

Free Methodist Historical Society

Newsletter

WINTER / SPRING 2021 — Volume 20, No. 1

KEEPING THE FAITH: A MILITARY SON'S LETTERS HOME TO THE PARSONAGE

BY JULIANNE CLASS

An email came to us at the archives about a collection of letters written during World War II between a Marine and his parents, Rev. James and Mary Bright. These letters had come to the sender's mother, the executor of Mrs. Bright's estate. She kept these precious items safe and now it is our turn to honor the legacy.

The Brights served the Free Methodist Church in Wabash Conference. Their only son, Richard, served in the Marines during World War II. These letters show a boy growing into his own and experiencing the world and his faith on his own for the first time. They also show the faith of parents back home.

Richard was drafted just after high school graduation. Like others of his age, his letters show a preoccupation with food, his dislike of boot camp food and how even the good stuff didn't compare to his mother's cooking. Depending on the day, he went back and forth over whether he would like to make the Marines his career.

Being a Christian came with its set of challenges. Richard wrote to his parents on April 5, 1944 about another Marine that he met who was also a Christian. "I sure got a swell break. Yesterday a fellow came into our platoon who is a Christian. He don't smoke or drink and he reads his Bible. He sure is a swell fellow and I

imagine he will be a help to me."

In August 1944, Richard boarded a ship for the Pacific Theatre. Before leaving, he told his parents how he would put a code in his letters to let them know where he was. They were to take the first letter of every sentence in the second paragraph.

To be honest, it's surprising he got it past the censors. He wasn't very subtle in the beginning; he underlined the letters spelling out where he was. In a letter from August 24, 1944, in code, he lets his parents know that he is in the Marshall Islands.

In letters to their son, James and Mary kept him abreast of the work going on in the conference and how family and friends were doing.

Amid their worry, they reminded him to lean on the Lord and seek His face, that God was in control.

The last letter the Brights received from Richard was from March 10, 1945. They learned two months later that Pvt. Richard L. Bright was killed March 13, 1945 in the Battle of Iwo Jima. Knowing how the story ended made it harder to read the increasing worry and heartache in those last letters from James and Mary. But what a testament to trust in the Lord. Even to the end, they believed God's will would prevail. What a joyous reunion it must have been: Richard, James, Mary and Jesus.



Published by the
**Marston Memorial
Historical Center**

ISSN 1546-4199

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“CHURCHMEN AT THEIR STAUNCHEST.”

THE FREE METHODIST AND WESLEYAN DEBATE OVER SCRIPTURE

By Rev. Dr. Bob Munshaw

The Free Methodist Church has historically taken a view of Scripture as infallible, and containing all things necessary for salvation. We have not, however, generally used the term “inerrant” to refer to the Bible. This issue came front and center when the Free Methodist Church and the Wesleyan Methodist denomination considered merging.

Both denominations had separated from the parent Methodist Episcopal Church over slavery and perceived issues of declension in the parent body (particularly concerning the doctrine of holiness), so it is not surprising that discussions about merger have come up through the years. Moreover, the history of the two churches are deeply intertwined. Some early Free Methodist ministers occasionally served in Wesleyan Methodist churches. For example, while Free Methodist Bishop Leslie Marston’s parents were Free Methodists, his father sometimes pastored in Wesleyan Methodist Churches.

In this article my focus is not so much on what the Wesleyans were doing, but how the attempt at merger forced the FMC to think carefully and make decisions concerning doctrines of fundamentalism. Studying the reasons such a merger never happened sheds light on the ways in which the two churches have handled fundamentalist doctrine, and also reveals the long-term rejection of fundamentalism within the FMC.

Throughout the twentieth century, leaders within both churches had recognized the deep similarities and kinship between the two denominations. The first conversations on merger originated in 1903. Free Methodist Bishop Wilson T. Hogue was a visiting delegate to the Wesleyan General Conference that year and suggested that the two churches consider merger. Though there was discussion by both churches for years to follow, merger talk was put aside for a time. Then, in 1943 leaders in both churches began to take more serious action on the issue of a merger. A joint commission was formed, and after a few years of discussion a report was published and presented to both churches in 1947. The commission noted that there needed to be future conversations, but their ultimate recommendation was: “Following long study and conference on the question of church union it is our consensus that merging of the two denominations is possible if there be the will to union among our respective groups.” They also included a proposed tentative plan of union, as well as outlining a planned name (The United Wesleyan

Methodist Church of America).

