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Church Trials in a Changing Society

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by

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The study of all aspects of the American frontier still continues, with new and sometimes divergent materials appearing year after year. Religion and morality have received a share of this interest. Dr. William Warren Sweet was a substantial contributor to this literature, particularly with his of source materials, under the general heading of Religion on the American Frontier. In this series, the one most directly related to the present subject is Religion on the American Frontier: Vol. IV: The Methodists, 1783-1840 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1946). Chapter XIII of this book is devoted to "Church Trials among the Methodists in the Early West." The documents which were used by Dr. Sweet and by his seminar
Varg, in the preparation of the chapter are a part of the collection of the Illinois Conference Historical Society, located at the Buck Memorial Library, Illinois Wesleyan University, in Bloomington, Illinois. At the time this collection apparently was in a chaotic state, and by no means all of the materials on church trials were available to Dr. Sweet and Mr. Varg. Subsequently an effort has been made to introduce order into the collection, but nothing further had been done with the documents pertaining to church trials until the author, under the direction of Dr. Richard D. Leonard, of Illinois Wesleyan University, undertook to organize them this year. A great many more case files were located, covering a span of almost one hundred years, and touching on over one hundred and fifty trials, of various types.

Several hypotheses began to emerge as these cases were separated and indexed. First of all, the nature of the charges brought changed through the years. Second, the charges were often linked directly to other events inside or outside of the church. Abolition of slavery, the Civil War Spirit in the North, and church divisions were reflected, for example. Third, the nature of the verdicts and the penalties shifted through the years, given equal charges. [Fourth, and this hypothesis is as yet untested, Illinois Conference is not typical of Methodism during the middle years of the nineteenth century in its stress on ministerial morality. The difference, if it exists, may be traceable to the famous "Backwoods Preacher", Peter Cartwright.]

Frontier morality was hardly of the highest quality. Moreover, Christians, at least measured in terms of church membership, were in a decided minority, in spite of the most aggressive evangelistic tactics. John Mason Peck, probably one of the most informed men on the situation in the state at the time, in A Gazetteer of Illinois (Jacksonville, 1834), estimates the total number of professors of religion at 25,000, or about one in eight persons in the state.[1] The Methodists, with 13,421 members (over half of those in the state), blanketed the entire state, having preaching in all of the counties.[2] Five years later, in 1839, Peck reported that there were 20,000 Methodists in Illinois, out of about 40,000 church members. The population had more than doubled, to 420,000, so the ratio of Christians to the total had dropped to one in ten.[3]

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[1] p. 92.
[2] Ibid., p. 89.
[3] The Traveler's Directory for Illinois. New York: Colton, 1839, pp. 135-137.

II.

Methodism has always had a ready mechanism for disciplining its church members and its ministry. The machinery began with John Wesley, as the General Rules of the United Societies, which are still preserved by the denomination. [Although the observance of them has been a casualty of the years, the 1956 Discipline still preserves the statement:

> These are the General Rules of our societies: all of which we are taught of God to observe, even in his written Word, which is the only rule, and the sufficient rule, both of our faith and practice. And all these we know his Spirit writes on truly awakened hearts. If there be any among us who observes them not, who habitually breaks any of them, let it be known unto them who watch over that soul as they who must give an account. We will admonish him in the error of his ways. We will bear with him for a season. But, if then he repent not, he hath no more place among us. We have delivered our souls.[4]]

Procedures for the trial of ministers and members likewise still stand, although they are rarely used today. Not so during the early years on the Illinois frontier. Most of the early Quarterly Conference records have been lost, but among those still available, Dr. Sweet examined the record of the Carrollton Circuit, 1839 to 1850. One of the regular questions asked at the quarterly meetings was "Are there any complaints or appeals?" During these eleven years, on this one circuit, five disciplinary cases were brought.[5] Trials of laymen were not normally recorded
of the Quarterly Conferences to which they were subject. The entire collection includes papers on only three such trials, apart from the references in the Quarterly Conference Minutes.

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[4] Doctrines and Disciplines of the Methodist Church, 1956. Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1957, p. 37.

[5] Sweet, Op. cit., pp. 667-8.

For ministers, however, the procedure was more centralized. Local preachers, local deacons, and local elders were brought to trial before the quarterly conferences, if they had been first adjudged guilty by a committee of investigation of their peers. If found guilty as charged of an act "sufficient to exclude a person from the kingdom of grace and glory", before the quarterly meetings, they were to be expelled and deprived of their credentials, and these were to be filed with the Annual Conference. For lesser offenses reproof followed the first two offenses, then trial if the error were repeated. Aside from this filing of the parchments, the Annual Conference Minutes do not indicate these trials, nor do the Conference files preserve the evidence, unless the local preacher had filed an appeal to the Annual Conference, which he, unlike the local church member, had the right to do.[6]

Traveling preachers were still more stringently examined. If they were charged with an offense of serious nature, or crime, they were examined before a committee of ministers and appropriate action was taken at once. The case was then finally adjudicated at the next session of the Annual Conference. Lesser charges here also, for "improper tempers, words, or actions", were reproved. Continued violations brought expulsion. Charges might also be brought for disseminating doctrines contrary to the Articles of religion, or for conducting oneself in a manner which rendered one unacceptable to the people as a traveling preacher. The penalty for the latter was location instead of expulsion, however. Appeals to the General Conference were the privilege of the traveling preacher, if proper notice of appeal were given.[7]

[6] The Doctrines and Disciplines of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1836. New York: 1836, pp. 67-71.

[7] Ibid., pp. 62-66.

Moreover, at the Annual Conference sessions, the names of the ministers were called. Each filed his report for the year, and as he did so, any member of the Conference who wished could express objections or complaints or place charges against him. Passage of character was by no means automatic. One hundred years ago, in conferences far smaller than the present ones, five or more ministers would commonly find themselves the subject of complaints on the conference floor. If these complaints were not too serious, they would be discussed at once and appropriate action taken. Otherwise, a committee would be created to consider them and report. The Committee reports were not automatically accepted, however. Their recommendations were always subject to review, and not infrequently were altered in some particulars, or even reversed, by the Conference as a whole. A "Select Number" was created to deal with serious cases or with cases in which formal charges had been brought.

