



METHODIST CAMP MEETING.
Engraving after a drawing by J. H. R. Robinson in the State of New York, in the District of the Southern District of New York.

An image of an early 19th century camp meeting. Camp meetings were perhaps the most prominent examples of the revivalism which characterized early United Brethren and Methodist church life, and informed their social vision.

Abolition, Temperance and Anti-Masonry

The Social Reform Agenda of the Antebellum United Brethren

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Few religious movements in antebellum America remained unaffected by the twin forces of democratization and revivalism. These two forces shared a common origin – American individualism – and expressed themselves in mutually complementary fashion; revivalism lent an impetus to popular democracy and the movement characterized by Jacksonian political expression brought democratic ideals within the mainstream of Christian religion. Historian Nathan Hatch identifies democratization as a natural by-product of the American Revolution. Democratization called into question both societal and religious authorities and seemed at times to challenge the very structure of society. “People confronted new kinds of issues: common folk not respecting their betters, organized factions speaking and writing against civil authority, the uncoupling of church and state, and the abandonment of settled communities in droves by people seeking a stake in the

back country.”¹ The religious groups that flourished in this environment were quite different from those that had dominated the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the colonies. Instead of Anglicans, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians, Hatch focuses on the emerging Methodist, Baptist, Disciples, African, and Mormon movements.

These new denominations almost exploded in numbers, as they skillfully combined the democratic elements of society with the message of salvation. Hatch demonstrates that the key to growth was not a shared theology; the growing churches disagreed strongly on theological issues. Nor was it even a democratic authority structure; the Methodists would not ordain uneducated laymen (unlike the Baptists); the Disciples were organized under the strong charismatic leadership of Barton Stone; and the Mormons instituted a very hierarchical structure. Instead, the key to growth was the degree to which laity influenced these movements. Not only were they permitted to participate in the decision-making processes, but also the spiritual experience of the layperson was considered as authoritative as that of a clergyman. Religion became the domain of the common person.²

The democratization of American religion also contributed to a new outbreak of revivalism during this same period. Both democratization and revivalism had their origins in individualism. Nineteenth-century revivalism implicitly contradicted the emphasis of pre-modern spirituality – the building of communities of faith for the purpose of corporate and personal holiness. Nineteenth-century evangelical spirituality stressed the personal conversion and faith of the individual, although such conversions would result in social reform movements that would seek to benefit the Church and society as a whole.

The focus of the revivalist message was, however, the personal relationship of each individual with one’s God. The evangelist called for

¹Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 6. Hatch looks specifically at songbooks, pamphlets and periodicals of selected religious movements to capture the character of American Christianity.

²*Ibid.*, 9-10. Hatch speaks specifically of three ways in which the most popular religious movements acclimated to the democratic spirit of this age. First, “they denied the age-old distinction that set the clergy apart as a separate order of men, and they refused to defer to learned theologians and traditional orthodoxies.” Second, they “empowered ordinary people by taking their deepest spiritual impulses at face value rather than subjecting them to the scrutiny of orthodox doctrine and the frowns of respectable clergymen.” Third, practitioners of these new movements “had little sense of their limitations. They dreamed that a new age of religious and social harmony would naturally spring up out of their efforts to overthrow coercive and authoritative structures.”

humble confession of one's sins,³ honest acknowledgement of one's need for a personal relationship with Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and sincere belief in the grace of God for salvation. The emphasis was, of course, on the *personal*, vertical relationship between the individual and his God. The call was not to the church or a community of faith, as earlier evangelists had preached, although the redeemed individual was expected to be incorporated within a religious body in due time.

This revivalistic message was perhaps epitomized by the career of Charles Grandison Finney, whose "new measures" brought scientific techniques to evangelism and made him a spiritual father of such modern evangelists as Billy Graham. He symbolizes the movement better than any other, for he combines within himself its primary influences.⁴ Finney was himself the product of a revival movement in the "burnt-over" district of western New York about two decades after the Second Great Awakening began in camp meetings in Cane Ridge, Kentucky. And he was a famous but small part of a large movement that was carried along largely by the efforts of anonymous, westward-looking laity.⁵

In his foundational survey of American revivalism, William McLoughlin identified the Second Great Awakening as one of five periods of intense religious revivalism in American history that were accompanied by massive social reform movements. (Robert Fogel echoed this understanding of the Second Awakening, although Fogel identifies only one, not two, prior "awakenings."⁶) Although McLoughlin detected

³The distinction between sin and sins is occasionally important. The former betrays an Augustinian belief in original sin, or the depravity of man. Charles Finney, on the other hand, spoke of sins as specific actions done contrary to the will of God. He did not ascribe to original sin and therefore was occasionally denounced as a Pelagian.

⁴Finney was a layman who became a preacher, much like Dwight Moody and Billy Sunday to follow. He even later became a professor and college president. The recognized leader of the growing throng of traveling evangelists, he was influential in many of the social reform movements that sprang out of revivalistic Christianity during the Second Great Awakening. In these ways Finney becomes a symbol of the entire movement.

