

CHRIST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

History Series: The History of John Wesley and the Methodist Church

Compiled by John H. Evans

OPENING INTRODUCTION:

WESLEY AND EVANGELISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The following papers provide a brief introduction to John Wesley and how the Methodist church came into existence. It is hoped that they will whet your appetite to learn more. To aid you in this, further reading material is listed at the end of this introduction. These, in turn, will lead you to other sources. Methodist archives and historical material can be found at Drew University in Madison, N.J. The web site for the United Methodist Church is also a good resource of information (www.umc.org).

What can we learn from Wesley and the evangelical movements of the 18th and 19th centuries that will help us in the 21st century? What are the similarities and differences between the Wesleys' time and ours?

We rightly feel that our time is undergoing rapid change. The era in which John Wesley lived (1703-1791) and the century following his death were also times of dramatic change. As noted in the first two papers that follow this introduction, the seeds of dynamic change that blossomed in the 1700's began in the 1400's with the discovery of new lands and cultures (the American continent) and developed with the works and philosophical positions of Martin Luther, Copernicus, Galileo, Descartes and, most of all, Newton. England had gone through great turmoil in the 1600's including violent upheavals in royal leadership and a civil war based partly on religious differences. This resulted in the breakdown of long-standing hierarchies and power structures that spawned a widespread belief that Man is in control and is capable of building the perfect society, without the need of God or divine guidance. Out of this grew movements that are still with us today such as socialism, communism, and deism. Most of our founding fathers were Deists who believed that God exists but is no longer involved in the development of the universe he created. The impact of Deism and the French Enlightenment was very strong. Many questioned whether Christianity would survive without the authority of the state – especially in the atmosphere of religious freedom and the separation of church and state in the newly founded United States. Yet, while the French skeptic Voltaire and his friends expected the demise of Christianity, a powerful revival was sweeping England, Scotland, and Ireland. So, when we note the time of change that Wesley lived in, perhaps distilling the evangelistic essence of John Wesley would be useful in helping us to address the challenges that we face today. Yet, in doing so, we must also identify the crucial ways that our time differs from the 1700's.

It must be understood right away that we cannot take Wesley as a personal model. His deep religious convictions did not change his obsessive-compulsive neurosis and his strongly authoritarian personality would be immediately rejected today. However, some aspects of Wesley's character are relevant to helping us navigate our modern situation. (In this regard, Outler's book is a great resource and is listed in the reference list below)

One aspect is that by April 1739 Wesley's passion for the truth changed into a compassion for people. From this time on he was enabled by the grace of God to be an effective evangelist.

A second aspect is that Wesley had a firm conviction that conversion is only the threshold of authentic and comprehensive evangelism. His practice of "preaching Christ" was always aimed beyond confession and conversion to a fuller faith and endless

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maturing of a life of grace. In his words, “Follow the blow, never encourage the devil by snatching souls from him that you can not nurture. Converts without nurture are like stillborn babies.”

Lastly, Wesley noted that while faith is inward and personal, the evidence of faith must be public and social. “It is expected of all those who continue in these societies that they shall continue evidence of their desire for salvation – first by doing no harm...; second, by doing all the good they can...; and third, by attending on all ordinances of God....” These are set forth as general rules in our Discipline. The Word must be made visible.

Word, music, liturgies, rituals, and interaction with fellow Christians communicate the Gospel. Although it went against his instincts, Wesley came to realize that the laity must do evangelism. While the clergy must lead, challenge and encourage, it is the laity who must demonstrate God’s love in ordinary daily life. We must keep in mind, though, that in Wesley’s day many people were either illiterate or had only the most elementary education. Many had never traveled more than, say, 20 miles from home and had a very limited range of experiences. This is in very sharp contrast with today’s world.