Gradually changes were made in this early procedure for the examination of character. Conferences stopped meeting with closed doors while the examination of character took place. In 1896, the Committee on Conference Relations was created. By 1909, the character of the ministers was being passed by groups, instead of individually. In 1932, the Journal of the Illinois Conference records that the ministers stood, and their characters were passed, a method suggested the Disciplinary Question, "Are all the ministerial members of the conference blameless in their life and official administration?" with the words, "No charges against them."[9] Today we assume that

[8] Illinois Conference, Journal and Yearbook, 1932, p. 16.
[9] Illinois Conference, Journal and Yearbook, 1959, p. 994.

a minister is blameless unless official charges are brought; a few generations ago, nothing was taken for granted. Even Peter Cartwright was the subject of complaints before the conference in five different years, and on one occasion, in 1854, the debate lasted almost all of three days before the charges were finally not sustained.[10]

III

The manner of handling charges has also changed through the years. One may question whether even Methodist ministers have succeeded in "going on to perfection" to the degree that is indicated by the fact that the Illinois Conference has not expelled a member since 1925. Quieter ways of dealing with miscreants have been adopted, such as permitting them to withdraw. One may also be inclined to suspect, on the basis of the trends indicated, that behavior which once would have meant suspension and expulsion at the next Annual Conference session is more often handled today by moving the man to a new and remote church, or by allowing him to transfer to another conference---a remedy which made its appearance as early as 1836, when S. F. Whitney was adjudged imprudent, and "in view of all the circumstances of his case, the Superintendent was requested to transfer him to the Erie Conference."[11]

[Table One presents an analysis of the number of cases which are mentioned in the minutes of the Illinois Annual Conference, between 1824 and 1931, by quadrenniums, and paralleling these figures, indicates the number of said cases which are supported by

[10] Illinois Conference, Minutes, 1848-1864, MS, pp. 207-215, in the Illinois Conference Historical Society.

[11] Illinois Conference, Minutes, 1836-1847, Typed transcript of orig. MS, 1836, p. 15, Illinois Conference Historical Society.

other materials as well in the collection. The discrepancies do not indicate that all of these case files are missing, however. In many instances a complaint was made during the examination of character at the Conference session and handled satisfactorily there, without further investigation, which explains many of the discrepancies in the early years. In the later years, many of the cases are listed simply as "permitted to withdraw" or "permitted to withdraw under complaints", while others are locations of men for one reason or another. In neither of these cases are the materials generally in the collections. They may still be in the custody of the appropriate boards. Another possibility is that they were destroyed in a fire at First Methodist Church in Springfield, some years ago, in which an unknown quantity of material belonging to the Historical Society was lost. The indicated rise in the number of cases after 1890 is only apparent. The figures are inflated by withdrawals and locations. In addition to the Illinois Conference materials, the collection contains data from the cases of Central Illinois Conference. No analysis of the Conference Minutes was made for Central Illinois Conference. Table Two indicates the number of cases on which some documents are available. The present analysis is based only on the Illinois Conference records, except for drawing occasionally on the Central Illinois materials for illustrative material. The Central Illinois cases roughly parallel those in Illinois. This Conference seemingly was more troubled by the "Holiness" controversy of the 1880's. The hypothesis that Illinois Conference was stricter than others is based on paralleling cases in Illinois and Central Illinois Conferences. A much more intensive investigation will be required to verify or disprove this hypothesis.

Table 1. Illinois Conference Complaints and Charges

Quadrenniums	Number of Cases Mentioned in Minutes	Number of Cases in Which Some Other Documents Are Available
1824-1827	3	0
1828-1831	10	1
1832-1835	6	3
1836-1839	19	8
1840-1843	20	6
1844-1847	24	7
1848-1851	27	8
1852-1855	14	7
1856-1859	18	12
1860-1863	13	5
1864-1867	12	7
1868-1871	12	11
1872-1875	5	2
1876-1879	8	2
1880-1883	8	2
1884-1887	4	0
1888-1891	6	4
1892-1895	8	3
1896-1899	9	0
1900-1903	5	2
1904-1907	3	0
1908-1911	10	4
1912-1915	5	0
1916-1919	9	1
1920-1923	6	3
1924-1927	11	4
1928-1931	5	0

Note: Often cases were carried over from one year to the next. These were counted only in the year of first appearance before the Annual Conference.

Table 2. Central Illinois Conference Complaints and Charges

Quadrennium	Number of Cases in Which Some Other Documents Are Available
1864-1867	10
1868-1871	10
1872-1875	7
1876-1879	7
1880-1883	2
1884-1887	3
1888-1891	3
1892-1895	3
1896-1899	3
1900-1903	0
1904-1907	0
1908-1911	2
1912-1915	0
1916-1919	0
1920-1923	1
1924-1927	0

Merged with Illinois Conference in 1927.

IV.

The most frequent charge during the first twenty years of the Illinois Conference was immorality, as far as cases which actually were tried and in which verdicts are available. There were quite a few complaints on the Conference floor of neglect of duty, maladministration, and unacceptability for performing the duties of a preacher, but these were often handled on the spot either by explanation from the brother in question, or by immediate Conference discussion eventuating in a decision by the body. The emphasis on morality as against doctrine on the frontier may be seen in the fact that between 1824 and 1843, there are 26 different charges or complaints of immorality, imprudent or unministerial conduct, or unchristian conduct, while on only three occasions was a man charged with "disseminating doctrines which are contrary to our articles of religion."[12] And of these three, the preacher's character was passed after discussion and admonition in two cases, and in the third case the real issue was maladministration. The charges do not always reveal the underlying problems, however. For example, the following:

> At a quarterly held at the house of Bro. John Rutherford in the Sangamon circuit, commencing on the 21st of March 1829---Members Present---
> Peter Cartwright P. E. James Mikian [illeg] A. P. John H. Benson C. P. Wm Sims, Jacob Bean, John Cooper Charles R. Matheny L Pr.---James Walters, C. Shingle Richard Smith Extrs.----------
> Joseph Dixion, Wm Foucks, Joseph McCoy, and John Rutherford C Leaders---on motion ordered that C. Pr Matheny act as secretary to this conference.
> Q. by P. E. are there any appeals---

[12] Discipline, 1836, op. cit., p. 63.