⁵If any group today has claim to spiritual descent from the revivalists of the early republic, it would be those who style themselves "evangelicals," and as represented by the National Association of Evangelicals. Indeed, their attachment to Finney as a spiritual father is still strong. This is evidenced in the publication of a devotional biography of Finney in 1983 by an associate evangelist of Billy Graham, *The Life and Ministry of Charles G. Finney* by Lewis A. Drummond (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1983).

⁶Robert William Fogel, *The Fourth Great Awakening and the Future of Egalitarianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).



19th century revivalist
Charles Grandison Finney,
(1792-1875), in an image
from the 1830s.

several strains in the Awakening, much attention is paid to “perfectionism” as the distinguishing social characteristic of revivalist preachers like Finney. Finney believed that “the reborn became totally unselfish or totally altruistic... This meant that the regenerate man was committed to sacrificing his own pleasures in order to advance God’s Kingdom on earth.”⁷ But whereas other groups focused their perfectionism on the building of utopian communities, or on a postmillennial eschatology,⁸ Finney believed that society must be changed by converting the individual. Thus, individualism fed a revivalism that resulted, almost contradictorily, in social reform.

THE UNITED BRETHERN

The Baptists and the Methodists were the primary beneficiaries of revivalistic Christianity, as their denominations quickly overtook all others to become the predominant religious bodies of the American

⁷*Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 128-29. McLoughlin has written other volumes on Finney and nineteenth-century American evangelicalism. He identifies the other four “awakenings” as the Puritan awakening (1610-1640), the first Great Awakening (1730-1760), the third Awakening (1890-1920), and the fourth (1960-the publication date).

⁸Perfectionism as expressed in a millennial theology is examined by Ruth Alden Doan in *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987). She specifically examines the Adventist movement, which arose during this same period from the same influences as mainstream revivalism.

nineteenth century. However, Protestant churches from all theological persuasions felt the effects of a movement that emphasized the spirituality of the layperson. One group of ethnic churches that has been largely overlooked in the research of the revivalistic movement is the German-American denominations.

These were larger than is commonly known during the pre-War decades, perhaps because they were experiencing a linguistic and cultural transition from German to English. In his seminal work on pre-War social reform, Timothy Smith compiled some membership statistics on these groups.⁹ In 1855, Methodists North and South numbered about 1.4 million, Baptists North and South about 800,000, and Disciples 170,000. Compared to these English-speaking groups, the Lutherans (primarily German) totaled 200,000, German Reformed 75,000, and United Brethren 67,000.¹⁰ Smaller German groups (Mennonites, Moravians, Church of the Brethren, etc.) numbered about 40,000. While the numbers are clearly estimates,¹¹ it can safely be said that German denominations together accounted for almost 400,000 people, or about one-tenth the total church membership of 1855.

The German-American denominations can be broadly divided into two groups – those with a strong Pietistic-Revivalist heritage and those without. Those without would include the largest German denominations – the Lutheran and German Reformed.¹² The other groups were small, somewhat isolated, and located primarily in Pennsylvania. The notable exception to this characterization is the

⁹Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War*. (New York: Harper, 1955), 20-21. Smith's sources include Robert Baird, *State and Prospects of Religion in America* (London, 1855), and Joseph Belcher, *The Religious Denominations in the United States: Their History, Doctrine, Government, and Statistics* (Philadelphia, 1857).

¹⁰By 1861, a United Brethren Bishop could claim over 90,000 members and a 33 percent growth rate within a single quadrennium.

¹¹Specific numbers do not appear in United Brethren records until the time of the Civil War. A subscriber to the United Brethren periodical, *The Religious Telescope*, wrote to ask why no "round numbers" were given of total UB membership. The reply: "We fear that the Spirit, called Satan, that induced David to give the round number of his men to the world, is now at work in the minds of thousands. It should be enough for the United Brethren in Christ to know themselves and God, which is life eternal" (July 15, 1835).

¹²Some would question whether it can properly be said that these groups lacked a pietistic heritage, especially since the original Pietistic impulse developed within the confines of German Lutheranism in Europe. However, Pietism was as much a reaction to orthodox Lutheranism as Methodism was to orthodox Anglicanism. Lutheranism proper was not pietistic, and is thus not included in this discussion.

United Brethren.¹³ They were the largest of these groups, were scattered from Pennsylvania to Illinois, and were most susceptible to the cultural pressures to become English. Yet they were small enough to remain largely monolithic in theological emphases, and continued to possess an unmistakable revivalistic identity.

This identity was fostered by their origins. The United Brethren began as a revivalist movement within German Reformed and German Mennonite communities in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. Organizers Philip William Otterbein (1726-1813) of the Reformed Church and Martin Boehm (1725-1812) of the Mennonite Church were closely associated with Francis Asbury and the emerging American Methodist movement at the end of the eighteenth century. In fact, there was very little difference in organization, function, or theology among the two groups. During the first several decades of the nineteenth century, there were repeated calls to merge the two groups, calls which went unheeded primarily because of language barriers and the lack of sufficient organization among the United Brethren.

