined by the grace of God to seek the salvation of my soul with my whole heart, and never rest till I knew the Lord had blotted out my sins.” When he eventually believed that God had truly forgiven him of his sin Watters was convinced that it was all God’s doing, that God had blotted out his (1806 : 17) sins: “My Almighty Saviour, [sic] who hath brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay.”³²

Salvation was not the final battle with sin in Watters’ life. For years after his conversion Watters struggled with the affects of lingering sin in his life, which he theologically referred to as the ‘nature of sin’ or ‘indwelling sin.’ Watters believed that a deeper work from God was needed in his life to draw him even closer to the Savior and to keep him from the traps of the devil, which he (1806 : 7) once referred to as the “heinous nature of sin.”

From the time of his conversion Watters had no doubt who he was in Christ. He never wavered from his belief that he was truly a sinner who had been saved by God’s grace, but his spirit found no rest as long as sin remained a significant factor in his life. Watters never suggests that he could forever, on this side of eternity, be free from all aspects of sin or temptation, but in true Wesleyan fashion, he was convinced that he could have victory from the ongoing effects of the remnants of sin in his life. These effects, Watters (1806 : 75) believed, could be destroyed.

³² A reference to Psalm 40:2.

Eventually, in 1778 he (1806 : 64) wrote; “I knew that I was, in Christ, saved from the power and guilt of sin, but not from its remains.”³³

A further aspect of Watters’ theology of sin that is abundantly clear is that he does not believe that one is saved in their sin. Sinners, in Watters’ thinking, are not saved so that they can remain in their sin, and thus continue to habitually sin. Instead, Watters clearly believed that God saves people from their sin: it is why Christ came to earth and died on the cross. On at least four separate occasions Watters’ refers to the notion of God saving people from their sin.

“I . . . believe that scores were added to the Lord, of such as were saved from sin.” (1806 : 47).

“God, was my utmost salvation from all sin.” (1806 : 64).

“I could not be satisfied without pressing with all my might, a present and full salvation from all sin.” (1806 : 75).

On the death of Watters’ mother-in-law, Ann Adams, Watters (1806 : 111) says; “She soon heartily welcomed the word of the Lord to her heart, and felt it as a two-edged sword in cutting her off from every sin.”

Victory over sin was not only possible in Watters’ theology, but it ought to be sought from God by every believer. This victory would not be possible if one believed that a sinner is merely saved in their sin, hence Watters emphasized his belief that we are in fact saved from our sin.

It was Watters’ realization of the hazards of the sinful nature, the consequences for those who failed to repent, and the accounting before God for those who failed to warn other sinners of these facts that drove Watters to be the fervent preacher that he was. His following comments illustrate this point.

“From my first finding peace with God, I found my mind much affected with a sense of the danger poor sinners were in. My heart was drawn out with fervent desires and prayer for their salvation.” (1806 : 21).

“Preaching and inviting poor sinners to the arms and open side of the Friend of sinners, has been my chief delight, and more than my daily meat and drink.” (1806 : 54).

“That we might be instrumental in the hands of God, in bringing lost sinners into the fold of Christ. (1806 : 58).

³³ Sanctification will be dealt with in more detail below.

“To deliver the glad tidings of the gospel salvation to saints and sinners, is the greatest honor ever conferred on mortal man.” (1806 : 117).

I dare not refrain from declaring his loving kindness to sinners; and, although I have often shuddered at the thoughts of being self-sent, yet have I much oftener trembled, lest by my backwardness and unfaithfulness in warning sinners, they should die in their sins, and their blood be required at my hands. (1806 : 23).

As serious as Watters believed sin to be, the work of God incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ, enabled him, and others who believed, to experience the joy of sins forgiven.

8.2.3 GOD THE SON

A comment by Watters (1806 : 10) concerning his pre-conversion attitude best describes the mystical connection to Jesus that he came to enjoy, as well as offering a glimpse into his Christology: “I refused to be comforted, but by the Friend of sinners. My cry was day and night, save Lord or I perish. Give me Christ or else I die.” Watters believed that Jesus was Lord; his Savior; that He forgives and saves; that we can call upon Jesus and know Jesus in a personal relationship; that God’s will is manifested through Jesus; that believers can find maturity in Jesus and that as a preacher, Watters was not only a servant of Jesus, but also His friend.³⁴

Watters loved Jesus with a deep enthusiasm. As a youth bound by sin Watters had experienced the change offered by Jesus, that many had spoken about and which he, like Nicodemus, puzzled over. He had confessed that he was a sinner in need of change, and he had experienced the full impact of the change he had seen in others and which he had sought for himself. Jesus was now his friend. For the rest of his life Watters wanted, nor sought, nothing else in comparison to his desire to remain a friend of the friend of sinners. It was through Jesus that Watters obtained his most precious gift: salvation.

Watters used the phrase ‘Lord Jesus’ seventeen times in his autobiography but without any noticeable pattern. Jesus as the Lord of Watters’ life was manifest in various ways. Sinners could approach the Lord Jesus as well as be forgiven by Him. (Watters 1806 : 12, 15). He would one day judge the world and the only way to escape the wrath of His judgment was through the salvation He offered. (Watters 1806 : 140, 129). Asbury (II 1958 : 294) notes that Jesus had been

³⁴ In his autobiography Watters used the name Jesus 42 times and Christ 48 times and connected the two terms 24 times.

given the “Divine right as the co-eternal Son . . . to the work of redemption and salvation.” The redemptive work of Jesus is preeminent in Watters’ Christology.

8.2.3.1 SALVATION

Watters never deserved the salvation that he had experienced and lived out all of his life, nor could he somehow fabricate it. In late 1770 and early 1771 Watters’ troubled spirit had exposed his own sinful state, at least to himself. His (1806 : 7) attempts to calm his restlessness led him to read his Bible more, attend church whenever possible, to seek out the “company of the pious” and even pray “four or five times a day.” These self proclaimed Pharisaic practices did nothing to heal his soul, because as Watters (1806 : 7) confesses, he was “seeking to be justified by the deeds of the Law, by trusting more or less in the performance of duties.” Although Watters never mentions the term ‘prevenient grace,’ or ‘preventing grace,’ which was a popular aspect of Wesley’s³⁵ theology of salvation, Watters clearly demonstrated it at work in his life. For several months, Watters (1806 : 8) testifies to having been drawn by God’s grace toward that point in his life where he finally surrendered his all to God in repentance: “I went home much distressed, and fully determined by the grace of God to seek the salvation of my soul with my whole heart, and never rest till I knew the Lord had blotted out my sins, and shed his love abroad in my heart, by the Holy Ghost.”

Watters knew that he was a sinner who warranted punishment, but Jesus’ vicarious suffering and His shed blood, had accomplished what Watters could not. Therefore salvation, in Watters’ theology, was only possible because of the shed blood of Jesus Christ on his behalf. Watters’ (1806 : 8-15) description of his own salvation experience reveals much about his theology:³⁶

Christ on the cross bleeding, and bearing the sins of the whole world in his own body, and dying to make a full atonement³⁷ for the chief of sinners, that they might not die eternally . . . Oh! how have I slighted the bleeding Saviour, and trampled his most precious blood under my unhallowed feet, and have done despite to the Spirit of grace . . .

Thus was I bowed down and determined to wait at the foot of the cross, while I was stripped of all dependence in outward things, and was well assured that there was

³⁵ Wesley believed that God’s prevenient grace is what enables sinners to recognize that they are lost and it enables them to reach out to God, but it is not the same as saving grace. See Wesley VI : 512.

³⁶ Some of these comments were also referenced in Chapter Two.

³⁷ This is the only time Watters uses the word ‘atonement.’

"no other name under Heaven given among men whereby we must be saved."³⁸ I had no good word or deed, in which I could any longer trust for righteousness, in whole or in part. I saw in a manner which no words can fully express, that I was a sinner -- the chief of sinners . . .

My burden was gone -- my sorrow fled -- my soul and all that was within me rejoiced in hopes of the glory of God: while I beheld such fullness and willingness in the Lord Jesus to save lost sinners, and my soul so rested on him, that I could now for the first time call Jesus Christ, Lord, by the Holy Ghost given unto me . . . A supernatural power penetrated every faculty of my soul and body . . . Such was the change, and so undeniable to all present that they appeared greatly affected and confident that the Lord had descended in the power of his Spirit.

Watters was very clear that salvation was a re-birth: A new beginning for an old life. He (1806 : 5, 90) made two very distinct references to the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus about the need for a personal born-again experience. As a youth Watters was puzzled over the concept of the new-birth, yet he grew to believe it to be the essential initiating experience into salvation by Christ. Likewise, on August 11, 1776, Asbury (I 1958 : 196) preached on the "the new birth . . . showing the superior advantages and satisfaction arising from it even in this life." Yet neither Watters nor Asbury do much to develop a thorough theology of the new-birth experience. It is clear to this writer that terminology is not a critical factor in Watters' theology. The salvation of a soul is infinitely more important than if the newly converted knew, and could espouse, the correct terminology.

Watters' own personal spiritual agony that climaxed in spiritual peace and assurance is obviously well documented. In spite of this, Watters never makes the mistake that his experience should be replicated in other seekers, if they too were to have the same victory. Religious experience, although firmly planted on the common ground of the vileness of sin and the holiness of God changing the sinner's ways, was expected to be varied and idiosyncratic. Watters' experience would understandably differ from those of others, yet the foundational theology with Watters was always the same.

Hempton (2005 : 25) offers a succinct synopsis of the Wesleyan position on salvation and the attitude of those who experience it:

Salvation is open to all, not a select few; the songs are dominated not by feelings of depravity or unworthiness, but of personal worth and affirmation; there is less concentration on the terrors of hell than on the deliverance of a chosen people; and the

³⁸ A reference to Acts 4:12.

emphasis is not so much on the escape from this world as on an embattled engagement with it.

Because Methodists believe that we are born into a state of sin, salvation is required for everyone, regardless of whom they are or what kind of a family they were born into. A righteous lineage was not a passport to automatic favour with God. Watters had considered his brother John to be a Christian by virtue of the life he was living, and was thus ‘astonished’ at his admission that he had recently been converted:

To my great astonishment he [his brother John] informed me that God had that day blessed him with his pardoning love, and expressed being very happy in the Lord. I expected that he had long known this; but he had been so moral and possessed so much of the form of religion that he found it hard to come as a sinner stripped of all to the Lord Jesus. (Watters 1806 : 12-13)

Watters realized that all must come to salvation, even the supposed pious. When reporting on his brother-in-law’s conversion Watters (1782 : 7) states that although William Adams “seemed to have power over all outward sin, and to walk in all the ordinances of God blameless; yet he still knew, that this itself would not do.” As a result Watters knew that he had to offer salvation in Jesus to everyone he could, even if they appeared to be religious. In fact Watters (1806 : 39) agonized for the salvation of sinners: “Day and night the salvation of the people among whom I labored was uppermost in my mind.” There were no restrictions in his theology on the salvation he preached. No hint of unconditional election or a limited atonement. “His preaching was a gospel of present salvation – full, free, and everlasting.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 65). Barclay (1950 : 326) says, “the Methodists offered salvation to all, without restriction.” Salvation was offered to everyone, to whoever would believe, regardless of class, race or gender.