An. from a reference to the proceedings of the last qr meeting confarence [sic], the case of Reddock Horne who stands suspended as a local Preacher and was continued untill [sic] this meeting was taken up and the charges read by the secretary, the certifficates [sic], & testimony in support of the charges, and after a full investigation the qr meeting committee who sit on this case be sustained being of opinion that the said R Horne is guilty as charged in said report---
Q. by P. E. what punisment [sic] will you inflict on said R Horne
on motion it is discided [sic] unanimiously [sic] that said R Horne be expelld from the Methodist E Church for lying and slander

Peter Cartwright P E.

C R Matheny Sec,t.[13]

As a matter of fact, Reddick Horne was one of the founders of the first Methodist Protestant church in Illinois, organized in Morgan County, on February 13, 1829. James Leaton records that he "had been twice suspended for his views on church polity," and "after his trial and deposition," the new church was formed.[14] But the Quarterly Meeting action quoted above does not reveal the dispute over church polity in its charges of "lying and slander", although the relationship is certainly more than coincidental.

The charges of immorality are perhaps the most interesting, reflecting as they do the society of the time. "Immorality" was used as the general classification not only for sexual offenses, to which it later was progressively restricted, but for falsehood or lying, slander, taking bribes, drinking, fighting on the Sabbath, violation of contracts, and non-payment of debt. The same charge might include specifications embracing several of these. For example, in the case previously mentioned of S. F.

[13] Church Trials: Reddick Horne, 1829, MS, Illinois Conference Historical Society

[14] History of Methodism in Illinois, From 1793 to 1832. Cincinnati: Walden & Stowe, 1883, p. 283.

Whitney in 1836, the facts appear to be as follows:

W. B. Mack and Mrs. Whitney had advanced beyond friendship to adultery. Mr. Mack wrote a letter of confession of his guilt to the Conference of 1836.[15] In the letter, he mentioned that he had given Brother Whitney a thousand dollars, all he had, to keep the matter secret, but the pledge was violated. "A unanimous vote (the members of the conference rising to their feet) was given to expel the said Wilder B. Mack from the roll of the conference and from the Methodist Episcopal Church, and it was resolved that the particulars of the case, with the conference action, be prepared for publication by a committee of Peter Cartwright, John Clark, and J. T. Mitchell. The report of the committee was returned as a "Notice" for publication, adopted, and a certified copy furnished to the Editor of the "Rushville Journal" (seat of the 1836 Conference) for publication, "with a request that it be published in the papers throughout the country generally."[16] It is apparent that not only was the action of Mr. Mack disapproved, but that the Conference wished the entire state to know what had been done. The contrast with the practice of two generations later of men being "permitted to withdraw under charges", without giving the specifications in the Conference Minutes is apparent. Evidently the earlier church was more concerned with being known as a body that dealt forthrightly with the sin in its ranks than with concealing its sins.

In this situation, Whitney had evidently taken Mack's property intending to settle it on his wife, then leave her; but after he

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[15] This letter is printed by Dr. Sweet, Op. cit., pp. 662-664, but the name is erroneously given as W. B. Mark instead of W.B.Mack.

[16] Illinois Conference Minutes, 1836-1847, Op. cit., 1836, pp. 16 & 18.

received the bribe, which was in landed property, he remained for several weeks undecided about the separation, with the result that the community suspected his motives for taking the land. Moreover, he sought to prevent the civil prosecution of Mack. And third, when he did decide to leave his wife, he did not do so at once, applying for divorce and transferring the property to her, which would have clarified his intentions. The Conference committee judged him to be "innocent of any criminal or sinful intention", but imprudent. They further reported "as Br. Whitney designed to obtain a bill of divorce from his wife, that in their opinion it would be better, both for Br. Whitney and the church that he be not appointed to a circuit in this conference the ensuing year." The action was then taken, as previously mentioned, to transfer him out of the state.[17]

The Church was always quick to act in cases of immorality in the early years, but rarely did they succeed in being as efficient as in the case of Simon Peter (even Simon Peter was not pure enough to last in the Illinois Conference), in 1837, in which the entire testimony was spread on the Conference Minutes.

Mr. Peter had been invited to the home of a Mrs. Forsythe after the evening services at the Conference session on September 28, 1837, to spend the night, and when shown his room embraced and kissed her and drew her toward its door, after a series of questions to ascertain the safety of the situation. She ran to a neighbor to get help, and he returned with her. Apparently Simon Peter was allowed to spend the night, after explanations. Charges were brought before the Conference for "Immoral Conduct" on September 30, Brother Peter

[17] Ibid., pp. 14-15.

pled guilty, and he was expelled from the church "unanimously, and by a rising vote."[18] In 1839, a petition was presented to the Conference for his restoration, on grounds of repentance and subsequent Christian deportment, signed by his neighbors, members of the church,[19] for the Grafton Circuit Quarterly Conference. The recommendation for restoration of credentials lost, by vote of 34 affirmative to 46 negative.[20] Perhaps the result of the original trial might have been different had not the Conference been placed in such an embarrassing position. As it was, Brother Peter was expelled from the church within forty-eight hours of his offense.

Similar offenses brought equally severe penalties to other men during these years, however, although hardly as quickly, as in 1841 when Reuben Plummer was expelled from the church for immoral conduct, three specifications, for putting "his hand on Miss Ogden in a very indecent manner---having it between her legs," for stepping on a woman's foot "to show a Christian affection," and for going "twice in the same night" to the bedside of a Mrs. Kizzard.[21]

An interesting case in 1844 charged Furney Stanley with immorality for "puting [sic] a lot of worthless shingles on Mr. Preston Funkhouser for good ones and thereby violating a plain contract made by yourself and him" and for falsehood in connection therewith. Stanley was found guilty and expelled from the church by the Quarterly Meeting at Fairfield in 1845.[22] Since Stanley was a local preacher, he had the right of appeal to the Annual Conference, His appeal was entertained and decision of the Quarterly Conference was reversed,[23]

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[18] Ibid., 1837, pp. 8-11.
[19] Church Trials: Simon Peter, 1839, MS, Illinois Conference Historical Society.
[20] Ibid., 1839, p. 26
[21] Church Trials; R. Plummer, 1841, MS, Illinois Conference Historical Society
[22] Church Trials; F. Stanley, 1844, MSS, Illinois Conference Historical Society.
[23] Minutes, 1836-1847, Op. cit., 1845, p. 26.

but the nature of the charge indicates that a Christian was expected to be as good as his word in business dealings.

