

**“CROAKERS AND BUSYBODIES”: THE EXTENT AND
INFLUENCE OF CHURCH METHODISM IN THE LATE 18TH
AND EARLY 19TH CENTURIES**

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In this paper I will be looking at an area of evangelical studies that is much neglected and misunderstood, namely pro-Anglican opinion within the 18th-century Wesleyan movement. The Church Methodists, as they were known, were an inevitable product of Methodism's origins within the Church of England. They were never formally organized or their views defined, but their collective influence lasted well into the 19th century. Simply put, a Church Methodist was someone who saw no contradiction in being both Anglican and Methodist. A necessary part of this viewpoint was opposition to separation from the Church of England. Church Methodism represents, therefore, the other side to one of the central issues of early Methodist history.

The existence of agitation in favor of separation from the Anglican Church is well documented in the secondary sources. Principal denominational historians like Abel Stevens, Thomas Jackson, and John Telford give the impression that late 18th-century Methodists were largely in favor of Methodism's becoming a distinct denomination.¹ The evolution of John Wesley's own position has also been covered in detail, most notably in Baker's *John Wesley and the Church of England*.² Examination of the Church Methodist viewpoint has been largely restricted to historical studies of Charles Wesley, not the most overcrowded area of evangelical scholarship. Charles, of course, was the great champion of the Anglican link and his posthumous reputation suffered as a result.³

The contempt of many 19th-century Methodist scholars for the Church of England is epitomized by Telford's description of the parent denomination as a "corrupted Church."⁴ The image of a vibrant Methodism struggling to break free of her Anglican fetters is reflected in the treatment of the Church Methodists. Thomas Jackson described them as "croakers. . . busy-

¹For example, Abel Stevens, *History of Methodism* (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1878), vol. 1, 314.

²Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (London: Epworth Press, 1970).

³Stevens, vol. 1, 311-312. For another example see George Smith, *History of Wesleyan Methodism*, vol. 1 (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans and Roberts, 1857), 582.

⁴John Telford, *John Wesley* (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1899), vol. 2, 382.

bodies” and “grumblers,”⁵ implying that they were more of an irritant than an influence. The viewpoint that they represented has never been discussed in detail and their very existence has been barely acknowledged.

This paper will seek therefore to shed some light on a neglected area. It will be argued that the Church Methodist vision, which was in truth the original dynamic behind the movement, was more representative of Connexional opinion throughout the 18th century than is commonly supposed. The legacy and survival of Church Methodism will also be explored. This had a bearing on the identity of the British Methodist Church, particularly in its Wesleyan mainstream, as it evolved during the 19th century.

It is well known that when the Wesley brothers commenced an itinerant ministry at the end of the 1730s they had no intention of leading a break away. The emphasis instead was very much on reviving the church in which they were ordained ministers.⁶ There is no reason to doubt the brothers’ sincerity although the irregular means that they employed gave good grounds for questioning the depth of their devotion to the Church of England. Such activities as lay preaching and the introduction of innovations from continental Europe such as the Love Feast and the band meeting, fuelled suspicion of the Wesleys’ intentions. As early as 1739, their own brother Samuel wrote that John and Charles were intent on separation.⁷

The brothers and their followers did not see it that way in the early years. Methodism reflected English society at large in that the vast majority of its adherents were Anglican and would have had no initial intention of straying elsewhere. It is true that many people would not have attended worship regularly,⁸ but there was still considerable sentimental attachment to “Mother Church.”⁹ One of the advantages the Wesleys enjoyed was their status as Anglican ministers. This allowed them to draw into the movement people who had no wish to be dissenters.

Nor was there any pressing need during the Wesleys’ lifetimes to make a choice between Establishment and Non-conformity. Methodism had many critics among Anglican clergy and laity, but at no time was the movement in serious danger of formal expulsion. This surprising fact, which seems to run counter to the traditional image of a Church of England pushing Methodism out of the home, can at least be partly attributed to the Hanoverian Church’s

⁵Thomas Jackson, *The Life of the Rev. Charles Wesley, sometime Student of Christ-Church Oxford...* (London: Wesleyan Methodist Conference Office, 1841), vol. 2, 137. See also John Telford, *The Life of the Rev. Charles Wesley, MA.* (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1900), 155.