8.2.3.2 JESUS ONLY

The early Methodists were adamant that salvation was found in Jesus only, by the grace of God, brought about as a result of the faith of the sinner in a living resurrected Jesus who had paid the price for their sins. As Asbury (II 1958 : 70) said; “Were it not for Jesus, who would be saved?” Watters never wavered from, nor doubted, his conviction that salvation in Jesus, at the personal experiential level, was the only path to salvation and eventual eternity with the Father. Although Watters had responded to God for salvation and was therefore an active, not passive recipient of

it, he is clear that he did not earn salvation. Watters had merely responded to the pull of God toward salvation. He had to call on God for forgiveness and then believe by faith that God heard his prayers, and that He had saved him from his sins.

In 1794 Watters was summoned to the deathbed of an acquaintance named Lewis Hipkins. His record of this event clearly illustrates his belief that salvation is in Jesus only, and that an individual needs to personally cry to God for Salvation. First of all Watters (1806 : 126) quotes from Acts 4:12: "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved." Then he (1806 : 129) records the following dialogue he had with Mr. Hipkins:

Looking up in my face he asked me if I could not give him a passport to Heaven. I told him that only God through the Lord Jesus could give him that, which was the witness of His Spirit, and the earnest of his inheritance above. He added, 'You are the door.' I told him that Christ was the door, and none else.

Just as no one can earn their salvation, Watters also believed that no one can seek salvation on another person's behalf and that when salvation is reached, it is through a personal encounter with Christ, and nothing else.

8.2.3.3 UNIVERSAL ATONEMENT

A cornerstone of Methodist theology and practice was their belief that God offered salvation to the entire world and that He had called the Methodists to at least strive to ensure that every living person had such an opportunity. Watters (1782 : 19) believed "that Christ tasted death for every man; and that every one, through him, might come to God, and be eternally saved." Watters' actions as a tireless evangelist who loved to lead sinners to a saving faith is a product of his understanding that the atonement of Jesus was indeed universal: available to all who would respond, and that it was not restricted for an elect few.

This "idea of the free, unlimited, effective grace of God available to all" (Barclay 1950 : 374) is what permeates Watters' writings and no doubt saturated his messages. Watters presented Jesus to his listeners as a universal Saviour who was ever offering forgiveness to whosoever would repent.

8.2.3.4 JUSTIFICATION AND REGENERATION

Watters does not use the word ‘justification’ and only once does he use the word ‘regeneration.’ Barclay (1949 : XXII) says that in Wesleyan “theology justification and regeneration were simultaneous or very close together,” which leads some to use these terms interchangeably, but there is a slight difference in their theological usage. Regeneration is what God completes in a new believer as they are restored into a right relationship with God: they are made new or regenerated. While preaching to a large congregation in April 1781, Watters (1806 : 90) impressed upon them “the necessity of regeneration.” Justification is the standing we have before God as a result of His work, where He declares us to be justified, or innocent of our sin. Watters would have fully concurred with the following two thoughts on justification. Wesley (VI : 509) said at “justification we are saved from the guilt of sin, and restored to the favour of God.” Asbury (I 1958 : 483) refers to justification as God bestowing upon His children “a right state of heart.”

8.2.3.5 ASSURANCE OF SALVATION - THE WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT

On his deathbed Samuel Wesley urged his son John, (XII : 100) to seek the witness of the spirit saying; “the inward witness . . . is the proof, the strongest proof, of Christianity.” John Wesley (I : 103) received his own inward witness experience at a meeting on Aldersgate Street in London on May 24, 1738. Barclay (1950 : 386) believes that there was no doctrine that was more clearly preached and taught by Wesley than that of the assurance of one’s standing before God.³⁹ The need for believers, particularly new to the faith, to seek the inward assurance of their salvation by way of the witness of God’s Spirit to their spirit, became a powerful Methodist doctrine. While on his deathbed, William Adams had a conversation with one of his sisters concerning the assurance of her salvation. He asked her “if she knew, that God for Christ’s sake had blotted our her sins . . . She told him she hoped so. He exhorted her not to deceive her soul; but to cry to God, till she *knew it*.”⁴⁰ (Watters 1782 : 28).

³⁹ See also Wesley’s (V : 111-134) sermon on “The Witness of the Spirit.”

⁴⁰ Italics the authors.

In the 1768 letter by Thomas Taylor in New York to Wesley, Taylor stated how the Methodist idea of the ‘witness of the Spirit’ as they had heard it from Thomas Webb, was new to many of his listeners: “His doctrines were quite new to his hearers; for he told them point-blank ‘that all their knowledge and profession of religion was not worth a rush, unless their sins were forgiven, and they had the witness of God’s Spirit with theirs that they were children of God.’” (Bangs 1838 : 54).

Watters (1806 : 15) became an ardent believer in this doctrine, which is clearly described in his own experience:

My burden was gone -- my sorrow fled -- my soul and all that was within me rejoiced in hopes of the glory of God: while I beheld such fullness and willingness in the Lord Jesus to save lost sinners, and my soul so rested on him, that I could now for the first time call Jesus Christ, ‘Lord, by the Holy Ghost given unto me.’⁴¹

While visiting a sick lady on August 22, 1815, who was desirous of the witness of God’s Spirit to her spirit that she was a child of God, Asbury (II 1958 : 789) counselled “her that it was very common for persons to be sure that God had blessed them.” Baker (1976 : 16) said “a devout Christian could personally *know* that he was saved from the penalty and from the power of sin.”⁴² It puzzled Watters (1806 : 38) that an Anglican parson, who “had studied divinity . . . and been preaching the gospel so many [years]; yet he knew nothing of his sins being forgiven, or of being converted:” Watters recognized, in contrast to his own experience and what he believed was available to all, that this particular priest had no assurance of salvation; no concept of God’s Spirit witnessing to his spirit that he was a child of God.

⁴¹ A reference to Romans 5:5.

⁴² Italics emphasis the authors.

8.2.3.6 INSTANTANEOUS CONVERSIONS AND DEATHBED CONFESSIONS

Two aspects of the conversion process that perplexed many Methodists when they first heard it preached were the notions of instantaneous conversions and deathbed confessions. A theology of works righteousness had permeated Anglican doctrine and practice where sinners could not experience God's pardoning grace in an instant because it had to be somehow sought and acquired over a period of time and thus earned by pious deeds.

Watters was convinced that even the vilest of sinners could experiences, with full assurance, instantaneous conversion, even if it was the moment they slipped into eternity. On just his first formal appointment as an itinerant preacher, with an Anglican parson looking on, Watters (1806 : 37) boldly declared: "The Lord is near – he is at your doors – at your hearts. Call on him and open your hearts by faith, and the Lord will come in this day – this hour – this moment." It was understandably perplexing to Watters why anyone would refuse the Lord, especially someone on their deathbed, which was the case when he met with Lewis Hipkins. In 1794 Watters (1806 : 130-131) wrote; "What poor excuses are these and a thousand more such, when we see an immortal spirit on the very margin of the grave, and no interest in Christ."

8.2.3.7 ETERNAL SECURITY

While commenting on human nature Asbury (III 1958 : 36) had said; "how subject we are to lose the grace of God." True to Wesleyan theology Watters also believed that humans could lose the grace of God. Watters did not believe in eternal security, yet there are no suggestions in his theology that he believed a single sin placed a believer in danger of eternal damnation. Watters did believe that an individual, who lived a life of habitual sin following a conversion experience, was in danger of losing his salvation. On his first itinerant journey in 1772, Watters and Williams looked for a young man in Alexandria, Virginia, who had been a part of the society in Philadelphia and evidently a Christian. Upon inquiry Watters (1806 : 26) learned that the man had backslidden: that "to our grief he had returned back to Egypt."⁴³ In a later comment Watters (1806 : 36) was even clearer on the issue: "I am of opinion that those who unhappily fall off from God, are prepared for greater sins . . . and . . . will sooner or later fall by little and by little."

⁴³ Stukenbroeker (1974 : 23) refers to this unnamed individual as Alexandria Methodism's first backslider.

In Watters' 1782 (page 3) publication, it states that Christians should not "hazard [or jeopardize] thy salvation and eternal peace."⁴⁴ Later in the same publication Watters (1782 : 12) says "they that follow Christ, shall not walk in darkness, that is, while they follow him," which seems to suggest that Watters believed that those who once followed Christ could choose to cease following Him. The following statement reinforces Watters' (1782 : 33) warning that Christians ought to remain close to the Lord, lest their salvation is lost: "If after you have escaped the pollutions of this world, through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour [sic] Jesus Christ, we are again entangled therein and overcome, the latter end will be worse with us than the beginning."

In spite of believing in the possibility of losing one's salvation, Watters was very secure in Jesus. In fact, he uses the phrase 'in Christ' nine times. Watters not only reveals the sense of security he found in his faithful walk with the Lord, but he also showed that his life as a Christian was not merely an attachment to Christ. Watters was IN Christ, both as a sinner who has been saved and as an instrument in Christ's work on earth. Three of the times Watters uses the phrase 'in Christ' appear in the same paragraph where he is describing his wrestling over the problem of lingering sin. He (1806 : 64) states "I knew that I was, in Christ, saved from the power and guilt of sin . . . I saw an unspeakable fullness and willingness in Christ, to save to the utmost . . . Yet often after long and earnest wrestling as in an agony, I have, though very reluctantly risen without obtaining the mind that was in Christ." Watters does not explicitly state that the more one walks faithfully in Christ the more one is secure in their salvation, but he does seem to suggest it. This thought will be discussed in more detail when sanctification is dealt with below.

8.2.4 GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT

Watters clearly understood that the Holy Spirit was the operational force of the Triune God he served. His 1782 (page 3) work spoke of "the renewing operations of a Saviour through the Spirit."⁴⁵ Asbury (I 1958 : 152) said; "The operations of the Spirit on the heart of man [is] to convince, convict, convert and sanctify." The Holy Spirit, according to Watters, could be

⁴⁴ This statement was part of the introduction to Watters' 1782 publication and appears to have been written by a third party, but since it is attached to a document that bears Watters' name, it is safe to conclude that it was consistent with Watters' theology.

experienced, resisted or cooperated with. The Holy Spirit was a powerful force that could dramatically change the makeup of a meeting and turn even the most stubborn sinner around.

8.2.4.1 THE OUTPOURING OF THE SPIRIT

Watters often prayed for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. He believed that the Spirit's power was accessible, yet Watters does not seem to try and force the moving of the Spirit, nor does Watters enter into rituals or activities whereby he could invoke the Spirit's activity. It was within the un-sensationalized gatherings of God's earnest people that Watters led his congregations to cry out to the Spirit for an outpouring. For those who felt a deep sense of remorse for their own state, or who desperately wanted to see the heart of sinners changed, the Holy Spirit was faithful to move, which inspired the worshipers to cry out even more and to offer testimonies to the greatness and goodness of God. Asbury (II 1958 : 383) refers to the "impulse of the Spirit," which Watters believed moved within individuals and gatherings. Wesley (VIII : 300-301) was of the opinion that the Methodists should move to wherever the Spirit is being poured out.