On October 11, 1739 Wesley read Jonathan Edward’s *Faithful Narrative of a Surprising Work of God in New England*. This was part of a revival that was sweeping the American Colonies and is now referred to as the First Great Awakening. It continued to the eve of the War of Independence and was powered by a very deep fear in the men and women whose protestant freedom left them standing alone with a deep sense of guilt before God and no priest to mediate for them. (Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, part II, book V, chapter V provides a very vivid picture of this problem, though it is set in Russian culture.) The movement dramatically answered Voltaire’s expectations that Christianity would wither away in an atmosphere of freedom with no state support, and it resulted in changing many lives for the better. Those who converted exhibited charity, thrift, honest industry, general decency, personal integrity, as well as sobriety during a time when heavy alcohol consumption was prevalent -- all of which led to personal gain. The weakness of this movement, however, was that it was one-dimensional and centered exclusively on personal experience. For the most part participants were isolated from their former churches and, therefore, from the tradition and rituals that help to deepen, inform and sustain faith and practice.

The Second Great Awakening began around the 1830’s and lasted until the Civil War. It revitalized the American eastern seaboard and rolled into America’s boisterous west. This Second Great Awakening invented the camp meeting and left some permanent institutions. The common images that most people today associate with the word “evangelical” were acquired in the Second Great Awakening. While this movement also enhanced many personal lives, there was not much social sensitivity, as it did not address the issues of the slave trade and the genocide of American Indians that were occurring at the time. The movement was so intent on countering Deism that it ignored Christian history and the larger Christian legacy. Participants in the movement knew something of Wesley, a bit of Calvin and Luther and essentially nothing of the history and theology that came before the Reformation. They so strongly rejected Deism and the rationalism it stood for that they developed a distrust of reason itself. In short, they focused so entirely upon personal salvation that they ignored tradition and reason. This is

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in direct contrast to what is known as Wesley's Quadrilateral, which dictates an active balance between scripture, experience, tradition and reason. (For more information on this fundamental structure of Wesley's theology see Part 26, which is the second-to-last paper of this series). This half-approach to practicing Christian faith, with its emphasis on personal experience in relation to scripture at the expense of actively exercising reason and tradition, still continues today.

The information offered in the papers that follow has been compiled from a variety of sources, many of which are referenced below. However, it should be noted that some of the information was accrued over many decades of personal study in both history and theology and so I no longer know the sources from which I gained the knowledge. It is my hope that this short survey of Methodist history will inspire others to thoughtful research and discussion.

Some References

- Emerson Fosdick, Harry. *Our Day and Wesley's*
Heitzenrater, Richard P. *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (225 pages)
Abingdon Press
- Maser, Frederick E. *The Story of John Wesley's Sisters or Seven Sisters in Search of Love* (120 pages) Academy Books
- McEllhenney, John, Editor. *United Methodism in America: A Compact History* (170 pages) Abingdon Press
- Outler, Albert C. *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (101 pages) Discipleship Resources, Nashville
- Outler, Albert C., *John Wesley* (2nd ed.), 1970
- Schmidt, Martin. *John Wesley: A Theological Biography* (2 vols. English translation). 1962-1971
- Simon, J. S.. *Life of Wesley* (5 vols). 1921 – 1934
- Vulliany, C. E., *John Wesley* (3rd ed.) 1954
- Wesley, John. *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*. 1755
- Wesley, John. *The Character of a Methodist*
- Watson, David Lowes. *The Early Methodist Class Meeting* (273 pages)
Discipleship Resources Nashville.
- Yrigoyen, Charles. *John Wesley Holiness of Heart and Life* (128 pages)
Includes a study guide by Ruth A. Daugherty

Some hymns by John and Charles Wesley that are found in the Methodist hymnal:

Prevalent Grace -----	339, 616
Justification by Faith-----	240 vv23
New Birth-----	22, 23
Assurance-----	363 last v.
Holiness-----	384
Scriptures -----	595 vv1, 3,4
Prayer -----	88
Communion -----	627, 1st v.
To be a Methodist -----	361
Public Prayer -----	288, 606, 607