

**The Importance of Recital
to the Recovery of the Soul of the Free Methodist Church**
by Doug Newton
for the 2004 Historical Symposium

They say history repeats itself. Yet they also say that movements can't be reborn once the movement has calcified into an institution. I wish "they" would decide which it is.

Is history cyclical – can it be repeated? Or is it linear – can movements not be renewed? Can there be a revival of the passion and genius of the first fifty years of our history? Or have we moved on beyond any hope of ever being a movement again? I think there's a chance for renewed momentum. But if it's ever to be the case, there are some lessons history teaches that we must pay attention to. Let's examine those lessons from within the context of my own personal history as a fourth generation Free Methodist.

Lesson #1: History does not repeat itself; people repeat it.

During my student years at Roberts Wesleyan College, I was permanently influenced by an old scholar, G. Ernest Wright, whose book on the Old Testament, *God Who Acts* called my attention to the concept of "theology as recital." I don't know if he coined the idea, and I am not sure that his use of the concept as a systematic construct for biblical criticism wasn't overreaching. But this construct for understanding the Bible persuaded me that for a religious community to perpetuate identity and mission there must be a collective commitment to the recital of its history. The admonitions and warnings found explicitly stated in Psalm 78 draw a one-to-one correspondence between

recital and community continuity.

PS 78:1 O my people, hear my teaching;
listen to the words of my mouth.
² I will open my mouth in parables,
I will utter hidden things, things from of old--
³ what we have heard and known,
what our fathers have told us.
⁴ We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell the next generation
the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD,
his power, and the wonders he has done.
⁵ He decreed statutes for Jacob
and established the law in Israel,
which he commanded our forefathers
to teach their children,
⁶ so the next generation would know them,
even the children yet to be born,
and they in turn would tell their children.
⁷ **Then** they would put their trust in God
and would not forget his deeds
but would keep his commands.
⁸ They would not be like their forefathers--
a stubborn and rebellious generation,
whose hearts were not loyal to God,
whose spirits were not faithful to him.
⁹ The men of Ephraim, though armed with bows,
turned back on the day of battle;
¹⁰ they did not keep God's covenant
and refused to live by his law.
¹¹ They forgot what he had done,
the wonders he had shown them.

The word “then” in v. 7 is the hinge point of the if-then argument which can be simply stated, “If through faithful recitation one generation will pass on to the next the things they know of God through oral transmission and experience, **then** succeeding generations will continue in faithful covenant with God.”

Now it may seem enlightened to take issue with such a simplistic one-to-one correspondence between recital and community faithfulness and continuity, but is it? And while there may be other factors that contribute to an unsuccessful transference of community identity and mission, I would place my bet on recital as the *sine qua non* – the “that without which there is nothing” – of continuity.

When a community fails in recital it fails in continuity.



I grew up in the quintessential Free Methodist church. It was one of the cookie cutter churches built in the 1960s with exposed arch beams in the sanctuary – you know the one I’m talking about. It was as prolific in Free Methodism as McDonalds in America.

We had JMS, CYC, WMS, and VBS, and almost every other three-letter acronym known to man, and my mother was in charge of them all on the familiar two-year rotation that wore out most of our saints who eventually wandered off to the verdant pastures in Gerry or Lakeland or Spring Arbor or Warm Beach. Today we talk about people serving in their “area of giftedness.” If someone had talked like that 40 years ago in my home church, everyone would have laughed. What an unrealistic luxury! Spiritual gift inventories? What planet did you come from? The *Planet of the Big Churches*? The only inventorying that went on was asking the questions, “How long has it been since Jeannette took her turn directing CYC?” and “Do you think it’s too much to ask Howard to be delegate, trustee, treasurer and a Sunday school teacher – for the next 50 years?” Spiritual gift inventories are to small churches as Disneyworld vacations are to inner city families.

We had four kids in our youth group when I was in high school, a youth group hosted by the pastors wife whom we figured was somewhere between 45 and 110 years old – we couldn’t tell. We met on Sunday nights, and our group meeting consisted of reading something about a missionary family and having a Bible lesson. Amazing that nearly everyone in the various youth groups during that decade is now in ministry or lay leadership!

We had a Bible Quiz team, quarterly communion services, an organ and a piano and a choir that managed to pull off an annual Easter cantata without breaking any windows with the shrill sound of untrained overly-vibratoed sopranos and perennially understaffed men's sections – which is to say we had two tenors, one bass who could hear his part and two others who followed usually about a half beat behind and a quartertone flat.

