

CHRIST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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

Compiled by John H. Evans

Sabbath March 4, 2007

Part 21: CONSOLIDATION AND ORGANIZATION

Part 19 portrayed a sample of the dangers and persecutions experienced by the early Methodists. Omitted were references to just plain hardships. Traveling on horseback, Wesley often rode in heavy rain, hail, snow and he faced poor roads and rivers without bridges. There are many accounts of his preaching to very large crowds in strong thunderstorms. (Need we note that there were no domed stadiums?!) The effect of this persecution and opposition was to intensify the zeal of the Methodists and encourage them to band together for mutual support. Previously mentioned were the “new building” in Bristol, the Foundry in London and other chapels that came rapidly. As soon as was feasible, Wesley had buildings built for his people, which involved taking on debt.

In Bristol a Captain Fry suggested forming a group to meet weekly for mutual support and each member was to bring a penny a week to help discharge the debt. Wesley’s previous experiences with the Oxford Holy Club, the society he helped to found in Georgia, the Moravian association and the United Society in London, led him to see that within Captain Fry’s suggestion lay a structure that would help to nurture the continued spiritual development of converts to Methodism. Other evangelists were contemporary with Wesley, but they provided no separate structure for ongoing nurture and maturation of the converted. Whichever of these societies should be regarded as the origin of the Methodist societies is difficult to say, and it doesn’t really matter; but the United Society of London in late 1739 set up some simple conditions for membership. One such condition required for membership was “A desire to flee from the wrath to come and be saved from their sins.”

To continue in the society members were required to show evidence of their desire for salvation:

First: By doing no harm, avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most often practiced; such as taking the name of God in vain, profaning the day of the Lord, drunkenness, buying or selling spirituous liquors, fighting, quarreling, brother going to law with brother, breaking the Golden Rule, softness, making bad debts, borrowing or buying without probability of paying.

Second: By doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all men.

Third: By attending on all ordinances of God.

There are 25 rules in the Methodist discipline, which are detailed in Part 25. Here we will simply summarize and say that the members were required to pursue, in Wesley’s phrase, “Holiness of heart and life.”

A major factor in understanding Wesley’s widespread and lasting effect is his firm conviction that conversion is only a doorway to growing in depth, understanding and dimensions of one’s newfound salvation. To paraphrase and quote Wesley, sometimes this meant “preaching Christ” in judgment on their self-righteousness. At other times it

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meant “preaching Christ” in mercy on their despair. But always, “preaching Christ” must be aimed beyond confession and conversion to aim toward endless fullness of faith and of living a life of grace. To use his words, “Follow the blow. Never encourage the devil by snatching souls from him that you cannot nurture. Converts without nurture are like stillborn babies.”

Wesley did not simply preach and provide meeting places, he accepted the responsibility for his converts’ growth in grace as a lifelong process. His convictions that the Gospel of Christ is for the whole person and for all humanity gave his ministry and mission a very broad character. To enhance both the physical well-being and the spiritual life of his converts he founded schools, orphanages, and dispensaries for the sick and he published pamphlets and books. He even experimented with electricity and recommended it for some things!

The movement grew so rapidly that soon help was needed. By 1744 Wesley had four other clergymen and four lay preachers who met in the first annual conference at the Foundry July 25-30, 1744. This consolidated the movement and provided a safety valve for differences of opinion. Wesley was an autocrat and retained complete control throughout his life. In contrast, against all his clerical instincts, he realized that the word audible could be made the word visible only by lay people exhibiting it in their lives in the shops and work places. Thus, he left each society pretty much on its own and depended on strong lay leaders emerging, as they did. Hence, the strange organization that was monarchical at the top but democratic at the grassroots! That is still the Methodist form of government today.

Among these lay leaders, some became lay preachers who were assigned to a circuit by the annual conference. Others worked in the local area where they lived. Many of these were women and notable among them were Sarah Crosby, Mary Bosanquet, Hannah Harrison, Eliza Bennis and others. Wesley had strong doubts about the propriety of women preaching but he recognized their deep commitment, their talents and that they were effective. Finally, in 1787, over the objections of his male preachers, Wesley officially authorized Mary Mallet to preach so long as she adhered to the doctrines that all preachers were expected to do. While Wesley thought the resistance to women preachers declined in his lifetime, it probably just submerged, only to resurface in the early 1800’s after Wesley’s death. To start, women were restricted to preaching to members of their own sex. Incidentally, in early Methodist chapels women and men sat on opposite sides of the chapel and were noted “for their swift singing without organ.”