The Beginnings of American Methodism

By Frank Baker *

FOOLS rush in where angels fear to tread.” So wrote Alexander Pope about the irreverent tourists in Wesley’s day, chattering even around the altar of St. Paul’s Cathedral. And perhaps it seems that a fellow-countryman of Wesley who ventures to speak to an American audience on the beginnings of Methodism in their own country is at least somewhat indiscreet, even if they do not immediately class him with those “mad dogs and Englishmen” who in their folly “go out in the midday sun.” On the other hand it seems likely that I should need to acquit most of you of the charge of being angels, and if you are exempt from one part of Pope’s indictment perhaps I may be excused from the other. At least I must plead a hearing before you cram the fool’s cap on my graying head.

After all, to some extent we are on common ground. Births and beginnings fascinate most of us, whether in the form of a cuddly puppy, a crinkled baby, a creaking cardinal—I mean the feathered kind, of course—a conquered atom, a colonized continent, a Christian Church, or a caricatured Methodism. Very soon American Methodism will be celebrating its two hundredth anniversary, and it is both natural and necessary to check the records and to see if we have our facts right. When did Methodism really begin in America? And where? It seems to this interloping Englishman looking over your shoulder as you thumb through the fading records that it would be wise to ask ourselves a preliminary question. Before we become involved in another battle of “priority” such as agitated our immediate forebears we should ask, “What, after all, is Methodism?”

“What is Methodism?” Clearly the essential Methodism which links us to our distant beginnings is not the totality of that sprawling, many-tentacled monster which we criticize—and which we love—as The Methodist Church. This was born in 1939 and no

*Paper read at the Annual Meeting of the Executive Committee of the Association of Methodist Historical Societies, Philadelphia, April 24, 1963. This article is particularly relevant because of the Bi-Centenary of American Methodism in the coming quadrennium. Dr. Baker, a clergyman in the British Methodist Conference, is now Associate Professor of Religion, Duke University, Durham, N. C. Dr. Baker is a member of the Editorial Board composed of professors from four seminaries—Duke, Candler, Garrett, and Perkins—which has assumed editorial responsibility for bringing out a critical edition of the complete works of John Wesley.
earlier, though most of its general features had been laid down long before, and had been remolded—sometimes out of all recognition—by each passing generation. What is the essential purpose that directed this long and painful process of experimentation, this constant trying on of new suits for a rapidly growing child in a world of constantly changing fashions? What is the inner genius of Methodism, its essence? Is it to be found in doctrinal teaching, in a moral code, in forms of worship, in evangelistic methods, in social service, in ecclesiastical organization—or in a particular combination of some or all of these features? "What is Methodism?"

This, I believe, is the question that John Wesley would urge upon us. Did he not warn his own contemporaries to be sure they knew what they were talking about, mentioning the case of the Irishman who said: "Methodists! Ay, they are the people who place all religion in wearing long beards!" 1 Wesley's own definition, as given in his Complete English Dictionary, was disarmingly simple: "A Methodist, one that lives according to the method laid down in the Bible." For our particular purpose this will hardly suffice, though we cannot afford to discard it as sheer propaganda. A brief analysis of early Methodism in Britain may help us to see our own historical problems more clearly—always a useful step toward finding a solution. There is no doubt that England was the birthplace of Methodism in its generally accepted meaning of the family of Protestant Christian denominations arising from the religious activities of John and Charles Wesley. (Here you notice that I insert, very cautiously, a rough working definition, which may at least start us off on our major problem.) Even in England, however, there has been much difficulty in deciding in what year Methodism really began, the chief contestants being 1738 and 1739, though a valiant fight has been put up by 1729, and some backers would favor 1725 or 1744, while even 1784 and 1795 have their supporters. We bypass the tortuous arguments in favor of these varied claims and take to the throughway of a generalization: early British Methodism may be divided into three main categories, which are also to some extent chronological stages—the movement, the society, and the church.