Like John Wesley and the Methodists, Otterbein and Boehm never intended to start another church. Neither left his church voluntarily. Otterbein was associated with the German Reformed until his death, although the relationship he (and his congregation in Baltimore) maintained with that church was tenuous at best. Boehm was dismissed from the Mennonite Church, largely because of misunderstandings arising from his revivalistic preaching and associations. Yet denominational labels were fluid enough that, while still continuing as a United Brethren bishop, Boehm joined a Methodist church that met on his property. It remains today as Boehm's United Methodist Church in Willow Street, Pennsylvania.

Otterbein and Boehm were first elected Bishops or superintendents in 1800. The first true organizational meeting had occurred eleven years earlier, when Otterbein, Boehm, and a group of associated ministers formed an accountability structure. After the death of both leaders, the younger generation adopted in 1815 a *Constitution*, a *Confession of Faith*, and a *Discipline*. They also chose new leaders to carry on the work, thereby guaranteeing the survival of the movement beyond the lifetime of its founders.¹⁴

¹³The formal name of the body is the Church of the United Brethren in Christ.

¹⁴Several United Brethren histories have been written. Early works include Henry G. Spayth's *History* (Circleville, OH: United Brethren in Christ, 1851), and John

Thus, the United Brethren were revivalistic in origin and structure. This pattern continued through the Civil War years into the present. The evidence for this is found most easily in *The Religious Telescope*, the United Brethren periodical. The *Telescope* featured a regular column called “Revival Intelligence,” an update on revivals taking place in various United Brethren communities. The *Telescope* also regularly featured sermons and articles by Charles Finney and other evangelists.¹⁵ But the revivalistic atmosphere invaded the entire church – the content of sermons, the training of ministers, the impetus for missionary activity, and the rapid Westward spread of the denomination.

During this time the church was also heavily influenced by the forces of American democratization. This was made possible by a shift in language from predominantly German to predominantly English. In 1817, the minutes of General Conference were written in German and measures were taken that 300 copies of the *Book of Discipline* were printed in German and 100 in English. In 1825, the denomination was sufficiently mixed to require two secretaries at General Conference – one for each language. By 1837, the tide had turned. That year, the church needed 5,780 English *Disciplines* but only 1,970 German, and a minister was appointed to translate the *Discipline* into German. In 1841, General Conference established a German printing press in Baltimore to counterbalance the English one in Ohio. The German press was to receive one-third of the denomination’s printing revenues. The General Conference of 1853 recognized the minority status of its German

Lawrence’s two-volume *History* (Dayton: United Brethren Publishing Establishment, 1861). Augustus W. Drury published his *History* (Dayton: The Otterbein Press) in 1924. A more recent work edited by Paul Fetters is titled *Trials and Triumphs* (Huntington, IN: United Brethren in Christ, 1984), and is helpful as an introductory text. Martin Boehm is best reported in *Reminiscences, Historical and Biographical, of Sixty-Four Years in the Ministry* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1865), by his son Henry. J. Steven O’Malley is the best living expert on Otterbein. His published works include *Pilgrimage of Faith: The Legacy of the Otterbeins* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1973). For the years following Otterbein and Boehm, consult the *Life and Journal of Christian Newcomer* (Hagerstown, MD: F. G. W. Kapp, 1834). Christian Newcomer was an early United Brethren minister and the immediate successor to Otterbein and Boehm as bishop.

¹⁵A Finney sermon is found as early as May of 1835. (The *Telescope* had begun publishing only five months prior.) By 1845, Finney was almost a regular feature. In March of that year, Finney’s article was observing that “for the last ten years, revivals of religion have been gradually becoming more and more superficial” (March 12, 1845).

members by creating separate German conferences in the Midwest.¹⁶ In 1861, the Conference elected bishops by language – three English, one German.

The change in language meant that United Brethren members were able to participate in broader cultural movements than had been hitherto possible. It also meant that they drew freely on American, rather than German, political and cultural ideals. And one of these ideals was American democracy, as understood in the early nineteenth century. This is seen as early as the second issue of *The Religious Telescope*, which contained a “Declaration of Rights:”

As all men are essentially equal in their rights, wants, and interests, it follows then this, that representative government is the only legitimate human rule, to which any people can submit. It is the only kind of government that can possibly reconcile in any consistent way, the claims of authority with the advantages of liberty. A prescriptive legitimate body, making laws without the knowledge or consent of the people to be governed by them is despotism.¹⁷