⁶E.g., Baker, 71.

⁷Quoted by Baker, 58.

⁸John Walsh and Stephen Taylor, “The Church and Anglicanism,” *The Church of England c. 1689-c. 1833: From Toleration to Tractarianism*, ed. John Walsh, Colin Haydon and Stephen Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 24.

⁹“The church could attract the kind of tribal loyalty given to kin or to parent; powerful feelings were drawn to it by the presence of ancestors in its graveyard.” Walsh and Taylor, 27.

professed tendency towards reason and acceptance of diversity. The violent religious conflicts of the previous century had left English society with a deep-seated aversion to extreme views, especially in the area of religion. A broad-based tolerant church establishment was seen as a bulwark against the renewal of sectarian conflict. The Wesleys' older contemporary, Archbishop Wake, proudly noted:

The moderation of the Church of England has been very exemplary... and we have felt the good effect of it in that peace we enjoy among our ministers, notwithstanding their known difference of opinion in many considerable articles of Christian doctrine. The Thirty-nine Articles ... we have left every one to interpret them in his own sense; and they are indeed so generally framed that they may, without any equivocation, have more senses than one fairly put upon them.¹⁰

Society's fear of division was reflected within the Wesleyan movement. William Grimshaw, the Anglican minister of Haworth in Yorkshire and one of the leading lights of Methodism in its northern heartland, gave his own view as follows:

By these means, Satan stirs up disputes, contentions and controversies. .. and then divides the Church of Christ into sects and parties¹¹

In 1763 the lay preacher, John Johnson, expressed similar views in a letter to Charles Wesley:

I dread the day when your brother and you shall be taken from us ... sometimes I think the Lord will stand by us ... at other times I think we shall be suffered to divide: and be destroyed¹²

Existing alongside this deep-seated aversion to schism was a genuine spiritual attachment on the part of many Methodists to the Church of England. In March 1760, the London layman John Parry wrote of his love of the Church in the following words:

I cannot see any cause, or excuse that man can make, why he should forsake her communion because (as far as I can see) her doctrine, discipline and liturgy is such is (properly attended to) as leads to holiness of life...I do desire to be more and more thankful that I was brought up by so tender a mother. . . .¹³

During his tours of the first half of the 1750s, Charles Wesley found lit-

¹⁰Quoted by Paul Avis, *Anglicanism and the Christian Church: Theological Resources in Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 138.

¹¹Quoted by Faith Cook, *William Grimshaw of Haworth* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 230.

¹²John Johnson to CW, ALS, June 2.1763, Reference Early Methodist Volume (henceforth EMV), 92, Methodist Church Archives (hereafter MCA).

¹³John Parry to CW, ALS, March 29, 1760. Reference EMV, 118, MCA.

the difficulty finding people willing to report itinerant preachers for encouraging separatist agitation. Some of the most vivid examples date from his final visit to Manchester in October 1756:

. . . the [class] leaders desired me not to let [Joseph Tucker] come among them again; for he did them more harm than good, by talking in his witty way against the Church and clergy. As for poor [John Hampson senior], he could not advise them to go to church, for he never went himself; but some informed me, that he advised them not to go. When we set the wolf to keep the sheep, no wonder that the sheep are scattered. . . .¹⁴

It may be suspected that Charles was told what people thought he wanted to hear. While this may have been true in some cases, there were individuals who took it upon themselves to curb separatist tendencies. In 1755, one Brother Norton of the London society attacked the itinerant Enoch Williams for his "profane wickedness" in saying prayers at the graveside of a dead child contrary to Anglican practice.¹⁵ Ironically, Williams himself was opposed to separation.¹⁶ He was so upset that he sought the advice of the Wesley brothers and was vindicated by both.¹⁷

It would appear from such evidence that the link between Methodism and the Church was stronger than the historical paradigm would suggest. During his discussion of the separatist controversy of the 1750s, the historian Abel Stevens stated that the majority of Methodists had little "ground of sympathy" with the Anglican Church and that Methodism had in effect missed a wonderful opportunity to cut itself free of a stagnant institution.¹⁸ The evidence that has already been presented and which will be reinforced throughout this paper does not support Stevens' statement.