Although itself one example of a much larger spiritual movement, the Methodist movement in Britain may be said to have begun with the group of Oxford students gathered around the Wesley brothers in 1729. Their main theme was the pursuit of holiness, whence their familiar title of "The Holy Club." They were methodical in their private and public devotions, in serious study of the Bible, and in service to the community, and so earned the more lasting nickname of "Methodists." Soon anyone who sought ener-

1 Works, 3rd edn., 1829: 8:347.
getically to know and to do the will of God was termed a Methodist. This remained John Wesley's basic understanding of Methodism, as we have seen from his dictionary definition, even after the movement had been tightly organized into coordinated societies. Methodism as a movement was simply German Pietism translated into English.

Along with the pursuit of piety was later combined the conviction that a devout Christian could personally know that he was saved from the penalty and from the power of sin. This emphasis came into the Methodist movement by way of the Moravians and John Wesley's Aldersgate experience, just as other aspects of the devout life had come by way of William Morgan, John Clayton, and William Law. These twin emphases upon piety and spiritual experience normally revealed themselves in a desire for Christian fellowship, in evangelical preaching, and frequently in a highly developed social conscience. Taken as a whole this movement was a stirring of the dry bones of conventional "churchianity," and especially of the Church of England, though the new spirit spread also to the Non-conformists. But the term "Methodist" was widely used all over the English-speaking world to denote the spiritual awakening in general, and this continued long after the formation of Wesley's societies.

The Methodist Society may be said to have originated in England in 1739, although Wesley had used the term "society" of the Holy Club at Oxford. The 1729 Oxford society, however, was an informal company, and was limited to members of the university, though it was their intention to serve the community and even to revitalize religion in general. The societies which Wesley organized in London and Bristol in 1739, on the other hand, were not restricted to one social group and became increasingly formal in their conditions of membership. These Methodist societies (like one for Oxford townsmen paralleling the Holy Club) were formed partly from older Anglican societies which had been revived under Methodist and Moravian influence, but were now splitting over theological issues, and partly from Wesley's own converts. They could clearly be distinguished from the older religious societies in that they looked to Wesley alone for leadership. His driving genius organized them into a tightly-knit "connection" by means of carefully chosen lay leaders and lay preachers, while at the same time preserving the devotional spirit, the high moral standards, and the program of social service that had characterized the Methodist movement. Throughout his life Wesley maintained that these societies were not churches nor their preachers ministers. Methodism was not a sect, an independent denomination, but a society. Loyal Methodists, he insisted, would regularly attend their parish churches—or their dissenting
meetinghouses—for public worship and the sacraments, for marriage and burial. The Methodist societies offered additional preaching services out of church hours and the extra fellowship of the weekly class meeting for those who were prepared to accept Wesley’s terms. As a society within the church Methodism had its own rules, its own conditions of membership, though these were simple—simple to understand, at least, if not to practice. There was no doctrinal test, nor did Wesley insist upon an experience of conversion before granting membership, but simply upon “a desire to flee from the wrath to come,” the sincerity of which was evidenced by avoiding evil, by doing good, and by using the means of divine grace.

The Methodist Church arose in Britain when the people called Methodists no longer depended upon their parish churches for worship and sacraments. Although Wesley maintained to his death that he was a loyal communicant and priest of the Church of England, in fact he had been severing strand by strand the ties which attached his societies to the parent body. As early as 1743 he had leased a disused Huguenot chapel in London, and in this episcopally consecrated building he was able without qualms of conscience to administer communion to his followers. Indeed we could make out a case on this evidence for the year 1743 as marking the birth of Methodism as an independent denomination. The year 1784, however, should probably be regarded as the date of Wesley’s implied Declaration of Independence. In that year he not only legally incorporated the annual Methodist Conference as a self-perpetuating body in complete charge of the Methodist Societies after his death, subject to no oversight by any Anglican bishop or court, but also himself assumed episcopal functions by ordaining preachers to administer communion to his followers. Charles Wesley echoed the dictum of his old schoolfriend, Lord Chief Justice Mansfield, “Ordination is Separation.” John Wesley still tried to make the best of both worlds, but British Methodism had in effect become a church in 1784, even though there was a show of remaining a society within the Church of England. After Wesley’s death, at the cost of several severe agitations and continued compromise, the separation became obvious and tacitly admitted, though the use of the term “church” by Methodism was long deferred, and there was no legal declaration setting up a Methodist Church until the present century.