SOCIAL REFORM

In addition to proclaiming representative government as the “only legitimate human rule,” were the United Brethren actively involved in influencing that government, and the society it governed, on issues of social reform? This is the crux of this study. Fifty years ago Timothy Smith argued cogently that the social reform movements of the nineteenth century grew out of a revivalistic theology and thus permanently influenced the study of American social reform. Smith examined the structure of American Protestantism, its view of personal and societal sanctification, and its eschatology, and concluded that these factors caused the mainline Protestant churches to adopt an aggressive

¹⁶During this period, Pennsylvania seems to have had the greatest German population of any conference. In 1837, when two times as many English *Disciplines* were printed as German, Pennsylvania Conference needed 1,000 of each. No other conference had a ratio even close to this. In 1841, all the other conferences requested 25-50 German copies (as opposed to 200-400 English copies). Pennsylvania requested 300 of each. Why, then, were the German Conferences organized in Ohio and Illinois, rather than Pennsylvania? A possible answer is that the Ohio and Illinois Germans were clustered, whereas the Pennsylvania Germans were located in physical proximity to the English churches.

¹⁷January 14, 1835.

The United Brethren: Origins of Two Churches

The United Brethren in Christ movement were among those called “German Methodists” in their first several generations. They originated as a trans-denominational revivalist movement in the German communities of Pennsylvania, Ohio, and the Shenandoah Valley in the mid-18th century and formed as a separate denomination only reluctantly. Even then, there was considerable movement back and forth between the United Brethren and the early American Methodists: One of



Bishop Milton Wright

the co-founding Bishops of the new Church – Martin Boehm – was also a member of a Methodist church meeting on his own property at the time of his death, and Francis Asbury preached his funeral service. There were occasional conversations about merger, due to the similarity of doctrine, organization, and evangelistic zeal, but language differences kept the movements separate.

After the period described in this essay, the United Brethren found themselves increasingly divided, as they struggled to forge a new identity as a fully-Americanized, English-speaking, newly-respectable denomination, and yet maintain their distinctiveness as a revivalist movement. By 1889, these divisions led to an institutional schism. The United Brethren in Christ (Old Constitution) were led by Bishop Milton Wright, father of the airplane inventors, and continue to this day; the author is an ordained elder in that denomination. The United Brethren in Christ (New Constitution) eventually merged with the Evangelical Association (another group of former “German Methodists”), and the combined group, the Evangelical United Brethren, merged with the Methodist Church in 1968 to become United Methodists, more than a century and a half after that idea was first proposed.

campaign for societal reform. Smith particularly investigated the abolition movement and efforts to assist the poor, but acknowledged that other movements fit the general pattern.

Smith's efforts were concentrated on the churches of mainline Protestantism. The responsiveness of minority ethnic denominations to these same influences has been largely unexamined (except perhaps in the case of the Catholic churches in America). How responsive were the German denominations to these influences? And, if the United Brethren are to be perceived as somewhat representative of the German revivalistic denominations, how responsive were the United Brethren to these same influences? Did the United Brethren revivalist mentality result in social reform movements? Were the United Brethren sufficiently anglicized by this time to experience the "democratization" necessary for involvement in these movements?

To answer these questions, three specific reform issues were examined – abolition, temperance, and anti-masonry. These were chosen because of their prominence during this time period. The evidence reveals that the United Brethren were very active in all three reform movements at a very early period. It also reveals a consistent three-step progression of involvement, from legislating membership standards to participation in larger issue-oriented organizations (such as temperance or abolitionist societies) to active political involvement.

The evidence amassed here is gathered primarily from two sources – General Conference decisions and *Religious Telegraph* articles. General Conference was a quadrennial gathering of elected ministerial representatives for the purpose of revising church structure and polity and electing church leaders. It was the highest authority of the denomination. *The Religious Telegraph* was the official organ of the denomination, published intermittently from December 31, 1834. Although it is perhaps more representative of the opinions of church leaders than of United Brethren laity, the news articles, letters to the editors, and sermons portray a church that was largely unanimous in its positions on these issues. Sampling from successive decades allows for a snapshot perspective of the progression of involvement alluded to above.

ABOLITION

In 1821, the General Conference of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ adopted the following resolution:

Resolved, that in no sense of the word shall slavery in whatsoever form it may escist [sic], be tolerated in our church, and that no slaveholder, making application for membership, shall be received, and that if any member be found to possess slaves, he (or she) cannot remain a member, unless he (or she) manumit his (or her) slaves as soon as notified to by the Annual Conference.¹⁸

From the first time United Brethren leaders addressed the issue of slavery, they stood in opposition to it. The first step in asserting that stand was to legislate behavior for the members of the denomination, as above. In 1825, provision was made for the gradual manumission of slaves to ease the financial hardship of the owner, but selling slaves was strongly prohibited, even when the announced intention was to cease slaveholding.¹⁹