When one examines the dominant place of the Church of England in national life during the 18th century, it becomes clear that the ties with the Methodists would have been difficult to loosen, even if Stevens had been correct in his assertions. Until 1837, all marriages, other than those of Quakers and Jews, by law had to take place according to Anglican rites. With regard to baptism, celebration was again restricted to ordained ministers of the Establishment. Some preachers baptised anyway¹⁹ and Methodist registers begin to appear from 1772,²⁰ but for most people, having a child

¹⁴Journal entry for October 21, 1756. CWJ, 2:130 and DDCW 10/2, MCA.

¹⁵Enoch Williams to CW, ALS, June 21, 1755. Reference EMV, 137, MCA.

¹⁶"You know my sentiments concerning those things.. it is not my duty to perform any of those sacred offices which are peculiar to you and those who are Established ministers except preaching." Williams to CW.

¹⁷Charles Wesley's detailed response does not survive, but his annotation on Williams's letter refers only to Norton's "roughness," implying that he considered Williams' treatment to have been unnecessarily harsh. Williams to CW.

¹⁸Stevens, 1:314.

¹⁹Bernard G. Holland, *Baptism in Early Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1970), 107-108.

²⁰See Holland's list of baptism registers begun before 1791, 170-172.

christened in a Methodist chapel was not an option even if they felt strongly on the issue. Chapel burials in the 18th century were also extremely rare. London's City Road Chapel opened its own burial ground in 1779,²¹ but it was not until 1803 that the Wesleyan Conference felt the need to direct circuits to keep registers of deaths and this instruction seems to have been widely ignored.²² The inability to offer certain vital functions contributed to keeping people both Methodist and Anglican.

The section of pro-Anglican opinion that was the most vociferous and influential, and which has therefore received the most criticism, was that represented by the wealthy and socially respectable members of the societies. Such people tended to be strongly Church Methodist in orientation. In this, they were often driven by secular considerations.

The late 18th century was a time of increasing religious toleration, but there remained significant advantages to be gained by membership of the Established Church. In England and Wales, only Anglicans were allowed to graduate from Oxford and Cambridge, be elected to parliament, hold commissioned rank in the military, or be appointed to many civil offices.²³ It is true that many of these restrictions were falling into disuse, at least with regard to Protestant dissenters, but there were still instances of religious discrimination.²⁴ Such a consideration would have meant little to the poverty stricken Methodists who formed the majority, but for anyone who had aspirations to respectability, to leave the Church of England would have been to step away from the Establishment in more than just the religious sphere. In the acutely class-conscious society of Georgian England, such a move would have had implications not merely for the individual, but also for his family.

The fact that the upper social strata of Methodism tended to favor remaining a part of the Church of England had far-reaching implications. They were often the best-qualified people to occupy important lay offices such as chapel trustee and society steward. The former in particular gave them tremendous influence as trustees had a considerable input into the daily running of a society and were able in some instances to control who occupied the chapel pulpit. The confidence with which the trustees conducted their business and the power, which they exercised, were on occasion brought to bear on Wesley himself. In the early 1780s there was a bitter dispute between the connexional leadership and the trustees of the first Methodist chapel, the New Room in Bristol. The trustees refused to change the terms of the chapel deed in accordance with a proposal to allow Wesley, and after him the Conference, the right of appointing preachers to serve at

²¹Stevenson, 309.

²²Leary, *My Ancestors were Methodists*, 8.

²³Michael Watts, *The Dissenters: The Expansion of Evangelical Nonconformity 1791-1859* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 2:417-418.

²⁴Watts, 417-418.

the chapel.²⁵ This refusal stemmed from the trustees' view that they were safeguarding the New Room “for the use of the Methodist Church, in connexion with the Church of England.”²⁶

Wealthy Church Methodists were also to a considerable degree the financial underwriters of the movement. It was the generosity of individuals that often made possible the building of chapels. The wealthy businessman John Ryle, for example, donated the site of the first purpose-built preaching house in Macclesfield.²⁷ In later years Ryle gave large sums of money for the building of two other chapels in the town²⁸ and his sons served as trustees but without abandoning their membership of the Church of England.²⁹ Ryle's grandson, John Charles, went on to become the first Anglican Bishop of Liverpool.