Another interesting trial took place in 1848, when Elijah Knox, a local deacon, was charged as follows:

Charge	Immoralities preferred by Abel H. Scott
Specific tion 1st.	For selling pork that was disordered.
Specification 2nd.	For proposing to hire me (Scott) to shoot the Widow Youngs horse beast.
Specification 3rd.	For falsehood by saying his horse had killed one of the Widow Young's sheep when he had not.

Only the first specification was sustained. Dogs belonging to Knox had hurt a hog belonging to a Mr. Pratt, and Knox killed the hog, agreeing to pay Pratt for it. When killed, Scott testified, "it had piggs [sic] in it, which from appearance had been dead in the hog until they were partially decayed, being in a manner rotten." Scott and Knox allegedly agreed that the hog was not fit to eat, but Knox then took the hog into Havana and sold it for good meat. Knox made no attempt to conceal the fact that the hog had been killed because of the injury done to it by the dogs. The purchaser's wife testified that "there was nothing the matter with the hog as she knew of, and that "it eat [sic] very well." The Knox family testified they also had eaten some of the meat. Apparently basically this was a case of the word of Scott, his neighbor, against that of Knox, there being no other direct witnesses. Elijah Knox was expelled from the church by the Quarterly Meeting Conference,[24] but his appeal to the Annual Conference that same year was entertained. The decision was reversed, after he made a statement in his own behalf to the Conference following the reading of the minutes of the Quarterly Conference trial.[25]

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[24]Church Trials: Elijah Knox, 1848, MSS, Illinois Conference Historical Society.

[25]Minutes, 1848-1864, Op. cit., p. 16, (1848).

An example of a case of unacceptability is found in the Annual Conference Minutes of 1840, Peter Cartwright bringing the charges against James Hitchcock. The specifications were two:

> When he travelled in the regular work he so conducted himself in reference to his support and in speaking of his own talents as a Preacher so as to hurt the feelings of the Brethren.
>
> He has physical ability and health sufficient to travel and preach long and loud [underline original] and yet refuses to do so.

The entire testimony is found in the Conference minutes. The first specification was sustained, and Hitchcock was located.[26]

Surprisingly, perhaps, the trials do not particularly reflect the division of the church between North and South in 1844, but abolition clearly was an issue at times. In 1838, a lengthy bill of charges, which evidently were rooted in the fact that Nichols had abolitionist leanings, was brought against P. W. Nichols, by a non-member of the church. The Presiding Elder replied that the plaintiff was not eligible to bring charges, and that in any case his charges were not serious enough to involve more than reproof. He concludes:

> With all sympathy for your feelings, therefore, and desire for the best interests of the church I judge that investigation on these charges is uncalled for---and sincerely hope you will dismiss the entire subject from your mind. "Study to be quiet." "Follow peace with all men" and holiness---And may he whose right it is to reign in your heart direct your steps.[27]

Nevertheless, Dr. Worrell pressed the case, writing to Bishop Andrews. An investigation was made at Conference, and after considerable debate, Nichols was located.[28]

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[26] Minutes, 1836-1847, Op. cit., 1840, pp. 24-27.

[27] Church Trials: P. W. Nichols, 1838, MS letter of L. Stubbins to Dr. E. Worrell, Illinois Conference Historical Society. The charges and other documents are also in the file.

[28] Minutes, 1836-1847, Op. cit., 1838, p. 21.

It has been mentioned that Conference members had the right of appeal to the General Conference. That right was exercised by Charles Atkinson, who had been located in his absence in 1844.[29] In 1845 he appealed the action of the 1844 Conference, but it was reaffirmed, after reconsideration of the case, whereupon he gave notice of appeal to the 1848 General Conference.[30] The charges against him were of unacceptability. Apparently his Presiding Elder was prosecuting for his failure to meet an appointment. The evidence, including certificates of doctors that a throat infection had been at least partly the source of the trouble, indicates there were extenuating circumstances. Atkinson's appeal was entertained by the General Conference of 1848, Peter Cartwright presenting his case, and the decision of the Annual Conference was reversed.[32]

The evidence generally would indicate that the preachers took the examination of character very seriously. Suspicions that many of the charges were frivolous or malicious do not seem to be borne out, especially during the early years. There did seem to be an increase of this sort of thing later on, after 1850. One exception to this generalization is found in the 1847 Annual Conference, during which the following exchanges took place:

John P. Richmond was complained against by W. S. McMurray, but passed after a request to withdraw to the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (subsequently reconsidered).

Richmond then complained that "Bro. McMurray had made the

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[29] Ibid., 1844, p. 8.
[30] Ibid., 1845; pp. 3-19, passim.
[31] Church Trials: C. Atkinson, 1845, MSS, Illinois Conference Historical Society.
[32] Journals of the General Confernce of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Vol. III, 1848-1856, New York: Carlton & Lanahan, n.d., pp. 62-63.

pulpit a vehicle to prosecute a tirade against Masonry." A Bro. Barrett complained that he had said "that he could go against Mexico and fight with the soldiers all the week and preach to them on the Sabbath." McMurray was passed after explanation.

Later in the day, Bro. George W. Robbins was called and objection were filed against him for maladministration by E. G. Falconer. Robbins passed. Falconer was then called and Robbins complained against him and presented charges, which were referred to a committee.[33] The year 1847 was one of the busiest in the history of the Conference as far as matters like this were concerned. No less than ten preachers were challenged that year, according to the Conference minutes.

V.