An unsuccessful draft for a new *Constitution* in 1837 did not address the subject of slavery. The successful draft, adopted in 1841, directed that “there shall be no connection with secret combinations, nor shall involuntary servitude be tolerated in any way” (Article II, Section 7). This is the *Constitution* still in force in the United Brethren Church. There were occasional disagreements on this stance. The Auglaize Conference in Ohio experienced an actual schism over the issue. A few ministers had their licenses revoked for their pro-slavery positions. *The Religious Telescope* was even burned in protest on a few occasions. However, these were rare occurrences, and most discussions after this point did not center on the morality of slavery, but rather on the interpretation of this stance in a variety of ambiguous contexts in the slave-holding states.²⁰

In 1852, the Virginia Conference quarreled over whether it was legitimate to hire a slave owned by someone else and asked for

¹⁸*Minutes of General Conference* (1821). United Brethren Historical Center, Huntington, Indiana. Most General Conference *Minutes* from this period exist either in manuscript form or in translation, and are unnumbered. Citations are noted simply by the year.

¹⁹The 1825 *Discipline* directs that “should some be found in our society, or others desire to be admitted as members, who hold slaves, they can neither continue to be members, or be admitted as such, without they do personally manumit or set free such slaves wherever the law of the state shall permit it, or submit the case to the quarterly conference, to be by them specified, what length of time such slave shall serve his master or other person, until the amount paid for him, or for raising him, be compensated to his master. But in no case shall a member of our society be permitted to sell a slave.”

²⁰Fetters, 228-9.

interpretation.²¹ General Conference took up the debate the following year, but seems to have left the question unanswered. A measure to prohibit selling grain to, or purchasing grain from, a slaveholder and another measure to prohibit the purchase of any article from a slaveholder were both defeated. A Virginia delegate gave a moving argument for the occasional need to purchase a slave for reasons of mercy. The General Conference voted to not alter its previous stance on slavery.²² The prohibition against slavery remained unchanged in the *Discipline* until 1945, when it was replaced by a position on race relations.

The United Brethren were not long satisfied to deal with slavery as solely a membership issue in their own ranks. The church was rapidly absorbing the democratic ideals of society and applying them to moral issues. A *Religious Telescope* article from 1835 made clear the connection between democratization and slavery:

If we seriously investigate the principles of our republican institutions, we shall at once discover, that all our just claims to the character of free men are based on the previous acknowledgement of an equality of rights... We are prepared to say, that we shall never fully realize those blessings which were intended for us by those who achieved our independence, until slavery, whatever may be its character or name, is universally done away; nor should we boast of our liberty, until our fellow-beings who tread our soil, are emancipated from unholy bondage.²³

The Church had clearly sided with those urging immediate emancipation against gradual emancipation, and was encouraging its members to be involved in broader movements. An article reprinted in the *Telescope* argues that there is “just the same reason for the system of action pursued by the abolition society... that there is for the system of the temperance society with regard to the curse of ardent spirits.”²⁴

²¹*Minutes of the Virginia Annual Conference* (1852). United Brethren Historical Center, Huntington, Indiana. Delegates adopted a five point resolution: 1) to “inquire within our bounds” as to whether any members owned slaves; 2) to “use all prudent and laudable means and measures to guard against criminal connections with slavery;” 3) to properly discipline any who are in the wrong; 4) to present all evidence to General Conference in 1853, if required; and 5) to request interpretation from that same General Conference.

²²*Minutes of General Conference* (1853); and *Discipline* (1853).

²³“Evil in the Land,” *The Religious Telescope*, September 23, 1835.

²⁴“Professor Nevin’s View of Slavery and Abolition,” *The Religious Telescope*, April 8, 1835. This article was originally printed in *The Cincinnati Journal*.

That same year an appeal was printed to the members of the New England and New Hampshire Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, urging them to adopt a policy against slavery.²⁵ John Lawrence, editor of the *Telescope*, had stronger words for churches that permitted slavery. He published a 224-page book entitled *The Slavery Question*, in which he accused some churches of being apologists for human bondage and oppression. He called for the workingmen of the nation to unite to defeat slavery.²⁶

From interfering with the stands of other churches and espousing abolition societies, an advance to direct political involvement did not require a huge leap. Political involvement increased as time passed. By 1845, the *Telescope* was commenting on the apparent pro-slavery composition of President Polk's Cabinet – four from slave states, two from free states. Political updates became part of the regular fare of United Brethren readers:

Everything indicates the rapid progress of our cause... Politicians gave it great prominence in the recent canvass – between sixty and seventy thousand votes maintained at the polls their fidelity to the cause of the Slave – the Supreme Court has published its decision, freeing slaves taken from one county to the other in the District of Columbia – the odious Gag rule has been repealed – our petitions have been referred to the proper committees – in Congress, slave-holding politicians have lowered their tone.²⁷

The pressure to become politically active in the movement must have been great in United Brethren communities. One member wrote a letter to the editor, complaining that “we are sometimes called slaveholders in principle... by members of our own Church. And why all this? Because we do not attach ourselves to the Abolitionists to carry out the political measures of that party, as some of our ministers and members have seen fit to do.”²⁸

²⁵June 3, 1835 and June 17, 1835.

