

**“THAT DEAR MAN OF GOD:”
EDWARD EVANS AND THE ORIGINS OF
AMERICAN METHODISM**

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The rise of American Methodism is largely the story of self-motivated laypeople whose experience of God’s redeeming grace compelled them to preach and organize societies, which later were linked together to form the earliest connection. Names that come readily to mind include Thomas Webb, Barbara Heck and, above all, Robert Strawbridge, whose independent, evangelical spirit neither required nor willingly accepted much direction from superiors.¹ The story of another of these earliest pioneers may now be told. Edward Evans of Philadelphia may well be the rightful possessor of the title “First American-born itinerant,”² but he may also have been much more. What remains of Evans’ life and legacy must be assembled from tantalizing scraps, including a 1770 autobiographical letter that he sent to John Wesley. Yet put together, these sources tell the story of a passionate and disciplined lay evangelist, whose independent spirit and itinerant labors parallel those of Strawbridge. Evans developed personal and spiritual connections with George Whitefield, Peter Böhler, Nicholas Von Zinzendorf and August Spangenberg, all of whom played important roles in the lives of the Wesleys. Moreover, as a member of the founding boards of trustees of Whitefield’s Academy (1740), the first Moravian Church in Philadelphia (1743) and Historic St. George’s (1769), Evans’ life opens a fascinating window into the dynamic, trans-denominational, and fluid spirit of early Methodism when it was still a movement, and not yet a church.

Evans’ Early Life

The date and place of Evans’ birth remain obscure, so it is not certain

¹ Robert Strawbridge (c.1731-1781), is usually credited with establishing the first societies that eventually became part of the organized Methodism in America. A lay preacher from Ireland, he emigrated to Frederick County, Maryland about 1760 and took up farming. He traveled widely, preaching and making converts, and built a log meeting house near his home about 1764. See Frederick E. Maser, *Robert Strawbridge, First American Methodist Circuit Rider* (Rutland, VT: Academy Books, 1983).

² After the recovery of the journal of Joseph Pilmore in the late nineteenth century, several historians concluded that Evans should be considered the first American-born itinerant, based on Pilmore’s references to Evans. See John Atkinson, *The Beginnings of the Wesleyan Movement in America* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1896), 145; John F. Hurst, *The History of Methodism*, 6 vols. (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1902), 4:106-108; and Francis Tees, *The Beginnings of Methodism in England and America* (Philadelphia, 1940), 89-90.

he was born on this side of the Atlantic, though that assumption, held by Methodist historians since the late nineteenth century, is supported by circumstantial evidence.³ The Evans family began emigrating to the colonies from Wales as early as 1683,⁴ and by the turn of the eighteenth century, various branches of the family were living in the Philadelphia area, including Willingboro, New Jersey, where the family of William Evans resided; William may have been the grandfather of our Edward.⁵

Edward Evans probably was born circa 1705-1710, based upon the dates his name begins to surface as an aspiring young merchant and community leader in Philadelphia. He was trained as a cordwainer, or maker of fine shoes, specializing in women’s shoes. If he was apprenticed sometime in his teens, he would likely be in his early twenties before becoming established in his own business. This must have been the case by 1732, when he became a shareholder in the Library Company of Philadelphia. The Library Company had been founded the previous year by Benjamin Franklin as an outgrowth of the “junto,” a group of ambitious, rising young men who gathered weekly to debate ideas and spur one another on to personal and professional growth. The minutes of the Library Company for December, 1732, record: “The Directors . . . have made inquiry concerning said Evans, who was a stranger to most of them, and having heard that he is honest and industrious and regardful of Books, they agreed to take him into partnership.”⁶

As early as 1736, notices under Evans’ name appear in the two prominent local news-papers, the *Pennsylvania Gazette* and the *American Weekly Mercury*, indicating that his home and evidently prosperous business were on

³ An exception is found in Dee Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000), 34, where she calls Evans “an Irish shoemaker who emigrated to the colonies in the 1730s,” but offers no documentation for this claim in her cited sources.

⁴ In 1683, John Evans settled in Lower Merion Township, later becoming a justice of the peace and state assemblyman. In 1797, Quaker preacher Hugh Roberts, on a trip to Wales, convinced 31 members of the Evans family to board the ship *Robert and Elizabeth*, which arrived in Philadelphia in July. See Dick Jones, ed., *The First 300: The Amazing and Rich History of Lower Merion* (Collingdale: Diane Publishing, 2000), 319; and J. Morris Evans, *Tapestry Threads: Jonathan and Rachel Cope Evans, Their Ancestors and Family*, (Gwynedd Valley, PA: J. M. Evans, 1993), 1.

⁵ There are two men named Edward Evans in colonial records in Philadelphia. The elder Edward (1679-1754) was a “joiner” or fine furniture maker of some note. That he was the uncle of our Edward Evans (who was a cordwainer) is asserted in the Name Index to “The accounts of Benjamin Franklin through 1747”, at <http://dspace.udel.edu:8080/dspace/handle/19716/2360>, compiled by Dr. J. A. Leo LeMay, Franklin’s biographer. According to *Philadelphia: Three Centuries of American Art* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1976), 13-14, the elder Edward was the son of William Evans, who settled in Willingboro in 1683; see also Cathryn J. McElroy “Furniture in Philadelphia: The First Fifty Years” in *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 13, *American Furniture and Its Makers* (1979), 61-80.

