

Social Issues and Controversies

I. THE NAZARENE REACTION

Characteristic of John Wesley's ministry was his concern for the impoverished. Responding to this spirit in the ensuing century, William Booth attempted to preach among the English underprivileged. When English Methodists did not react favorably to his vision, he left the Church. Thus the Salvation Army was born. Under somewhat different circumstances the Church of the Nazarene sprang from the Methodist Episcopal Church in America in the waning days of the nineteenth century. Its founder was one of the leading ministers of the Southern California Conference.

At the close of the Civil War, in reaction to the lax morality and irreligion of the post-war period, a "holiness" movement sprang up in various sections of the country. At first this took the form of camp meetings within Methodist circles, stressing the doctrine of entire sanctification as a work of grace distinct from and subsequent to justification. Wesley's doctrine of perfection, or entire sanctification, has had a significant impact in Christian history. Dr. Willard Sperry reminds us that

some forty of our smaller sects represent would-be reform movements which began within Methodism, as renewed attempts to recover or to achieve the perfectionism which Methodism originally professed and has never ceased to seek.¹

This holiness movement had reached noticeable proportions in California by 1884. The Southern California Conference joined with the California Conference that year in reaffirming Wesley's doctrine of perfection but warning against certain "Union Holiness Bands," which were attracting many Methodists into their ranks. The leaders of these bands were characterized as "irresponsible, insubordinate, erratic and fanatical, who reject the advice and control of pastors and official boards, and set themselves forth as the special exponents and exemplars of holiness."² Since schisms and dissension were appearing in several localities, the movement or any semblance

of it was in much disfavor especially among many bishops of the Church. No further agitation seems to have occurred until 1892 when Dr. Phineas F. Bresee appeared to have been demoted.

Dr. Bresee had transferred into the Southern California Conference in 1883 from Des Moines. By 1892 he had held the leading pastorates in the Conference, had been a delegate to the General Conference held that spring, and was completing his first year as Presiding Elder of the Los Angeles District. During these twelve months a large number of evangelistic meetings were held on the district. Laymen and ministers alike responded, and an extensive three-months' campaign of Pentecostal meetings ensued.³ Dr. Bresee called in some of the leading preachers of the National Holiness Association. He was a firm believer in entire sanctification. During this year several of the Methodist ministers of the district apparently claimed to have experienced perfect love and heart holiness. By Conference time Dr. Bresee was in disfavor with Bishop John H. Vincent and was not reappointed Presiding Elder. Instead he was assigned to Simpson Church (its successor, Westlake, in 1927 merged with Wilshire, which had succeeded Hobart Blvd.). The following year he was appointed to the Boyle Heights (Grace) Church. During the year there he became extremely interested in the Peniel Mission on South Main Street in Los Angeles. At the close of the 1894 Conference year he requested a supernumerary relationship in order that he might devote more time to the mission. Apparently he hoped that it might be brought under Methodist auspices. When this request was refused, Dr. Bresee was granted location.⁴

It is a testimony to Dr. Bresee's spirit that no word of bitterness or condemnation of the Methodist Episcopal Church came from his lips or pen. Like Booth in England a few years earlier, he simply took up what he now believed to be his greater calling from God. Within a few months, however, he felt that the Peniel Mission was not exactly the kind of work to which he should devote his time. "His call was not to a floating class—here today and gone tomorrow—but to a more organized form of work among the common people who had homes and families, and who needed a church home."⁵ Accordingly, on October 20, 1895, he organized a new church which he named "Church of the Nazarene." In association with him in this venture was Dr. J. P. Widney, who had just resigned as President of the University of Southern California and been discontinued as a probationer in the Conference. Dr. Bresee and Dr. Widney became co-pastors and general superintendents in the new church. Four years later Dr. Widney withdrew from the Nazarene church

and was received into full connection in the Southern California Methodist Conference. He was appointed to the "City Mission—Los Angeles." The Mission was formally organized by the Annual Conference in 1908. Its door opened every day and night ministering to thousands. In 1921, under the direction of C. B. Sweet, one of its converts, it ended its short history by merging with Newman Methodist Church and Deaconess Friendly House. This was to become the Church of All Nations under the leadership of Bromley Oxnam.