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Turning from our analysis of Methodist history in Britain we are comforted by at least one fact. If we look for the same three categories in American Methodism—as I believe we should—there can be no hesitation in declaring that here Methodism entered its final
church phase in 1784. The group of preachers summoned to the
Lovely Lane meetinghouse in Baltimore that Christmas apparently
gave beyond Wesley's intentions for them when they officially
adopted the title of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Nevertheless
they acted along lines which he himself had laid down. He had sent
them a "superintendent" empowered to ordain in Thomas Coke, and
had nominated Francis Asbury for ordination as a fellow-super-
intendent. (The word "superintendent" suffered a sea change into
"bishop"—a fate to which English words are still exposed in trans-
Atlantic passage.) Wesley himself ordained other elders for service
in America. He sent over a revision of the Book of Common Prayer
for the use of American Methodists; once more without the
imprimatur of any Anglican authority. Even so the ecclesiastical status
of American Methodist might well have remained as ambiguous as
that of British Methodism but for the clean-cut decision of that
momentous Christmas Conference, which constitutes an incon-
 trovertible landmark in American Methodist history.

If in the case of the beginnings of the church phase the American
Methodist historians are in a far better position than their British
counterparts, the situation is much more complicated when we con-
sider the Methodist movement and the Methodist society, both of
which existed here as well as in England. Once more it is necessary
to ask a number of preliminary questions before we are in a position
to offer any definitive answers, and to ask these questions in the
context of the differing aspects of Methodism as movement and as
society which we discover from our study of early British Meth-
odism. And we must begin at the beginning.

The first question should be: Was John Wesley a Methodist when
in 1735 he set sail for Georgia as a missionary of the Society for the
Propagation of the Gospel? The answer must unhesitatingly be
"Yes," for according to his own definition a Methodist was a spiritual
seeker rather than a converted sinner. Even if we ask if Wesley
was a converted man at this time our answer might well be the
same, though (as he later explained) he then possessed the faith
of a servant of God rather than the assured faith of a son which
came to him at Aldersgate. He was a devout Christian seeking a
deepen personal experience of God, in other words a true "Oxford
Methodist." Indeed the Georgia mission was quite clearly a Holy
Club project, absorbing four of the group's key members, and
 gaining the intended support of at least two others.

John Wesley's spiritual status during the years 1736 and 1737,
the larger part of which he spent in America, may be gauged by
his closing manifesto, that pioneer Collection of Psalms and Hymns
which he published at Charleston, South Carolina in 1737, but
which had been prepared and used in Georgia. The hymns for
Sunday (at the beginning of the book) and for Saturday (at the end) are mainly hymns of praise. The middle section of twenty for use on Wednesdays and Fridays, however, all emphasize personal salvation from sin, and most of them claim that this can come only by the free grace of God in Christ. Most of the items which Wesley chose or translated for this section were already in the form of personal prayers addressed to God in the second person, and he amended others in order to transform them also into prayers. Assuredly the editor of this volume, however naive and tactless he might have been in his High Church enthusiasm (and however inept in conducting a love affair), was no cold formal cleric, but a true Methodist.

