

## TRUTH AND FREE METHODIST TRADITION

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My professional life has been spent working on the campus of a secular research university, so I am acutely aware that at least three distinct understandings of truth are current in our culture. I can illustrate by pointing to the Noyes Chemistry Building on the main quad of my university. In that building for years I taught the literature of fantasy to a large annual congregation of undergraduates from every college on campus. There is heavy irony for me in the fact that forty years earlier, two uncles of mine, trained at Houghton and Oberlin, studied for their Ph.D.s in chemistry at my school, no doubt using the same building. Those two uncles, part of a family of twelve siblings, were, to my knowledge lost to faith and the church. The truth of science displaced the truth of Christian faith. That still other truth, of literature and the arts, is well captured in, for example, the fantasies of hope and imagination that I was happy to teach. Ringing the central campus, I add, are the university foundations. These bridges between area churches and the campus represent an institution that was in fact created by the Methodists of Urbana many years ago. They witness to the truth of special revelation. I lament the fact that these three sorts of truth are so regularly segregated in our culture, for the religious purchase on truth has much to learn from the rigor of science, as well as from the imaginative and often hopeful expansiveness of literature and the arts. The approach of science can help us to be honest about the actual, while the approach of the arts can keep us aware of the boundless expanse of the possible.

Apropos of truth and our tradition I shall make a number of miscellaneous comments by way of three carefully defined stances, those of the naive observer, the partisan, and the ironic partisan. But before going into that miscellany, I want to put before you friends and fellow-believers a capsule statement. I like to think of it as a time-release capsule, for its sense is condensed enough to ask for an extended period of what I hope is useful consideration.

We are, historically defined, a branch of the church committed to a confident supernaturalism and also a radical empiricism. With respect to the first, we part company with the secular world and with much of the more liberal part of the Protestant constituency. With respect to the second, which implies looking always to actual experience, we are in the grand tradition of Wesleyanism, of American revivalism as epitomized in a Jonathan Edwards, and also of American pragmatism as exemplified by William James. I should mention that James was used approvingly by Bishop Marston in his Free Methodist history of 1960. But radical empiricism has always had difficulty with finding exact and unambiguous language for speaking of religious experience. That difficulty with language is most apparent, naturally, if a particular experience is infrequent. We are wise to keep track of our terminology, always checking it against the lived and the actual.

The responsible and creative uses of language have been my professional concerns. Language ought to be precise, and when it cannot be precise, it must be evocative of the complex, even paradoxical truth of any experience referenced. Often, language only properly serves the truth when it tells stories, which may well be the testimony of the primary experiencers.

Language can pull away from effective evocation, and the proof-stories may become hard to find, for the reason that the witness of one age has not been well carried on to the next. A radical empiricism is honest to the state of affairs. It is unsolicited objective reporting. It is a phenomenology. On the other hand--and I stress this-- confident supernaturalism is at ease with reports of the miraculous, the heavenly, the perfect, the gracious, the impossible but true. A robust supernaturalism, lived out, will mean that a radical empiricism taps into stories of the humanly impossible, and yet true. In our tradition supernaturalism finds specific expression in our hope-filled beliefs about the sundry works of the Holy Spirit, about Providence, and about the promised future. If, however, it should happen that a conspicuous gap opens up between supernaturalist belief and actual practice, if the disciplines which foster the regular manifestation of the miraculous wither away, if familiar terms cease to have any meaningful reference, you have the rule and reign of irony.

Now that was quite a capsule, but I assure you it can be downed more readily than getting a pill down the throat of any cat I have ever known.

I promised a definition of three different stances vis-à-vis the truth of our tradition. The first of these, that of the naive observer, identifies the non-insider or newcomer. He, or she, has access to appearances, to public information, to numbers, to printed material, to what some would call the objective and others the superficial, but which I am inclined to call the aspect, or the face of the matter. As an example of the naive observer I mention a recent newcomer to our Champaign-Urbana congregation, Our church building is just thirteen years old, and to us old-timers it is still new, but the newcomer has seen it differently. To this naive observer the church looks tired. The carpets are spotted, the kitchen tiles need replacing, there is a clutter of things stored in corners. Do we have a plan, this observer wonders.

