

Free Methodist Historical Society

Newsletter

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FREE METHODIST HISTORY + JUST GAMES = WINNING COMBINATION

BY JEFF FINLEY

Longtime Free Methodists may note a bit of irony in the new Free Methodist Timeline game from Just Games and the Marston Memorial Historical Center.

Many Christians considered “card-playing” to be a sin until societal changes of the 1960s led to a shift in evangelical focus. Earlier generations might be shocked to see today’s FM leaders gathered around a deck of cards pulled from a box with the denomination’s name and logo. They might accept the game, however, if they noticed the absence of jokers and queens and the presence of Methodist heroes like Barbara Heck (who encouraged the establishment of America’s first Methodist church in 1768) and Phyllis Sortor (the FM missionary whose kidnapping and release made international news in 2015).

The game’s timeline stretches from the Epworth rectory fire of 1709 (which nearly claimed the life of 5-year-old John Wesley) to Flat B. T. (an illustration of FM founder B. T. Roberts inspired by Flat Stanley of children’s literature) in 2018.

Larry Winckles, FM World Missions’ Europe area administrator, said that he and Mark VanValin, director of Mission Igniter’s Detroit Initiative, founded Just Games to develop “games that we would enjoy playing, but that would also have a purpose.” They brainstormed with New Hope FMC (Grand Rapids, Michigan) Pastor Eric Perry and former SEED Livelihood Co-Director David Brewer to develop two card games — the Justice Deck (which explores issues of social



justice) and the Free Methodist Timeline. Sponsors covered the cost of development and printing to make the first two games a reality.

Winckles hopes the game will spark interest in denominational history and bring exposure to the Marston Memorial Historical Center and FM Archives in Indianapolis. Center Director Cathy Robling said Marston leaders are grateful for the creative efforts. “The history of the FMC can be learned in a fun setting. I’ve already heard of pastors who want to use it in their membership classes, children’s church and other avenues of learning.”

The game requires players to put people, places and events in chronological order. Card backs reveal the correct year and a brief historical summary. The game scales well according to the number of players, their ages, and familiarity with the FMC. For a limited time both games can be ordered at a bundle discount of 20% off, or \$24. The game(s) can be ordered from freemethodistbooks.com.

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The Mission of the Free Methodist Historical Society is to preserve Free Methodist heritage and transmit it faithfully to each generation in order to assist the Free Methodist Church in fulfilling its mission.

ERNEST AND PHEBE WARD

The Pioneering Free Methodist Missionaries to India

By Shivraj K. Mahendra

Editor's note: We first met Free Methodist Elder Rev. Shivraj Mahendra when he came to the Marston Center to do research on early Free Methodist missionaries Ernest and Phebe Ward for his PhD dissertation at Asbury Seminary. We were touched by his story of conversion to Christianity, his discovery of the Ward's connection to his hometown, and how this eventually brought him into the Free Methodist Church!

Exactly 100 years before the Lord Jesus Christ appeared to me in a dream, Rev. Ernest Ward walked through my village in Chhattisgarh, central India, exploring the possibility of starting a Christian mission in 1896. I believe the prayers of Ernest and Phebe Ward were key to the spread of the gospel of Christ in central India during the late nineteenth century and beyond. Also, the story of their labors for the salvation and uplifting of India's millions remains a significant chapter in the history of Christianity and missions.