The second question is this: Did Wesley begin any typically Methodist practices in Georgia? Once more the answer is “Yes.” America witnessed (as we have just seen) at least a strengthening of Methodist hymn singing, if not its birth, and the first published Methodist hymnbook. Germ ideas for other practices later developed more fully in the British Methodist societies were first tried out in Georgia, such as extempore prayer and preaching, the band meeting, the love feast, even the temporary authorizing of a lay preacher in Charles Delamotte. Most important of all, however, was the fact that in Georgia Wesley clearly developed the practice of forming societies of Christian seekers to meet for prayer and fellowship (including the singing of hymns) quite apart from their regular worship in the church. It was no looking back through rose-colored spectacles that led Wesley to claim in 1781 in the last volume of his *Concise Ecclesiastical History*: “The first rise of Methodism, so called, was in November, 1729, when four of us met together at Oxford; the second was at Savannah, in April, 1736, when twenty or thirty persons met at my house; the last was at London, [on 1st May, 1738—still before Aldersgate], when forty or fifty of us agreed to meet together every Wednesday evening, in order to a free conversation, begun and ended with singing and prayer.”

From this passage it is clear that if Wesley had defined Methodism in a more specific sense the main feature of such a definition would have been the organized fellowship of a Christian society. We should therefore look more closely at what was involved in this “second rise of Methodism,” namely the society in Savannah. Wesley writes in his *Journal*: “We considered in what manner we might be most useful to the little flock at Savannah. And we agreed, 1. To advise the more serious among them to form themselves into a sort of little society, and to meet once or twice a week, in order to reprove, instruct, and exhort one another.” He went on to describe how this society was divided into bands on the Moravian pattern: “2. To select out of these a smaller number for a more intimate union with
each other, which might be forwarded, partly by our conversing singly with each, and partly by inviting them all together to our house.” They met on Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday evenings. Within a few weeks a similar society was meeting on the same evenings in the southern outpost preparing for attack by the Spaniards, Fort Frederica. The members attending spent “about an hour in prayer, singing, and mutual exhortation.” The Collection of Psalms and Hymns affords a sample of what they sang on those occasions.

Thus Wesley clearly introduced Methodism as a movement and even as an embryo society to America in 1736, and indeed in some features of the experiment America seems to hold priority over England. Our next major question would seek to discover whether in fact this spiritual sapling bore any fruit in America. Was there any continuity between this experimental introduction of Methodism to Georgia in 1736 and its permanent establishment in other parts of America thirty years later? This major question can best be approached by way of several minor questions, but even so it must be confessed that no complete nor compelling answer can be given. Enough for our present purpose if some doubts are raised about the common assumption that the only link between the American Methodism of 1736 and that of 1766 was that they both originated in the British Isles, though quite independently of each other.

And first, Was Wesley’s Georgia mission a failure? The answer seems to be both “Yes” and “No.” Even some of the practices charged against him, such as his rigorous but faithful pastoral visitations, proved in fact of real spiritual value, and the lives of some of his parishioners were certainly altered for the better. The pietist pastor of the Salzburger community at New Ebenezer, Martin Bolzius, paid high tribute to Wesley, though he was not blind to the fact that Wesley’s personal faith needed deepening: “He does the work of the Lord, and since he is most affectionately disposed towards his Savior and the souls of his congregation, the true and chief Shepherd will surely supply him with a greater measure of the Spiritus Evangelici. He performs the duties of Christianity very earnestly, and visits his people industriously, and is well received by some.”2 We note the last phrase, “well received by some,” not only for its limitations, but also for its positive content. Wesley himself could conscientiously claim: “All [i.e. all the English-speaking settlers] in Georgia have heard the word of God. Some have believed, and begun to run well. A few steps have been taken

towards publishing the glad tidings both to the African and the American heathen" [i.e. Negroes and Indians].

But . . . Wesley antagonized the ruling faction in his parish—not the first minister to commit this cardinal sin, nor the last—and so was lost to those whom he had already served well and might have served far better. Charles Delamotte, who had accompanied Wesley as a schoolmaster, stayed behind to hold the spiritual fort. After a few weeks of despondency he reported that the Savannah society continued to meet for prayers and fellowship in his home, having been turned out of Wesley's. Renewed persecution drove away some but united the remainder, a few becoming "zealous advocates for the Lord God of hosts." Delamotte thus became public enemy No. 1 for the ruling clique headed by Sophy Hopkey's uncle and guardian Thomas Causton, who held the strategic position of chief magistrate and was determined to "break the neck of" the society. He launched another lawsuit. This time he was unsuccessful. The Grand Jury dismissed the charges against Delamotte as motivated merely by "spite and malice against Mr. Wesley." The effect was similar, however. Six months after Wesley himself, Charles Delamotte also was frozen out of Savannah and returned to England. But not before he passed on the torch of Christian fellowship and evangelism to George Whitefield, another member of the Holy Club who had come in response to their pleas to second the work of the Wesleys. Whitefield noted the "many divisions among the inhabitants," and remarked how when Delamotte set sail at least "the poor people lamented the loss of him, and went to the waterside to take a last farewell."