The second stance I am developing is that of the partisan. The partisan is the committed insider. The Free Methodist partisan typically has relatives in the church. A father or grandfather was a preacher. The partisan has some familiarity or connection with Indianapolis. The partisan could probably, if asked, find Winona Lake on a map. As examples of such partisans I would mention people like Don Riggs and Brenda Young and John Ellis.

The third stance is that of the ironic partisan. Such a person is a loyal critic, active in pointing out ironies, especially those discrepancies between profession and practice. The ironic partisan, because he or she is a partisan, is also committed to resolving the ironies. As an example of the ironic partisan I would name Charles Kingsley. I worked with Brother Kingsley on his autobiography, helping him cut it by half, so it wouldn't be

longer than the Bible and working on emphasis so his lifelong skirmishing with his beloved church would feature solutions rather than problems. Charles was always impatient with a church which considered itself evangelical but did precious little by way of evangelizing.

Now to observations which make use of these three defined and illustrated stances.

## THE NAIVE OBSERVER

The naive observer would, I believe, notice the following truths about the Free Methodist Church in the US.

1. Numberwise the church has been in a protracted decline in the United States, even as global membership has shown remarkable growth. In 1925 there were 1284 Free Methodist church with 80 thousand in Sunday School and about 40,000 members. The Church of the Nazarene, beginning several decades later than the Free Methodist denomination, showed 1500 churches in 1925, with 60,000 communicants. In 2002, Free Methodist figures showed 852 churches with 73,000 members, while the Church of the Nazarene showed 5000 churches with 644,000 members. The latter church showed an 1100 per cent increase while the Free Methodist Church, in number of churches and in membership as a percentage of the U. S. total population showed sharp decline. The naive observer looking only at the United States would say the movement is a spent force. Of course we praise God for our extraordinary constituency in Africa. If God is kind, we shall not end like the Christian Catholic Church, based in Zion, Illinois, now all but invisible in the US, and, for the fruit of its missionary zeal in Africa, a witness diffused among scores of syncretistic sects. (I should add, parenthetically, that some very good news I report, just being back from South Africa, is that the Zionists, with well-conceived materials from Zion, Illinois, and a growing group of teachers in the field, are firmly committed to bringing the African contingent into strict orthodoxy.)

2 In giving, Free Methodists continue to be generous, but the distribution of giving over the decades has changed. Between 1968 and 2003 giving as a percentage of per capita disposable income dropped from 9.6 % to 7.6 %, still a respectable figure, given the fact that according to David Barrett the global figure for Christian giving is only 2.26 per cent of income. However, the fraction of Free Methodist giving which went for benevolence dropped by half. The Church of the Nazarene over the same period saw a drop in giving from 6.5 % to 4.2%, but the decline in benevolence as a percentage of the whole was only a third. Without thorough inspection, a straightforward interpretation of the data is that we Free Methodists, while generous, are not as generous as we once were, and assuming some relationship between love and money, we are not funding our love as we once did. .

3 In our language for our signal teaching about the deeper life made possible through the work of God the Holy Spirit we demonstrate what to a philologist must appear as a checkered and puzzling history. In this connection I have been working with six

histories of the Free Methodist Church, as well as with a very modest survey of living witnesses.

In John McGeary's history of 1908 we encounter the language of "worldliness," "formalism" "Zinzendorfism" and "gradualism. If you hadn't guessed, all of these are bad. McGeary gives high honor to the phrase "entire sanctification."

Marston's history published in 1960 does not index the term "worldliness," and Marston was himself very much a man of the world, having made a reputation as a child psychologist before becoming a paid churchman. He discusses "formalism" wisely, contrasting it with "fanaticism," but making use of William James and recognizing a spectrum rather than just the two poles. Curiously, Marston has five index listings for sanctification, and five for "perfect love," but no listing for "entire sanctification."