Ryle was only one of many individuals across the country whose generosity facilitated expansion and famous work among the poor. One of the most striking examples of Methodist philanthropy was William Marriott who served as an executor of John Wesley's will and as steward of London's City Road Chapel.³⁰ After his death in 1815, it was estimated that Marriott in one three-year period alone gave away more than £16,000. This level of annual giving was greater than the total income of the London Society.³¹ Marriott was exceptional, but it would be fair to say that most societies had at least one benefactor.³²

Not all wealthy Methodists would have been pro-Anglican, but the majority were of that party; men like John Horton who was a member of the Common Council of the City of London or the Mayor of Leeds Dr. William Hey. The collective influence of such men did much to promote the Methodist cause but they were also firm in their conviction that the movement should remain an integral part of the Church of England.³³

Early Methodists were well aware of the need to attract wealthy recruits.

²⁵John A. Vickers, *Thomas Coke* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), 59.

²⁶“Minutes of a meeting of the New Room Trustees,” D, July 29, 1783. Reference “Letters Chiefly to the Wesleys,” 2:72, MCA.

²⁷Benjamin Smith, *The History of Methodism in Macclesfield* (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1875), 74.

²⁸Smith, 149-150 and 230-231.

²⁹Smith, 231 and Gail Malmgreen, *Silk Town: Industry and Culture in Macclesfield 1750-1835* (Hull: Hull University Press, 1985), 153.

³⁰*Gentleman's Magazine*, 1815, 185 and Stevenson, 94.

³¹The income of the London society in 1803 for example was £4,066. *London Society Account Book 1766-1803*, MCA.

³²The annals of local Methodism frequently record the generosity of men like the banker Thomas Doncaster who in 1776 gave £50 towards the erection of the first chapel in the Lancashire town of Wigan. Marjorie Swindlehurst, *John Wesley and Wigan* (Wigan: Owl Books, 1991), 19.

³³See the correspondence of John Horton to Charles Wesley (DDPR 1/41, 1/44, 1/46 and 1/47, MCA). William Hey was both Methodist and Anglican until 1781 after which he severed his links with the Wesleyan movement. *Dictionary of Evangelical Biography*, 10:549.

The preacher Samuel Bardsley wrote in June 1773 of keeping the best seats in Nottingham chapel for the “gentle folks” who sometimes “drop in.”³⁴ This casual remark provides an invaluable glimpse into the grassroots reality of Methodism’s early years. In return for their willingness to take on a disproportionate share of expense, such people expected their views to receive special consideration.

Charles Wesley alluded to another important aspect of the separation issue in a letter to his brother in 1778. Charles was defending himself against criticism by certain preachers furious with his insistence that only Anglican clergymen could officiate at London’s newly-opened City Road Chapel.³⁵ Charles remarked to his brother that one reason for his insistence on this point was that many of the subscribers to the chapel building costs were not in fact Methodists.

This observation draws attention to the fact that the brothers’ work enjoyed a considerable measure of support from members of the Church of England. Such sympathizers might have taken part in Methodist worship but saw no need to signify formal membership of the movement by joining a class. It has been estimated that for every class member there were two such adherents.³⁶ Many of these people would not have been prepared to render financial assistance, or any other kind of support, to a separate Methodist denomination.

John Wesley could not afford lightly to alienate the pro-Church Methodists of wealth and influence. By the same token neither could he upset the many thousands of evangelical sympathizers within the Church of England, who regarded the Wesleyans as a part of the Anglican family, if slightly wayward at times. In a letter of February 21, 1786 referring to events of forty years previous, Wesley made the point that, “if we had then left the Church, we should not have done a tenth of the good which we have done.”³⁷ Such considerations account for his softly-softly approach to the question of separation. At the conference of 1788 he spoke in the following words against Thomas Coke’s formal proposal that Methodism part company with the Church of England: “He [Coke] skips like a flea; I creep like a louse. He would tear all from top to bottom - I will not tear but unstash.”³⁸ Wesley knew through experience and instinct, the pace at which to proceed with regard to influential opinion within the movement and on its periphery.