²⁶John Lawrence, *The Slavery Question* (Dayton, OH: United Brethren Publishing Establishment, 1854), iii.

²⁷“General Progress of Anti-Slavery Movements,” *The Religious Telescope*, March 12, 1845.

²⁸September 24, 1845. The author was John Coons.



Left: Bishop Lewis Davis (1814-1890), the “father of higher education” in the UB Church, was president of Otterbein College, an abolitionist and also a UB Bishop. Right: Bishop Jacob Markwood (1815-1873), was chased out of southern territory for the anti-slavery stance of the UBC.

Until the time of the Civil War, the United Brethren in Christ had been ardently pacifistic. That stance changed when the war became a war against slavery. The United Brethren were somewhat fanatical supporters of the North. Western College, a United Brethren school in Iowa, had a higher percentage of students enrolled in the Union Army than any school in the nation. And Lewis Davis, the president of Otterbein University, another United Brethren institution, had a station of the “underground railroad” in his home.²⁹ Many ministers, including some from Virginia, volunteered for the Union Army. At least three United Brethren ministers in Virginia were arrested for refusing to take an oath of allegiance to the Confederacy. Bishop Jacob Markwood was forced to flee the state when a reward was placed upon his head.³⁰

Thus, it is seen that the Church of the United Brethren in Christ was adamantly on the side of anti-slavery forces for what its leaders

²⁹Otterbein College was one of the few colleges in the nation that welcomed blacks on the same basis as whites. It was also a center for antislavery agitation.

³⁰Fetters, 226-230.

perceived as both legitimate Christian and democratic reasons. The Church promulgated its anti-slavery position by requiring it of its members, then by encouraging societal involvement in anti-slavery movements, then by endorsing direct political and even military involvement in the cause of emancipation.

TEMPERANCE

The temperance movement in the United Brethren Church began by perhaps asking too much. A preliminary *Discipline* written in 1814 included this prohibition – “Every member shall abstain from strong drink, and use it only on necessity as medicine.” The following year, when a complete book of *Discipline* was compiled for the first time, this section was omitted.³¹

The issue was not revived again until 1833, when General Conference directed its ministers to cease the “distillation or vending of ardent spirits,” but said nothing about using alcohol, either medicinally or recreationally.³² It also made no mention of the use of alcohol by laity. They were addressed four years later in a General Conference circular that warned against drunkenness and of engaging in business with alcohol, but made no prohibitions, choosing “to advise, rather than legislate on this subject.”³³

Legislation was, however, right around the corner. In 1841, a General Conference delegate moved that the article on making and selling alcohol “be so altered and amended as to embrace lay members.” There was discussion on the issue, but the majority adopted the motion. The change was reflected in the 1841 *Discipline*. A proviso added, “This rule shall not be so construed as to prevent Druggists and others from vending for Mechanical or Medicinal purposes.”

³¹In 1845, David Edwards, editor of *The Religious Telescope*, argued that the United Brethren Church had maintained an official stand against alcohol since 1812 (November 19, 1845). Did he mean 1814, or was there an earlier prohibition? In either case, Edwards is obviously unaware that the UB had no statement on alcohol between 1815 and 1833.

³²The 1833 *Discipline* states, “Should any Exhorter, Preacher, or Elder, from and after the next annual conference in 1834, be engaged in the distillation or vending of ardent spirits, he shall for the first and second offense be accountable to the quarterly or yearly conference, of which he is a member; said conference will in meekness admonish the offending brother to desist from the distillation or vending of ardent spirits, as the case may be; should these friendly admonitions fail, and the party continue to act in the same... such Preacher, Elder, or Exhorter will for the time not be considered a member of this church.”

³³The circular was printed in the 1837 *Discipline*.

While the *production* of alcohol had been effectively outlawed, its *use* had not been addressed since the 1814 Conference. In 1845, a minority of the delegates at General Conference voted against retaining the 1841 stance on alcohol. They were not imbibers; on the contrary, they did not believe the position to be strong enough since it did not prohibit use. They were to win their battle four years later. The 1849 General Conference directed that “distilling, vending, and use of ardent spirits as a beverage shall hereafter be forbidden through our Society.” The previous sanction of losing one’s membership if found in violation was retained. Total abstinence by all members was the position held by the Church of the United Brethren in Christ until 2005, at which time the Discipline was changed to “strongly urge” members to eschew the use of alcohol.³⁴

Although total abstinence was not enjoined until 1849, there had been participation in temperance societies and the temperance movement as a whole for some time. *The Religious Telescope* began publication on the last day of 1834, and its first issues addressed temperance more than any other topic. A recommendation of temperance societies was published in the third issue – “The Temperance Society is a project of benevolence, designed to induce men, women, and children to practice self-denial, and to register the names of such as will consent to practice that self-denial, so far as to abandon it forever.”³⁵

It is clear that at this point the temperance movement had as its goal the *voluntary* abstinence of individuals from alcoholic beverages. The *Telescope* would carry annual reports from temperance societies, in which the movement’s leaders would boast of how many distilleries were stopped, how many merchants refused to deal in alcohol, and how many drunkards became temperate. However, the seeds for political involvement, at least among the United Brethren, were already present. An 1835 article argued that “he is in error in supposing that a Christian may not be a politician, or that a politician cannot be a Christian... The cause of temperance is the cause of the moralist – and at the same time is essential to good government and a healthy condition of the body politic.”³⁶

³⁴This author played a significant role in that change of policy.