The number of complaints per year, very high in the last years the decade of the 1840s, dropped off to a low level in 1854 and 1855, then rose again, but not to as high a level. Clearly, before the Civil War the tendency was for fewer charges to be brought. At the same time that the number of charges was decreasing, the size of the Conference was increasing. On the whole, it would appear that these are years of increasing concern for the way things were done. Various types of immorality still formed the major basis for complaint, (28 cases), but there was stress on maladministration, (10), leaving work without permission, (4), unacceptability (4), improper conduct (5), faulty doctrine (3). Conspicuously, many cases mentioned did not give the charges, although they can be derived in part from other sources. The trend was away from detailing such matters in the Minutes. The listing is by the most serious charge brought. Often several would be given in a single case.

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[33]Minutes, 1836-1847, Op. cit., 1847, pp. 14-16 passim.

The observance of the Sabbath received special emphasis around 1850, apparently. In 1849, a complaint was made against Benjamin Newman that he had traveled on the Sabbath. After discussion, he was passed, but a resolution was approved by the Conference requesting the Committee on the Sabbath to prepare a general resolution on the subject of receiving letters from the post office on the Sabbath. It would appear that the offense of Newman was that he had gone or sent to the Post Office for his mail on Sunday.[34] In 1852, complaints were brought against F. Magee, by the said Benjamin Newman, that Magee had "left Chicago and traveled on a canal boat on the Sabbath day", moving that he be charged with high impropriety for his action. The conference did not pass the motion, however.[35]

In 1852, William Ellers was charged with the use of intoxicating beverages, and was suspended until the next session of the Annual Conference. He wrote a letter of confession to the Conference, offering to locate and pledge himself to abstinence if the Conference would lift his suspension and restore his parchments.[36] Peter Cartwright moved his expulsion, but a substitute by W. D. R. Trotter that he be expelled from the ministry but retained as a member of the church prevailed.[37]

One of the most bizarre cases in the history of the Conference was tried in 1857, when James Knapp was charged with drinking, with dishonesty, including the theft of a body from the grave, with lying, and with perjury. The testimony indicated that Knapp and another man disinterred the body to get the skeleton. A drug store employee on coming in to work in the morning had found the skeleton

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[34] Minutes, 1848-1864, Op. cit., pp. 46 and 50 (1849).
[35] Ibid., p. 143, (1852).
[36] Church Trials: Wm. Ellers, 1852, MSS, Illinois Conference Historical Society.
[37] Ibid., p. 141, (1852).

back of the counter, and the flesh and viscera in a pan in another room. He had previously heard the defendant making plans for doing it. The father of the deceased learned of the exhumation and was instrumental in bringing the charges. Knapp was a superannuated preacher, a member of the Southern Illinois Conference. He was apparently expelled from the church by action of the Illinois Conference, since he lived within its bounds (at LeRoy, Illinois).[38]

Land claims were a source of controversy on the frontier. They figured in some way in several cases.

The prolonged case against Peter Cartwright in 1854, previously mentioned, and its concomitant charge against I. C. Kimber, grew out of a dispute over the sale of mission property in Springfield. The case is marked by an exceptional number of objections, appeals to the bishop for rulings, and similar emphases on technicalities, first by Cartwright and then by Kimber. In later years, this sort of thing became almost a standard pattern, but it was relatively rare during the early period. Both were eventually passed, but it is clear that a substantial minority did feel that Cartwright had overstepped his bounds in the case, the vote being 19 for and 36 against sustaining the first general charge.[39]

It would be interesting to know all there was between Cartwright and Daniel J. Snow. Certainly the two were antagonists. Snow was admitted on trial in 1843. He left his appointment in 1847 to accept work for one year with the Illinois State Colonization Society, and was reproved by the [illegible]

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[38]Church Trials: J. Knapp, 1857, MSS, Illinois Conference Historical Society.

[39]Minutes, 1848-1864, Op. cit., pp. 207-223 passim (1854). Vote recorded, p. 215.

Conference for his action, according to James Leaton.[40] Cartwright did not take part in the 1847 action, as far as the record indicates.[41] Leaton's comment that Snow was reproved by the Conference is not borne out. The reproof was initially voted, but then it was stricken from the record. In 1848, Snow wrote a letter to the Conference which was regarded as "disrespectful and unbecoming." It was resolved "that the reproaches against certain members of the Conference named therein, are highly imprudent, and that Brother Snow deserves the censure of this conference." The censure was approved and Snow was located, in his absence and without his consent.[42] In 1849, Mr. Snow was present and requested permission to address the conference in connection with his location in 1848. This granted, he explained his actions and expressed his intention to appeal to the General Conference. W. D. R. Trotter spoke also, and the two professed mutual reconciliation. Peter Cartwright disavowed personal unfriendliness toward Show, but stated "he had been and still was aggrieved at Bro. Snow's course and letters."[43] In 1851, Snow brought charges against Peter Cartwright, but withdrew them before a decision was reached in the case.[44]

After Snow was reinstated by the reversal of the Illinois Conference action by the General Conference in 1852, Cartwright brought charges of immorality, falsehood, slander, and fraud, which were partially sustained, and Snow was expelled by the 1853 Conference, after a vigorous prosecution by Cartwright.

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[40] "The Illinois Conference of the Methodist Church, 1840-1851", typed transcript, p. 149, Illinois Conference Historical Society.

[41] Minutes, 1836-1847, Op. cit., 1847, pp. 7-23 passim.

[42] Minutes, 1848-1864, Op. cit., pp. 21-23 (1848).

[43] Ibid., p. 56 (1849).

[44] Ibid., p. 116 (1851).