Meanwhile an association composed of the Church of the Nazarene and similar evangelical bodies had formed in Los Angeles. In 1907 this group united with an eastern agency known as the "Association of Pentecostal Churches of America." In 1915 the entire body adopted the name "Church of the Nazarene."⁶ Dr. Bresee continued to be the outstanding figure until his death that year. The *California Christian Advocate* paid special tribute to the quality of his personal life and dedication: "Dr. Bresee was a very able preacher and especially effective as an evangelist. He was a man who was greatly admired and loved by a large personal following."⁷

2. LIBERAL HISTORICAL CRITICISM

This issue never reached the controversial heights in the Southern California Conference that it did in the Southern Church. There were definite indications, nonetheless, that the new Biblical thinking did not go unchallenged. Like several other Conferences Southern California sent a strongly worded memorial in 1903 to General Conference calling for a full investigation of the liberal teachers at Boston University School of Theology and Garrett Biblical Institute.⁸ General Conference, however, merely urged the bishops not to confirm any professor for such a position in any Methodist seminary if his doctrines were doubtful.⁹ By 1910 the historical approach to the Bible was apparently becoming widespread in southern California. That year the Annual Conference voted that a course in Bible and Missions be given at the summer session at the University of Southern California. In the next breath it declared itself opposed to the new liberalism: "Instead of simply refuting the pernicious interpretation of Scripture now so industriously spread over southern California, we must meet all error with the inculcation of positive truth and thus overcome evil with good."¹⁰ Fifteen years later, during the famous Scopes trial at Dayton, Tennessee, when the Pacific Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, was making some very strong pronouncements against the new trends, the Southern

California Conference was significantly silent. Dr. Robert P. Shuler's attacks on liberalism at the University of Southern California in 1925 suggested its definite presence there.¹¹ The silence of the Southern California Conference would appear to indicate that by this time it generally had accepted the modern approach to the Bible and implicitly had sanctioned the teaching of the University.

3. WAR AND PEACE

Methodists quickly joined the parade of patriotism which marched throughout America in 1917. In many quarters anyone who opposed the war became suspect. The *California Christian Advocate* expressed this spirit precisely: "It is a little difficult to understand the operations of certain people who pride themselves on being conscientious objectors to war."¹² While the Southern California Conference had repeatedly spoken out in support of disarmament talks from 1912 to 1916, she was now officially in favor of the declaration of war.

The position of the Conference and the Church as a whole was dramatically illustrated by the removal of Edwin P. Ryland from the District Superintendency. Dr. Ryland, a former minister of the Southern Methodist Church, was assigned to the pastorate of the Hollywood Church in the Southern California Conference in 1910. After six years at the church he was appointed Superintendent of the Los Angeles District. On April 6, 1917, the United States declared war on Germany. Adna Leonard, presiding bishop of the Southern California Conference at the time, decided to tour the state of California with other church leaders to promote patriotism. As he expressed it later:

I intend that the world shall know the position of The Methodist Church in the world war. This is a war for human liberty. It is a war for Christian principles . . . The Methodist Church will allow no other organization in the land to out do it in demonstration of loyalty and patriotism. I expect every minister to stand out in his community as the leader of the forces of patriotism.¹³

Dr. Ryland's conscience would not let him participate in the rallies; at Annual Conference he stood alone in voting against the resolution supporting the war effort. Bishop Leonard, deciding that a change must be made, removed Dr. Ryland from his superintendency. Edwin Ryland bore no bitterness. He stated that he recognized the necessity of harmony within the bishop's cabinet. Since in all honesty

he could not support the war, Ryland remarked that "it is perfectly proper that I be relieved of my office."¹⁴

From our present vantage point, it might be easy to cast scorn on Bishop Leonard. Although the 1916 General Conference made no pronouncement other than a hope for peace, Bishop Leonard, in his deep patriotism, probably thought that the Church must feel in 1917 as he did. He neither spoke nor acted for or through the Church as a whole, but he did speak and act as he felt sincerely led. He was a Christian man who was true to his convictions regardless of the cost. He told Dr. Roy Smith once that there "are so many things I have to do that are repugnant to me personally. As a brother I would not but as a bishop I have to."¹⁵ Dr. Ryland was magnanimous: "I greatly admire Bishop Leonard as a man. . . . I bear no ill will in the matter. The bishop has done his duty as he sees it."¹⁶

Bishop Leonard appointed Dr. Ryland to Santa Barbara, but the feeling engendered there and elsewhere against a pacifist led Dr. Ryland to believe that it would be impossible to work in the Conference. He therefore withdrew from the Methodist Episcopal Church and became pastor of the Mount Hollywood Congregational Church, an outstanding liberal pulpit in which he was succeeded by the socially mindful Congregational mystic, Allan A. Hunter. In 1931 Frank G. H. Stevens introduced at Conference a resolution reciting the facts of the case and requesting Dr. Ryland to rejoin the Methodist Episcopal Church. He was credited with service for all the years of his withdrawal and in 1932 was readmitted in full standing. Thus a happy conclusion came to an otherwise unfortunate episode in the history of the Conference.

