

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-81849-0 - An Introduction to World Methodism

Kenneth Cracknell and Susan J. White

Excerpt

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Prologue

It is a summer Sunday morning in one of London's oldest streets. On one side of the road is the famous Bunhill Cemetery, where Daniel Defoe and William Blake are buried. On the opposite side, a large company of people flows out of a religious building, which is set back from the street by a wide courtyard and flanked by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century buildings. At the center of the courtyard is a life-size bronze statue of a man in eighteenth-century costume. But the people emerging from the building – men, women, children, and babes-in-arms – are clearly of the twenty-first century. Our first impression of them is of the variety and color of their clothes: many wear the native dress of India and Japan, China and Korea, Africa and the Pacific Islands, the Middle East and South America; others, decked out in the traditional Western “Sunday best,” could be from Australia, New Zealand, North America, Europe, or South Africa. It is always considered to be a rather special occasion to be in this place, and the people were in high spirits when they assembled.

Every Sunday of the year this scene is reproduced here, as Methodists from all around the world gather at “Wesley's Chapel,” the mother church of world Methodism. Built by John Wesley himself and opened on November 1, 1778, this chapel marked a kind of coming-of-age of his religious movement, and the beginnings of its separation from its religious parent, the Church of England. The people we see today gathered beneath the statue of John Wesley came for a service of Christian worship in the Methodist style, and for a form of Christian fellowship that cuts across national, ethnic, and racial lines. They came to express their common identity as Methodists and to reach back to their common roots as a community of faith. Conscious of themselves as inheritors of a particular history, many have walked out behind the chapel to stand quietly at Wesley's gravesite, marked by a stone obelisk. In immaculate eighteenth-century prose (Wesley died in 1791), the inscription declares:

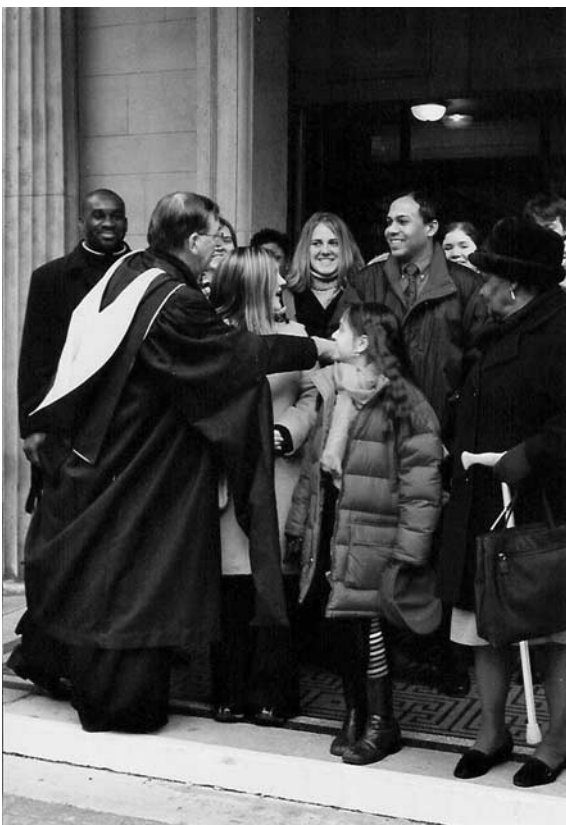
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1. Wesley's Chapel, City Road, London, serves as the "mother church" of world Methodism. Here Dr. Leslie Griffiths, the minister, greets members of the international congregation.

This great light arose by the singular providence of God, to enlighten these nations, and to revive, enforce and defend the pure apostolic doctrines and practices of the primitive Church, which he continued to do by his writings and his labours for more than half a century; and to his inexpressible joy not only beheld their influence extending, and their efficacy witness, in the hearts and lives of many thousands, as well in the Western world as in these kingdoms; but also, far above all human power and expectation, lived to see provision made, by the singular grace of God, for their continuance and establishment, to the joy of future generations. Readers, if thou art constrained to bless the instrument, give God the glory.

All those Methodists who gather around Wesley's grave can claim the key words in this inscription as part of their own religious identity: "providence," "apostolic doctrines," "joy," "witness," "grace."

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But if this picture of harmony and union were the only story to be told about the religious tradition called Methodism, we would have a very brief and simple task ahead of us here. As it happens, the journey of Methodism through the better part of three centuries and across six continents, from a founding vision, through a spiritual revival within a national church, to an independent ecclesial body and a worldwide communion of independent churches, has made any complete description of the particularities of Methodist identity a very difficult undertaking.

If we leave Wesley's Chapel in London's City Road and travel six thousand miles southwest across the Atlantic Ocean and back in time, another aspect of Methodism's complicated story begins to reveal itself.