Twice while reporting on his work on the Sussex Circuit in 1778, Watters refers to the Spirit's supernatural work. Shortly after he began his ministry on the circuit Watters (1806 : 63) says he could "not get round the circuit the second time, before the Lord was graciously pleased to pour out his Spirit in a very unusual manner." As the leader of God's people on the circuit, responsible for ensuring that all those who wanted could experience the blessings of God's Spirit, Watters (1806 : 66) admitted that his "cry was incessant -- Father glorify thy name -- pour out thy Spirit." Later while ministering at the deathbed of Lewis Hipkins in 1794, with several onlookers gathered, praying and urging the dying man to make peace with God, Watters reports that "the clouds burst, and the very heavens appeared to open with blessings, and the power of God's Spirit was felt by many present."

On numerous occasions Watters experienced the moving of God's Spirit. He witnessed how it impacted meetings, changed lives and empowered individuals. Watters (1782 : 17) said that it was possible "to have the constant indwelling of God's holy spirit in his soul, enabling him to live nearer to the Lord, than ever he had done before."

⁴⁵ See footnote 44.

8.2.4.2 THE SPIRIT BRINGS CHANGE

Watters experienced first hand the change that can come about in an individual's life that yields to the Spirit of God. It was never a matter of what man could do. Without God moving and changing people's lives through His Spirit, a sinner will always remain a sinner. Not only did Watters sense the change that had occurred in his own life, but those around him recognized the change too:

Such was the change, and so undeniable to all present that they appeared greatly affected and confident that the Lord had descended in the power of his Spirit, and wrought a glorious work in the "presence of them all."⁴⁶ My two good friends greatly interested in my happiness, caught me in their arms, rejoicing over me as a father over a returning son -- "Who was dead and is alive again, who was lost and is found."⁴⁷ (Watters 1806 : 15-16)

In fact, Watters uses the word 'change' five times when detailing the circumstances of his conversion, each time being very careful to note that whatever change he or others noted, it was entirely the work of God, through His Holy Spirit.⁴⁸ Watters (1782 : 9, 14) also very vividly described the change that the Lord brought about in the life of William Adams.

8.2.4.3 STRIVING WITH AND RESISTING THE HOLY SPIRIT

In spite of the wonderful work the Spirit accomplishes in the lives of those who fully submit to Him, Watters acknowledged that there were some who simply refused to yield. He (1806 : 12) says, "How little do sinners know what they are doing, while resisting the Holy Spirit, and refusing to have Christ to reign over them." Watters also believed that the Holy Spirit should not be trifled with: that there were consequences for resisting the Spirit and that the Spirit would not always strive with sinners as He drew them toward the saving arms of Jesus Christ. In other words, Watters believed that the Spirit should be responded to when He is moving, and that He could be resisted:

⁴⁶ A possible reference to Acts 27 : 35.

⁴⁷ A reference to Luke 15:24.

⁴⁸ See also Watters 1806 : 8, 16, 17, 18.

I observed the dreadful consequences of neglecting to seek the Lord while he was to be found. That his Spirit would not always strive with man -- that the day of grace would not always last. Call on him therefore while he is near --before he removes from you his gospel. (Watters 1806 : 37)

Asbury also believed that man could resist the Holy Spirit. While preaching a sermon on July 26, 1778, he noted how non-responsive the people were to the gospel. Later that day Asbury (I 1958 : 277) wrote, “The Almighty does not destroy their moral agency, to save them by irresistible grace.” God bestows the grace that becomes the conduit of one’s salvation, but that grace could be received or rejected. As Lang (1972 : 135) says; “God must give the grace but man must use it.”

8.2.4.4 GRIEVING THE SPIRIT

Watters was aware that a person refusing to yield to the moving of God’s Spirit could, thus, grieve the Spirit. Although Watters did not fully detail his understanding of the grieving of the Holy Spirit, he did appear to be fearfully aware of the reality and consequences of such an action. As a youth he was deeply concerned that his protracted wrestling with the Spirit before fully submitting to it would be grievous to the Spirit. In his sermon; “On Grieving the Holy Spirit,” Wesley (VII : 489) stated that as long as the Spirit is grieved, it “will not purify our nature.” Wesley (VII : 489) also said that it was within our power, because of God’s grace, that we can behave in such a way that does not grieve the Holy Spirit. Much later in Watters’ life, while at Hipkins’ deathbed, Watters was deeply concerned that the Spirit was possibly being grieved by Hipkins, who was so close to death, but yet he delayed for so long, his surrender to God:

My God, what sympathy, fear, and deep concern did my bleeding heart feel in that moment, lest the grieved Spirit, and long neglected Saviour [sic] now should say, for none of those that were bidden (and made light of the invitation) shall taste of my supper. (Watters 1806 : 123)

Mr. Hipkins did eventually submit to God and enter eternity a converted soul.

8.2.5 SANCTIFICATION

All Methodist preachers took great delight in introducing sinners to the saving Savior, but they also all recognized that “the Methodist Way in Christian experience is not fulfilled in conversion.” (Barclay 1950 : 314). Personal conversion is just the first step on a path toward a deeper and more thorough Christian experience, often referred to as perfect love, holiness, sanctification or *full* salvation. “For those early American Methodists, Wesley’s emphasis on the gracious possibility of full salvation was nothing less than divinely inspired.” (Burke 1964 : 301).

The answer to the third question in Wesley’s (VIII : 299) ‘Minutes,’ which asked about the divine mission placed on all Methodists was, in part, to spread holiness. The American Methodists agreed with their British counterparts that God had raised them up to spread holiness across the land, which was not just a state of spiritual discipline they ought to strive for, but a work of God to be personally experienced and lived out.

The early Methodist preachers believed, as Wesley had believed and taught, that God can sanctify a heart and life to the point that a believer will no longer experience significant bouts of wrestling over sin, while at the same time never escaping the possibility of sin. Wesley (VI : 509) taught that at “sanctification we are saved from the power and root of sin, and restored to the image of God.” Wesley himself never made any clear declaration of having received this experience, yet no serious student of Wesley would ever doubt that he was indeed sanctified. Barclay (1950 : 316) says that Asbury also did not make a clear declarative statement of his sanctification, yet he came close to it on at least two occasions. On Tuesday, June 14, 1774 he (I 1958 : 114) wrote, “Me heart seems wholly devoted to God, and he favours [sic] me with power over all outward and inward sin.” In October, 1791 Asbury (I 1958 : 696) testified that, “I am afraid of losing the sweetness I feel: for months past I have felt as if in the possession of perfect love; not a moment’s desire of anything but God.”

It is without doubt that the most distinctive doctrine of early Methodism was that of heart holiness. Asbury (I 1958 : 269) said; “I want for nothing but more holiness.” The preachers were committed to seek the experience, to live it and then to preach it. Unlike Wesley and Asbury many early Methodists claimed to have experienced sanctification and they boldly testified to it, Watters included. It is through the written testimony of Watters’ experience of sanctification that his theology on the topic becomes abundantly clear.

8.2.5.1 WATTERS WRESTLES WITH SANCTIFICATION

Lyerly (1998 : 27) says “Methodists so diligently explored their inner selves that even a single day’s soul-searching could cause them to both soar and plummet in tortured self-examination.” This was the case with Watters, which he vividly and very candidly details in his book as he writes about his thoughts on and experience of sanctification; a topic he devoted more attention to than any other. Interestingly, Lang (1972 : 62) says the topic of sanctification also dominated Asbury’s thoughts, particularly in the first ten years of his journal.

Watters only used the word sanctify, or its derivatives,⁴⁹ six times in his autobiography, but he uses several other terms in describing his experience such as a deeper work with God, full salvation, being saved from indwelling sin, being saved to the uttermost, perfect love, going on to perfection, and being made perfect in Christ’s love. Watters described his wrestling over sanctification as being a struggle against indwelling sin, the remains of sin or the corrupt nature. The state of being unsanctified Watters (1782 : 5) termed, “The unrenewed posterity of Adam.” The usage of accepted or common terminology in this regard is once again evidently not important to Watters. What was critically important to him, and what becomes abundantly clear to his readers, is that he sought and obtained the blessing of sanctification.

Shortly after his conversion Watters had come to realize that in many respects his spiritual journey had just begun. There would be many experiences that he would still have to go through, and many inner battles that he would have to fight, as he endeavored to serve God more and more closely. Casual readers of Watters’ experiences in this regard might conclude that he was overreacting, or his fanatical inclinations were creating self-induced inner turmoil. Watters was always a very level headed and even tempered man. The struggles he had on the path to sanctification were, in a sense, par for the course. Watters’ desire to be holy was pitted against his lingering sin, which played out as brutal clashes of spiritual warfare.

After being an itinerant for less than a year, and having fallen terribly ill in mid 1773, Watters desperately did not want to die so early, his (1806 : 33) number one reason being; “I thirsted to be more holy.” Later that year, while on his first formally appointed itinerant journey Watters (1806 : 31) recorded the following tussle over his unsanctified state:

⁴⁹ Sanctified, sanctification, unsanctified.

For several months I was very much affected, with a deep sense, not only of my unfaithfulness but more especially of the many evils of my unsanctified nature and daily imperfections before a holy God. At no period since I first knew the Lord, had I found such opposition from the carnal mind (the remains of indwelling sin) -- I felt while under the power of these convictions, my life a continual warfare, and myself a poor pilgrim in a strange land, as it respected my case, and my own spiritual advantage.

A year later Watters (1806 : 41) was still struggling:

I frequently found, to my great grief, that my religion was too superficial, and that though sin did not reign, yet it remained and marred my happiness. I often mourned and wept, fasted, prayed, and truly longed to be sanctified throughout, soul, body and spirit, that I might be able to serve the Lord without interruption.

Still two years later, in 1776, Watters (1806 : 54) prayed; "O! that I may be as clay in the hands of my divine potter. My God save me from this evil man, (myself)." Watters believed that he carried around within him essentially two natures. A holy nature that was yearning to totally be God's and a carnal nature that was doing all it could to keep him from experiencing the full blessings that God wanted to pour out on him. While on the Brunswick Circuit the following year, amidst the great revival that had been swirling around that region for several years, Watters became more persistent in his prayer to God for sanctification and his own discipline to ensure that there was no habitual willful sin keeping God from sanctifying him. He (1806 : 59) wrote:

I had not been long, nor gone far in this Circuit, before I met with several who I fully believed to be further advanced in the Divine life, than any I had ever conversed with before. I had long desired to see some of those who had experienced the great salvation . . . Through the Summer I endeavored to pay the greatest attention to the state of my mind, and daily wrote down my exercises. I was more frequent and fervent in private duties, and endeavored not only to desire, but to expect, that the Lord would cleanse and save me to the uttermost.