³⁵“Temperance Address,” *The Religious Telescope*, January 28, 1835. The author of the address was Rev. George Duffield, a Presbyterian from Cumberland County, Pennsylvania. He was also a relative of the author of this study.

³⁶“Temperance,” *The Religious Telescope*, August 12, 1835.

By 1855, the *Telescope* was advocating legislation for prohibition and even advocating some of the tactics of renowned temperance advocate Carry Nation, if necessary. The periodical recorded approvingly an amusing incident in Ohio, in which a group of ladies formed a temperance group called the “Mt. Pleasant Phalanx:”

Its object was to put down the sale and use of ardent spirits – First, by moral suasion; Secondly, by law; and thirdly, if need be, by physical force... On yesterday morning, at eight o'clock, the ladies (having been informed that a new house of drunkenness was about to be opened in our village) assembled together and proceeded to the place of concealment, and bursted [sic] in the heads of barrels and kegs, until all was spilt – wine, brandy, beer and cider, all in one pool, until it ran into their shoes. A bystander observed afterwards, that the only chance now for liquor, was to squeeze it out of the ladies' stockings. Mt. Pleasant shall be free, by the strength of God.³⁷

Legislation primarily concerned various state efforts modeled after Maine's edict of total prohibition in 1851. Although there were no United Brethren churches in Maine, Indiana was one state in which the United Brethren had a significant presence. The Indiana legislature passed a similar piece of legislation in 1855, causing howls of approval from the *Telescope*: “The friends of temperance in that state are greatly rejoiced at this triumph. We hope now that the law will be enforced and that no judicial meddling about ‘constitutionality’ will be allowed to cripple the enactment. The temperance car is moving.”³⁸

Following the Civil War, the temperance movement lost steam momentarily. Only Maine remained “dry” by 1868. But the United Brethren Church did not change its stand. Rather, Otterbein University and other schools became centers for the temperance movement, and many United Brethren individuals joined in the political efforts to regain lost territory. A United Brethren college president, Henry A. Thompson, was the Prohibition Party's vice-presidential candidate in 1880.³⁹

As with the abolitionist movement, the United Brethren followed the temperance path in a three-step process. They tightened membership standards, urged participation in larger movements, and

³⁷“Maine Liquor Law in Force in Ohio,” *The Religious Telescope*, February 7, 1835.

³⁸“Temperance in Indiana,” *The Religious Telescope*, February 14, 1835.

³⁹Fetters, 232.

then even advocated political involvement. It was a decided transformation from the days of being a small, overlooked ethnic minority.

ANTI-MASONRY

In 1826, a Freemason by the name of William Morgan was abducted and drowned in New York State by brother Masons. His fate was the direct consequence of his vow to publish the secret rites of the Society. Morgan's story touched off a firestorm of protest against not only the Masons, but also other secret societies. The United Brethren Church contributed to this firestorm. The storm was eventually to split the Church in 1889.

Why did the United Brethren, among others, object so strongly to secret societies? John Lawrence, sometime editor of *The Religious Telescope* and United Brethren gadfly, wrote a book on the subject in 1852. In *Plain Thoughts on Secret Societies*, Lawrence echoed that common argument that secret societies were anti-democratic in an egalitarian age: "Secret societies give to one class of men an advantage over other men, which an honest man and Christian does not want." Furthermore, every "republican" would agree that "all good citizens should enjoy equal rights, and that no set of citizens should organize themselves into a society which gives them power, and bad men in that organization power, to take advantage of their fellow-citizens."⁴⁰

Even in the church, Lawrence pleaded, democratic, egalitarian relationships should be paramount. "Secret societies establish a bond of union and brotherhood not recognized in the Scriptures, and which conflicts with and annuls the bond of union and communion established by God." A Mason claims a higher responsibility to his lodge brothers than to his brothers in Christ. "A Christian Mason is required to regard, not his brother in Christ, as a member of the household of the faithful, to whom he is especially bound to do good, but his brother in the secret lodge of which Christ is not head."⁴¹ The influence of Jacksonian democratization had obviously been influential within even the ethnic versions of evangelical Christianity in the antebellum era.

⁴⁰John Lawrence, *Plain Thoughts on Secret Societies* (Circleville, OH: United Brethren Publishing Establishment, 1852), 47-48, 51.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 60, 63.