Interestingly, a substitute motion which follows was offered but lost:

> Although Rev. D. J. Snow has been by our Conference voted guilty of Falsehood and Slander, yet in view of the fact that a palliation is found in misunderstandings t at may have existed between him & Dr. Cartwright therefore we decide that he should be deprived of all ministerial functions and that he be required to render up his parchments---

The proposition for a slightly milder penalty was not granted, expulsion prevailed, and D. J. Snow again signified his intention to appeal.[45] Among the other things that Snow had said, in print, was that "Dr. C. was rapidly losing the great influence he formerly exerted over the conference " according to the charges brought by Dr. Cartwright, under the he ding of "Slander"; other and more serious items were also mentioned.[46]

Snow again appealed to General Conference, of 1856 this time, and his case was remanded for a new trial because of irregularities. Peter Cartwright again brought charges, this time on grounds of immorality, contumacy, and unministerial and unchristian conduct. Snow was suspended for one year by the 1857 Conference.[47] In 1858, a charge of falsehood was brought against Snow, this time not involving Cartwright, and on the word of a Brother Hecox that Brother Snow had expressed his desire to withdraw from the Conference and the church, he was recorded as withdrawn under charges of immorality, in his absence.[48] He was present in 1859, and evidently had not been notified of the action taken against him in 1858. On hearing of it he gave notice of appeal, then subsequently placed a memorial before the conference for investigation, on the grounds that the allegations in 1858 were false, and that the man bringing the 1858 charge by his own

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45 Ibid., pp. 179-180 (1853).

46 Church Trials: D. J. Snow, MSS, 1853, Illinois Conference Historical Society.

47 Minutes, 1848-1864, Op. cit., pp. 300-301, and Church Trials; D. J. Snow, 1856, MSS, Illinois Conference Historical Society.

48 Minutes. 1848-1864, Op. cit., pp. 318-319.

admission, did not know the truth of his allegations. Affidavits were taken that the Conference action in locating him was based on his own statements, and apparently the previous action was affirmed.[49] The question of the validity of the 1858 charge was not mentioned--a rather conspicuous silence, it would seem. He is not mentioned thereafter. James Leaton says he went to the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.[50]

A much more thorough investigation would be necessary to determine the facts of this case, but evidently Snow opposed Cartwright quite vigorously and volubly, at least from 1848 on, and the sentiment was reciprocal. Cartwright prosecuted aggressively. These years around the mid-century are the ones in which he seems to have been the most vocal of his career in being the upholder of faith and morality, at least among the preachers of the Illinois Conference, and, one might suggest, also the years in which he was most stoutly opposed. Later, he would be regarded as the symbol and father of Illinois Methodism.

One more case from the 1850s will suffice. Thomas W. Jones was brought to trial in 1850 and again in 1851, on marital charges. The 1850 case, for breach of marriage contract, was printed in part by Dr. Sweet.[51] Jones was suspended till the next Conference session. The minutes of the Conference trial in 1851 cast light on the question of increased table expenses due to his marriage.[52] Once again the charge was sustained, and he was suspended for one year, which was less than had been demanded on the floor of the Conference.[53]

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[49]Minutes, 1848-1864, Op. cit., pp.318-319 (1859).
[50]Leaton, Illinois Conference, Op. cit., p. 151.
[51]Op. cit., pp. 646-648.
[52]Church Trials: T. W. Jones, 1851, MS, Illinois Conference Historical Society.
[53]Minutes, 1848-1864, Op. cit., p. 109 (1851).

VI

During the decade of the 1860s, in the Illinois Conference, several trends are noticeable. Discounting the war years, only about two cases per year came before the Conference. There is one exception, 1868, in which no less than eight were brought. The years 1863, 1864, and 1866, were also somewhat above the average. The nature of the charges also shifted. Of thirty-two new cases between 1861 and 1869, only seven were for immorality. Four were for unacceptability, two for maladministration, two doctrinal, and eleven for improper conduct. The Conference repeatedly took charges of immorality and reduced them to "imprudence", which naturally did not carry the same severity of penalty.

These new cases of "imprudent" conduct sometimes actually involved more serious charges than those which a few years before were viewed as "immorality" and led to prompt expulsion from the church. In 1868, W. C. Lacey was complained against for drinking wine, and doing it in public. An explanation from him sufficed, however, and while his act was condemned, his character passed.[54] Also during the decade, A. F. Rogers was repeatedly brought to trial ---in 1864 for theft and selling tobacco on Sunday, in 1866 for selling spirituous liquors and for falsehood, in 1869 for selling spirituous liquors and for having a wicked and malicious spirit.[55] Yet the penalty in 1864 was only admonition, and in 1866 and 1869 one year suspensions. In 1852, William Ellers had been expelled, despite his offers to locate, for drinking. In the 1860s, neither drinking nor selling of intoxicants was sufficient grounds for expulsion apparently.

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[54]Illinois Conference Minutes, 1868-1871, MS, Illinois Conference Historical Society, p. 12, (1868).

[55]Church Trials: A. F. Rogers, 1864, 1865-66, 1869, MSS, Illinois Conference Historical Society.

Similar revisions of what constituted immorality were taking place with respect to sexual offenses. The most striking example of this comes from the files of the Central Illinois Conference, so the parallel cannot be overly emphasized. G. W. Gray was brought to trial in 1865 for "unchristian conduct" for making lascivious advances toward young ladies attending Grand Prairie Seminary. There were eight specifications to the charge, extending over several years, with five of them being sustained and the charge sustained. These specifications were in one instance so serious as to involve Gray's

> Kissing Amanda Babcock in private---persuading her to sit on his lap in private in the Methodist Church and in his own house---indecent suggestions---unhooking her dress and puting [sic] his hand on her bosom, putting his hand under her clothes at Mr. Stone's house---lying down with her on a bed at his own house and putting his hand on her private parts.

This specification was sustained. Yet the action of the Conference was to reprimand him and suspend him for <u>one year</u>.[56] Thirty years before, Simon Peter had been expelled from the church for far lesser offenses.

The great crime of the war years, as the church identified itself closely with the Union cause, was disloyalty. Even rumors of disloyalty were sufficient to bring challenges on the Conference floor for W. P. Paxson and W. R. Howard in 1863, although both were passed, after explanations.[57] Howard was reprimanded by the chair. Suspicions of W. C. Blundell were voiced the same year, and were referred to his Presiding Elder for investigation.[58]

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[56] Church Trials: G. W. Gray, 1865, MSS, Illinois Conference Historical Society.

[57] Illinois Conference Minutes, 1860-1863, MS; Illinois Conference pp. 431-434 <u>passim</u>, (1863).