We even had our one rich family who were denominationally connected, due to the husband being on the Board of Administration. This was my early education in the correspondence between wealth, privilege and power. But then every typical Free Methodist church had their rich family who held positions in higher up places that kept us connected with “the denomination.”

My family was well-off ourselves though. I remember how bad I felt – my best friend being the pastor's son – knowing that my dad made \$20,000 a year, and the pastor's family made \$6,500. As I said, this was the quintessential Free Methodist church. Exposed beams. Overworked moms and dads. One rich family. And an undersupported pastors family.

I suppose its one anomaly was that the pastor wore vestments (a FM oxymoron) and also road motorcycles, played jazz trombone (definitely oxymoronic!) and sported the only evidence of a post-war syndrome I knew about in those days – called a tattoo – that sometimes showed itself when he gestured broadly during some particularly poignant point in his sermons.



But my home church never recited history. We had no liturgies of community memory. The only recital event that comes to mind occurred during our quarterly

communion as we used the prescribed service from the *Book of Discipline*.

But there was no Free Methodist history. The most I knew about Roberts or Fairbairn was that one was the founder and the other a bishop, and both were award pins I could earn as a top achiever in CYC.

But there was nothing about a gospel to the poor, or the manifestations of the Holy Spirit, or social advocacy and political action. Don't get me wrong; now that I look back, these influences were felt, but no recitation was heard. And I was left floundering to find the identity of the Free Methodist church on my own. And I found one. Unfortunately, it wasn't very accurate. This leads me to the second lesson we need to learn about history.

To borrow a teaching method with a familiar ring: You have heard how it is said, "Nature abhors a vacuum." But I tell you...

Lesson #2: History Abhors a Vacuum

In the absence of formal recital, history will make up its own story. It will not leave the past without a voice. The question always is: *What story will be heard?*



I had been pastoring a Free Methodist church for about three years, long enough to begin building my list of "frequently asked questions" about Free Methodism. Near the top of the list was the perennial, "What's the difference between Free Methodist and regular Methodists?" I had my answer of course, but I wasn't always the one being asked. Sometimes people asked members of my congregation.

In one memorable case, a young couple who had recently become Christians after attending our church, asked one of our older members that question. Ironically, this 75

year old was named Mrs. Younger. Bill and Jean would often pick her up for church. When they had been coming long enough to catch on to the fact that the “Free” in our name referred to a category of Methodists, not just a local designation, like Living Water Methodist or St. Luke’s Methodist, they asked Mrs. Younger the question about the difference. Gratefully, they kept coming back to church even after her straightforward, didn’t-bat-an-eyelash answer that the difference between Methodists and Free Methodists is that “we believe we don’t sin.”

I think my official theological response when I heard that answer was “Yikes!”



Over the years my reaction has changed from one of shock to understanding. I came to realize that historical-theological understanding in the church is stratified. In the upper levels of historical-theological conversation people engage in fully formed dialogue on issues like entire sanctification. There may be and most likely always will be disagreement on the finer points of these issues, but at least everyone involved is fully apprised of the breadth of the conversation.

But there are other levels of understanding where people are not privy to the entire conversation. They hear bits and pieces. They hear a camp meeting evangelist preach one sweaty sermon about God’s power to utterly transform the human heart; they study an Aldersgate lesson once every four years as the curriculum cycles around to the doctrine of entire sanctification; and these people are left to form their historical-theological opinions around scant input and “sound bites.” This is not nearly enough information to come to a mature understanding of our beliefs as Free Methodists, but they don’t know that. And history and theology will not lie unformed.

Just as water vapor forms around random dust particles in the air, perceptions of

history will form around bits and pieces of random information. And the result is not very often something that can be called showers of blessing – rather more like showers of blunder.

We believe we don't sin. Actually, Mrs. Younger's rendition of our historical doctrine is not that far removed from one still extant today in some Free Methodist circles. Recently a Free Methodist pastor, now a superintendent, told me that he was reprimanded by a parishioner for having communion too frequently because "we as Free Methodists should not be put in a position of having to confess sin, since it is contrary to our doctrine of entire sanctification."

History must be intentionally and carefully recited throughout all levels of the church, because, like it or not, history is always being recited by someone somewhere. It is our failure to understand these things – viz., that the transmission of history never stops being a matter of oral tradition; that we don't control the promulgation of history just by discussing it academically or writing it down competently; that even in literary cultures history is still largely a function of verbal transmission by untrained persons – it is our failure to understand these facts that gives rise to the distortion of history and mutation of ideas that ultimately undermine a people's sense of identity and mission.