David McKenna, in his fine history of recent decades, published in 1997, has one index listing for "formalism," but none for "worldliness, and none for "perfect love" or "perfection." He does have thirty references for "entire sanctification."

In the pose of naive observer, but one who has eavesdropped on many many sermons over six decades, I would observe that the language of worldliness and perfectionism has dropped out altogether from our discourse, along with "Zinzendorfism" and "gradualism." The first of this second pair, by the way, is the position that sanctification is coincident with regeneration, and "gradualism" affirms a lifelong process of sanctification. "Formalism" is plainly at the exit door. "Entire sanctification" has retained currency in recent decades, though I rarely hear it used now

I think it fair to say we have established something like *détente* with the world and worldliness, and with formalism and forms in worship, are reluctant to speak of perfection in a culture awash with the insights of biology and depth psychology, and still see merit in believing, if not very effectively teaching, the truth of a post-regeneration crisis in the believer's experience of God the Holy Spirit. Biological insight makes us uneasy talking any more about "eradication," "extirpation," "carn-ality," "the old man," or "inbred sin." I have not heard any of those terms used homiletically in at least two decades. But then I have missed a few of the sermons preached in that time. I have noticed that, 100 years after the founding of the Free Methodist Church, the 1960 Book of Discipline adjusted somewhat the language about the sinful nature. Bear in mind that if we choose to speak at all about sinful "nature," those secular thinkers who make "nature" their inclusive focus will have things to contribute to the discussion.

I served on the doctoral committee of a very capable woman who has since published perhaps a dozen books. Her thesis on Hawthorne touched on the phenomenon of 19th-century perfectionism, and I have gone back to that dissertation recently. She was right, I think, to give a historical context in this country for perfectionist thought and language. I believe it still important and possible to teach a crisis work of sanctification, but the language of "perfection" is very difficult; to use. I recall Dr. Mary Tenney's

embarrassment when Elton Trueblood, the great Quaker scholar and theologian, asked her point blank, "And you, Miss Tenney. Would you say that you have been perfected in love?"

Still in the pose of naive observer I conducted an amateurish survey of seven adult Christians in my home church, and seven more on the staff here at the World Ministry Center. The results are certainly not probative, but they are suggestive. I asked just three questions, and for each question there were only three permissible answers: yes, no, and I prefer not to answer without further definition of terms. The three questions were (1) Have you been entirely sanctified; (2) Have you been perfected in love for God and other persons, and (3) Have you, in a single crisis work of the Holy Spirit in your heart, been delivered from the inclination to sin. The results were surprising to me in more than one way. Of the fourteen, seven allowed as Yes, they had been entirely sanctified. Yet only two of the fourteen claimed to have been perfected in love for God and other persons. J. A. Wood, writing in 1906 on the subject of perfect love, insisted that "perfect love, perfection, sanctification, holiness" are utterly synonymous, but our several respondents clearly saw that different clusters of meanings are implied. I would say that they are anything but synonymous, though they may be strongly associated. On the matter of once-and-for-all deliverance from sinful inclination, seven in my survey said Yes, but one of the respondents, a psychiatrist, cheated by adding to his Yes, the phrase "more than once."

To sum up these comments of the naive observer: the numbers for the Free Methodist Church in the US are indicative of a least a tired church, if not a declining one, and the usages of the language for the deeper life are indicative of historic change, of communication-overload, and so, I gather, only modest reproduction of the defining experience. We would need many oral histories gathered in the next several years to assess appropriately the wisdom and truth of our historic witness.