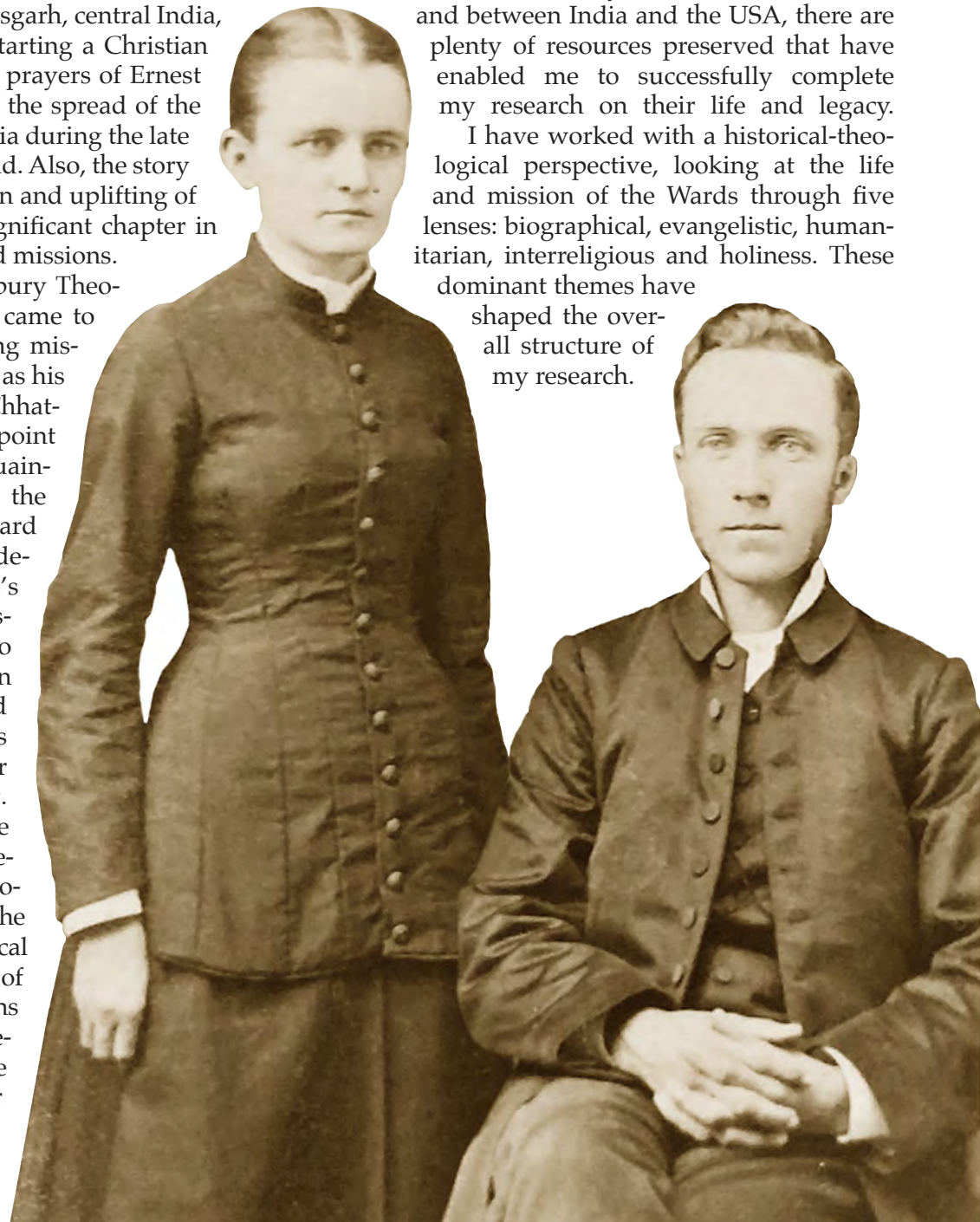
While working in the Asbury Theological Seminary Archives, I came to learn about Ward's pioneering missionary work in India as well as his special trip to north Bastar (Chhattisgarh). Interestingly, at this point I was also making the acquaintance of Free Methodists for the very first time. I had never heard about the Free Methodist denomination — or even Ward's contribution to Christian mission in India — until I came to the U.S. Thus, my interest in researching Ward was fueled by both a personal curiosity as well as academic demand for a promising dissertation topic.

Primary sources on the Ward family are carefully preserved in the Asbury Theological Seminary Archives, the Marston Memorial Historical Center, and the University of Virginia's Special Collections Library. I have also found related secondary sources at the British Library and the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center.

While a few diaries and letters of the Wards have not survived their many transfers within India and between India and the USA, there are plenty of resources preserved that have enabled me to successfully complete my research on their life and legacy.

I have worked with a historical-theological perspective, looking at the life and mission of the Wards through five lenses: biographical, evangelistic, humanitarian, interreligious and holiness. These dominant themes have

shaped the overall structure of my research.



The biographical lens outlines the life and legacy of Ernest and Phebe Ward and sets the stage for exploring their mission endeavors. Born and raised in Illinois, Ernest and Phebe were products of the holiness revival and camp meetings of the Free Methodist Church. Ernest Fremont Ward (1853-1937) and Phebe Elizabeth Cox Ward (1850-1910) received their missionary calling in 1880 and left for India the same year. They went as faith missionaries, without any guaranteed regular support from a church or mission organization. This ordinary couple from humble backgrounds were transformed into extraordinary instruments of the gospel in the hands of a missionary God.

The second lens historically looks at the evangelistic and church planting endeavors of the Wards. It briefly highlights the establishment of mission stations in places now spread in at least four states of India. The Wards' understanding of the gospel, their mission methods, the story of their village outreach, and the evangelistic vision of the FMC also form the contents of this chapter. This study for the first time shows that it was Ernest Ward who was instrumental in the conversion of the famous Marathi Christian poet Narayan Vaman Tilak.

Evangelism and social action went hand in hand in the ministry of Ernest and Phebe Ward. From a humanitarian or philanthropic lens, the Wards worked in a variety of associations with different missions such as the Pentecost Bands; however, they did not cease to be Free Methodists. In fact, despite organizational issues and challenges, they contributed significantly to India's nation building through famine relief, orphan care, education, medical work, etc. Gospel to the poor was a heartbeat of the Wards which was expressed in their holistic mission, fully in accordance with the Free Methodist Church's vision.

The Wards' understanding of religion, interreligious encounter with people of other faiths, and their approaches and responses to religious themes and issues is another significant aspect of their legacy. Ernest and Phebe lived in direct contact with Hindus, Muslims, Parsees and aboriginal tribes throughout their life and ministry in central India. As representatives of the religion of the Bible, as they called Christianity, Ernest and Phebe endeavored to witness Christ to people of all faiths. It is argued, from the viewpoint of theology of religions, that they adhered to an exclusivist position. They were able to impact the lives of their listeners and associates through their lived faith.