History abhors a vacuum. History will be heard. But left to itself, left to the natural forces of the mnemonic realm (please note I did not say demonic) it will be heard with little resemblance to the truth. It will be at best a caricature of the truth. And its quaint oddities will have little power to compel the devotion of new generations.

This leads to lesson number three and one example of what I mean by the "natural forces of the mnemonic realm."

Lesson #3: History Recedes From View Along a Curve

Margie and I had the privilege of living in heaven on earth, Estes Park, Colorado. Before moving there in the year 2000, we had visited on numerous occasions to camp in the Rockies with our daughters for a vacation. Invariably, we had at most a week to enjoy the breathtaking grandeur of the mountains, and then the day always came when we had to pack up the tent to head home. It became my habit as we drove away to keep one eye on the road ahead and one on the rear view mirror. Like a heart attack victim clinging to life, I did not want my view of the mountains to come to an end. Of course it always did. The distance and curvature of the earth saw to it. There came a point when, like the setting of the sun, the last mountain peak once towering in plain sight shrank and sank below the flat line horizon.

Our view of history is like that. Great moments in time happen. Monumental events shape the lives of thousands. Towering personalities inspire multitudes of people. But the past and the future lie on a curve; our present lives move across the broad circumference of time toward new peaks just coming into view ahead while the old peaks recede.

Call this *the curvature phenomenon of memory*. We have all experienced it in our family histories. To demonstrate this fact, let me lead you through a simple exercise. Imagine yourself standing on the floor. Now begin to think of everything you know about your father or mother. Imagine yourself stacking one fact on another, like building blocks. Where were they born? When? What did they do in school? What was their first job? How did your parents meet? What did they enjoy? Once you begin stacking up facts

about your folks you begin to see just how tall this pile of information becomes. Imagine exhausting everything you know about them. The stack of facts is huge.

Now move to the left of that stack of knowledge, as if moving along a timeline toward the preceding generation and begin to stack up everything you know about your grandparents. Imagine exhausting everything you know about them. How tall is that stack. It's much, much smaller than the stack of knowledge about your parents. Now move to the left again, further into the past, and begin to stack everything you know about your great grandparents. Do you even know their first names? How tall is the stack? Not very tall.

In reality each person's stack of information should be roughly the same height, because they each had equivalent facts about their lives. However, your knowledge of them shrinks, because most of the facts of their lives sink below the horizon of memory due to this curvature phenomenon.

To those of us currently alive, it can seem almost a mocking indignity that our entire lives, for example my life, may be shrunk within just three short generations to a caricatured one-liner: *Great Grandpa Newton used to be a writer of some sort*. Only the highest peaks of my life will be remembered, if at all. And if at all, the scant amount of facts falsifies memory and distorts the truth.

The only way to circumvent the curvature phenomenon is to record a heavily detailed history and inspire some passion in the succeeding generations to read and tell the fuller story of Doug Newton. That is unlikely to happen with me as an individual person, but if it doesn't happen with a whole community of people, there will be a far greater loss of meaning, significance and identity.

The work of the historian is to reach back into the past and counteract the curvature phenomenon.

My wife and I have done that with the mountains we recently left behind. Photographs, paintings, and artifacts as reminders and even facsimiles of our experiences in the mountains adorn our present home. We stack them high; we compensate for the curvature that removes them from sight by intentional *recollections* that make the distant mountains much more present to us.

Without the work of passionate historians to assemble voluminous records, to stack fact upon fact, to create and safeguard intentional *recollections*, the truth of the past slips from sight taking with it a community's sense of identity and mission. Then after that, token recitals of history, if any, resemble the efforts of an old movie star with a bad facelift trying to look young and beautiful again.

The curvature phenomenon is overcome only by aggressive collection and *recollection* of *all* the facts. Finally, I must underscore this with one more history lesson.

Lesson #4: True Recital Forms the Interpretive Lens for the Details of History

To be sure, history is not merely an encyclopedic collection of facts, but the organization of those facts into categories and stories that create context. In that sense, recital is reflexive. It is history serving history. It is history made memorable for the sake of history made clear.

Even as we engage in this symposium the world is presently engaged in a discussion about Mel Gibson's portrayal of the crucifixion in the stirring movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. We have been witnessing first hand how varying contexts of faith

elicit widely varied interpretations of the facts of Jesus' death. Numerous groups approach the same set of facts with different faith recitations, and they consequently are repulsed, or angered, or broken, or attracted by what they see.