## THE STANCE OF THE PARTISAN

The partisan, stressing the core truths of Free Methodist faith, would I believe, point to eight convictions. But before listing those eight, I choose to make a bold claim about how we have behaved ourselves theologically. With its emphasis upon experience, Wesleyan theology has typically avoided two reductions to absurdity. These are the absurdities which are consequent upon a "hyperlogical" theology, one which refuses to rest in antinomy or yoked contraries. The principle antinomy, of course, is that between fate and freedom. An extreme development of God's will as fate ends with a god far worse than the devil. I have often said I would be a happy atheist before I accepted some versions of god which make that god the creator of the vast majority of persons with the preconceived intention of damning them to perpetual torment. At the other extreme is the humanism which makes persons utterly free, and as the Puritan Richard Sibbes once observed, if man is perfectly free, then he is God. So let us rest with the contraries of fate and freedom, avoiding the absurdities of a god worse than Satan, and of man equal to God. We might be wise, as well, to trust antinomy a bit more in speaking of perfection and sinful nature, much as Wesley does implicitly in his

magnificent text for the covenant service printed in our hymnal, as the Collect does in the Communion service we celebrate, and in the actual testimony of sanctified persons. Our Book of Discipline, from 1860 forward, in the article on Entire Sanctification, has without embarrassment embraced the antinomy of further spiritual growth after the crisis of sanctification. That sounds like gradualism, but a sanctified gradualism. Now to eight core truths of Free Methodist faith (I do not pretend to be exhaustive)

1. We accept transcendence, which is to say the supernatural and the miraculous. Nature is far from being all that is.
2. God's will and Word are to be submitted to. We approach Scripture as authoritative, expecting that God will address us with conviction, instruction, and encouragement. In my graduate training in language and literature I was schooled to be critical of texts. But in the case of Scripture, I find that the text is marvelously critical of me, but not only critical. It is also life-defining and enhancing. God as Spirit does indwell His word.
3. The resurrected Jesus Christ is very much alive and makes himself known to us in the communion of spirit with Spirit. Christian assurance is just one of the evidences of our intimate relationship with a living Christ
4. The fundamental disciplines of the Christian life are regular Bible-reading and prayer.
5. God's great invention, after the World, is the Church. This unique fellowship of the forgiven and the inquiring has no earthly equivalent, and is the antepast of Heaven. (See Lloyd Knox's sermon-tract, "I Believe in the Church.")
6. Because God loves us each one, utterly, without regard to our merit or works, we are freed to be concerned about persons other than ourselves.
7. Unlike the way things are with some fatalistic theologies, we believe that there is such a thing as Christian growth. The 12-year-old Jesus, after all, could increase in favor with God and man, and that conundrum is of a piece with the insistence that salvation is a thing to be worked out lifelong. No crisis of grace should end in antinomianism or inertness.
8. We have a message of the best news imaginable, a message to be shared with the world. God is reconciled. If you are not already so reconciled, BE reconciled to God. Every good thing is promised to those who believe, world without end, forever and ever.

You will notice that these eight convictions do not really constitute what Bishop Marston, coining a term, called "distinctives." For they do not so much set us off from all other Christians as put us squarely in the grand tradition. I can rest with defining differences-- "Soul-marks," if you like-- which involve church polity; geography, ethnic history, or habits of worship, but I am much less comfortable with an identity founded upon claims of uniquely-privileged theological discernment. Historian McGeary could claim that it is

only as Free Methodists live by “peculiar doctrines” that they are faithful to the church’s mission. That seems to me to be too much the language of religious war rather than of effective witness and evangelism. I remind you of the cliché that the first casualty of war is the truth. In my youth I did hear claims about Scriptural holiness which implied, on a par with statements of the most hard-nosed supralapsarian Calvinist, that the vast majority of persons, including well-intentioned Christians, would never see the halls of Heaven. My older sister was willing to concede that Wesleyan Methodists, Nazarenes and the adherents of the Pilgrim Holiness way might make it, but that was about the sum of it. Such a position is scarcely a Gospel, but we have a Gospel. To put my listeners firmly back in their chairs, I add that Jesus dared to sum up the way to life in terms of an unqualified love for God and neighbor. How that, or his other injunction that we are to be perfect as God is perfect--how those two are to be worked out in terms of the instantaneous as well as the never-ending, seems to mandate a never-ending exploration. In any case, I cannot imagine that Jesus’ epigrammatic encouragements require for their implementation 200 US denominations--Huston Smith counts 900-- and 38,000 denominations worldwide (David Barrett’s current count). If such numbers reflect essential dividedness in the Body of Christ, his body is not so much divided as it is atomized.