It is important to question just how representative of Methodism at large were the staunchly pro-Anglican views of many of the trustees. Certainly,

³⁴Samuel Bardsley to John Shaw, ALS, June 16, 1773. Reference BRD 1/4, MCA.

³⁵The itinerant Joseph Sutcliffe called it the “temple of Methodism.” Joseph Sutcliffe, “Manuscript History of Methodism,” 2:918, MCA.

³⁶Henry Rack, *John Wesley: Reasonable Enthusiast* (London: Epworth Press, 1989), 437.

³⁷JW to Thomas Taylor, February 21, 1786. JW, 7:316.

³⁸Adam Clarke, “Original Letter of Dr Adam Clarke,” *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 18 (1931-32), 25-26.

many of the secondary sources give the impression that during the course of the 18th century there was a growing clamor within the rank and file of the societies for independence from the Church.³⁹ This most frequently took the form of demands for itinerants to be able to administer the sacraments, particularly Holy Communion. At several points during Methodism's first fifty years there were crises as preachers unilaterally responded to popular demand. In 1756, for example, John Wesley was pushed to the brink of separation after it was revealed that preachers had been administering Communion in London and Reading.⁴⁰ This coincided with other developments that widened the gulf between Methodism and the Church of England, such as the registration of chapels as dissenters' meeting houses for the legal protection that was afforded.

It could be argued that such evidence is a strong indication that there were a growing number of people who favored separation, and that by the 1780s, they formed the Methodist majority. There were certainly those who felt no allegiance to the Established Church. In 1751, for example, a significant number of Methodists in the northwest England sided with the dissident preacher John Bennet when he left the Wesleys. The congregation that Bennet subsequently founded was Congregationalist in character.⁴¹

The Wesleys were prepared to accept converts from all denominations and, in areas where traditional nonconformity was strong, this inevitably contributed to a watering-down of the Anglican element. The best example of the effects of such local dilution occurred in Norwich in 1760.⁴² East Anglia had always been a stronghold of dissent and it is likely that this contributed to demands that year for Methodist preachers to administer communion.⁴³ The result was a controversy that dragged on until Conference, at John Wesley's insistence, reaffirmed its loyalty to the Church.⁴⁴

³⁹For example, “although respect for the personal authority of [John] Wesley restrained the Methodist societies from formal separation until after his death, that action was ultimately inevitable. Nor was it surprising that the majority of the Methodist converts, drawn from the ranks of dissenters or the classes neglected by the ministrations of the Church, should sit loose to the relics of Anglican religious practice retained by their leaders. Their interest lay in the new church organization evolved by John Wesley, not in the old system in which he had been reared.” Norman Sykes, *Church and State in England in the XVIII Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), 394. See also John S. Simon, *John Wesley: The Last Phase*, 2nd ed. (London: Epworth Press, 1962), 330-331.

⁴⁰In his discussion of this episode, Baker gave the chapter heading “Separation Narrowly Averted.” Baker, 160ff.

⁴¹Simon Valentine, *John Bennet and the Origins of Methodism and the Evangelical Revival in England* (Lanham, Maryland, and London: Scarecrow Press, 1997), 249-273.

⁴²John Wesley observed during his visit to Norwich in March 1759 that the majority of the Methodist communicants were from a nonconformist background. Entry in John Wesley's journal for March 18, 1759. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 21:179.

⁴³Baker, 129, 175-179.

⁴⁴Baker, 129, 175-179.

As suggestive as such incidents might appear, there is very little in the way of documentation concerning the popular view of the separation issue. At one end of the spectrum there were the trustees, for whom social acceptance and attachment to the Church of England went hand in hand. On the other side of the divide, there were a considerable number of itinerant preachers, frustrated by the restrictions placed on their ministry. Men like Charles Perronet and, from a later period, John Pawson regarded the Anglican Church with contempt and looked forward to the day when Methodism would part company with what Pawson described as "that old withered harlot."⁴⁵

The view from the Methodist mainstream is, however, clouded. Many of Wesley's followers were barely literate and comparatively few letters and diaries have survived. Such sources that do exist, tend not to express strong feelings one way or another. It may well be that ordinary people did not equate demands for the sacraments with separation from the Church of England. The theological detail of such questions troubled the educated leadership, but it is doubtful whether they mattered a great deal to the majority of the brothers' followers.