It was in this context that Whitefield paid tribute to the labors of his "worthy predecessors" in Georgia, including this testimony: "The good Mr. John Wesley has done in America, under God, is inexpressible. His name is very precious among the people; and he has laid such a foundation, that I hope neither men nor devils will ever be able to shake." Whitefield was unduly optimistic, of course, as well as somewhat naive. Powerful men like Causton did in fact successfully join hands with the devil to shake the foundations of devout Christian living and evangelical fellowship laid by Wesley and his Oxford Methodist companions. As a result history has not been able to point out any dramatic fruits of Wesley's labors in Georgia. Fruits, however, there certainly were. When in 1778

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4 Ibid., 8:308-10; cf. 1:322n. Delamotte left Georgia 2nd June, 1738, see E. Merton Coulter and Albert B. Saye: A List of the Early Settlers of Georgia (Athens, 1949), entry 396.
6 Ibid., p. 157.
Wesley preached on "the late work of God in North America" he spoke of the "Great Awakening" under Jonathan Edwards in New England, and in the same breath of a simultaneous "work of grace in the newly planted colony of Georgia... both at Savannah and Frederica; many inquiring what they must do to be saved, and 'bringing forth fruits meet for repentance.'" For this he assigned much of the credit to the Moravians, though this could hardly be true—except indirectly—in Frederica. Whitefield himself echoed that early tribute in the last message which he sent to Charles Wesley in 1770: "Do pray. I am sure prayers put up above thirty years ago are now answering (i.e. being answered); and, I am persuaded, we shall yet see greater things than these." Yet when all the tributes have been paid to Wesley’s early American ministry it is probably fair to say that the influence of Wesley on Georgia was of less importance than the influence of Georgia on Wesley.

Another question affecting the problem of continuity is Wesley’s attitude toward America. Did he shake its dust from his feet in 1737 until his immigrant followers belatedly revived his interest in the 1760s? By no means. Both brothers maintained a warm interest in America, and both hoped to return. John Wesley’s links with Jonathan Edwards, for instance, are in themselves sufficient for a paper, or even a book. He was deeply moved in 1738 by reading Edwards’ Narrative of the New England revival, and this reading led to a very important analysis as well as a quickening of his own spiritual experience. Within a few years he published his own extract from the work. In fact Wesley retained such a high regard for Edwards that he prepared for publication more separate editions of his writings than of any other man. After careful and sometimes drastic abridgment and editing each of Edwards’ four major works in the Great Awakening was published in England by Wesley: the Faithful Narrative, as noted above; The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God, in 1744; Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival in 1745—this was also included in volume 30 of Wesley’s Christian Library; and lastly A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections, which appeared somewhat strangely in 1773, in volume 23 of Wesley’s own Works. Wesley also prized and republished Edwards’ edition of David Brainerd’s autobiography. When Wesley was asked in 1745 whether he was interested in joining a kind of postal prayer circle for evangelical ministers in Great Britain he enthusiastically agreed, and suggested that Edwards and Gilbert Tennent should also be invited.