## THE IRONIC PARTISAN

Now to consider that third stance, that of the ironic partisan. This stance, I remind you, combines commitment with critique oriented toward action. We have in this series of seminars been engaged together in a search for the Free Methodist soul. Bible-believers know that there is no soul without a body. What are the observable truths about us Free Methodists functioning in local churches, each a cell, if you like, in Christ’s body--what are those truths which point the way, even if a demanding one, to better health, vigorous vitality, to the fruiting of the Spirit. I shall list four, with considerable hesitation and tentativity, for I do not pretend to global vision or a perfected spirituality, and I am eager to see what emerges from the Asbury center for the study of renewal movements.

1 In the last half century we have become materially rich as a church and have not adjusted. We are intoxicated with our affluence. Our national per capita disposable income, adjusted for inflation, was in 2003 three and a half times what it was in 1947. While some good things have happened on the front of ministering to the poor, we are for the most part innocent of how to proceed. On the other hand, speaking globally, we are preponderantly a church of poverty and of color. We would be wise to speak of a ministry to the rich. Such a ministry to the rich, that is, ourselves, would be the spiritual largesse of the rest of the global Free Methodist family directed our way. One of the signs of vitality in the US church in the past thirty years has been the flourishing of new ethnic churches--Hispanic of several kinds, Haitian, Egyptian, Portuguese. Books are being written on the shift of the center of global Christianity to the developing world. We are positioned exceptionally well to benefit from the ministry of our global partners to us wealth-addled and lukewarm Americans. I think of an inspiring conference in Kansas City only last March when I was blessed and strengthened by the inspired ministry of

our Puerto Rican superintendent, Mercedes Reynoso. I think of being taught and enriched here last March by our Brazilian bishop. I think of the extraordinary work being done in northern Illinois by Alma and Juan Cordova. I think of the great synergy over twenty five years between Dwight Gregory and ethnic groups of all sorts along the northeastern seaboard.

It should be clear that our nostalgia and platitudes about ministry to the poor can be more than vapor as the reality of the global Free Methodist family bears in upon us in the US (and yes, in Canada as well). We discover the wondrous vibrancy of our urban ethnic churches, are ministered to in our riches, and learn again what it is to minister to the local poor, many of them in our newest churches.

2 From the appearances, revivalism is an obsolete method of evangelism for the local church. Methodists of all kinds love methods, but new methods are in order. The Free Methodist Church was founded in a time of revivals. I grew up, as many of us here did, when local churches held revivals, with visiting evangelists. But fifteen years ago, when I was sitting on the FM evangelism commission, I learned we had only five itinerant evangelists in the field, while the Nazarene church had 200. David Clardie, the best paid of our five had netted \$15,000 the previous year. (I add parenthetically, when interim pastor Tom Ryan asked us some weeks ago about our church's hosting a brief revival series, Helen and I sat down and struggled to come up with a single name of a nonbeliever we would find it natural to invite to such a series, rather than to an Alpha group in our home.) Tent meetings, street service, protracted meetings in local churches--do any of us here actually believe we will see conversions that way? And if not, what else is in order? My wife, who I believe has the gift of evangelism, has observed that the typical Free Methodist local church is sadly uninformed about new strategies. There are many: the Alpha course, readily adapted if found to be too charismatic,. Willow Creek materials and personnel, simple ongoing training from the pulpit in giving personal invitations and sharing one's faith; and, of course, churchplanting, which I am told is the best of all, but is not usually an option for the smaller local church.

Are we really clueless about why many of our local churches do not see a single adult conversion in a year's time? Why do we call ourselves Evangelicals? An unfamiliar term I did not mention earlier in connection with Zinzendorfism and gradualism is "perdition." It means "lostness." I have not heard it recently. Have you? Do we recall what it describes?