Looking through the lens of holiness, this theme emerges as the dominant theological theme in the thought and mission practice of Ernest and Phebe

Ward. From their personal experience of conversion to the proclamation of the gospel to the nations, and from humanitarian services to the interreligious encounters, the Wards were influenced, invigorated, and driven by the perception, experience, and pursuance of holiness. It is demonstrated that as the products of the Christian holiness impulse of the mid-nineteenth century, the Wards were enthusiastic advocates of this teaching in everything they endeavored in mission. This chapter for the first time shows that Ernest Ward was the founding President of the India Holiness Association, a credit long overdue.

Ernest and Phebe Ward did not have the privilege of any formal seminary training, but they were lifelong students of the Bible, Christianity, languages, religions and cultures. Ernest was self-taught. He was not a historian, missiologist or theologian, but an exemplary laborer, a missionary of the dirt and dust, in the kingdom of God. His missionary methods may be compared to those of the apostle Paul. He was a passionate evangelist engaged in holistic mission. After his retirement in 1927, he continued to witness in the Los Angeles area until his last breath. Phebe was a woman of prayer and a great companion to her husband in all the mission endeavors. The life and mission of the Wards was characterized by sacrificial service, scriptural holiness and godly humility. Their older daughter became a lifelong FM missionary to India in her own right. The first Indian Bishop of the FMC was the Wards' adopted grandson.

My work celebrates the life and ministry of a pioneering missionary couple who have not found any significant mention in the mission conversations of our time. As a study of lesser-known missionaries, my research has been incredibly challenging. It has not been as easy as imagined but certainly a rewarding experience. I am pleased to present a resource that fills a major gap in the history of Christianity and missions in general and the history of Free Methodist Church in particular. It draws insights from mission endeavors of the Wards and hopes to inform the ongoing historical and missiological reflections in Christian studies. In addition, it underlines a clarion call to holistic mission in the pattern of the Wards in our own times.



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BOOK REVIEW

Kevin M. Watson. *Old or New School Methodism? The Fragmentation of a Theological Tradition*. New York, NY; Oxford University Press. 2019. Pp. xi, 298 ISBN: 978-0190844516.

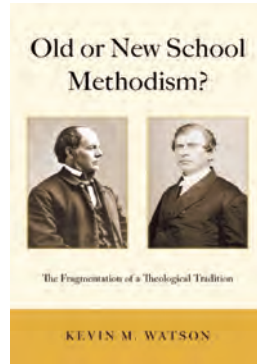
Dr. Kevin M. Watson, assistant professor of Wesleyan and Methodist Studies at Chandler School of Theology, has offered a valuable gift to students of Methodist history, and in particular to the Free Methodist Church, through his book *Old or New School Methodism?* Watson uses two key figures in Methodism, B. T. Roberts and Bishop Matthew Simpson of the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC), in order to elucidate the differences that had sprung up within Methodism by the mid-nineteenth century. Watson summarizes his thesis: "The major argument of this book is that the history of B. T. Roberts' expulsion from the MEC and the subsequent formation of the FMC represents a crucial moment of transition in American Methodism... as the dramatic growth of the previous half-century contributed to a desire for greater cultural influence and middle-class respectability."

Free Methodist readers will appreciate the way in which Watson places the doctrine and practice of holiness as central to the differences between these two charismatic leaders. Roberts and his followers insisted upon the centrality of John Wesley's teaching about the possibility and desirability of experiencing entire sanctification in this life. Watson rightly points out that the MEC removed a section focused specifically on the doctrine of entire sanctification from its Book of Discipline in 1812.

In contrast to B. T. Roberts, Watson paints a portrait of Bishop Matthew Simpson, who he controversially describes as "the most influential leader in the history of American Methodism." Simpson, unlike Roberts, was comfortable with the language of civil religion, gladly blending Methodist Christian faith with American patriotism and championing the cause of both the Methodist Church and the American Nation as instruments in the divine hand.

Roberts, unlike Simpson, made no effort to modulate his language or portray himself as a "moderate" regarding controversial issues of the day like slavery or pew rental. Watson's treatment of Roberts in the second half of his book offers a helpful summation of his life and, most importantly, of the disagreements that led Roberts to be expelled from the MEC and form the FMC.

Despite Watson's masterful treatment of the subject, his claim that the initial fragmentation within Methodism began in the late 1850s strikes me as dubious since such a bold claim ignores the multiple theological fragmentations that had already taken place within American Methodism dating back as far as 1792. Indeed, by 1830 no fewer than nine new denominations had broken off from the MEC. I would have preferred to see these fault lines traced more carefully. I would have also liked to see Watson do more on the difference between the economic theories of Simpson and Roberts, since for Roberts holiness must always express itself monetarily. In summary, however, Watson has done a great service to the FMC by writing this book, and I consider it the most important work on Free Methodist history since Howard Snyder's *Populist Saints*. — Gregory R. Coates



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