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7 Works, 7:410.
Wesley, indeed, seems to have got on better with American than with English Presbyterians, the point of difference being the warmth of their evangelical spirit. When Gilbert Tennent and Samuel Davies visited England in 1753 on a fund-raising tour for Princeton College, they were sympathetically welcomed by Wesley. It is possible to suspect an undertone of hesitance in his Journal comment: “An admirable design, if it will bring Protestants of every denomination to bear with one another.” Assuredly there is no guile, however, in Wesley’s cordial relations with Samuel Davies himself. Indeed Davies in some ways offers one of the closest parallels to Wesley in the New World, as an evangelist carving out in Virginia a circuit of Presbyterian societies varying little from Methodist societies. They were mutual admirers of each other’s work. From 1755 onward Wesley sent parcels of his own publications to Davies, and these were warmly received. Some, like the Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, were retained in Davies’ own study. Others were passed on to a fellow minister, Mr. Wright of Cumberland. The major part, however, seem to have been distributed among the poor whites, with exhortations to pass them on to their neighbors after reading. Though Wesley’s challenging tracts seem to have proved of good service, the most impressive tribute is to a later edition of the Collection of Psalms and Hymns. Davies reported that these hymnbooks enabled the Negroes “to gratify their peculiar taste for psalmody” to such good effect that they sometimes spent the whole night in singing them.10 Nor was this a one-way traffic. After abridgment Wesley republished one of Samuel Davies’ patriotic sermons of 1755, shortening the title to The Good Soldier and omitting a prophetic reference to “that heroic young Col. Washington, whom I cannot but hope Providence has hitherto preserved in so signal a manner, for some important service to his country.”11 We would give much for a sight of Davies’ diary, which seems to have disappeared.

Wesley did not forget America. Nor was he there forgotten. His Charleston hymnbook was by no means his only early American publication. In 1740 Andrew and William Bradford, the pioneer printers of Philadelphia, issued an edition of the Wesleys’ Hymns and Sacred Poems of 1739, which was “sold for the benefit of the poor in Georgia,” and so probably sponsored by Whitefield. In 1743 Wesley’s Bristol printer Felix Farley put out several of Wesley’s publications with the imprint “sold . . . by Andrew Bradford, in

10 Wesley’s Journal, 4:101, 125-6, 149-50, 194-5.
11 Although Wesley’s abridgment of Religion and Patriotism the Constituents of a Good Soldier went through two editions in 1756 it is now extremely rare, not known to Sabin, and the original author not known to Richard Green, in whose Wesley Bibliography it appears as item 178.
Philadelphia.” These included the Hymns and Sacred Poems of 1740 and 1742, volumes distinct from that of 1739. Also bearing this imprint were the extract from Wesley’s Journal dealing with Georgia, The Character of a Methodist, and Thoughts on Marriage and a Single Life. Wesley’s sermon on Free Grace, which precipitated the temporary breach with Whitefield, was published at least three times in America, once in Boston and twice in Philadelphia, including an edition by Benjamin Franklin. Franklin seems to have imported a number of Wesley’s English publications from his close friend William Strahan, who was Wesley’s chief London printer from 1739 to 1762. Wesley’s tract, The Nature and Design of Christianity (an extract from William Law’s Christian Perfection) seems to have been popular with the German-speaking inhabitants of Philadelphia, and was published by Christopher Saur of Germantown in 1744 and 1756. The first American edition of Wesley’s Primitive Physic also appears to have been published in Philadelphia, in 1764.

Nevertheless this reciprocal interest does not seem to have led to the establishment of any specifically Methodist societies between those founded experimentally in Georgia in 1736 and those founded farther north in the 1760s by Methodist immigrants. The Methodist movement, however, in the broader sense, continued long after the Wesleys left America, and long after in England it had been overshadowed by the Methodist society. The title “Methodist” was not only used of Whitefield to whom it clearly belonged, but of many evangelical leaders walking in the footsteps of Frelinghuysen, Edwards, the Tennents, and Davies. The “enthusiasm” of these so-called Methodists aroused the same kind of antagonism as that of their fellows in England, including persecution by some ministers of the Episcopalian church. In 1763-64, for instance, the Anglican itinerant missionary Thomas Barton, who had served in Pennsylvania from 1754, reported that “the Church of England . . . has hitherto stood her ground amidst all the rage and wildness of fanaticism, . . . whilst Methodists and New Lights have roam’d over the country, ‘leading captive silly women,’ and drawing in thousands to adopt their strange and novel doctrines.”