After several months serving various circuits in southern Virginia in late 1777 and early 1778, and having to battle a persistent throat and voice ailment, Watters (1806 : 62) wrote; "If I did ever desire to be wholly the Lord's it was now. My heart through grace was constantly fixed upon the object of my desires." At a meeting on the Sussex Circuit in 1778, where the outpouring of God's Spirit was particularly evident, Watters (1806 : 63) reports how he and several others, "lay prostrate at his footstool, scarcely able to rise from our knees for a considerable time, while there were strong cries and prayers from every part of the house, for

that ‘perfect love which casteth [sic] out all fear.’⁵⁰ Watters (1806 : 63) goes on to say how this deep seated desire of his was affecting him physically: “I felt faint, and my system was much affected through the vehemence of my desires after the divine image. O, my God! when shall I awake up with thy likeness, and be filled with thy fullness?” The following passage shows the depth of Watters’ (1806 : 64-66) on going struggle and his strong resolve not to abandon it:

I saw daily my corrupt nature and the imperfections of my most holy things, in a manner I never, did before . . . I knew that I was, in Christ, saved from the power and guilt of sin, but not from its remains. I was several times thus wrought on very powerfully, and was in an agony of soul and body to be wholly the Lords, above all things desiring to be a Christian indeed, in whom there is no guile. I saw an unspeakable fullness and willingness in Christ, to save to the utmost all that came to God through him; yet often after long and earnest wrestling as in an agony, I have, though very reluctantly risen without obtaining the mind that was in Christ. Many were my inward conflicts, and earnest were my struggles after all the depth of love . . . Holiness and the fruits thereof were the desire of my longing, panting, thirsty soul.

. . . I had been peculiarly stirred up to seek the Lord to deepen his work in my heart . . . after I had been preaching, many were groaning for a deeper work of grace, while our heart melted before the Lord as wax before the fire, and the Spirit and the bride said, come, O! come, and accomplish thy gracious promises in our souls. Come and destroy the man of sin, and make us complete in thy image . . . I was in an agony, and my heart ready to burst asunder with longing after the blessing, expecting every moment to hear the kind release: Go in peace, and sin no more . . . I felt a deep and awful sense of the Divine presence, and a calm within that words cannot describe.

After several years of faithfully serving God and walking closer and closer with Him in fellowship, and after months of agonizing travail, along with many of his fellow Methodists on the Sussex Circuit, Watters received the assurance from God that he had sought: he was truly God’s child, sanctified holy:

Before I closed my eyes for sleep, I felt greater confidence that the Lord had graciously deepened his work, and a distinct witness that I was his. The holy fire, the Heavenly flame instead of sinking or decreasing as it frequently had done after great refreshments, now arose higher and higher . . .

In a few weeks, I found that it is by faith we stand in every state of grace . . . I withdrew from the house into a solitary place, and on my knees most earnestly desired not to rise till every doubt was removed from my anxious breast. I was most graciously and powerfully blessed, and filled with confidence and peace, and for the present felt more established than I had at any time been.

The most glorious work that ever I beheld was in this circuit among believers. Scores professed to be sanctified unto the Lord. (Watters 1806 : 66-67)

⁵⁰ A reference to I John 4:18.

Watters (1782 : 13-14) had previously detailed his brother-in-law's sanctification when he wrote the following:

Sometime in the summer 1777 . . . the Lord gave him a greater sense of the inward corruption of his heart . . . he had known for some time that there must be a deeper work wrought in his heart. But now he seemed all a-thirst for an heart perfectly devoted to God

What particular means the Lord made use of to convince him so deeply of his inbred sin, I can't assuredly say . . . so he began to labour [sic] for that perfect love which casts out fear, that he might be able to withstand every storm that God might permit to arise . . . on August 17th, 1777, he [God] wrought such a mighty change in his [Adams] soul, that he believed, he had saved him from all his inbred sin . . . he had no doubt of this blessed work. I think, I may with safety say, that none that had an intimate acquaintance with him, could see any reason to disbelieve him.

8.2.5.2 SANCTIFICATION AND SIN

Watters' belief in his sanctification, and that of others, did not mean that he was then free from the prospect of future sin, nor was he released from the need of continuing to pursue the Lord in a relationship of love. Watters never gives any indication that his spiritual disciplines declined after his 1778 experience on the Sussex Circuit. He remained an ardent and active follower of the Lord, continually endeavoring to remain in favor with God and his fellow man while he constantly sought ways to serve God more fruitfully. It was incumbent upon all Christians, even those sanctified, to be "daily pressing after a growth in every grace of the Holy Spirit," (Watters 1782 : 18) and to be in a state of "continual readiness" (Watters 1782 : 32) to meet the Lord.

The evident change that came about in Watters' life as a result of this experience is that he never again doubts God's acceptance of him as His child and he never again agonizes over persistent indwelling sin. This writer is not suggesting that Watters never sinned again. What is clear, at least from the written testimony of Watters and those who knew him, is that he never again seemed to struggle with habitual sin in his life, while remaining vigilant in the Lord lest he grew careless and slipped back into sinful habits. In other words Watters clearly continued to grow dramatically in the Lord subsequent to his sanctification experience. As Barclay (1949 : XXIII) says, while commenting on Wesley's theology, sanctification "never means excuse from the need of growth." Watters (1782 : 24) recorded his brother-in-law's dying admonition for continual vigilance in the spiritual life: "Take care; Satan and sin are always near; Christ may we always nearer feel."

Watters had simply wanted to live a holy victorious life, and following the Sussex experience in 1778, he evidently did. D. A. Watters (1898 : 32) said his great-uncle had “entered into the experience of perfect love.”

8.2.5.3 PROMOTING AND PREACHING SANCTIFICATION

Watters became an ardent promoter of sanctification, in the sermons he preached and the life he lived. While on the Baltimore Circuit in 1779 Watters pressed his hearers for a deeper walk with the Lord. He (1806 : 74-75) writes:

Many of them were deeply convinced of the remains of sin, and determined to tarry in Jerusalem, until they were endowed with power from on high, to love God! with all their hearts; and a considerable number through grace, found the great and gracious promises of the glorious gospel applied to their souls, to the destruction of sin . . . I could not be satisfied without pressing with all my might, a present and full salvation from all sin, and many I am fully persuaded to this day, recollect those divine seasons with, grateful hearts, and have ever since felt their happy effects, and will feel them more fully to all eternity.

Still on the Baltimore Circuit Watters (1806 : 75) reported on a Quarterly Meeting where a fellow Methodist preached on sanctification:

Our last quarterly meeting was held at my brother's preaching house Deer Creek. My good friend W. M___e⁵¹ a local preacher from Baltimore Town preached the first sermon in which he particularly dwelt on indwelling sin in believers, and their privilege in Christ to be saved therefrom -- that this salvation was by faith alone -- that all who feel the want thereof ought to look up now, just as they are, believing . . . expecting the blessing every day -- every hour -- every moment.

Watters always believed that God was willing to empower His children with victory over sin: to sanctify holy whoever earnestly sought the blessing and whoever was willing to live the life.

8.2.5.4 SUMMARY ON SANCTIFICATION

From the personal testimony of Watters, the following can be safely deduced about his theology on sanctification.

- Initial conversion is not the last critical spiritual experience one has.

⁵¹ Wrenn (2000 : 77) believed this individual was William Moore.

- Subsequent to conversion a Christian will struggle with the problem of lingering sin.
- This struggle could last an extended period of time.
- It is God who sanctifies when He chooses to.
- Sanctification is accepted by faith.
- Sanctification is an experience that empowers a believer to be victorious over sin.
- Sanctification is both an experience and a lifestyle.

8.2.6 THE CHURCH

Watters' theology of the church is strongly grounded in his belief in both the universal and local church. In the introduction to his autobiography he (1806) states the "church [is] composed of Christians of all denominations" and that he believed the Methodists, even before they formed into a formal church, were a part of God's universal church.⁵² His belief in the Scriptural validity of the local church is clear since he refers to local groups repeatedly. He (1806 : 1, 4) says his "parents were members of the Church of England," and that "it was my constant practice to attend the Church." When discussing the ordinance issue at the 1777 Deer Creek Conference, it did not seem to concern Watters (1806 : 57) if Methodists received the ordinances "from and communed with the Presbyterians [or] the Church of England." In this sense Watters had a strong ecumenical spirit. God and His redemptive plan were not exclusive properties of the Methodists. Like Watters, Asbury (I 1958 : 114) also believed that the Methodists were Scripturally sound, yet not exclusively so: "Blessed be God for so many who experience the same work of grace which we preach, and at the same time are not of us."

As more and more local churches developed, tensions between the duties of a traveling preacher and local preacher grew. Asbury tried to encourage his preachers not to get ensnared with a stationary life, while many of the preachers found the prospects of settling down into a regular ministry, with a wife and family, very appealing. Although Watters spent many productive years as a local preacher, he (1806 : 117) always believed that the "traveling ministry is in my estimation one of the greatest blessings with which a people can be blessed." Watters went on to say that since both the traveling preacher and local preacher can both be supported in Scripture and that they both have roles to play in the church, steps should be taken to ensure that

⁵² See Watters 1806 : 139.

the one does not overshadow the other. He (1806 : 118) said; “there ought to be the greatest attention in the government of every church, so as to unite and settle these two particular spheres of action in such a manner as for neither to clog the other, much less, destroy the other.”

Watters believed in the relevance of religious societies and separate denominations.⁵³ He (1806 : 103) said “the Methodists in England and in America, formerly did not call themselves a particular church, but a religious society in connection with different churches, mostly with the Episcopal church.” He (1806 : 102) very proudly, albeit briefly, reported on the establishment of the Methodists in America as a separate church:

On the twenty-fifth of December, one thousand seven hundred and eighty-four, our conference met in Baltimore, to consider the plan of church government . . . It was adopted, and unanimously agreed to with great satisfaction, and we became instead of a religious society, a separate church under the name of the Methodist Episcopal Church.⁵⁴

Watters (1806 : 140) obviously believed that the Methodists, first as a society and then as a denomination, held a special place in the redemptive plan of God:

As to the discipline of the Methodist Church, though I have no doubt but it has its defects, yet I do think that it is by far the most scriptural and the most primitive of any I have ever seen, and the best calculated to spread the genuine gospel, and to keep up the life and power of godliness in the Church of Christ.

Yet Watters is very intentional in declaring that ultimately the church as a whole, is not of man. It is God’s, more specifically, Watters says it is ‘the Church of Christ.’ Watters (1806 : 21) was hopeful that all his siblings would find “their places in the Church of Christ,” while he feared that the ordinance issue in the late 1770’s would have an adverse impact on Christ’s church. He (1806 : 72) said; “Nothing to me, appeared more formidable, and leading to more terrible consequences than introducing unscriptural doctrines into, or dividing, the Church of Christ.” To Watters, (1806 : 85) the most significant aspects of his life were, “the Church of Christ and the salvation of poor sinners.”