It is interesting that John Wesley's ordinations for North America in 1784, often seen as the crucial stepping stone towards formal separation,⁴⁶ do not appear to have been particularly well-received in England. It is difficult in fact to find any section of Methodist opinion which was in favour. One itinerant described them as an "hodgepodge of inconsistencies"⁴⁷ while another was yet more strident in his criticism:

Who is the father of this monster, so long dreaded by the father of his people and by most of his sons... Years to come will speak in groans the opprobrious anniversary of our religious madness for gowns and bands.⁴⁸

Even John Pawson, that fervent supporter of separation, was against the ordinations along with the rest of Wesley's cabinet council of senior preachers. This negative reaction within the itinerancy was not tempered by time. Later in the decade as ordinations were carried out for Scotland and England, the body of preachers remained distinctly negative. In 1786, for example, when Wesley was urged to ordain a preacher for Yorkshire, a majority of Conference was against.⁴⁹

⁴⁵John Pawson to [Charles Atmore], February 13, 1786. *Letters of John Pawson*, ed. Bowmer and Vickers, 1:37.

⁴⁶Charles Wesley went so far as to obtain the legal opinion of Lord Chief Justice Mansfield to the effect that "ordination was separation." His brother typically refused to accept the truth even of that unequivocal statement from one of the highest legal officers in the land. Baker, 273.

⁴⁷Quoted by Tyerman, 2:439.

⁴⁸Tyerman, 2:439.

⁴⁹Rack, 519-520.

Reaction to the ordinations within lay Methodism at large was muted. One of the few places where we are told something of the response was Bristol. The New Room trustee Henry Durbin wrote to Charles Wesley in November 1784,⁵⁰ that many within the Bristol society were so appalled that some were reluctant to accept the sacraments from his brother’s hands. Durbin was a staunch supporter of Methodism’s Anglican links so his opinion was not necessarily representative, but there certainly does not appear to have been any general call within British Methodism for the American example to be followed.⁵¹

This confused state of public opinion was carried over into the decade that followed John Wesley’s death in 1791. There was, if anything, a conservative reaction as the first post-Wesley Conference stated its determination not to deviate from the Wesleyan legacy.⁵² In part this was a response to recent changes in the political situation. The terrors of the French Revolution, resulted in fear and suspicion within British society at large. Formal separation from the ecclesiastical establishment no longer seemed a good idea to men like Thomas Coke who in 1788 had advocated separation, but who three years later wrote as follows to the itinerant Joseph Benson:

I see a separation from the Established Church... pregnant with all the evils you mention. It would probably drive away from us and from God thousands of our People.. . More than this we should soon imbibe the Political Spirit of the Dissenters; nor should I be much surprised, if in a few years some of our people, warmest in politics, and coolest in religion, would toast... a bloody summer and a headless King.⁵³

Yet at the same time, there remained calls within the societies for greater freedom of action with regard to the sacraments. Among the societies where communion was administered by Methodist itinerants in the early 1790s were Bristol, Newcastle, and Manchester. This was despite the efforts of Conference to check such activities.⁵⁴

⁵⁰Henry Durbin to CW, ALS, November 4, 1784. Reference “Letters Chiefly to the Wesleys,” 2:74, MCA.

⁵¹There was a separation at Plymouth Dock in 1785 led by the itinerant William Moore. This apparently occurred because of the wish of the Methodists there to receive the sacraments from their own preachers. This, however, affected only a part of one society and may have been a response to the fact that there was no Anglican Church in Plymouth Dock itself and therefore no easy access to the sacraments.

⁵²“We engage to follow strictly the plan which Mr Wesley left us at his death.” *Conference Minutes*, 1 :246.

⁵³Thomas Coke to Joseph Benson, ALS, July 15, 1791. Reference PLP 28/7/22, MCA.