The focal point of the term “Methodist” both in its general sense and to some extent in its specific sense was George Whitefield. He was an Oxford Methodist summoned by John Wesley, his “father in the Gospel,” to assist in Georgia, and he succeeded in large measure in accomplishing in America what Wesley returned to accomplish in Britain. The fire of the Great Awakening—and of the Georgia awakening—was continually dying down for want of fuel, but it was rekindled and spread by Whitefield. Not only did he help

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America to maintain the spiritual glow. He also had a constantly mellowing effect on the tendencies toward harsh puritanism and dry orthodoxy among the evangelical dissenters on the one hand, and on the religious formalism and political Toryism of the Episcopalian ministers on the other. Certainly the Holy Club played an important role in spreading vital religion throughout eighteenth century America, even though this was brought about by a Methodist movement rather than by means of Methodist societies organically linked with those in England.

It has often been claimed that Whitefield formed no societies in America, but this is not quite true. Both in England and America he stressed the value of Christian fellowship. His first visits to Philadelphia in 1739 were climaxed by the formation of two societies, and the society which he had previously formed at Lewes, Delaware was still rousing the ire of the local Anglican missionary in 1741.\(^\text{13}\) The kind of revival that he fostered among both Anglicans and Dissenters clearly encouraged society meetings for Christian fellowship as well as preaching services. His *Hymns for Social Worship*, published in 1753 and frequently reprinted, in addition to the noteworthy emphasis in the title, contained 132 "Hymns for Public Worship" and 38 "Hymns for Society and Persons Meeting in Christian Fellowship." Nevertheless he organized no "connection" in America, either in Wesley's name or his own. The Methodism that he had learned at Oxford was diffused through existing and newly created churches of other denominations. In this process Wesley believed that Whitefield squandered his spiritual fruits, yet in order to preserve similar fruits in England Wesley himself was led into forming a new denomination, albeit against his desires. In this respect it could be argued that Whitefield was a better Methodist than Wesley.

Nor was Whitefield permanently estranged from the Wesleys. In a letter written November 16, 1769 in answer to a specific question on the matter by Professor John Liden of Lund Wesley wrote: "Mr. Whitefield is a Calvinist, Messrs. Wesley are not; this is the only material difference between them." Whitefield wrote regularly to the Wesleys from America, and they shared sympathetically in the ups and downs of his preaching itinerancy there. As he prepared for his last voyage Whitefield wrote to John Wesley: "Reverend and very dear sir, [he was always respectful, even obsequious at times] What hath God wrought for us, in us, by us! I sailed out of these Downs almost thirty-three years ago! . . . Mutual Christian love will not permit you, and those in connection with you, to for-

get a willing pilgrim, going now across the Atlantic for the thirteenth time." There is no more sincere nor discerning tribute to Whitefield's evangelism than Wesley's funeral sermon preached at Whitefield's request both in his own London headquarters and in Wesley's Foundery. Wesley even offered to prepare Whitefield's papers for publication. Clearly they were united in spirit, if not in theology and in the mechanics of Methodist organization.

As an evangelist at large Whitefield helped to keep alive a spiritual expectancy in America which both stabilized the Christian denominations already in being through the spirit of the Methodist movement, and kept the soil in condition for the coming of Wesley's preachers. It seems possible that he did even more, nurturing individuals and groups who later formed the nuclei of more specifically Methodist societies. There are hints of this in what became the main centers of Methodist influence, though they are only hints, needing much further documentation. In Maryland the Bayards of Bohemia Manor were among Whitefield's disciples and apparently became supporters of Wesley's societies. In Philadelphia the little group that gathered around Captain Thomas Webb in 1767 numbered two of Whitefield's converts, Edward Evans and James Emerson, the latter of whom is supposed to have held together a group of "Methidies" for a generation. In New York Whitefield helped to keep alive at least a flicker of evangelism, and a revival on Long Island in 1764 died down only to be quickly rekindled by Captain Thomas Webb, leading to the organization of Methodist societies in organic touch with Wesley. Well might Jesse Lee write that through Whitefield's labors "the way was opened for our preachers to travel and preach the gospel in different parts of the country."