Throughout the ongoing merger negotiations in the 1950s, a collaborative *Book of Discipline* and hymnal, *Hymns of the Living Faith*, were produced. But the committee also noted several areas as potential problems for any plan of union. One was the relationship of the denominations to their colleges. The Wesleyans owned their schools, while the Free Methodists did not. Another significant issue was related to the authority of Scripture, and whether or not they were considered inerrant.

In trying to write the Article on Scripture within the proposed constitution, this became an important point of contention. The Wesleyans wanted to include the word “inerrant.” The Free Methodists did not. In 1955, the Wesleyans decisively voted against merger, and subsequently formulated a new statement of their own on Scripture which strengthened their position on inerrancy.

Discussion about potential merger came up again in the 1970s, and again, though merger seemed imminent, issues arose. The final attempt at merger was again stalled by the Wesleyans concerning the relationship of their churches to their colleges, as well as the statement on Scripture. At their 1972 General Conference, a motion came to the floor to preserve their 1955 statement on Scripture. There, Wesleyan superintendent emeritus Roy Nicholson argued passionately that the strong and comprehensive language on inerrancy from 1955 be retained. Though he was opposed by those who sought to sustain merger hopes, the motion passed. If merger were to come to fruition, it would be the Free Methodists who would have to acquiesce. The Wesleyans were unwilling to accept a compromise statement on Scripture, preferring their more robust statement on inerrancy.

The Mid-Week Reminder #552 of the Greenville FMC, dated May 14, 1974, provides us a window into the debate. There, future bishop Donald Bastian made observations about the merger meetings he had attended. He described the committees of the two churches as “churchmen at their staunchest.” He noted that “the debate was careful and respectful,” and that there were a few intense moments. Finally, he stated, “The doctrinal issue that excited the greatest debate was the statement on the Scriptures.”

In anticipation of a likely merger, in 1974 the FMC made the compromise position, that of inerrancy, their official Article of Religion. While many FMC leaders

were not satisfied with the inerrant position, it was the official statement of the church for more than 15 years, and many within the church did desire and support such a strong statement on inerrancy. But this did not guarantee a merger. The Wesleyans still needed to ratify such a statement at their upcoming 1976 General Conference, for they had previously determined that an adequate statement on Scripture was “a prerequisite for eventual merger” at their last general meeting.

The FM compromise notwithstanding, in 1976 the Wesleyans voted to bring an end to the negotiations. On Oct. 27, 1976, at the third seating of the Board of Administration of the Free Methodist Church, merger talks between the FMC and the Wesleyan Methodist Church were officially put to rest. Perhaps merger fatigue had set in, but by 1976, the will to merge was no longer pursued by either church. The 1976 decision was particularly painful, bringing to termination a process that had practically begun with a joint commission between the two bodies which was set up and which began three decades earlier.

It seems clear in this instance that while the FMC struggled with whether to maintain a conservative view on Scripture, or whether to compromise with the Wesleyans and accept an inerrant position, the Wesleyans were definitely fighting for what must be seen as the fundamentalist position in this instance. There is no question that there were Free Methodists who desired the FMC to embrace the fundamentalist positions on this and other issues. American religious historian George Marsden described fundamentalists as “militant” in their “fierce opposition” to modernism. As these two denominations, so similar in history, theology, and doctrine, considered merger, such opposition is important to keep in mind. The issue of inerrancy became a firm test of the faith for fundamentalists. We see in this case study the Wesleyans exemplifying both the fundamentalist mindset and doctrine.