⁵⁴For example, “The Lord’s Supper shall not be administered by any person among our societies... for the ensuing year, on any consideration whatsoever, except in London.” *Conference Minutes*, 1792, 1:260. London was an exception because of the presence of Anglican clergymen who were working within the Methodist society and were able to administer communion by virtue of their orders.

The result of the sacramental controversies of the 1790s was a series of compromises. These culminated in the "Plan of Pacification" hammered out at the 1795 Conference. This decreed that communion, baptism and burial of the dead would only be administered with the consent of the majority of trustees, stewards, and leaders. Communion would be administered according to Anglican rites and never on Sundays where it was available in the parish church.⁵⁵ The Plan of Pacification ended the major disputes over the separation question as it appears to have been regarded by the contending parties as a fair compromise. In any case, worry over this decades-old problem was swiftly replaced by more pressing concerns over the question of democracy within the Connexion.

The Plan of Pacification has been regarded as marking the final defeat of Church Methodism.⁵⁶ There are certainly grounds for this view as society after society petitioned Conference for the rights on offer.⁵⁷ This was accompanied by a stream of anti-separatists leaving the movement, including important laymen like Henry Durbin of Bristol.⁵⁸ How many people left cannot be accurately determined but it appears to have been a problem throughout the country.⁵⁹ Significant secessions from Methodism back to the Church of England are known to have occurred in West Yorkshire,⁶⁰ Newcastle,⁶¹ Bristol, and Lancashire.⁶²

The strongest expression of pro-Anglican sentiment occurred in Ireland where in the three years from 1815 over 10,000 Wesleyans, constituting more than one third of the national membership, left the parent Connexion rather than receive the sacraments from Methodist preachers.⁶³ The rebels established the Primitive Wesleyan Methodist Connexion in 1818 which remained part of the Anglican Church until 1878. Special circumstances were, of course, applicable to Ireland, but it was still an unexpectedly vigorous reaction from a supposedly defeated Church Methodist party a quarter of a century after John Wesley's death.

The Church Methodist story did not come to an end in the early 19th cen-

⁵⁵Conference Minutes, 1792, 1:322-323.

⁵⁶Harrison, *The Separation of Methodism from the Church of England*, 56-57; Oliver Beckerlegge, "The Church Methodists," *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 34 (September 1963): 64; Thomas Percival Bunting, *The Life of Jabez Bunting* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans and Roberts, 1859), 1:86-87.

⁵⁷Harrison, 57.

⁵⁸John Pawson, "A Short Account of Mr Henry Durbin," *Methodist Magazine* 22, (1799): 487-489.

⁵⁹Durbin's obituary in the *Methodist Magazine* remarks that he was joined by "many other respectable persons, who had long been highly valued by us." *Methodist Magazine*, 488.

⁶⁰Sarah Crosby to Mary Fletcher, ALS, January 25, 1794. Reference MAM F12.5A/10, MCA.

⁶¹Stamp, *The Orphan House of Wesley*, 166.

⁶²Smith, 169-170.

⁶³F. Jeffery, "Church Methodists in Ireland," *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 34 (December 1963): 73-75.

ture. After 1795 the link with the Anglicans ceased to be a major consideration for the leadership, but at the society level, it was a different picture. Not all the Church-Methodists felt strongly enough on the issue to leave the connexion. The wealthy Bristol merchant James Ireland, for example, maintained a neutral stance in the controversies and continued to support both Anglican and Methodist causes.⁶⁴ John Horton remained a Church Methodist until his death in 1802 and attended Conferences as an executor of John Wesley’s will.⁶⁵ Mary Fletcher maintained the important Madeley society as a stronghold of Anglican Methodism until she died in 1815, after which her companion Mary Tooth continued the tradition for another generation.⁶⁶

Many Methodists continued to regard themselves as having a shared denominational identity for years after the Plan of Pacification. It remained the custom in several places such as Manchester, Macclesfield, and Bradford for Wesleyan congregations to collectively attend Anglican sacramental worship.⁶⁷ The local historian William Leary discovered that it was not uncommon in the 19th century for children to be baptized in both chapel and parish church.⁶⁸ In 1821 the Vicar of Bridgerule in Devon wrote of the local Methodists, “They all attend [the parish] Church as the House of God, and more regularly than those who have no such meeting”⁶⁹ As late as 1870 a few chapels were still refusing to allow preachers to administer the sacraments or permit worship during the hours of Anglican services.⁷⁰ Nor was this duality confined to the rank and file. In 1826, Adam Clarke, the first itinerant to be three times President of the Wesleyan Conference, described the Anglican Church as the “purest national Church in the world” and himself as a “thorough member of the Church of England.” He acknowledged that even after holding such high office in the Wesleyan movement, he would be prepared to seek Anglican ordination if he was allowed to preach wherever he pleased.⁷¹ It is evident that old habits and loyalties died hard.