Then there are those who come with no prior faith recitation. Mel Gibson hopes that his faith which guides the camera, the sounds, and the actors will provide an interpretative context for the facts that leads those viewers to understand Jesus' earthshaking act of sacrificial love. The faith context shapes the perception of facts.

But what if a person is left to observe facts with no context for understanding them? What if there is no recital that creates context?



I grew up in the camp meeting sect of the Free Methodist church. I never missed one Adam's Center camp meeting from the year I was born until I went to college. Other than quarterly communion, and infrequent reminiscences by my grandparents and parents, I had no connection to our denominational history outside of camp meeting. But in camp meeting history came alive – which is to say, the old people went on display. Wrinkled images of Free Methodism of days gone by.

Camp meeting was an annual unfocused Hubble telescope taking me back in time toward the big bang of the Free Methodist movement. But it never got me all the way back. I could only guess at who we were originally meant to be. And the guess was quite poor.

The uncontextualized images and impressions were all I had to go on to understand our identity and mission as Free Methodists. Images and impressions such as:

- Sister Jones – no please don't let it happen again this year! – getting blessed and running around the tabernacle shouting, "Glory! Glory! Glory!" in tones that

made Edith Bunker's voice sound as silky as Sarah Vaughn. She became my visual definition of "being filled with the Holy Spirit."

- Holiness was old people who never loosened their tie, opened their white-shirt collar, or rolled up their sleeves on a hot August Sunday afternoon, because "it was Sunday."



Don't get me wrong. I love how the church shaped me. For example, I'd be willing to bet that my exposure to mellifluous phrases like "superfluous adornment" birthed my love for language. After all, how many children ever hear the word "superfluous" intoned so frequently and reverently before the age of accountability?

And as an adult, I came to recognize many other better images of our identity and mission which silently shaped my young heart and mind.

For example, I now recognize that being Free Methodist meant accepting an invitation to dinner at the home of a destitute family who put shaved ice in the milk to keep it cold, because they were too poor to have a good fridge.

It meant choosing as my best friend one of only two black students in my huge high school, because my little Free Methodist church had a black family who had been accepted and loved as people.

It meant my Mom standing at a kitchen counter every Wednesday night cutting out construction paper getting ready for CYC because "somebody's got to do it this year."

It meant smelling the smell of padded pews, because when CYC was over for the summer, we went to Wednesday night prayer meeting where they knelt when we prayed.

It meant the irrelevance and inconceivability of asking the question, "What does

the church have to offer my kids?”

It meant loyalty, devotion, and lifelong commitment to something much more important than my wishes, my likes and dislikes.

It meant being imprinted about the reality of God by my third grade Sunday School teacher who couldn't teach a lick, or do a thing to hold our attention except cry every time she said the name of Jesus.

Unfortunately, these things were never gathered up and understood in context. And I never saw where the kneeling came from, or tenderness toward the poor... or why my teacher puddled up at the name of Jesus. I just didn't know, until somebody recited our true history to me. Until someone risked irrelevance – the classic prejudicial charge against all historians – and loved the God of this church enough to say out loud what He had done for the world by raising us up.

I will utter hidden things, things from of old--
³ what we have heard and known,
what our fathers have told us.
⁴ We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell the next generation
the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD,
his power, and the wonders he has done. (Psalm 78)

There are people who scoff at efforts to keep history alive, to keep the story of history true to history. There are people who would just as soon move on to what's new and let history drop below the horizon. There are such people. But when they are gone both their name and their people will be forgotten.

But as for me, when I am gone and the knowledge of who I was recedes along the curvature of memory and my name is only ink on a family tree, I will have been part of a people raised up by God for making holy history and lasting impressions on the earth. And that's a history worth reciting.

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Lesson #1: History does not repeat itself; people repeat it.

Key quote: For a religious community to perpetuate identity and mission there must be a collective commitment to the recital of its history.

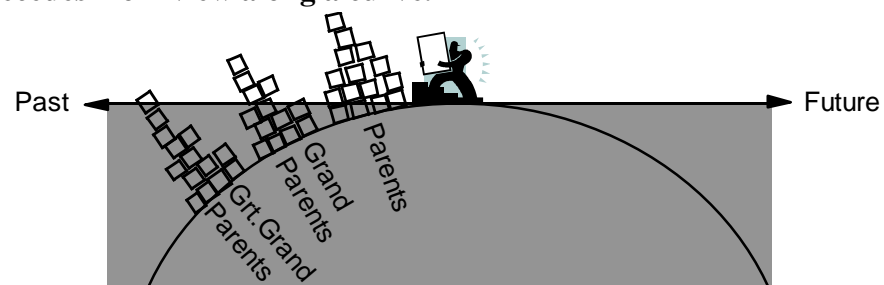
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turned back on the day of battle;
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Lesson #2: History abhors a vacuum.