The theology of revivalism provided another reason for opposing secret societies. The 1877 *Discipline*, although it is outside the period under discussion, succinctly states the theological disagreements the United Brethren Church had with secret societies:

We believe that secret societies are evil in their nature and tendency; ...that they employ the forms of religion in unwarranted services and ceremonies, not in the name of Christ nor founded on the merits of his atonement; ...that they pervert the Holy Scriptures to foolish and unholy uses; that the ceremonies encourage many of their adherents in hopes of eternal life without a truly evangelical faith.⁴²

Thus, secret societies were not only wrong for being secret and undemocratic; they were wrong for offering a salvation that was not from Christ.

Three years after the William Morgan incident, the General Conference adopted the following resolution – “Resolved, that in no way or manner, nor in any sense of the word, shall Freemasonry be approved or tolerated in our church.” Masons currently in the church were advised that if they continued to attend their lodges or participate in their ceremonies, their church membership would be revoked.⁴³ Like the alcohol stance, the secret society position found its way from the *Discipline* to the new *Constitution*, an even higher authority, in 1841. Surprisingly, there is little discussion of Freemasonry in the periodical articles of this period. In 1835, two articles appeared arguing both sides of the issue of whether anti-Masonic societies were needed.⁴⁴ No other substantial treatment was located in the volumes researched.

There was occasional opposition in the pre-War years from within the church. A committee was appointed in 1849 to examine the stand and consider changes. One delegate, later to become a bishop, issued a minority report that he “did not believe it to be any part of the prerogative of an ecclesiastical body to legislate in regard to what may be

⁴²1877 *Discipline*.

⁴³*Minutes of General Conference* (1829).

⁴⁴“Freemasonry” and “Anti-masonry,” *The Religious Telescope*, April 22, 1835. The Freemason advocate made the argument that “if the principles of the institution of Masonry are inimical to freedom – are destructive of good morals, or are in any way unworthy of being cherished by freemen – they cannot flourish here; and if they are frivolous and trifling (as some allege and many believe) now that the veil is lifted, let them alone, and they will prove themselves innoxious [sic].”



An Anti-masonry cartoon from the 19th century.

called... secret societies.”⁴⁵ In 1858, the Sandusky Conference in Ohio was startled to discover that six of their ministers were connected with the Masons in some way. All confessed and repented when assured of forgiveness and continued standing within the conference.⁴⁶ The General Conference of 1861 reaffirmed the decision of the Sandusky Conference in this matter.

It was only after the Civil War that the United Brethren began to involve themselves in larger anti-Masonic movements, partly because the lodge movement had flourished during the war years. The National Christian Association Opposed to Secret Societies was formed in 1867, had significant United Brethren participation, and elected United Brethren Bishop David Edwards as its president in 1868. Bishop Edwards compared the anti-Masonic movement to the anti-slavery movement before the war. But he had to contend with a growing minority within his own church who desired a loosening of the rules regarding Masonic membership.

⁴⁵*Minutes of the General Conference* (1849). The report's author was Jacob Markwood.

⁴⁶*Minutes of the Sandusky Annual Conference* (1858). United Brethren Historical Center, Huntington, Indiana.

Those who favored Masonic affiliations were strong enough by 1889 to control General Conference and adopt a new *Constitution* that did not prohibit Masonic membership. Those who held to the 1841 *Constitution* withdrew and organized themselves as the Church of the United Brethren in Christ (Old Constitution), led by Bishop Milton Wright, better known as the father of airplane pioneers Wilbur and Orville Wright. The majority styled themselves the Church of the United Brethren in Christ (New Constitution). They merged with the Methodist Church in 1968. Those holding to the old constitution do not permit Masonic membership to this day.

The United Brethren undoubtedly supported anti-Masonic political movements, but there is no record of such substantial involvement as with the abolitionist and temperance issues. This is probably because of the church's preoccupation with disagreements within its own ranks after the War.

CONCLUSION

The United Brethren in Christ were early and actively involved in the movements for abolition, temperance, and anti-Masonry. They tightened their membership standards as a first step, encouraged participation in wider movements as a second step, and, with the possible exception of anti-Masonry, encouraged their members to attempt political solutions for these issues.

This was fueled by revivalism and made possible by democratization. Revivalism provided the theological basis for social reform. Personal conversion, millennial expectations, and societal transformation encouraged United Brethren to confront what they saw as evils in their society. Democratization involved a change in attitude from personal convictions to political involvement. The United Brethren chose political ends because the emphasis upon democratic ideals and processes made it feasible and acceptable. Otterbein and Boehm, living in a different time, would probably not have chosen this route.

Thus, what Hatch proposed about other groups in American society was true for the United Brethren, and probably for other German groups as well. And what Timothy Smith, William McLoughlin and others have argued for mainstream Protestantism was true for the ethnic churches also, as long as one recognizes that language and cultural shifts were needed for full participation in these reform movements.