[58] <u>Ibid</u>., pp. 423 and 428.

He was brought to trial at Marshall, Illinois, July 26, 1864. The charges may be interesting:

1st Charge - Disloyalty to the government of the United States.

1st Specification - In a failure to identify himself with any of the movements looking to a support of the Government.

2nd Specification - In selecting as his daily associates those known to be in sympathy with the Rebellion.

3rd Specification - In speaking disrespectfully of a Union Prayer Meeting held in Marshall for the avowed purpose of praying for the Union Soldiers.

4th Specification - In failing to pray in public for the President or Armies of the United States.

II Charge - Immorality.

1st Specification - In visiting groceries or Liquor Shops, and in associating with such persons as are usually found in such places.

2nd Specification - In a failure to recognize the obligation of the Nation to observe a day of National Thanksgiving when so ordered by the Chief Magistrate.[59]

The Committee found him guilty of the first charge, not of the second, although imprudent in connection with the matters in the second charge, and suspended him until the ensuing Annual Conference. The evidence actually is of a negative nature almost entirely, and would seem to indicate that Blundell did not take a strong stand either for or against the government. Some of the testimony indicated that his ministry for years had been marked by staying out of political questions--but in the heat of the Civil War, neutrality apparently was not enough. Having been suspended, Blundell withdrew from the ministry and membership of the church, by a letter dated July 28, 1864.[59]

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[59]Church Trials: W. C. Blundell, 1864, MSS, Illinois Conference Historical Society.

It is interesting to review one of the charges of unacceptability as a minister which came out of this decade to see some of the things that were expected in those days. For this purpose, we may turn to the trial of John Nottingham in 1866. The charge of inefficiency was sustained, and he was located "at his own request." Peter Cartwright chaired the committee of investigation. The following excerpts from the minutes of the trial are instructive:

> Bro. J. H. Moore, P. E. of Bro. Nottingham stated that such were the peculiarities of Bro. Nottingham that he could not be useful as a travelling preacher--that the difficulty was constitutional with Bro. N.--that he had no power to impress others--that he could not sing. His moral character was unimpeachable--and he has been prudent in his deportment--but has no power to control others. . . . Bro. N. seems to be more inefficient than he would otherwise be, on account of his feeble health--Bro. N. seems to have some ability to instruct persons in private, but not in public with power so as to affect men's minds.[60]

Nottingham admittedly was diligent in pastoral work and in the Sunday school matters, but his inability to sing and to speak at all times with such force as to "control others," with his health, were regarded as sufficient grounds for location.[60]

Another charge, related to the emphasis on more education for ministers, was brought against W. B. M. Colt in 1866 for his "great indiscretion in the use of language touching theological institutes, as well as in speaking of the condition of justified persons in contrast with the ungodly." He was passed after admonition.[61]

The upsurge of cases in 1868 may be similarly explained, as W. H. Rayburn, A. C. Armentrout, and W. B. M. Colt were all complained against for teachings productive of insubordination.

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[60] Church Trials: John Nottingham, 1866, MSS, Illinois Conference Historical Society.

[61] Illinois Conference Minutes, 1864-1867, MS, Illinois Conference Historical Society, pp. 112-113 (1866).

Armentrout and Colt were passed and located "at their own request",[62] while Rayburn, against whom more serious charges were pending, was the subject of an investigation by the Presiding Elder between the Conference sessions, and was deposed from the ministry in 1869.[63]

VII

By 1870 the great era of church trials had ended. To be sure, a trickle of cases continued---15 complaints between 1870 and 1879, 13 during the 1880s, 23 during the 1890s, over 40 in the first three decades of the twentieth century, but the real cases were almost over. After 1870, the actual trials are few. The church discovered the device of permitting withdrawals under charges, however, and these increased, being used in 1877, 1879, and steadily thereafter. The withdrawal replaced the practice of expulsion almost entirely. Since 1870, only seven persons have been recorded as expelled from the ministry and membership of the church---H. O. Hoffman in 1882, for bastardy, fornication, and falsehood; S. K. Coats in 1888, for immorality (taking "indecent liberties")---this expulsion was reversed by a Judicial Conference---it may be questioned whether the intent was not to "get" Coats, in light of the testimony and the way it was used in trying the case; J. H. Williams, a local preacher, in 1891, for falsehood and dishonesty, upheld on appeal to Annual Conference; W. F. Wright, in 1894 and 1895, for forcing a separation with his wife, falsehood, slander, profanity, encouraging gambling, and insubordination; John B. Wolfe, in 1902, for fornication and adultery, lying and falsifying, high imprudence

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[62] Illinois Conference Minutes, 1868-1871, MS, Illinois Conference Historical Society, pp. 18-19 (1868).

[63] Ibid., p. 73, (1869). Also Church Trials: Wm. H. Rayburn, 1868-9. MSS, Illinois Conference Historical Society.

and unministerial conduct; F. H. Lathrop, in 1921, for obtaining money by misrepresentation and false statements; and S. T. Weaver, in 1925, for fraudulent dealings. A noticeable trend was in the sheer volume of material accumulated in the course of a trial. Some of these cases involve testimony running to hundreds of pages, occupying as much as three inches of file space per case, which by way of comparison, is considerably more than was accumulated for D. J. Snow in the entire course of litigation against him between 1848 and 1859. Many of the early case files, apparently complete, contain very few documents, running sometimes only to a few pages of testimony.