An important aspect of this question and one that is often overlooked was stated by the Wesleyan minister George Osborn in 1842:

⁶⁴*Dictionary of Evangelical Biography*, ed. Lewis, 1 :594.

⁶⁵Stevenson, 569-570.

⁶⁶Mary Fletcher was the widow of the Anglican evangelical John Fletcher. After her husband’s death in 1785 she continued a ministry in Madeley that ignored the widening gulf between Methodism and the Church. She built a chapel, one of the trustees of which was the Anglican incumbent, and also had the right of appointing the curate of the parish. Fletcher-Tooth archive. Reference MAM Fl., MCA.

⁶⁷John Walsh, “Methodism at the End of the Eighteenth Century,” in *A History of the Methodist Church of Great Britain*, ed. Davies and Rupp, 1:288; Rose, “Cornelius Bayley and the Manchester Methodists,” 156.

⁶⁸Leary, 7.

⁶⁹Quoted by Arthur Warne, *Church and Society in Eighteenth-Century Devon* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1969), 109.

⁷⁰Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, Part 1, 2d ed., *An Ecclesiastical History of England*, vol. 5 (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1970), 370-371.

⁷¹Adam Clarke to George Wilkinson, ALS, January 27, 1826. Reference PLP 25.7.8, MCA.

The Methodists have never yet as a body, renounced all connexion with the Establishment. .. prohibited attendance on her services, nor made it binding upon their people to forsake her communion.. .Nor have they ever been excommunicated⁷²

If a Methodist wanted to enjoy the sacraments in both a Methodist and an Anglican setting, he or she was perfectly entitled to do so. The intricacies of the Church Methodist link were of little practical importance to people like the Wesleyans of Bridgerule. They continued to attend both church and chapel and suffered no crisis of conscience. Many of them had been raised Anglican and seem to have viewed their continued association with the Established Church almost as a birthright. Rather than signaling the defeat of the Church-Methodist party, the Plan of Pacification allowed Methodism to remain an inclusive organization, an important feature of the movement since the earliest days.

Inevitably over time, Methodism cemented its own identity as a separate denomination. For some of the Connexional leaders, the movement's Anglican parentage was a source almost of embarrassment and the lingering sentimental attachment felt by many of their brothers and sisters for the Church of England was not something to be mentioned in the Connexional histories. There was a curiosity regarding what Methodism might have achieved had she made an earlier break from the Church of England's apron-strings. Abel Stevens, writing at the apogee of the Victorian Wesleyan Methodist Church, made the following observation concerning events of the 1750s:

Had Methodism taken a more independent stand at this early period...it is the opinion of a few wise men that it might before this time have largely superseded the Anglican hierarchy, and done much more than it has for the dissolution of the unscriptural connection of the Church and State.⁷³

One of the interesting aspects of this question is the way that it illustrates the gulf that exists between the view from the Connexional center, which is the one that receives the most attention, and what was actually happening in the circuits. It appears that the issues attendant on separation simply passed by many members of the societies. They occupied the minds of important ministers like Benson, Bradburn, and Moore, but many people simply carried on worship in the way that best suited them. The Church Methodist tradition might have been largely ignored, as something that was somehow unworthy of this proud new denomination, but it did not disappear and contributed to Methodist identity. It is moreover an aspect that deserves fresh evaluation as Methodism and the Church of England explore common ground and draw inspiration from a joint heritage and the possibility of a shared future.

⁷²[George Osborn], *Modern Methodism, Wesleyan Methodism*, Wesleyan Tract for the Times V (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1842), 10.

⁷³Stevens, 1:314.