It is the year 1996, and 3,000 Methodists from around the globe have come together in Rio de Janeiro, hosted by the vigorous Methodist Church in Brazil, for the quinquennial meeting of the World Methodist Council and Conference. The opening communion service is a spectacular pageant, with the flags of more than seventy independent Methodist bodies carried in procession, and with worship-leaders from Indonesia, Australia, Liberia, Cuba, Argentina, Western Samoa, Nigeria, Russia, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, Angola, Bolivia, India, Ghana, Taiwan, Puerto Rico, Fiji, Canada, Kenya, South Africa, the Philippines, Malaysia, Slovakia, Pakistan, Italy, Finland, Mexico, Portugal, Germany, Spain, Sri Lanka, and Switzerland, as well as from the USA and the United Kingdom. The members of this congregation represent both national churches and subdivisions of those churches, as well as amalgamated ecclesial bodies within which Methodists are an integral part, such as the United Church of Canada, the Church of South India, and the Church of Pakistan. In the days which follow, the Conference participants, joined for this occasion by members of the World Federation of Methodist Women, hear speeches and are led in Bible study by prominent Methodists, as well as by eminent visitors from other denominations, such as General Eva Burrows of the Salvation Army, who reminds those gathered of the words of the founder of that movement, William Booth: "I valued everything that bore the name Methodist. To me there was one God, and John Wesley was his prophet."

By and large, the proceedings take place in the same atmosphere of cordiality and mutual respect that was so evident in our visit to Wesley's Chapel. But on the last day of the Rio Conference, Bishop Peter Storey of the Methodist Church in Southern Africa gives an address entitled "Good News to the Poor" in which he declares unequivocally that "the gospel, as given in scripture and experienced in our Wesleyan heritage, is good news to the poor." He identifies what he calls "a struggle for the soul of world Methodism":

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There is a prosperous Methodism in the developed world, and Methodism with the poor in the rest of the world, with some places like South Africa, where both exist in glaring contrast to each other. The question is: what model will become the true sign of what we are? The prosperity model of success is very seductive, and it is sad to see how anxious are many of poorer congregations to emulate it. But the gospel of Jesus – who was rich, yet for our sakes became poor – surely calls for the opposite to happen. Prosperous Methodism must do something about its manna pile. How this is to happen is, I believe, a crucial question for the World Methodist Council.

As Bishop Storey becomes more impassioned and eloquent about his South African experiences, presenting serious challenges to the values of the rich (“God’s warning to prosperous Methodism is: find ways of engaging face to face with the poor: your soul depends upon it”), it is noticeable that many in the audience are listening to him with increasing hostility as well as with serious discomfort. When he finishes, half of his Methodist audience rises up in standing ovation; the other half sits silently in their seats.

How can the people gathered at Wesley’s Chapel from around the world all describe themselves as “Methodists”? And how can those who describe themselves as Methodists at the World Methodist Conference be so deeply divided? In this book we shall look at some of the factors that have resulted in both the deep unity among Methodist people and institutions, and the significant cleavages that exist between them. We will see how the various branches of the Methodist family have been affected by their different histories, cultural expressions, and sociological contexts, and how these factors have shaped their values and attitudes. We will investigate both the common theological and institutional “core values” which hold all these Methodists together, and the theological and social questions which drive them apart. In the end, we hope that we will have drawn a picture that will help readers understand something about the complex religious tradition called Methodism.

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CHAPTER I

*The beginning of world Methodism: John Wesley
and his movement*

Just as the core identity of a human family is defined by a relationship to common progenitors, so too is the core identity of the religious family of Methodists defined by a relationship with the person credited as the movement's founder. The central place of John Wesley in the Methodist story is undisputed. But for his present-day spiritual descendants, debates over Wesley's place in Methodist life, controversies about the meaning of his own life and work, and serious divisions of opinion on the content of his theology and its contemporary application are all central to understanding world Methodism. It is not surprising, then, that we begin our study of Methodism with John Wesley, his life, his world, and his religious program, as we attempt to discover the various ways in which the contemporary multiethnic, multiracial expression of Methodism relates to its English roots in the eighteenth century.

