

Wesleyan

An Old Fashioned Methodist Camp Meeting

HISTORICAL SUMMARY OF METHODISM

Methodism is a name designating several Protestant groups. Methodism has its roots in the work of John and Charles Wesley, sons of an Anglican rector and his wife, Susannah. A friend and Oxford classmate of the Wesleys, George Whitefield, was also instrumental in forming the Holy Club (c. 1725), which stressed "inward religion, the religion of the heart." These awakenings coupled with the club's insistence on exacting discipline in scholastic as well as spiritual matters earned its members the jeering title of "Methodists" by 1729.

In 1735 the Wesleys sailed to America as missionaries, but not before John, a somewhat troubled young Anglican priest, noted: "My chief motive is the hope of saving my own soul." In the spring of 1738 John Wesley returned to England filled with a troubled sense of failure. He was attracted to the piety and feelings of inward assurance so notably evidenced among the Moravians. Wesley knew this was lacking in his own life despite his outward discipline. He saw himself failing to bear fruits of "inward holiness." Convinced of the necessity for faith and the inner witness, Wesley passed through a torturous spring, fearing that at the advanced age of thirty-five both life and God were passing him by.

Unwillingly, he writes later, he was persuaded to attend a Bible study meeting on May 24, 1738, in Aldersgate Street, where an unknown layman was expounding on Luther's commentary on Romans. There, Wesley writes, "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins." The Aldersgate experience, definitely a turning point in Wesley's life, was not so much an outright conversion experience of the type that came to be associated with the revival movements of England and America as it was a firm receiving of assurance of this priest's own salvation. Aldersgate was what Wesley needed.

By 1739 the distinct and aggressively evangelistic and highly disciplined Methodist movement spread like wildfire through field preaching, lay preaching, bands, and societies. The "Rules of Bands" demanded a highly disciplined life, an exacting schedule of meetings in which the society members were expected to share intimate details of their daily lives, to confess their sins to one another, to pray for each other, and to exhort members of the class toward inner holiness and good works. The enthusiasm of the revivals came under the control of the bands or societies. The weekly prayer meetings; the use of an

itinerary system of traveling preachers; the annual conferences; the establishment of chapels; the prolific outpouring of tracts, letters, sermons, and hymns; and the general superintendence of John Wesley became the hallmark of what emerged as a worldwide Methodist movement.

Beginning with Church of England congregations banning John Wesley from their pulpits in 1738, before Aldersgate, tensions with the Established Church were inevitable and eventually disruptive.

As the revivalist awakening came to include Methodism, work extended from England to Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, where a Calvinistically oriented minority formally established themselves in 1764. Soon lay preachers were active in America, establishing circuits along the mid-Atlantic states under the supervision of Francis Asbury, sent by Wesley in 1771. In 1744 a conference was held in London and standards for doctrine, liturgy and discipline were adopted. The Wesleys maintained their personal ties (ordination) and devotion to the Church of England with its emphasis on the sacraments and its antipopery views. Episcopal in its organization, the Methodist Connexion was autocratically controlled by John Wesley.

By 1784 Wesley concluded that no one individual would be a suitable successor. He therefore moved to record a "Deed of Declaration" in which he declared a group of one hundred of his most able leaders (the "Legal Hundred") his legal successor. This established that Methodist societies were now duly constituted as legal entities, conceived of as ecclesial in ecclesia but formally separate entities from the Church of England. This also established the Annual Conference as the primary authority in the Methodist system.

In September of that same year Wesley yielded to American pressure to have his preachers administer the sacraments by ordaining two lay helpers as elders and Thomas Coke as general superintendent without consulting with his conference. He was persuaded to this act by Peter King's Account of the Primitive Church (1691) that presbyters held the same spiritual authority as bishops to ordain in the early church and by the Bishop of London's refusal in 1780 to ordain any of Methodism's preachers in America. The three newly ordained men were dispatched to build up the full work of Methodism in America. At the Christmas Conference in Baltimore in 1784 Coke ordained Asbury, and the Methodist Episcopal Church was organized. Coke and Asbury were elected general superintendents. A Sunday Service based on the Book of Common Prayer and Twenty five Articles of Religion abridged by Wesley from the Thirty nine Articles were adopted by the new denomination.

Continuing his work among the various societies, Wesley ordained a number of presbyters in Scotland and England, and for the mission field. Unlike Methodism in America, no formal separation was consummated in England until after Wesley's death in 1791. A councilor effort by the Church of England in 1793 prompted a formal "Plan of Pacification" in 1795. But final separation occurred in 1797, as the Rubicon had been crossed in 1784, and the formal organization of Methodism was well under way by the beginning of the nineteenth century.

In England a number of Methodist bodies splintered from the main Methodism movement. The Ecumenical Methodist Conferences formalized a renewed councilor spirit. From 1907 to 1933 various groups united to become part of the Methodist Church. On July 8, 1969, a plan calling for merger of the Methodist and Anglican communions faced defeat at the hands of the Anglican Convocations where the concept of historic episcopacy as an office and not an order proved unacceptable. In Canada the Methodist Church of Canada joined with the Presbyterian Church and selected Union Churches together with the Congregational Churches to form the United Church of Canada.

In the United States numerous Methodist - oriented bodies exists. Some came into being in disputes over doctrinal issues. Others arose out of social concerns. The Wesleyan Methodist Church, organized in the 1840s, drew its inspiration from Orange Scott, a New Englander lacking formal education but committed to the Abolitionist movement. The Methodist Protestant Church, opposing the episcopacy, separated in 1828. By 1860 both doctrinal and social tensions were intense, and the Free Methodist Church was founded, largely under the inspiration of B T Roberts. In 1844 the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, was formed over the slavery issue.

Other significant Methodist denominations in the United States are the African Methodist Episcopal (1816), the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (1820), and the Christian Methodist Episcopal (1870), all black, totaling more than 2.5 million members. The year 1939 brought the reunion of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the Methodist Protestant Church, and the Methodist Episcopal Church to form The Methodist Church.

A group of German pietists under Jacob Albright were attracted to Methodism and in 1807 organized the Newly Formed Methodist Conference or the German Methodist Conference. The English speaking Methodist lay preachers were unable to serve this German-speaking immigrant group, so the Evangelical Association was formed in 1816. During this same period Phillip Otterbein, friend of Asbury, together with Martin Boehm founded the United Brethren in Christ among German speaking immigrants with its organizing General Conference in 1815. In 1946 these two German immigrant churches merged to form the Evangelical United Brethren (E U B) Church. With its ethnic distinctiveness on the wane, and clearly Methodist in polity and theology, the E U B merged in 1968 with The Methodist Church to form The United Methodist Church.

Long distinguished by an emphasis on practical faith, Methodism and its various offshoots have sought to avoid a strict confessionalism. The addition of a new section to the 1972 Discipline, "Our Theological Task," which formalizes a posture of doctrinal pluralism that appeals to Wesley's sermon "Catholic Spirit", was an acknowledgment of the wide diversity of views within modern Methodism over the proper balance of Wesleyan orthodoxy and a theology of experience. It can be easily said that Wesleyan Methodism emphasizes the doctrine of sanctification, which is nothing more than a desire and commitment to become Christ-like in one's personal life and build a life of character. Currently, two evangelically based Methodist renewal groups are calling Methodism to return to its traditional Wesleyan theological heritage.

(Adapted from an essay by P. A. Mickey)

Elwell Evangelical Dictionary

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