During the same period, there were nineteen persons permitted to withdraw under charges or complaints. The case of Hardin W. Davis in 1892 is interesting in that the charge was immorality, specifically being intoxicated. Brother Davis pled guilty, with extenuating circumstances. He wrote that he had begun drinking as a boy, before entering the ministry, thinking that it was only habit and he could quit. He fought his desire for alcoholic beverages successfully, after his c nversion and entry into the ministry, until his "physician prescribed gin for kidney trouble." After taking it, he did begin drinking again, but friends guided him to the Keeley Institute and, he affirmed, "I went to Dwight, was treated, and cured--I believe I am permanently cured for the following reasons--. . ."(emphasis his). He made an eloquent plea for forgiveness and another chance in the church. In support of the belief in alcoholism as a disease, at least in some cases, and of the efficacy of the Keeley cure, the testimony of doctors, including the head of the Institute, and of alcoholics who had taken the Keeley treatment, was presented by the defendant. The charges

were unanimously sustained, nevertheless, and Davis was suspended locally.[64] He was then "permitted to withdraw under charges" at the Annual Conference.[65] Thus a cycle was completed, from the expulsion of William Ellers for the use of intoxicants in 1852, to the suspensions for one year of A. F. Rogers in 1866 and 1869 and the passage of W. C. Lacey's character in 1868, to the "permission to withdraw under charges" granted Hardin W. Davis. The church was again viewing drinking with increased disapproval. The Ellers and Davis cases are strikingly parallel. The difference in outcome is a sign of changing views.

The file in the 1894 case of Vincent Aten, a member of the Central Illinois Conference, contains a confidential letter that is rather illuminating, written to Aten by his Presiding Elder, J. S. Cumming, dated April 14, 1891:

> Last evening I received a bill of charges by Mail from Bro. Lessig against you. They are not in proper form, or I would send you a copy. As soon as he corrects them I will send them.
>
> I have tried to keep him from preferring charges, but it seems that he is determined. I have hithertoo [sic] advised you and others to not prosecute him, but I can do so no longer. I suppose there must be a trial.
>
> I write to you confidentially. I have consulted good men. They and I think that, in view of all the facts in the case, the charges that have been withheld so long should be preferred immediately. I recommend these things:
>
> 1. That you consult Bro's Sheeley and Woodmanser.
>
> 2. Prepare charges, simple and direct, and few. I suggest (1.) Violation of the Rule of Discipline which forbids "speaking evil of magistiates [sic] or ministers,-- Evil speaking. (2.) Swearing-- (3.) Refusing to attend the means of grace.--(He has been labored with.)-------Under each charge briefly state one or more--(not too many) specifications, which you can prove by two or more witnesses.
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> I visited Bro. Buckey today and engaged him to take

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[64] Church Trials: Hardin W. Davis, 1892, MSS, Illinois Conference Historical Society.

[65] Illinois Conference, Journal and Yearbook, 1892, p. 14.

> care of the trial. I will give him an appointment in writing as soon as you let me know who signs the charges. Consult him in everything.
>
> 3. Write me as soon as this is arranged, giving me a copy of the charges, and any other information you think I ought to have.
>
> 4. Let all be done within a day or two at the farthest so that the trial may take place next week, if possible. If later it will interfere with Dist. Conf.--
>
> 5. Keep quiet. Say nothing to any body, except the brethren you consult with, and enjoin secrecy. ... .

This letter would appear to indicate the attitude toward trials during the 1890s, both in what is said and in its implications. In connection with the second recommendation, it seems to be a rule of thumb that the number of charges and specifications bears an inverse ratio to their actual significance and validity during these years. A strong case did not require many specifications, and too many specifications led one to suspect that the actual offense was minor.

Charges were finally brought against Vincent Aten in 1894, for lying, with reference to the Lessig case, and for immorality. Under the latter charge, specification 2 was sustained, reading in part,

> the said Vincent Aten went to the home of Alta B. Spangler, and approaching her attempted to kiss her. She repulsed him, but he persisted in his purpose, threw his arms around her and held her against him in an indecent manner and kissed her several times before she could extricate herself. At the same time he talked about her form, felt of her breasts, asking if they were natural, and said to her that it made him hot every time he looked at her.[66]

Despite the specification being sustained, along with others of a like nature, the charge was not sustained. Aten's character

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[66] Church Trials: Vincent Aten, 1894, MSS, Illinois Conference Historical Society.

was passed after reprimand and admonition in open conference, and he continued in the effective ministry.[67] Contrast this with the early immorality cases.

After 1904, the most prevalent activity of the Committee on Conference Relations seems to have been in connection with locations, either voluntary or involuntary, of ministers in supernumerary standing.

A trend toward justifying the behavior of the person that began in the 1860s continued, so that increasingly the Conference held that there was no ground for action in the complaints brought before them, especially if those complaints were concerned with leaving the work. There were two investigations during the early 1880s of alleged doctrinal deviations. For the rest, leaving the work, which rarely brought severe action, and immorality, more commonly defined as "imprudent and unministerial conduct" during these years, accounted for the few cases. It has now been more than fifty years since a full trial was conducted for any cause other than mismanagement of financial affairs, in the Illinois Conference.

VIII

Times have changed. Society has changed, and so has the church. It seems rather clear that in the early years the church was a moral force, consciously, vigorously, and conscientiously engaged in self-examination. It demanded of ministers and members alike a standard of personal morality well above that of the

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[67] Central Illinois Conference, Minutes, 1894, pp. 17-18.

general frontier population, and brought swift action against violators. This moral impact should not be forgotten. It was as much a part of the frontier church, at least among Methodism in Illinois, as the better known, more glorified camp meeting. The church stood against its environment. With the passing years, the gap has narrowed. The general culture has become more moral--or at least it is less blatant in its immorality--while the church has become more easy-going.

On the frontier, morality was portrayed in black and white. Either a man was immoral or he wasn't. If the charge were at all serious, not too much consideration was given to his motives, his apologies, or his pleas of extenuating circumstances. Today we see shadings of gray in looking at our actions. Perhaps this is better. But the old system worked in its day, facing a less complex culture, and we should not be too quick to discredit it, or to say that there were so many trials because the preachers were poorly trained and often spiteful. The evidence does not support that assumption.

It may be that there are fewer trials in more recent years because the conference is more careful about the quality of the men who enter it. But it could also be that there are fewer trials because of a slackening of standards, as well as because of the changes in the handling of charges. The nature of charges has changed. The penalties have changed.

The most heinous crime in the frontier church was immorality, broadly defined. If we are to judge by the cases of the last sixty years, the great sin of our time is a failure to pay one's debts.

"By their fruits ye shall know them"--even by the fruit which they examine for spots or discard as rotten, for thus their values, their attitudes, and their views of society are revealed.

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