3 With the passing of revivalism our traditional ambivalence about the sacramental as an access to the supernatural has meant we find ourselves in a number of awkward situations. We tend to be careless in relating the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to spiritual readiness and to the sacrament of baptism. Families go to the front to receive the elements, with children who have had no instruction or heart-preparation. The fact is that we are quite casual about the two sacraments we honor, namely Holy Communion and Baptism. Without a definite conversion to cite, the early adolescent may come to the traditional time of confirmation wondering what his or her rite of

passage is to be. A family in our church, headed by a Jewish Christian, has three sons. Their sons wondered why the church did not have anything like their cousins' Bar Mitzvah. I mention all this to say we have halted between two distinct modes of staging the Christian life. One is ordered by sacraments--for the Roman and High Anglican Church seven, including Baptism, Confirmation, Marriage and Last Rites. The other model is defined by works of grace, and personal decision. We would be wise to determine how rigorously we follow the instructions of our communion service, how seriously we commend baptism, how we relate sacraments to personal decision.

I choose to go over the same territory, from a slightly different angle. We have traditionally not fully trusted the sacramental. In old language, "formalism" typically was a code word for reliance upon sacramental rites rather than the spontaneous outpourings of the Spirit. Such "formalism" was to be avoided and we seem now to hesitate undecided between a laissez faire supernaturalism and a reasonable use of the sacraments as God-ordained instruments of grace. It was by the merest happenstance that I was ever baptized, and that by my grandfather, by sprinkling when I was sixteen I have no confirming certificate. At the little Cleveland Mt. Pleasant church we saw the district elder four times a year, at which times we enjoyed the Lord's supper. On the other hand I have hosted Catholic friends who see such benefit in the Mass that they take it daily.

Is the Lord's table something to be visited frequently, after solemn preparation? And what about baptism? How many of our churches, like my own, are obliged to use a nearby barrow pit, or borrow a neighboring church's portable baptismal tank? In a word, do we Free Methodists truly believe that the sacraments are efficacious? If so, what is implied for how we make use of them in terms of expectation, preparation and frequency?

4 There is a disconnect between our teaching about the deeper life in Christ and the conspicuous fact, so evident in church history, that sanctification demands spiritual disciplines and the structures which support such disciplines. We are an undisciplined church, part of a larger American constituency which is also largely undisciplined but is becoming newly aware of the heritage of the disciplines of the Christian life. Dostoyevsky's young hero, Alyosha (one of the Brothers Karamazov) learns much from an early brief period in the local monastery. He reports that the spiritual life seemed so possible behind the monastery walls, but on his return to town, he was immersed again in the muddle of the commonplace. We should not ignore history. The deeper life is sustained, cultivated by disciplines. Ordinarily in the past those disciplines tacitly assumed sequestration of some kind, much time together with persons of like commitment, and then a venturing out in unselfish ministry. The more selfless and interventionist the ministry, the greater the need for the disciplines. Certainly the truly challenging disciplines are those of doing, rather than not doing--by which I mean spiritual exercise such as meditation along with creative venturing and loving engagement, as distinct from the disciplines of rejection, refusal, abstinence and

condemnation. I add that disciplines, self-chosen, are the point, rather than the rules others impose upon us.

Do I need to remind anyone here that the Wesleys got the nickname that stuck, the Methodists, because they were so earnest in their disciplines. Let's agree that "Methodists" sounds a lot better than "disciplinists," but disciplines are of the essence. I am confident that Howard Snyder's account of the Robertses and early Free Methodism will make clear how our soul is implicated in the models of those early earnest, joyous, enthusiastic, hope-filled, disciplined believers.

I love my church family. I see it is as part of a larger family, in a still larger family. Our soul is, of course, not to be defined apart from God the Holy Spirit. That Spirit is the source of holy purpose and unquenchable hope.