Key quote: Just as water vapor forms around random dust particles in the air, perceptions of history will form around bits and pieces of random information.

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The Curvature Phenomenon of Memory

*Gray area represents "out of sight/memory."

Key quotes: *The work of the historian is to reach back into the past and counteract the curvature phenomenon. ...*

Without the work of passionate historians to assemble voluminous records, to stack fact upon fact, to create and safeguard intentional recollections, the truth of the past slips from sight taking with it a community's sense of identity and mission.

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Five Proposals for Becoming A Recital Church

- 1) **Make a careful review of FM mutations of historical and doctrinal fact** both by the “tradition-bound” and the “contemporary-relevance” sects of the church.
- 2) **Create and broadly circulate a brochure-length synopsis of American evangelicalism**, its doctrinal-theological shortcomings in terms of outcomes (fruit), compared with classic Wesleyan theological principles which can produce better outcomes.
- 3) **Give priority commitment to publishing and producing “recital” oriented resources.** History is “story”, and stories capture the imagination of young and old alike.
- 4) **Develop an “ordination-track” for lay leaders to increase historical theological literacy.** Since equal clergy-lay representation in governance is a value in our church, our commitment to develop “godly competent leaders” should not be limited to our clergy. There must be a concern for equal distribution of not only “voice and vote” but historical/theological competency.
- 5) **Greater “quality assurance” standards in the ordination process.** It is undeniable that we must exercise great flexibility in our ordination processes and requirements to fit the diverse life-situations of our emerging clergy. But our “flexing” should not result in a relaxing of standards of proficiency in theology, history and polity.

Five Proposals for Becoming A Recital Church (with possible commentary notes.)

- 1) **Make a careful review of FM mutations of historical and doctrinal fact** both by the “tradition-bound” and the “contemporary-relevance” sects of the church.
Comment – From time to time I hear both parties make weird claims about what we believe or don’t believe, or what was true of our church somewhere along our historical timeline.
- 2) **Create and broadly circulate a two-page synopsis of American evangelicalism**, its doctrinal-theological shortcomings in terms of outcomes (fruit), compared with classic Wesleyan theological principles which can produce better outcomes.
Comment – Our over-reactionary fear of appearing sectarian has resulted in our silence on these matters.
- 3) **Give priority commitment to publishing and producing “recital” oriented resources.** History is “story”, and stories capture the imagination of young and old alike.
Comment – Only a few generations ago, young people learned to read and write using the McGuffey Reader. The stories contained in those books were intentionally selected and published to convey cultural values and character qualities to be prized and practiced by young people. Since when did “indoctrination” become a four-letter word? We are naïve if we fail to recognize that children are always being indoctrinated by something persuasive and powerful. If that is the case, then the church should not roll over and surrender our tools for persuasion.
- 4) **Develop an “ordination-track” for lay leaders to increase historical theological literacy.** Since equal clergy-lay representation in governance is a value in our church, our commitment to develop “godly competent leaders” should not be limited to our clergy. There must be a concern for equal distribution of not only “voice and vote” but historical/theological competency.
Comment – Over the years I have seen a divide between clergy and laity occur because pastoral leaders are required to gain a working knowledge and appreciation for Wesleyan theology, but lay leaders are not. I have been in numerous meetings when pastors are contending for something, because it is an important Wesleyan principle or practice, yet some people stare blankly, barely tolerating the “irrelevance” and “waste of time” over these theological issues.
*Comment – While it may be an unrealistic standard for all lay leaders to have a high degree of theological literacy, at the least **any lay leader in the general church [BOA, General Conference delegates, etc.] should be as competent** in Wesleyan theology and Free Methodist history as the pastors.*
Comment – Some may think this is elitist, but I disagree. Requiring a common theological grounding for pastors and lay leaders is no different than requiring that we speak the same language. It’s something we need to do in order to make wise decisions and to maintain unity in the bond of peace.
- 5) **Greater “quality assurance” standards in the ordination process.** It is undeniable that we must exercise great flexibility in our ordination processes and requirements to fit the diverse life-situations of our emerging clergy. But our “flexing” should not result in a relaxing of standards of proficiency in theology, history and polity.