The word ‘congregation’ appears in Watters book about a dozen times. A congregation, according to Watters’ usage, referred to any gathering of God’s people, whether they were outdoors listening to a sermon, at a formal quarterly or annual conference meeting or gathered together for worship in a building designated for such a purpose.

⁵³ Watters used the word denomination four times in his book. 1806 : 7, 60, 139, 141.

⁵⁴ This writer is aware that this reference and the next were used earlier in this paper. They are repeated here because of their relevance to this section.

Watters loved the church. He attended it ritualistically as a youth; he enthusiastically joined it in service as a young man; he defended it as a leader and he sought its advancement as a faithful servant. There was no greater cause in life for Watters than to be a part of God's church.

8.2.7 LAST THINGS

Watters does not devote a lot of attention to eschatology, but he does touch on the subject. Watters believed that heaven and hell existed as the eternal destination of all people, and that how individuals respond to the Lord here on earth will determine where in eternity they end up. Watters believed that all of his efforts for the Lord and the church would be rewarded in eternity one day. He was frustrated at times when sinners did not consider the eternal consequences of the life they were leading. Toward the tail end of the Revolutionary War, in April 1781, Watters (1806 : 91) said too many people were "taken up with their fears and cares, to attend at this time to the concerns of eternity." Watters (1806 : 140) was anxious that everyone be aware of the reality of eternity because "every one must give an account to God for himself in the day of the Lord Jesus." Yet death, or even judgment for that matter, to the Methodist, was not to be feared: "Death . . . is not a punishment to the righteous." (Asbury I 1958 : 318).

Watters, by his life and testimony, continually endeavored not to jeopardize his meeting with the Lord in judgment one day, which motivated him (1806 : 100-101) to live faithfully and to warn others to do the same: "I have never, since I first knew the Lord seen anything in this world worth living an hour for, but to prepare and assist others to prepare, for, that glorious kingdom, which shall be revealed at the appearing of our Lord and Saviour [sic] Jesus Christ."

So real was his conversion and subsequent walk with the Lord, that from the earliest days of his life as a believer, and as a Methodist, Watters (1806 : 101) had clearly demonstrated that "nothing on earth is worth a thought, only in relation to the great and glorious end, of our creation and redemption by Jesus Christ, the Lord our righteousness."

As sure as Watters was in his preparation for heaven, he did not take it casually. His (1806 : 53) report on the 1776 Conference shows how he and his fellow Methodists were seriously making every effort to be prepared for eternity: "We were of one heart and mind, and took sweet counsel together, not how we should get riches or honors, or any thing that this poor world could afford us: but how we should make the surest work for Heaven and eternal

happiness.” Wesley was also as focused on preparation for eternity when he (VII : 230) said that we “live for nothing else . . . [but to] love, and serve God on earth, and enjoy him to all eternity.”

Just as heaven was a promised blessing, hell, in Watters theology was a very real threat, which he was determined not to qualify for. Watters only referenced hell a handful of times, most of which centered on his conversion. As a youth he was evidently petrified of hell. He (1806 : 2, 3, 9) says, “I was much terrified with thoughts of death, and the torments of hell . . . For a year before I desisted from the Devil's service, I saw so plainly I was in the way to hell . . . My concern was such, that I feared lying down or closing my eyes, lest I should open them in hell.” Watters (1782 : 8, 32) believed in “an eternal hell, prepared for the devil and his angels . . . with devouring flames for ever.” His (1782 : 21) brother-in-law, just days before his death, while suffering terribly, was very “concerned on account of his younger brothers and sisters, who were still in an unconverted state; and who, if dying in that state, he knew very well from the word of God, must eternally perish.” Yet for the believer, assured of their place in the family of God, hell was not to be feared. Watters (1782 : 28) said; “what a blessed thing to die without one fear of hell.”

But hell was not where Watters preferred to camp intellectually or theologically. The blessings of heaven that were promised to be his, and all those who he introduced to the Savior, was the end Watters was more often thinking on, and for which he was so faithfully working toward. When William Adams died Watters (1782 : 31) said “our loss is our brother's gain; for I doubt not but he is gone to him whom his soul loved.” In the conclusion of his book Watters (1806 : 142) wrote, “I am now in the fifty-fifth year of my age, and the thirty-sixth since I set out for the Kingdom of Heaven.”

William Watters was a Wesleyan theologian by the sermons he preached, the organization he associated with, and the life he lived. His associates knew full well that Watters was a man of a single focus when it came to his beliefs. The doctrines of conversion by faith in Jesus alone; the problem of inbred sin; the solution for inbred sin through the sanctifying work of God, and the need to remain righteous before God throughout life, were not just part of Watters' basic theology, they were the essence of his life's most significant experiences and the tenets by which he lived that life. They contributed to the fabric of his purpose. Watters loved the Lord, within which he loved Methodism: its theology and practice. In addition to his clear theology, the life of

William Watters was marked by significant events, which he willingly became a part of, but whose notoriety he never set out to seek. In spite of the obscurity that his life and accomplishments remain in throughout much of modern Methodism and Church History in general, Watters does have a discernible and managed legacy to this day, although largely restricted to the region he lived and worked in most: northern Virginia and southern Maryland. The concluding chapter of this paper is going to briefly sketch the legacy of William Watters.

CHAPTER NINE**THE LEGACY OF WILLIAM WATTERS**

At the first Methodist meeting Watters attended in his post-conversion state, he (1806 : 18) proclaimed that it was “a greater blessing to be received a member amongst them than to be made a prince.” William Watters was not born to be a Methodist, nor did he set out to be a prince, yet he became both: a prince among Methodists. Watters rose to prominence though he did not seek it nor did he bask in it. He worked sacrificially, giving the best years of his adult life, along with his health, to a cause that he truly believed was the most worthy on earth: preaching the gospel within the vehicle of Methodism. Just a few months after Watters began his itinerant service for American Methodism, the movement boasted around one thousand adherents. When Watters died more than fifty-five years later Methodist ranks had mushroomed to almost half a million. Naturally Watters was not responsible for all those recruits, but there is no doubting the fact that his initiative that made him the first American born Methodist itinerant preacher, his tireless years of successful service, his leadership during the most trying of times and his passion to see Methodism reach the lost for Christ were major contributing factors to the overall success of American Methodism in its first sixty years of existence. It is mere speculation to project what Methodism would have been like in 1827 had Watters never given his life to the cause back in the early 1770’s. How many less souls would have been reached? How would the movement have survived through the Revolution years? Would the schism have been healed as rapidly and with as little long-term harm? Would the churches in northern Virginia and Maryland that benefited from his service still be in existence today? One would never know the answers to those questions, but what is known without any doubt is this: “Many of the spiritual sons of . . . Watters assisted at the founding of the church,” (Porter 1928 : 381)¹ and “It is because early Methodism was blessed with the ministry of such men that it received the mighty impulse which yet abides.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 9).² This final chapter will outline the legacy of Watters and detail what some individuals and organizations are doing to keep his memory alive.

¹ Porter quoted William Phoebus, a prominent itinerant and local preacher, and contemporary of Watters.

² Bishop McCabe, who wrote the Introduction for D. A. Watters’ biography of his Great Uncle, made this statement.

9.1 A NEGLECTED HERO OF THE CROSS³

One could excuse the fact that “William Watters has not always been well-known among United Methodists,” (Wrenn 1977 : 10) worldwide, but “it seems strange that one holding such a unique place in so great a denomination should be neglected this long,” (Corkran 1928 : 382), in his own backyard. Efforts to protect Watters’ legacy have been sporadic over the years, even in his own home states of Maryland and Virginia, where American Methodism, to a large extent, was birthed, where it survived through critical growth pains thanks to Watters and where it thrived, also thanks in part to Watters.

It is evident to this writer that those who have looked back in time have appreciated Watters’ efforts more than his own contemporaries did during his lifetime, or even at his death. In 1805 Watters’ brother Nicholas was honoured with a three-page eulogy in the Conference Minutes following his death. Richard Whatcoat in 1807 and Francis Asbury in 1816 received the same recognition, and rightly so.⁴ When Watters died in 1827, no formal recorded mention of American Methodism’s first native itinerant was made. His death and the life he had lived seemed to pass without notice from the denomination he gave so much to. And about the grave where we was laid: “The sacred spot where rest the ashes of William Watters, [was] almost lost to the church by neglect.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 155).⁵

It took Methodists more than half a century to finally recognize Watters’ contributions to their denomination, with a suitable stone over his grave. It then took another half century for Methodist leaders to realize that his gravesite ought to be preserved, a matter over which they appeared to wrangle for some fifteen years. Once the future of his grave was at last settled, it took another thirty-plus years before proactive measures were taken to maintain the Watters gravesite in such a manner that afforded the legacy of the man its due respect and honour.⁶ It is

³ This is the title of an article written by Clarence Corkran that appeared in the May, 1928 issue of *Methodist Review*.

⁴ For the above mentioned eulogies see *Minutes* 1983 : 336-339 for Nicholas Watters. *Minutes* 1983 : 386-389 for Whatcoat and *Minutes* 1840 : 272-274 for Asbury.

⁵ This writer does wish to acknowledge the fact that Watters has not been neglected in recent years by the staff and associates of The Virginia United Methodist Heritage who have published several articles on Watters over the past thirty years. These articles have been referenced in various parts of this research and are listed in the Bibliography. This writer is indebted to Mrs. Patti Russell, the editor of this Journal, for her assistance.

⁶ The efforts to preserve Watters’ legacy alluded to here will be discussed in more detail below.

not surprising therefore that “every now and then some intrepid soul has dared ask, ‘And who was William Watters.’” (Wrenn 1977 : 10).

9.2 THE WATTERS FAMILY

“The family to which Watters belonged was perhaps one of the most remarkable in the early annals of American Methodism.” (Stevens 1867 : 392). As the youngest of nine children⁷ William had no real father other than the care of older brothers, yet as a young man, he soon became the spiritual leader of his family. Although some of his siblings had been converted before him, it was Watters who led the charge as a preacher of the gospel and the winner of souls, but he would not be the only Watters to do so. The middle brother, Nicholas, became a Methodist preacher and was ordained in 1799. His family line alone has “furnished fifty-three ministers and missionaries to the church.” (D. A. Watters 1915 : 10). His two oldest brothers, John and Henry respectively, both opened their homes to Methodist societies. The all-significant 1777 Conference, at which the English Methodist leaders bade their young and somewhat nervous Americans farewell, was held at the home of Henry Watters, on whose farm, “one of the earliest Methodist churches in Maryland was erected.” (Stevens 1867 : 393). The fifth born Watters boy in the family, Steven, became a local Methodist preacher. The homes of these Watters men were frequently and much appreciated resting stations for Asbury and other travelling preachers for many years.

With already an extremely active Methodist family behind him, Watters married into the Adams family, which arguably was to become an even more prominent family in Methodist circles than his was. Blakemore (1951 : 1) says Sarah’s family was “identified as one of the most useful in American Methodism.” Watters (1806 : 112) says that the Adams “house was constantly a preaching place” until they built a preaching house on their property. Wrenn (2000 : 79) says of the ten Adams children, “three became Methodist preachers, and two were wives of Methodist preachers.” Wrenn (2000 : 77) also sates that the Adams home became “a favorite [sic] stopping place for Methodist preachers, Francis Asbury chief among them.”