By the 1760s the desire for evangelical preachers could be heard on every side, and Whitefield was probably the first to ask Wesley to send men over to help. In September 1764 he wrote from Philadelphia: "Here is room for a hundred itinerants. Lord Jesus, send by whom Thou wilt send." In answer to such pleas Wesley replied in 1767 that he could spare no itinerants, but that "some of the local preachers are equal both in grace and gifts to most of the itinerants," recommending to Whitefield one man in particular. When

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14 James Bayard wrote to Whitefield May 10, 1749, for instance: "Oh that the midnight state of the Church of England might be remembered by our Dear Emanuel." (George Whitefield correspondence, Library of Congress.)


16 James Waddell of Lancaster County, Virginia, wrote Whitefield on August 5, 1766, asking whether the Long Island revival had been "injured or interrupted by the Stamp Act," and asking Whitefield to send one of his "flaming preachers" to itinerate through Virginia. (George Whitefield correspondence, Library of Congress.)

17 Short History of the Methodists (Baltimore, 1810), p. 38.
in 1769 Wesley at last sent over two itinerants he asked Whitefield to keep a fatherly eye on them.

Meantime a few Methodist local preachers and class leaders had emigrated to America for various personal reasons, especially Irish Methodists seeking a fresh economic start. During the 1760s these men were encouraged to make ventures in holding fellowship groups and preaching in a small way, particularly Robert Strawbridge in Maryland and Philip Embury in New York. Their efforts were coordinated and new evangelism was begun by the most mobile of all the local preachers, Captain Thomas Webb. Letters from him and others made it clear to Wesley that the time had come for him to separate itinerants to work in America, and to assume responsibility for organizing American Methodist societies. The first two itinerants came out in 1769, and for some years Wesley pondered following them himself. American Methodism, in its society phase, after a lengthy gestation and prolonged and complicated labors, had at last been born.

Where does this leave us in our discussion of the beginnings? With two clear dates at the outer extremes and much uncertainty in the middle. I think that we can claim that as a movement Methodism began in America with the Wesleys in 1736 and as a church with Coke and Asbury in 1784. Methodist societies of a kind existed from 1736 and remained a feature of the movement, though subject to much fluctuation and offering little concrete proof of real continuity in any area. The frame of mind and heart which Wesley thought of as Methodism was kept alive by scattered evangelical leaders and especially by his former spiritual lieutenant George Whitefield, whose consolidating labors were taken over for the specifically Methodist societies by Captain Webb in 1766 or early 1767.

We all like to have something tangible to celebrate, of course, and we rightly prefer it to be as clear-cut as possible. It would seem to me that although the birth of the Methodist movement in America must be dated in 1736, the beginning of the consolidation of the tentative Methodist societies into a true Methodist connection owing allegiance to Wesley should be dated in 1766. It seems almost certain that Robert Strawbridge built his log meetinghouse at Sam's Creek before that year, but accurate documentation is lacking. He may well have crossed the Potomac to nearby Leesburg, Virginia, where land for a Methodist meetinghouse was purchased on May 11, 1766. In October of that year Philip Embury began to preach in New York. We should surely do some celebrating in 1966, but

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much homework is necessary before we can see the full picture, as I believe we eventually shall—though not until the celebrations of 1966 are a distant memory.

There is one further comforting and challenging consideration, however. Far more important than these *dates* of Methodist beginnings are the *data*—in the literal sense of that Latin word, the *things given* by God for the enrichment of this great nation through Methodism. John may have planted, and George may have watered, but through the nurture of Robert and Philip and Thomas, and especially of Francis, God eventually gave a wonderful increase. To Him be the glory!