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BOOK REVIEW

Jeffrey W. Barbeau. *The Spirit of Methodism: From the Wesleys to a Global Communion*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2019. xii + 199 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-8308-5254-3. \$21.60.

This short book offers a brief history of worldwide Methodism and is intended to help Methodists, particularly members of the international United Methodist Church, find their way amidst the current controversies they are facing. Barbeau strives to accomplish his aim not by advocating for specific policies but by helping Methodists understand their own religious tradition—or perhaps he would prefer “traditions.” In the prologue he writes, “I’ve written this book to provide a framework and coherent vision of the varieties of Methodism in the world today” (xix). Important to Barbeau is the term “Broad Church Methodism”—“Broad Church” being a label primarily used within Anglicanism—which he uses to signify multidimensional diversity within the global Methodist community.

The book is divided into three parts: “The Origins of British Methodism,” “The Growth of North American Methodism,” and “The Expansion of World Methodism.” Each part has multiple chapters within it. The story begins, expectedly, with a rough overview of John Wesley’s life and ministry. Chief biographical details such as his godly Anglican upbringing, ministry in Georgia, and Aldersgate experience, combined with an introduction to his theology and preaching, give the reader a good sense of Methodism’s background and early character. Barbeau fills out his portrait of the early movement with a chapter each on Charles Wesley and George Whitefield, skillfully interweaving biographical discussion with a broader unfolding of the early Methodist story. Far from painting an idealistic or romantic picture of evangelical bliss, Barbeau portrays the bitter with the

sweet, the controversy and infighting along with the revival. The fourth and final chapter of Part 1 describes some important figures and developments within British Methodism from Wesley's latter years all the way to the twenty-first century, from Wesley's controversial ordination of two men to the presbyterate to John Scott Lidgett's work among the poor of southeast London in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The diversity within the tradition, including conservative and liberal-leaning voices, becomes clearer through a contrast of differing beliefs about the Sabbath and its proper observance.

Part 2, though ostensibly about North American Methodism, is about Methodism in the United States. Chapter 5 describes its beginnings, focusing on Francis Asbury but also giving attention to other early leaders such as Captain Thomas Webb. Barbeau is careful to convey the character of Methodism in this time and place, showing how it combined "evangelical preaching, the Anglican standards of church order, and the doctrinal principles of John and Charles Wesley" (57). The chapter concludes with an account of the 1784 Christmas Conference in Baltimore and the decision to form the Methodist Episcopal Church. Chapter 6 explores the relations between Methodism, slavery, and abolitionism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Here Barbeau creates a nuanced picture that does justice to the complexity of these relations and neither demonizes Methodism nor whitewashes its sins. Important black Methodist figures such as Harry Hosier and Richard Allen feature prominently. Barbeau then, in a chapter suitably titled "Holy People," discusses a host of realities in nineteenth-century Methodism, including temperance, the rise of the Holiness Movement and its independent denominations, the push for the allowance of female leadership in the church, and the varying treatment of Indigenous Americans. The final chapter in this section outlines the Methodist struggles with modernism and modernization and gives an account of the formation of the United Methodist Church.

Part 3, which addresses the growth of Methodism outside of Britain and the United States, begins with a chapter on South Asia. Barbeau structures the chapter mainly around three important figures: Wesley's trusted servant Thomas Coke, the

missionary E. Stanley Jones, and Sri Lankan church leader Daniel Thambyrajah Niles. This progression strengthens the theme, prominent in Part 3, of missional efforts leading to strong churches that have their own voice in the global Methodist community. Next, Chapter 10 addresses Africa, where there are now almost as many Methodists as there are in the States in spite of the horrors of colonialism and slavery. Barbeau highlights the struggles between European and African cultures and aims to show that the success of Methodism in that continent depended upon its embracing of African culture and identity. From here, he moves to an account of Methodism in East Asia, focusing on the remarkable efforts of Robert Samuel Maclay and John Sung. Part 3 concludes with a chapter on Latin America that highlights Methodists' relations with Roman Catholicism, the influence of Pentecostalism, and issues relating to poverty and political power.

The book concludes with an epilogue that engages in more extensive interpretation of Methodist history and addresses the contemporary situation more directly. Barbeau first notes the diversity of global Methodism and shows how "Methodism flourished most when Wesleyans adapted their founders' influence to the needs of the people" (154). He then moves to a discussion of the problem of identifying authentic Methodism and offers five principal characteristics of Methodism throughout its history: "grace and responsibility," "biblical and sacramental," "societies and classes," "laity and clergy," and "social concern and personal piety" (156–59). Finally, he returns to the notion of "Broad Church" Methodism and advises caution in the consideration of a schism.

However else a book might be judged; it should at least be evaluated by what it aims to accomplish. *The Spirit of Methodism* appears to have two main purposes: (1) briefly to tell the story of global Methodism in a non-academic way and (2) to help Methodists navigate their current difficulties by improving their understanding of their tradition. Barbeau undeniably succeeds in achieving the first objective. This book is a well-constructed, concise survey of Methodist history that covers the central figures, ideas, and events. A large amount of research clearly went

into this project, as the information is accurate and balanced. Barbeau is also to be commended for his clean and accessible prose.

