

The Civil War in Southern Appalachian Methodism

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Review

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Dunn, Durwood *The Civil War in Southern Appalachian Methodism*. University of Tennessee Press, \$42.00 ISBN 978-1-62190-001-6

Divided Methodism in Tennessee

In *The Civil War in Southern Appalachian Methodism*, Durwood Dunn portrays an Eastern Tennessee that was filled with competing factions long before 1861. The central contention lay between the local, unpaid preachers and their typically younger, salaried supervising itinerants, who generally held their provincial brethren in contempt. Dunn emphasizes that “practically every schism or rebellion in early American Methodism had its origins in this disaffected class of local preachers,” (20) and virtually every antebellum Holston controversy flowed naturally from this unstable relationship. To use the most pertinent subcategory, during the 1840s and 1850s, a rising class of itinerants began actively recruiting the wealthy into the Methodist fold, in direct and self-conscious contradiction to Wesleyan antimaterialism. Not incidentally, many of these fresh converts were plantation owners. To the itinerants, antiquated antislavery principles had kept this more refined, genteel portion of the population out of the Methodist denomination, and belonged to a past that included love feasts and class meetings. The laity and local preachers cherished these putative relics, clinging to a faith that allowed fellowship across racial and social lines. While emblematic itinerant R. N. Price believed the creation of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS) providentially freed the church from unscriptural abolitionists, local antislavery preacher Absalom B. Wright sorrowed that his denomination had strayed from its founding principles. Local preachers and their itinerant supervisors in Holston viewed Methodist tradition and practice through diametrically opposed lenses.

After the firing on Ft. Sumter, the Methodist leadership in the Holston Conference transitioned to a cosmology that conflated love of the Confederacy with faith in God. Under the dictatorial command of Bishop John Early,

suspicion of Union sympathies served as a sufficient cause for expulsion from the church. The local Methodist preachers generally resisted this Confederate Religious State, a reaction which Dunn traces back to their antebellum resentment of the condescending itinerants. As Dunn explains, "all the anger at their repeated humiliations at the hands of itinerants now seemed to explode in overwhelming support for the Union." (105) This rift between the Confederate and Union Holston Methodists would not be healed with either the liberation of Knoxville in 1863 or the final shots at Appomattox. Backed by the talented pen of the pugnacious William Gannaway Brownlow, the newly formed Holston Conference from the Methodist Episcopal Church insisted that the MECS had vacated both its property rights and moral authority by traitorously supporting the Confederacy during the Civil War. Resolution to the numerous ensuing civil and religious disputes would await unification in distant 1939. By then, a Holston Methodism where African Americans and Caucasians confessed their sins together in biracial class meetings was lost to even historical memory.

The chief contribution and most glaring weakness of *The Civil War in Southern Appalachian Methodism* lies in its emphasis on the friction between local preachers and itinerants in the Holston region. Durwood Dunn provides ample evidence that the tension was real and that it either exacerbated or caused religious strife within the Methodist denomination. Wielding that fraught relationship to explain the local preachers' incipient Unionism is both unpersuasive and unnecessary, however. As Dunn himself relayed, historians have long recognized the idiosyncratic East Tennessee region's antislavery and Unionist sentiments. Local preachers sharing their laity's proclivities calls for no interpretive acrobatics. Dunn also leaves unexplored topics that cry out for elaboration. For example, if "African Americans had been attracted to Methodism from its earliest days in America largely because converts from all walks of life found in its doctrines and class meetings a revolutionary expansion of human agency," (38) were they comparing the experience to Calvinism? If so, in what form? Quibbles aside, *The Civil War in Southern Appalachian Methodism* sheds light on both East Tennessee and the larger Methodist denomination, accomplishing the crucial goal of any regional religious study.

Remington Charles Vaught Jr.'s dissertation, "Divided by Faith: The New School Presbyterian Debate Over Slavery," contends that the antebellum biblical polemics over slavery created an indelible divide in American Protestantism.