As World War II approached, the attitude of the Conference recognized the right of every individual to take a stand as his conscience dictated. In 1933 the Conference had supported the stand taken by two students at the University of California at Los Angeles who asked to be excused from participating in military training on conscientious grounds. Though carried to the United States Supreme Court, where the position of the Conference was defeated, it illustrated a radical change in attitude from 1917.¹⁷ This stand for the right of an individual to follow the dictates of his conscience was carried over into the united Conference where several tests of this nature were yet to be met.

4. CIVIL LIBERTIES

The Southern California Conference has always been vitally

interested in the preservation of civil liberties. By 1931 Los Angeles had become notorious for the suppression of civil rights. Force, in the form of the "Red" squad of Lieutenant William Hynes of the Police Department, was used to disperse groups meeting in the interest of labor. Elaborate police spy rings were admittedly in operation. In the final overthrow of such tyranny the churchmen of the Methodist Episcopal Church were definitely instrumental.¹⁸

Several groups came under careful scrutiny of Conference committees. Some of these organizations, such as the "Better America Federation of California," were found to have used their influence to "deny to groups with whom they disagree the fundamental rights of free speech and assemblage as guaranteed by the Constitution." Furthermore, they had tried "to create suspicion concerning liberal leaders and thinkers."¹⁹ Another group which was carefully investigated was the American Civil Liberties Union, which had been accused by many people in and out of Conference of being communistic. Dr. A. A. Heist, first director of the Union, was a member of the Conference. The Conference committee reported that while the extreme position taken by the Union in upholding rights of communists and non-communists was debatable, there was no evidence that it was communistic and recommended support of the Union's ideals.²⁰

5. THE ECONOMIC ORDER

The Southern California Conference in 1898 defined Christian brotherhood in the economic sphere as meaning "that the resources which our Father has given to society shall be available for the welfare of each member of the great social family."²¹ In keeping with this the Conference thereafter protested violence on the part of both labor and management and declared itself in favor of a living wage.²² The various novel utopian movements of the 1920's and 1930's, such as Technocracy and the Townsend Old Age Pension, were never officially endorsed by the Conference though there was scattered support among the laity and clergy. Probably the most crucial labor problem in southern California thus far in the twentieth century was created in the 1930's by the immigrants from the Dust Bowl. A noted historian of California has keenly observed that this unprecedented influx of impoverished and unskilled labor came at the worst possible time for California: "Agriculture of all kinds and in every section was nearly prostrate. Prices of farm products were below cost. Crops remained unpicked and rotted on the ground."²³ Added

to this was the ever-present problem of the Mexican nationals in the Imperial Valley. Whenever and wherever any of these workers attempted to organize, violence usually occurred. While the Conference often made pronouncements on these problems, there was no concerted effort to help labor to organize. This was true variously because of outright opposition to labor, indifference or fear, and perplexity over the issues involved.²⁴

Statements on the economic order as such created a furor in the 1930's. In 1932 several members of the Conference, meeting with other ministers in Chicago, adopted a manifesto calling for a new order based on co-operative endeavor and brotherhood. Annual Conference that year went on record for concrete proposals such as the abolition of child labor and the right of labor to organize and to regulate itself under Federal supervision. These proposals closely resemble many measures adopted subsequently by the New Deal.²⁵ In 1934 the Conference, following the lead of the New York East Conference, officially took a stand favoring "the public ownership and operation of public utilities and of the principal means of production and transportation."²⁶ Opposition from some ministers and many laymen mounted steadily. This came to a head between the Conference sessions of 1935 and 1936 with the organization of a Methodist Laymen's Committee, which lasted only about one year. The probable reason for its early demise was that the General Conference itself in 1936 frankly recognized that differences of opinion existed among and between laymen and ministers and declared that the true test of proposals and systems must be the Christian doctrine of personality.²⁷ Tensions slowly eased thereafter in the Conference, particularly as increasing concern over Nazi mobilization drew Christian men and women together.

Concrete action by the Conference in the economic realm was best expressed by the activities of local churches and individuals in the matter of relief during the depression. Many ministers served on welfare committees. Some churches set up revolving loan funds and encouraged co-operatives. Others collected and distributed food and medical supplies. First Methodist Church of Hollywood was typical. For eight years its relief committee functioned twenty-four hours a day giving assistance in whatever way it could.²⁸ Such activities were among the most substantial contribution that the Conference ever made in the realm of economic life and thought.