Regarding the second objective, it should be acknowledged that certain difficulties within Methodism have developed since the authoring of this book; the United Methodist Church's controversial vote took place shortly before the publication of this work and was followed by subsequent proposals for ecclesial division. Even so, the objective remains relevant, and the book seems to me more than adequate in its efforts to fulfill this goal. Barbeau's success with the first goal, of course, gets him a great deal of the way; because the book provides a good account of history, it helps Methodist readers understand their tradition. But Barbeau goes further, striving to highlight aspects of the story that he seemingly believes were, and are, important to the flourishing of Methodism. He is particularly enthusiastic about cultural adaptation, indigenous expressions of faith, and the inclusion of non-Western voices in global Methodist conversations. At times he even finds teaching moments in which he makes these ideas explicit. For example, at the end of the chapter on Africa, he writes, "As with so many other places around the world, African Methodism flourished only so far as the people saw Christ at work in and through the culture in which they lived" (128). This point becomes even clearer in the epilogue.

Such commentary is helpful and adds to the value of the book. However, it is unfortunate that Barbeau focuses on these lessons to the neglect of others, particularly those that can be gleaned from the decline of Methodism in certain parts of the West. Particularly regrettable is his almost complete neglect of Canadian Methodism. Aside from being a part of the bigger Methodist story that deserves to be told in a short survey, even if only briefly, it has import for the controversies Barbeau has in mind in the penning of this history. By 1871, Methodism was the largest branch of Protestantism in Canada, and when the denomination simply called the Methodist Church was formed in 1884 by the union of bodies with members in the Dominion, Newfoundland, Bermuda, and Japan, it was the largest Protestant denomination in Canada (Neil Semple, *The Lord's Dominion: The*

History of Canadian Methodism [Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996], 179, 182, 195). Some of the most influential nineteenth-century Canadians before and after confederation, such as Egerton Ryerson and Hart Massey, were Methodists. Then, in 1925, the Methodist Church joined with a few other denominations to form the United Church of Canada, which rapidly turned toward liberalism and saw astounding decline throughout the rest of the century. Instead of making great contributions to a new ecumenical body, the tradition of Wesley and Asbury faded almost to the point of nonexistence. Today, there are a few evangelical groups that identify somewhat closely with the Methodist heritage, but they are quite small and of modest influence within the Canadian Protestant community. By any orthodox Christian standards, Canadian Methodism has been an utter catastrophe, and its story deserves serious attention by anyone who is involved in the current controversies. Presumably the generally orthodox Methodists who helped lead Canadian Methodism to the edge of the precipice were pleased with how progressive they were being.

In addition to achieving his objectives, Barbeau skillfully handles two major historiographical concerns. First, he avoids excessive bias, polemics, and hagiography. He does not, for example, make John Wesley's life story into a tale of how a high-church legalist got true Protestant religion and pried the helpless masses from the claws of the Church of England. His fairness is especially clear in the chapter on slavery and abolitionism, in which he unflinchingly portrays the failures of Methodists such as Asbury. Barbeau could perhaps have done more to acknowledge other shortcomings of major figures, but considering the nature and length of the book, the generally positive presentation is fair. Second, he finds a *via media* between heavily providential history and naturalistic history. The book suggests that movements of the Spirit are behind Methodism, but it does not relate all the twists and turns of its history, or its quarrels with other groups, to the divine will or a larger spiritual narrative. An additional feature of the book worth noting is the strong emphasis on influential people such as Wesley and John Sung. This might be judged excessive in an academic work, but since Barbeau is

endeavoring to introduce readers to the Methodist tradition and its history, it is entirely reasonable for him to focus on its central figures.

In my opinion, there is little to criticize in this compact volume aside from the omission noted above. One minor comment is that more attention could be given to the place of entire sanctification within Methodism. Barbeau explains the doctrine and tells of how it has been asserted over the years, but he does not quite do justice to the subject. The doctrine and experience of entire sanctification is arguably a main distinguishing characteristic of Methodism and the wider Wesleyan family, as no other major Protestant stream has conceptualized sanctification in quite that way. Yet, entire sanctification has proven difficult to uphold. In spite of valiant efforts to formulate theology about it and to encourage people to experience the second work of grace, there appears to be an inexorable slide away from it, leading to ambivalence, tension, and occasional schisms. Further explanation of this reality and discussion about it in the epilogue would make the book a little stronger. A final note is that in encouraging Broad Church Methodism, Barbeau would do well to consider, even very briefly, how well similar approaches have fared in other branches of Christianity. If he wishes to present it as a viable option, he should at least be able to point to previous successes elsewhere.

The Spirit of Methodism is an impressive book overall. It will be a good starting point for those who want to learn about Methodism, and some will likely benefit from its attempts to help the United Methodist Church and related bodies find their way. In this short publication Barbeau also sets a good example for Christian historians: he deals honestly and fairly with a subject, keeping in mind the significance of the past for the present day.

David A. Doherty
Hamilton, ON