Bishop Marston went on to remark that “while al-



Committee on merger exploration, November 1970

ways conservative in doctrine, the Free Methodist Church has never been characterized in any general sense by the temper of a belligerent fundamentalism.” This is not completely true, for there have been times when individuals and the church have embraced fundamentalist doctrines and have demonstrated fundamentalist belligerence. However, the rejection of inerrancy, as well as the choice not to antagonistically fight for entrenched positions, will enhance the church’s ability to engage with and interpret Scripture in a healthy and supportive environment, with honesty and integrity in an ever-changing cultural landscape.

The Free Methodist Church may purport to value the components of Wesley’s theological methodology as essential hermeneutical lenses, but it is important to recognize that how a person or group conceives of Scripture and how they use it do not always line up. Most people find it easier to embrace interpretations that line up with their own theology—not recognizing that their opinions have been formed by culture, family and the church—than to rigorously and consistently follow a demanding methodology that can push them to question their own views. Generic modern evangelicalism has been rightly critiqued for offering a Gospel that is comfortable, and that often allows one to ignore the ethical entreaties of the Gospel which begin with the call to love God and neighbor. This is why it is so important for Free Methodists to look back at their history and methodology, and to have these inform the church as it continues to engage culture in the future.

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BOOK REVIEW

Matthew Nelson Hill, author. *Embracing Evolution: How Understanding Science Can Strengthen your Christian Life*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020. ISBN: 978-0830852833.

Matt Hill, FM elder and Asbury Seminary graduate, teaches philosophy at Spring Arbor University. His book *Embracing Evolution* proposes a reconciliation between the Bible and evolutionary science, with a focus especially on holiness and discipleship.

Hill frankly “embraces” evolution, while also making clear that God alone is Creator. Having studied the subject in some depth, Hill goes further in affirming evolutionary processes than some FMs will be comfortable with. His main point however is that if we faithfully follow Jesus, we ourselves can “evolve” spiritually, growing more and more into the likeness of Christ. Evolution, understood in a way submissive to biblical authority, can help us better understand holiness and the formative effects of Christian community.

Over the years Hill has “met dozens of people who have turned away from their faith—unnecessarily so—because they were told they had to choose between faith and science.” He seeks to undercut that myth. Insights from evolution can help us understand how God works, and how the world works, so that we can better cooperate with grace. As Christians “we can teach and cultivate our behavior—nurturing positive proclivities while learning to avoid rather detrimental instincts” (p. 2). “When we acknowledge the full [evolutionary] picture of human origins, we can learn to nurture traits such as altruism, kindness, and empathy” (7).

Hill’s intended audience is Christians who already largely accept “an evolutionary account of human origins” (5) but who don’t see its relevance to Christian life and discipleship. There is “no reason why God couldn’t have started this process of [human] evolution 3.7 billion years ago when organic life started on earth” (48). Agreed. God is capable of creating humans directly (as pictured beautifully in Genesis 2) or indirectly,

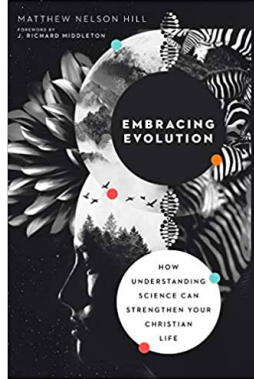
through divinely-guided evolution. I have no problem with either option, or a blending of them, so long as we remain fully submissive to biblical authority. We can be open to more fully understanding Scripture over time as scientific discoveries accumulate, as we already do with things like DNA and earth’s rotation around the sun.

I am largely persuaded by the book’s main argument, though not totally. Is it really true that knowledge and acceptance of evolutionary theory better equip us to “nurture positive traits” in ourselves?

Perhaps. Also, there are still big holes in evolutionary theory. The science itself is still evolving, and with time may actually converge at some points with Scripture. (It wouldn’t be the first time.)

There is and needs to be a debate within the church about compatibility between scientifically-verified evolution and full trust in biblical authority. John Wesley said God has given us two books, the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature—both true. The Bible in its unique revelation of Jesus has priority over the Book of Nature, but each book helps us understand the other and thus walk in God’s ways. Matt Hill’s *Embracing Evolution* is a welcome contribution to our ongoing debates.

— Howard A. Snyder, Wilmore, Kentucky



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