⁷ All seven boys and two girls were converted “in less than nine months of one another: and joined the Methodists in the year of our Lord 1771.” (Minutes 1983 : 338). This was from Watters’ own words taken from the obituary he wrote for his brother Nicholas.

Watters and Sarah had no biological children, but the line of those who looked to them as leaders and as parent figures is incalculable. Watters' service to Methodism and his wife's gracious willingness to marry a man with such a passion, coupled with her own years of courteous hospitality that extended to an endless stream of travelling preachers who stopped at their home in need of rest and sustenance, just as her parents had done, filled a need that encouraged and soothed many an exhausted preacher. Although they were just two members of two regular, though extremely prominent Methodist families in the Northern Virginia-Maryland region, William and Sarah Watters gave to the church and Christianity at large, years of service whose benefits will only truly be realized in eternity.

9.3 WATTERS' PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Mr Thomas Wren, a nephew of Watters by marriage, who would have known Watters in the prime of his life, "described him as a man of medium height and slender physique, dignified in his carriage, and exceedingly courteous and affable, attired in knee-breeches, buckle-shoes, claw-hammered coat, and gold spectacles." (D. A. Watters 1898 : 170). William and Sarah grew to be extremely close to young Thomas and had him in their home many times. When Watters continued to preach in the last years of his life, despite "failing eye sight, it was often young Tom who led his uncle to the pulpit." (Marr 1999 : 5). Henry Boehm (1866 : 339), who was a guest in the Watters home said Watters was a man "of medium height, of very venerable and solemn appearance." Philip Gatch (1854 : 152-153) says he saw Watters at a Camp Meeting in 1813 and says; "He was then a venerable looking man; his head was white, his form erect, his countenance full of benevolence."

A portrait of Watters appears in the 1915 (D. A. Watters 1915 : 4-5) publication of the Watters family line and in the 1985 account of the history of the William Watters Memorial United Methodist Church, discussed below. This writer has not been able to ascertain the origin of the portrait or its current whereabouts.

9.4 WATTERS' HOUSE

As was briefly stated in Chapter Three of this paper, after years of battling poor health and feeling the responsibility of caring for a wife, Watters arrived at the very difficult decision of ceasing the travelling ministry for a season and settling down into a more stationed ministry. He bought “a spot of ground” (Watters 1806 : 98) from his father-in-law and proceeded to build a house on it. Jeanette Marr (1999 : 1-6) offers a very informative and concise summation on the history of Watters’ house.

The land on which Watters built his home initially consisted of about four acres but increased by fifty acres when Mr. Adams, his father-in-law, died in 1809. The house consisted of less than five hundred square feet and comprised only two rooms on a single story, with a loft and stone chimney. It was built with squared logs and rafters with the floorboards being supported by logs that had been flattened on one side, and filled in with a mixture of mud and straw.

On his farm Watters grew vegetables, various grains and he kept a small amount of animals. He also ventured into a fishing business and by the time of his death he owned a small amount of shares in a bank and two houses in Georgetown.

Watters’ house, which had obviously changed hands, was dismantled in 1960 to make way for a housing subdivision. It is believed that if it still stood, it would be at 6521 Engel Street, McLean, Virginia, (Marr 1999 : 1) just a few miles from the centre of Washington D.C.

9.5 ASSESSMENT OF OTHERS

As has been stated previously in this paper, the only major treatment that Watters’ life has received in writing prior to this research has been by the hand of his great nephew and fellow Methodist preacher, Dennis Alonzo Watters,⁸ who published a biography on Watters in 1898 and a detailed family tree of the Watters family in 1915. Although this paper has made substantial use of these works already, following are some additional general comments about the positive impact of Watters’ work written by an actual blood relative who was born just twenty-two years

⁸ D. A. Watters was actually Williams’s great, great nephew through the line of Watters’ second oldest brother, Henry. (See D. A. Watters 1915 : 12-13).

after Watters' death. D. A. Watters would have had ample opportunity to hear from many family members about their impressions and first hand experiences of his Uncle Billy:

To the close of his long, useful, and eventful life, he guarded carefully the citadel of his soul and character, and reputation of the Christian ministry. No charge was ever brought against his Christian or ministerial character. The cause he had espoused he served with zeal and faithfulness to the end. (D. A. Watters 1898 : 70)

No preacher more loyal to Methodism ever graced the ranks of her itinerancy than William Watters. True, faithful, and abundant in labors, in season and out of season, he opposed all schisms, and, observing the signs of the times, he sought the reconciliation of all estranged parties, that the unity of Methodism and the bond of peace might be preserved. Unwavering in his faith and devotion to God, his fealty to the Church of his choice was never questioned. He was ever ready to defend her doctrines and polity. (D. A. Watters 1898 : 148)

William Watters was a man of tender conscience, sterling integrity, pure life, and singleness of purpose . . . a life so simple, so beautiful, so true . . . His sincere life was humble and unpretentious, his example good, his work genuine and enduring in a great and righteous cause. (D. A. Watters 1898 : 170-171)

Following is a compilation of what others have also said about Watters, with this writer not finding a single negative comment ever written about the man. D. A. Watters (1898 : 51) quoted a Dr. Daniels as saying the following about Watters:

To take upon himself that office in those days implied the deliberate sacrifice of all things for Christ's sake and the gospel's. To enter this ministry was to face the certainty of poverty, privations, dangers, ridicule, and opposition, with a good prospect of violence and martyrdom; and in this view of the subject, the act of this young man, in leading what was to be the long column of American itinerants, was one of the most heroic things ever done in this country.

Watters and the acknowledged Father of American Methodism, Francis Asbury, had a long close relationship. Asbury affectionately referred to his friend as "brother Watters" on several occasions. On May 23, 1798, Asbury (II 1958 : 160) referred to Watters as "brother Billy" and on October 13, 1798, Asbury (II 1958 : 175) wrote about seeing "my old friend William Watters."

Henry Boehm was a faithful traveling companion of Francis Asbury for many years. After attending the 1811 Virginia Conference, Boehm and Asbury stopped at Watters' home for some much needed rest. Boehm (1866 : 339-340) records the following about his visit:

On the 28th of February we rode to William Watters's. He retired from the regular work in 1806, but his heart was always in it. He was now living in dignified retirement on his farm on the Virginia side of the Potomac, opposite Georgetown. He was the first traveling preacher raised up in America . . . Bishop Asbury and he were lifetime friends. The bishop was acquainted with him before he was licensed to preach and used to call him familiarly; "Billy Watters." When these aged men met on this occasion they embraced and saluted each other with 'a holy kiss;' and the bishop, writing of this visit in his journal, speaks of him as 'my dear old friend, William Watters.'⁹ He was distinguished for humility, simplicity, and purity.

Few holier ministers has the Methodist Church ever had than William Watters. I rejoice that I was permitted to hear him preach, and to be his guest; to eat at his table, to sit at his fireside, to enjoy his friendship and hospitality. His house was for years a regular preaching-place on the circuit . . . he died in holy triumph. His name will go down to the end of time, bearing the honored title of *The First American Methodist Traveling Preacher*.

William McKenney, a local preacher from the Georgetown area where Watters had served wrote; "Often it has been my privilege to hear Father Watters even after age had . . . obscured his vision . . . While explaining salvation by faith, holiness of heart, and integrity of life . . . he never failed. He always hit the nail on the head and drove it home." (Marr 1999 : 4).

Corkran (1928 : 384) said; "Watters was a builder of Methodism and not of self." When referencing the various accomplishments in his life for the cause of the Gospel and Methodism, Corkran (1928 : 382) also said; "Any one of these events in the history of Methodism ought to entitle him to a prominent place." Corkran (1928 : 387) wrote that Watters was "to be everlastingly commended for his profound Christian Character."

Prolific nineteenth century writer of American Methodism, Abel Stevens, made the following observations about Watters:

"Such was William Watters, the first of the thousands, the tens of thousands, of American Methodist itinerants who have spread the Gospel over the North American continent, a man fervent in spirit, prudent in counsel, indefatigable in labor, saintly in piety." (Stevens 1864 : 189).

"William Watters . . . was now fifty years old, mature in health and character, of extreme amiability, good sense, self-possession, and soundness of judgment." (Stevens 1967 : 390).

In a footnote Stevens (1867 : 392) quoted from a letter he had received from a D. Creamer, Esq., of Baltimore who said the following about Watters:

⁹ Asbury's record of this visit is found in Volume Two (1958) of Asbury's Journal, page 664.

It is strange that so little is known of the latter years of so great and good a man. He was one of the most holy and useful men of the many who have adorned Methodism -- a Virginian Christian gentleman of the right type. His upright walk and sterling character were proverbial.

Stukenbroeker (1974 : 101, 107) referred to Watters as “a modest, serious gentleman, courteous and affable, he was a preacher of extraordinary reputation . . . A Methodist pioneer for the liberty of the Christian pulpit.” It is puzzling to this writer, in light of how Stukenbroeker praised Watters in the above references and in several others, why the publishers did not include Watters amongst “the Methodist colonial greats” they list on the dust cover of Stukenbroeker’s book.¹⁰

In 1981 Raymond Wrenn, (1981 : 8) a relative of Watters by marriage,¹¹ said; “To this day there are still members of the Adams and Wrenn families who speak fondly of Aunt Sarah and Uncle Billy Watters:”

So it is with men. Some live uneventfully in a dull age. They can be measured by such local landmarks as the dates of their birth and death, the children they rear, and the honorary degrees they receive. But sometimes we come upon a man who defies such a conventional sketch and William Watters was such a one. (Blakemore 1951 : 1)

9.6 PASTORATES, CHURCHES AND TRUSTEESHIPS

En route to his first itinerant experience, Watters and Williams stopped for a night in Georgetown¹² where Watters reports that Williams preached what was very possibly the first Methodist sermon ever preached there.¹³ A little over a decade later, Watters built his home in the area, which is where over a forty year period, he helped several congregations get established as he served as a local preacher, trustee or charter member. Watters obviously did not idly drift into inactivity when not serving a circuit. For example, in spite of having an appointed traveling preacher to serve the circuit where he lived in 1784, and battling on going serious health issues, Watters (1806 : 99-100) says he rode “as much in the circuit as the preacher who was appointed to it.” This drive within Watters to constantly be of service, and his determination not to waste

¹⁰ They list Asbury, Coke, Whatcoat, Pilmore and Rankin, among others, but not Watters.

¹¹ In an earlier issue of the same Journal referenced above Wrenn (1977 : 7) said “It took me some years to discover that the Rev. William Watters was a cousin of mine, and that he was one of the great men in the Methodist Church.”

¹² Over the years Washington, Georgetown and Alexandria, along with several other towns, have merged into one large metropolitan area that surrounds the current US capital.