If anyone could be said to be a "man of his age," it was John Wesley; his lifetime came close to spanning the eighteenth century. Indeed, to understand Wesley and to understand his period are deeply interconnected enterprises. Most scholars speak of this as the era that was decisively and pervasively marked by Enlightenment rationalism. The rise of scientific empiricism, combined with increased social mobility, fostered an emphasis on personal autonomy and freedom from the older constraints. But in the British Isles it was also a time of recovery from a long period of religious and civil instability. Just less than a half-century before Wesley was born, the monarchy had been restored after a bitterly fought Civil War. As a result parliament had established new Acts of Uniformity, which imposed the liturgy of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer and demanded allegiance to the new king as head of the Church of England. Presbyterians, Independents, and Baptists were now "nonconformists" (those who failed to adhere to the Act of Uniformity), and many Anglicans sympathetic to their views were physically ejected from their parishes and formally silenced in the affairs of state. These Dissenters had to find a place for themselves in this new

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religious situation and we shall see how the extended Wesley family was deeply implicated in this religious change. In his own person John Wesley represented so many of the hopes and fears of his time. In adulthood, he would come to play a major role in the passionate public debates over the proper form and substance of piety, the political meaning of religion, and the obligation of Christians to their neighbors in the new social situation created by the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution.

JOHN WESLEY'S METHODISM

Methodists disagree about many things, but none of them doubts that Methodism owes its existence to two men: John Wesley and his younger brother Charles. They were both born in rural Lincolnshire, the second and third sons respectively of a learned but impecunious clergyman and his pious and resourceful wife. Their father, Samuel Wesley (1662–1735), was rector of the Church of England parish of Epworth, where he had a reputation for being both zealous and opinionated. He also demonstrated a general lack of interest in practical matters that eventually resulted in a stint in Lincoln jail for debt. Samuel's own father had been among those clergymen who had been deprived of their parishes for refusing to assent to the 1662 Act of Uniformity. But although Samuel Wesley had been intended to follow in his father's footsteps, he took a different theological path, and at the age of twenty-two he became a High Churchman, enrolling himself at Exeter College, Oxford. After leaving university and taking up his duties at Epworth (under Tory patronage), Samuel Wesley spent much of his time writing rather mediocre epic poems and compiling a massive Latin commentary on the Book of Job. His seeming indifference to the pastoral needs of his flock made him a less than popular parish priest.

The mother of the Wesley brothers had also been affected by the religious instability that followed the restoration of the monarchy. Like her husband, Susanna Wesley (1669–1742) was also the daughter of a nonconformist, Dr. Samuel Annesley (1620–96). Though he opposed the execution of Charles I, Annesley had generally supported the Parliamentary cause and was ejected from his parish in 1662 for failure to subscribe to the Act of Uniformity. He continued to minister to fellow Dissenters in Spitalfields in East London where the young Susanna was brought up. While still in her early teens, Susanna proved herself to be as independently minded as her future husband by turning her back on her family's religious allegiances and becoming a member of the Church of England. Following her marriage to Samuel Wesley in 1688, Susanna gave birth to nineteen children, only ten of

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2. The Reverend John Wesley painted by Frank O. Salisbury, 1932.



3. The Reverend Charles Wesley, artist unknown, painted from life sometime around 1735.

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whom survived to adulthood; from the beginning she took on responsibility for her children's education and was perhaps the most persistent religious influence in the lives of the Wesley brothers. It was she, for example, who advised her son John to undertake the study of "practical divinity."

There is no doubt that John Wesley's mind was indelibly marked by these two curious, creative, and scholarly parents. Certainly it was they who taught him to trust in reason, which we shall see manifested in his constant appeal to logical argument and his abhorrence of anything that he regarded as "namby pambical." Like many other Anglicans, from the time of Richard Hooker onwards, he could conceive of elements in revelation that were *above* reason; but there would never be anything in the divine economy which would be *contrary to* reason. As a result of his intellectual upbringing, John Wesley would also be the first church reformer equipped to reckon with the Enlightenment, and in particular with its philosophical problems with the divine-human relationship. At the same time, he was also poised to comprehend and respond to the challenges attending the birth of empirical science. He would certainly have known that Deists like John Ray and William Durham were making pioneering observations in botany and astronomy, and that Isaac Newton and John Locke had already made their distinctive contributions to physics and natural philosophy. This sense that the results of science had to be included in any valid explanation of the world led Wesley to reject obscurity or mystery (for example, the appeal to dreams or visions) as a source of religious knowledge, and his own scientific interests, exemplified by his medical experiments with the "electrical machine" (a kind of electro-shock therapy), were fully incorporated into his pastoral responsibilities for "cure of souls."