¹³ Russell (1998 : 27) speculates that it could have been Watters who preached the first Methodist sermon in Georgetown.

his God-given talents is what kept him serving the world to the very end. Below is a brief synopsis of some of the churches that Watters served two centuries ago, which are still in existence today, or which exist in his honor.

9.6.1 TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA¹⁴

The small town of Alexandria was part of the Frederick Circuit from 1774 until 1776, after which it was incorporated into the Fairfax Circuit. The Methodist Society at Alexandria was organized on November 20, 1774 under the leadership of a young preacher, not yet out of his teens, by the name of William Duke.¹⁵ In May of 1775 Duke was sent to New Jersey, leaving behind little evident success, with the exception of the small society. Watters replaced Duke following the May 1775 Conference¹⁶ and served the area on the Frederick or Fairfax Circuits for the next two years, sharing preaching responsibilities with a few other preachers; Strawbridge, Rodda and Garretson, being among them. (Stukenbroeker 1974 : 253). Watters (1806 : 46-57) recorded significant progress on these circuits, which he again served in 1778.

In 1789 Watters and six others became trustees for the Alexandria Methodists who had grown to such an extent that they wanted their own meetinghouse. The trustees proceeded to acquire land and organize the construction of a building for the purpose of worship. The building was completed in 1791 and became the “first meeting house of what is now Trinity United Methodist Church in Alexandria,” (Marr 1999 : 3) Virginia.¹⁷ As an organized and functioning congregation, referred to in early Methodism as a ‘station,’ the Trinity church was able to support a full time preacher and was independent of the circuit that served the surrounding

¹⁴ The town is “named after John Alexander, the original owner of the land.” (Stukenbroeker 1974 : 8). Much of the information in this section comes from the official history of Trinity United Methodist Church written by Fern Stukenbroeker, (1974) a history professor and long time member of the church. This writer is thankful to Rev. Amy Jones of Trinity for a copy of this book entitled A Watermelon For God.

¹⁵ In the previous year Asbury (I 1958 : 67) had visited the Duke family in Baltimore and preached in their home on January 18, 1773. Like many families who became prominent in early American Methodism, the Dukes had grown discouraged with the Church of England and became very receptive to the message preached by the Methodists. (See Stukenbroeker 1974 : 26-27; Clark I 1958 : 69).

¹⁶ Stukenbroeker (1974 : 59) claims Duke was not replaced on the circuit by Watters until November of 1775, yet Watters (1806 : 45) clearly states that he began work on the Frederick Circuit shortly after the May 1775 Conference. In July of that same year Watters (1806 : 46) records a significant “gracious revival in the lower part of the circuit which spread all around.” Wrenn (2000 : 75) believes this ‘lower part’ included parts of Northern Virginia, which would have included Alexandria.

¹⁷ See also Stukenbroeker, 1974 :76-82.

area.¹⁸ In 1793 Asbury (III 1958 : 122-123) asked Watters to help the Alexandria church as a supply preacher as often as he could since the preacher Asbury had placed there was “weak in body and not as strong as some in faith and love.”¹⁹ Watters formally served the Trinity congregation as pastor in 1801, 1803 and 1804. (Stukenbroeker 1974 : 253-254). In 1803 a great revival swept over the church, tripling its membership.²⁰

In 1804 the original building was replaced with a new one, which was in turn replaced by its current sanctuary in 1942. Today the church is located at 2911 Cameron Mills Road, Alexandria, Virginia, about ten miles from where Watters’ home was and where he is buried. In his will Watters’ bequeathed his books, some of his furniture and some silverware, to the church in Alexandria. Today there is no record of his books and furniture but the church still holds his silverware. In 1942 a teaspoon of Watters’ was placed in the cornerstone of the present Trinity church. (Stukenbroeker 1974 : 235).

Stukenbroeker (1974 : 101-102) says; “Probably no person in all of Methodism knew the Alexandria society better . . . Trinity was his church . . . William Watters’ life formed a mighty arc of 50 years’ service to Trinity.”

9.6.2 FAIRFAX CHAPEL, CITY OF FALLS CHURCH, VIRGINIA²¹

Watters had served the Fairfax Circuit for several months back in 1775 and 1776 and then again in 1778. One of the congregations that emerged within this Circuit became known as Fairfax Chapel,²² which Russell (1998 : 30) says was the first Methodist church in the area. The church grew out of the Adams home, which Steadman (1964 : 224) referred to as the “forerunner to the Fairfax Chapel” since it was used so often for Methodist services. In 1794 Watters (1806 : 120) referred to it as “our Chapel”²³ and it was at the Fairfax Chapel in 1798 that Asbury (II 1958 :

¹⁸ See Stukenbroeker (1974 : 44, 76) for more information on the various stages a group of early Methodists went through as they grew from being a society on a circuit, cared for by a traveling preacher every few weeks, to a self sufficient congregation supporting a local preacher of their own.

¹⁹ Stukenbroeker (1974 : 253) identifies this preacher as Jeremiah Cosden.

²⁰ See Stukenbroeker (1974 : 109) for more details.

²¹ Some of the information listed in this section comes from the brief histories of the below congregations, listed on their respective web sites.

²² “Harry Hoosier, sometimes called ‘Black Harry’ in the old records, was the first Negro Methodist Preacher. His first recorded sermon was preached in Fairfax Chapel.” (Steadman 1964 : 93). Asbury (I 1958 : 403) recorded this event on May 13, 1781.

²³ See also Wrenn, 2000 : 80.

175) said he had seen and conversed with his “old friend William Watters.” Evidently Watters had become very active in the life of the church over the years. More than forty years after Watters first served the Fairfax Circuit, Methodism was still thriving in the area.

In 1818, with Watters’ eyesight failing, but his passion to serve still very evident, Watters agreed to serve on a committee of trustees for the Fairfax Chapel. The Methodist congregation at that site was in the process of erecting their third building when Watters and his fellow trustees were called upon to help with some legalities. One of their tasks was to oversee the deeding of the land that the chapel stood on over to the Methodists. Members of the Adams family, Watters’ in-laws, owned the land but the Methodists had never, until that time, legally assumed ownership of it. For a single penny the land around the Chapel was deeded to the trustees, one of who was naturally Watters. (Steadman 1964 : 94-94). In 1819 the congregation built a red brick church, which could very well have been as a result of the work that Watters was doing as trustee. The City of Falls Church grew up around the chapel, which was located just south of Washington and about 5 miles west of Watters’ home.

During the Civil War in the 1860’s, the congregation at Fairfax Chapel experienced two significant setbacks. First, Union troops demolished the church and used its bricks for their own purposes, then the congregation split over the issue of slavery with the segment who opposed slavery forming a new congregation of their own. They took on the name “Crossman Methodist Episcopal Church,” in honor of a local benefactor, Isaac Crossman, who donated the land for their new church. Today the Crossman congregation still exists, holding meetings at 384 North Washington Street, Falls Church, Virginia.

The pro-slavery division of Fairfax Chapel also formed a new congregation, which is still in existence today. The church is called the Dulin United Methodist Church²⁴ located at 513 East Broad Street, Falls Church, Virginia.²⁵ Today Oakwood Cemetery exists where the Fairfax Chapel once stood.²⁶

²⁴ The church is named after William Dulin who donated the land the current church still stands on.

²⁵ Due to legal action taken by members of the Dulin and Crossman congregations, which was initiated in 1904, the United States government, in 1915, paid out \$1,600 for the destruction of Fairfax Chapel. After paying attorney’s fees, the congregations split \$1,280. The figure of \$1,600 was the estimated value of the building at the time of its destruction. (See Steadman 1964 101-103).

²⁶ Some of this information appears on a plaque, which is erected at the entrance to the Oakwood Cemetery, City of Falls Church. It can be viewed online at;
http://photos.historical-markers.org/main.php?g2_itemId=5567#photograph.

9.6.3 THE WILLIAM WATTERS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, MCLEAN, VIRGINIA

The above named church was located at 1219 Swinks Mill Road, Mclean, Virginia and was formed in 1967. (Wrenn 1981 : 8). It existed for only fifteen years. In 1982, with the church on the brink of closure due to dwindling attendees, the members of William Watters United Methodist Church joined Lt. Luke's United Methodist Church located at 7628 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church, Virginia. Today a thriving Korean Methodist church meets at the significantly improved location of the former William Watters church on Swinks Mill Road in Mclean.

9.6.4 THE WILLIAM WATTERS MEMORIAL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, JARRETSVILLE, MARYLAND²⁷

Watters was born and grew up in Harford County, Maryland, which is also where he first ministered as a young man: newly converted to Christianity and Methodism. In honor of being in the area where Watters hailed from, and in recognition of "one who helped profoundly in establishing Methodism in America," (WWMUMC 1985 : 2) the William Watters Memorial United Methodist Church, is named.

William Watters never personally served the Harford Circuit, but his brother, Nicholas, did in 1800. (WWMUMC 1985 : 3). Watters makes no mention of the Circuit in his autobiography. His family, who had converted around the same time he did, used their homes for meetings houses and preaching points. In the 1840's the Methodist society that was meeting at the home of Mrs. Ester Watters, set about the construction of a church, which was completed in 1844 and named Eden Chapel, after Eden Town, which was the name of the surrounding community at that time. The land on which the church stood was deeded by the Watters family to the Methodists on January 20, 1844. (WWMUMC 1985 : 8).

In 1897 work on a new building, close to the site of the original Chapel, commenced. The first groundbreaking for the new sanctuary was ceremonially carried out by fifteen children, six

²⁷ The information in this section is mostly derived from a short sixteen-page account of the history of this church sent to this writer by the church's current pastor, Rev. Ray Keene, entitled "William Watters Memorial United Methodist Church: 1844-1985." Since no author is listed this writer will reference the booklet as WWMUMC, the first letters of the booklet's title.

of whom were “great, great grand nieces and nephews of William Watters for whom the church was named.” (WWMUMC 1985 : 10). The church is beautifully constructed from large Rock Ridge granite blocks, extracted from a nearby quarry. It has two steeples; one of which is home to a thirteen hundred pound bell. The property is located on a picturesque country road just a few miles outside the town of Jarrettsville.²⁸

9.7 WATTERS’ GRAVE AND THE WILLIAM WATTERS FOUNDATION

Watters was buried in 1827 in a Watters-Adams-Wren family cemetery on his farm. Almost two decades later, in 1845, his wife was buried beside him. “For many years his grave remained unmarked.” (Ferguson 1892 : 117). In an attempt to preserve Watters’ legacy a decision was made in 1889 “to mark his grave with a suitable monument.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 155). In 1892 an impressive marble obelisk, set on a three-tiered base, was placed on Watters’ grave. On the four sides of the monument is inscribed the following tribute, appearing here as it does in stone.

In Memory of
Rev. William Watters
The First Native Itinerant
Methodist Preacher in
America.
Born Oct. 16, 1751,
Died March 29, 1827.

He was a pioneer leading
the way for the vast army of
American Methodist Itinerants
having the everlasting
Gospel to preach.

Fervent in spirit, prudent
in council, abundant in

²⁸ This writer visited this church on August 4, 2007.

labors, skillful in winning
souls, he was a workman that
needed not to be ashamed.

Also His Wife
Sarah Adams
Erected by the Virginia
Conference of
The Methodist Episcopal
Church

With the nation's capital and surrounding towns rapidly expanding in the twentieth century and rural farmland swelling into urban development, the cemetery where Watters lay was soon competing for peaceful living space. "The William Watters site became vulnerable to the curious and, worse, to mischievous pranksters. Vandals toppled the granite obelisk from its base. And there it lay, mute testimony to the seeming indifference of the Methodists." (Russell 1998 : 28). The land became overgrown as neighbors complained of the eyesore.

It wasn't until the 1950's that several Methodist historians, leaders and interested parties began efforts to do something about the gravesite.²⁹ Since the land was privately owned, and there was some growing sentiment of preserving Watters' grave for posterity reasons, regardless of where he lay, one suggestion was to move the grave to Mount Olivet Cemetery in Baltimore, Maryland, because it would be close to Watters' place of birth and it is where several other distinguished Methodists are buried, Asbury included. Another suggestion was to move the grave to nearby Oakwood Cemetery, which was on land that originally belonged to Watters' in-laws. Other suggestions that were batted around included moving the grave to a nearby university campus or even laying it beneath the pulpit of a nearby church.

In 1965 the deed for the land on which Watters lay buried was presented to the Virginia Methodist Historical Society with one binding condition, that the transfer of ownership of the land becomes "null and void if any of the remains of any person buried in said cemetery is removed, including Rev. William Watters." (Russell 1998 : 32). Methodists had at last agreed to

²⁹ For a list of some of the ensuing correspondence that circulated over a fifteen year period about the future of Watters' grave see Russell 1998 : 29-33.

leave the renowned preacher where he lay, and to preserve his gravesite in honored memory. On July 11, 1969, Watters' grave was designated Historic Site # 7 by the General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church. The obelisk was re-anchored to its base and the grounds occasionally cleared by volunteers, but its general and perpetual upkeep remained uncared for, for the next thirty years, partly because encroaching developments restricted access to the gravesite.

In 1994 the last remaining large tract of land in the area that surrounded the grave, and which still belonged to the Thomas Wren family, was sold. With the subsequent construction of about a dozen homes in the immediate area, access to the gravesite was made more convenient. In 1996 the Virginia Conference Historical Society established the William Watters Foundation, which is charged with the maintenance of Watters' gravesite.³⁰

The official address of the gravesite is 6430 Linway Terrace, Mclean, Virginia, which is surrounded by all the trappings of twenty-first century suburbia. At the entrance to the site is erected a sign that reads as follows;

GRAVE SITE
OF
WILLIAM WATTERS

FIRST AMERICAN BORN
ITINERANT METHODIST PREACHER

BORN OCTOBER 16, 1751

DIED MARCH 19, 1827³¹

ADAMS-WREN-WATTERS CEMETERY

A gravel driveway flanked by a Catholic school on one side and a small wooded lot on the other, leads up to the cemetery that is encircled by an iron fence, ninety feet in circumference. The cemetery is dotted with what appears to be randomly placed stones that bear no markings or inscriptions, but which indicate the burial places of other occupants of the cemetery. In the middle of the enclosure is a sturdy squared off iron fence in the center of which

³⁰ This writer was the guest speaker at the annual meeting of the William Watters Foundation held on Sunday September 30, 2007, in Mclean, Virginia. This writer had no knowledge of the foundation's existence when he commenced this research but is extremely appreciative of its work.

³¹ The date of Watters' death as listed on this sign is erroneous. It should be March 29.

proudly stands the obelisk over Watters' grave, a bold testimony to the work, pioneering spirit and unwavering fortitude of one of the most noteworthy servants of American Methodism.

9.8 THE BALLAD OF WILLIAM WATTERS

In 1977 Raymond Wren (1977 : 10-12) published the following ballad in honor of his distant relative, William Watters. It is reprinted here in its entirety without commentary from this writer as it clearly stands on its own as a fitting part of the Watters legacy:

THE BALLAD OF WILLIAM WATTERS

When William Watters was a wee little lad,
He enjoyed all the money that his father had;
He liked to ride in the coach-and-four
On an occasional trip to Baltimore,
William Watters! I wish I could be like him!

When Billy came to man's estate.
He would ride to the hounds and stay up late;
He played at cards with all the rest,
And drank his share, of Maryland's best,
William Watters! I wish I could be like him!

Then along came a preacher, a Methodist,
And that was the end of the whiskey and the whist;
He called all the people to come repent,
And William was the first who went.
William Watters! I wish I could be like him!

As soon as he was able to work it,
He got a horse and rode a circuit,
A~preaching the gospel farther and wider.
Living off the land on corn-pone and cider.
William Watters! I wish I could be like him!

He preached to the east and he preached to the west,
And soon was accorded one of the best;
So once on the occasion of the bishop's absence,
He even presided at the conference.
William Watters! I wish I could be like him!

This was the chance that William needed,
So without ado, he proceeded
To appoint himself to Fairfax Chapel,
Where dwelt Sally, his eye's true apple.
William Watters! I wish I could be like him!

Now Sarah was William Adams's daughter.
He was rich, and many sought her.
William sped while others tarried,
And within three weeks, they were married!

William Watters! I wish I could be like him!

This was fine, but it didn't last—
 The year went by just too darn fast,
 And the bishop sent him to a mountain charge
 Where the pay was small and the work was large.
 William Watters! I wish I could be like him! (I do?)

Most circuit riders lived the single life,
 But William took along his wife.
 Till Sarah found that travel was a bother,
 And William shipped her back to her father.
 William Watters! I wish I could be like him!

To see the couple united again,
 Papa Adams gave them a house in McLean;
 And the bishop, not to be outdone,
 Gave him the church in Washington.
 William Watters! I wish I could be like him!

Now the new Federal City wasn't much—
 Mostly boarding-houses and such (or worse),
 So the bishop said to our man in McLean:
 "Billy, hit the road again."
 William Watters! I wish I could be like him!

This time, when he had to roam,
 William left his bride at home
 In the care of his brother from Baltimore—
 (But that didn't work out too well either.)
 William Watters! I wish I could be like him?

So William came back to the house in McLean,
 And vowed, "I'll never leave Sally again.
 I'll preach anywhere, even a school cafeteria,
 So long as it's somewhere in the metropolitan area."
 William Watters! I wish I could be like him!

So there he stayed till they got old,
 The saint of Mclean, as I've been told;
 And there he lies, without pain or risk,
 Beneath a marble obelisk.
 William Watters! I wish I could be like him!
 (But not just yet.)

Today thousands of Methodists worship across America's Mid-Atlantic Seaboard in churches located on historic itinerant circuits that Watters faithfully rode. It is probable that only a small minority have ever heard his name and even less have grown to appreciate his work. The realization that history has not accorded Watters his just recognition, had he known it, would not have perturbed the preacher, for he never served humanity for his own advancement. He

preached the gospel, endured hardship and gave of his best for the glory of God. A life dedicated to God and a life of service to mankind, was inseparable to Watters, which is exactly how he lived for some fifty-five years. If Watters could survey the Methodist landscape today that has grown from the roots that he and his contemporaries planted, he may have reservations about some of those who bear the Methodist name and who have wandered from their theological heritage, but overall this writer believes that Watters would be satisfied. The Wesleyan-Methodist movement still thrives, with millions of faithful disciples claiming it as their spiritual home. Only a handful of church historians have ever referenced the legacy of Watters and even fewer have attempted to define it, yet in a spiritual sense it is very simple: men, women and children who have a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and who worship Him within the Methodist family of churches is what Watters worked for. In that sense the legacy of William Watters will never die.

CONCLUSION

Positions taken and conclusions made in this research are unlikely going to be considered controversial. The major building blocks of early American Methodism and the cornerstones of Methodist theology have not been challenged. The invaluable contributions of the early leaders referenced above have not in any significant way been discredited or questioned. What this research has set out to do and what this writer believes has been accomplished, is that the life and work of one of Christianity's faithful but obscure warriors and one of early American Methodism's most noteworthy servants has been given the attention it deserved. If this work ever gets widely circulated it is hoped that the name of William Watters will be clearly recognized by all who have even a remote interest in Methodist history and that the major contributions he made to the cause of Christ under the umbrella of Methodism will never again be neglected or forgotten.

It must be remembered by all who consider the merits of his life that the earthly passion that drove Watters in the traveling work of an itinerant preacher was his inner relationship with his Savior. In a letter to an unknown recipient Watters (1806 : 106) said, "The sacrifice that a preacher makes in giving up his choice, and going wherever he is appointed, is not small. But no one is worthy of the name of a traveling preacher, that does not cheerfully go anywhere he can, for the general good." The 'general good' for Watters was that souls were being saved to the glory of God. As long as health permitted, and even at times when it did not, Watters carried the Gospel torch of early American Methodist itinerancy with a determined resolve that inspired many in its wake. Watters, along with his Methodist co-workers; "crossed bridgeless rivers, blazed their way through dense forests, surmounted rugged mountains, slept on the ground, and lived on plain and often unwholesome food, that they might hew out the first timbers and lay the first stones of the temple" (D. A. Watters 1898 : 160) that has become the family of Methodist churches as we know them today.

Watters sought no office, no wide recognition, nor any special consideration. He unassumingly endeavored to serve his world armed with little more than a dramatic personal spiritual experience and some basic understanding of Wesleyan theology, but he soon developed into a successful winner of souls and an accomplished defender of his faith. With more than half a century of varied and faithful service behind him, blind and near death, Watters was still been

called upon to minister to those around him as he grew to be one of the most venerable old saints American Methodism will ever have. Those who knew him best constantly sought Watters out for his qualified service, his sound advice, his exceptional preaching and his pastoral comfort.

In the course of wanting to do nothing more than what God had called and equipped him to do, Watters became the first to do many things, and subsequently distinguished himself in the eyes of those who knew him and those who endeavor to know of him. “So great was his devotion to his Master and to the work of the ministry that he ceased only to labor when he ceased to live.” (D. A. Watters 1898 : 153).

It is possible that this writer has blown the William Watters trumpet louder than some may judge is deserved, but if we fail to honor those who gave sacrificially to worthy causes so that we in posterity can enjoy the freedoms we do, then we would have failed not only their efforts, but humanity at large. American Methodism would have survived without Watters, but not as well. Souls would have been won to the Kingdom of God without Watters but not as many. The study of Church History will always be a worthy pursuit for both scholar and layman, but without the likes of William Watters and the army of other American born itinerants that dared to follow him, our efforts would not be as rewarding and the stories we so joyfully put to paper would never be as captivating and challenging.

Watters remains unknown to many, forgotten by some and possibly neglected by others, but the annals of history have ensured that, although scantily referenced for far too long, his service will never truly end. This writer has unashamedly and unapologetically sought to make a hero out of William Watters: The first American of American Methodism.

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