At the same time there was a particular kind of piety that was transmitted in the Wesley brothers' Christian nurture. Susanna Wesley took responsibility not only for their intellectual development, but for their spiritual development as well, and in the letters of counsel she wrote to them throughout her life she emphasized personal faithfulness, the quest to understand the will and providence of God, and pious attention to prayer and good works. She also provided an example of the importance of mutual care in the religious life. When Samuel was away in London attending the Convocation of the Church of England, the care of the Epworth parish's religious life was taken up by Susanna, and evening meetings in her kitchen rivaled the services in church. Samuel's temporary curate wrote to him in London complaining about the situation and Samuel immediately sent a letter rebuking his wife. A sense of her strong-mindedness can be felt in some of the words of her reply:

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As I am a woman, so I am also mistress of a large family. And though the superior charge of the souls contained in it lies upon you as head of the family, and as their minister, yet in your absence I cannot but look upon every soul you leave under my care as a talent committed to me under a trust by the great Lord of all the families of heaven and earth.

For Susanna Wesley, holiness was clearly something to be pursued in shared common life, and not simply passively received, and this too would become a major theme of the Wesley brothers' lives and work.

JOHN WESLEY'S FIRST CONVERSION

After schooling in London and then undergraduate work at Christ Church, Oxford, from 1721 to 1724, John Wesley's mind turned to his ordination. Although the clerical vocation was almost a foregone conclusion in the circles in which he was brought up, it became the catalyst for Wesley's first quest to find real holiness, and he began by seeking out models and guides from the Christian past. He read Thomas à Kempis's influential treatise on the *Imitation of Christ* (c. 1418) and Jeremy Taylor's *Rules and Exercise of Holy Living* (1650) and of *Holy Dying* (1651). Wesley says that in this reading he was "exceedingly affected" by those passages in particular which referred to "purity of intention": "Instantly I resolved to dedicate all my life to God, all my thoughts and words and actions, being thoroughly convinced there was no medium but that every part of my life (not some only) must either be a sacrifice to God or to myself, that is in effect to the devil." From this resolve came Wesley's commitment to an ordered life: to fasting, to good works, to journal- and diary-keeping. For many historians of Methodism, this counts as his first conversion, and was an experience as real and as powerful as the more famous conversion in Aldersgate Street thirteen years later in 1738. Nowhere in his writings does Wesley ever repudiate or discount this first turning to God.

But even this profound re-dedication to a more intentional form of Christian living was not the beginning of Methodism. This came a few years later when, according to John, he and his younger brother Charles both saw that they could not be saved without "holiness." In 1727 Charles had followed his elder brother to Oxford where, with some other junior members of the university, he had organized occasional meetings for study, prayer, and religious conversation. John had been ordained deacon in 1725 (priest in 1728). In 1726 he went to assist his father as curate in the parish of Epworth. In November 1729 he returned to Oxford to take up residence as a Fellow of Lincoln College, to which he had been elected before his return

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to Epworth. Once there, his natural gifts for leadership asserted themselves and he took over Charles's meetings.

In the following year these gatherings became distinctively a "Holy Club." One of their number, William Morgan (1712–32), suggested they should visit the inmates of the Oxford Castle prison and the poor of the Oxford slums. This charitable work increased as they did, in Charles Wesley's words, "what good we could to the bodies and souls of men." Such actions, along with other habits that outsiders found irritating, such as rigorous fasting and rising at four or five in the morning for prayer and Bible reading, led eventually to notoriety for the members of the "Holy Club" among their fellows at Oxford. They were taunted with various nicknames: "Bible moths," and "Supererogation men" and members of the "Godly club." The term "Methodists" was first applied to the group in 1732, when John Bingham of Christ Church observed that "a new set of Methodists . . . has sprung up amongst us." A total of some forty persons were involved in Oxford Methodist groups in the six years that Charles Wesley superintended it. Wesley himself thought later that this Oxford "Holy Club," with its meditative piety, was the beginning of Methodism, and represented the first manifestation of God's purpose "to spread scriptural holiness over the Land."

But even this rigorous program of asceticism and good works was not to bring about the "holiness" that John Wesley had in mind, and when an opportunity occurred in 1735 to become a missionary overseas, and thus to "withdraw even more entirely from the world," he seized upon it. This missionary activity was to be undertaken under the auspices of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, and would involve ministering to the settlers of the newly established American colony of Georgia. So, with fellow Oxford Methodists Charles Wesley, Charles Delamotte (1714–86), and Benjamin Ingham (1712–72), John Wesley set off on his missionary venture. Although he surely had the religious needs of the colonial inhabitants in mind, other forces were propelling him to Savannah: "My chief motive," he wrote at the time, "is the hope of saving my own soul."

Wesley arrived in Georgia on February 6, 1736 and with his colleagues he set about replicating Oxford Methodism in North America. At first he met with some success. By late in 1737 attendance at the parish church in Savannah had grown to between sixty and seventy, and Wesley had even managed to persuade two or three dozen people to come regularly for prayers at five o'clock in the morning. One undoubtedly attractive feature of these services was the use of hymns collected by the Wesley brothers