⁶ *Minutes of the Library Company of Philadelphia, 1731-1768* (Bound, handwritten volume at the Library Company of Philadelphia), entries for December 11 and December 14, 1732.

Front Street.⁷ On March 5, 1737, he married Rebecca Clark in the Friends Meeting House on Arch Street, where both were members. The couple would as many as six children, only one of whom, Nathaniel, would survive to adulthood.⁸ By 1740, Edward Evans was a prosperous, well-known local businessman and community leader, raising his family and associating with prominent people like Benjamin Franklin and Charles Brockden, the Colonial Recorder of Deeds.⁹ Evans' life soon would change dramatically, however, due to the arrival of a human whirlwind by the name of George Whitefield.

Whitefield and the Great Awakening

In the 1740s, America was in the midst of a great spiritual movement, later called the Great Awakening, which historians have credited with creating bonds between the colonies that provided the foundation for the American Revolution.¹⁰ The Great Awakening transcended denominational boundaries and, with its emphasis on heartfelt faith or "experimental religion," prepared the way for organized American Methodism later in the century. It was also part of a larger, transatlantic revival, which included pietistic groups in continental Europe led by such men as August Herman Francke and Nicholas von Zinzendorf, heirs of the Puritan movement in England and America, such as Isaac Watts and Jonathan Edwards, and reformers within high church Anglicanism, which included the Wesley brothers.¹¹

A vast communications network linked these disparate groups, supply-

⁷ In an advertisement that appeared in the *American Weekly Mercury* of March 17, 1736, Evans published an appeal to recover two gold rings and other items "lost or taken secretly" from his home, promising any persons who returned the goods that "there shall be nothing said less than thanks for their civility." In a notice in the February 26, 1740 edition of the same paper, he offers for sale the remaining two years' service of an apprentice in his care. He also appears in notices as executor of several estates.

⁸ *Philadelphia Monthly Meeting, Births and Deaths, 1677-1826; Marriages, 1672-1759, 1759-1814*; microfilm records at Swarthmore College. Children who died were listed with a parent's name. Among them are: William, son of Edward, (d. May 21, 1740); Jane, daughter of Edward (d. July 6, 1745), Rebecca, daughter of Edward (d. October 22, 1745); another Rebecca, daughter of Rebecca (d. June 8, 1748), and Margaret, daughter of Edward (d. April 2, 1761). Moravian records mention Edward's daughter Rebecca, noting her birth on September 19, 1747 and baptism on November 19 of the same year. An obituary for Nathaniel in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* of November 5, 1767 describes him as the "only and most dutiful son of his aged and affectionate parents."

⁹ Charles Brockden (1683-1769) was also a justice of the peace, and drew up the articles of agreement for the Library Company of Philadelphia for Benjamin Franklin. See *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, XII (1888), 185-189.

¹⁰ For example, in *A History of the American People* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 116, Paul Johnson calls the Great Awakening "the proto-revolutionary event, the formative moment in American history, preceding the political drive for independence and making it possible."

¹¹ See Susan O'Brien, "A Transatlantic Community of Saints: the Great Awakening and the First Evangelical Network" in *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 811-832; and John Walsh, "Methodism and the Origins of English-Speaking Evangelicalism," in Mark Noll, ed., *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles & Beyond, 1700-1990* (New York: Oxford, 1994).

ing them with news of “revival intelligence” from other quarters, and their leaders saw themselves as part of the same movement of the Spirit, despite theological differences. Thus, John Wesley recorded in his journal for October 9, 1738: “In walking [to Oxford] I read the truly surprising narrative of the conversions lately wrought in and about the town of Northampton in New England. Surely ‘this is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes!’”¹² He read the work of Jonathan Edwards, a congregational minister and Calvinist theologian whose works Wesley later would edit and republish, more than any other single author.¹³

The chief connecting link in this transatlantic Evangelical movement was the Rev. George Whitefield (1714-1770), who shuttled between England, Wales, Scotland and America in an itinerant career of more than thirty years. The chief catalyst of the Great Awakening in the colonies, Whitefield has been called America’s first national celebrity. His preaching services up and down the eastern seaboard were major events, promoted, among others, by Ben Franklin in his *Pennsylvania Gazette*.¹⁴ A member of the original Oxford Holy Club with the Wesleys, Whitefield made the first of seven journeys to America in 1738.

It was during his second and most spectacularly successful tour in 1739-1740, that Edward Evans fell under the spell of the “Grand Itinerant.” In the fall of 1739, Whitefield made his first dramatic appearance in Philadelphia, then the largest and most cosmopolitan city in the colonies, with about 13,000 residents. William Penn’s experiment in religious toleration had resulted in a diverse population of Quakers, Anglicans, Baptists, Presbyterians, Catholics and Jews. For much of the month of November, Whitefield preached in and around the city, attracting enormous crowds that cut across all ethnic, linguistic and religious lines. After a winter tour through the south, he was back in the city the following spring, and the effect of his preaching on the population was startling, even to such a confirmed skeptic as Benjamin Franklin, who recalled,

It was wonderful to see the change soon made in the manners of our inhabitants; from being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seem’d as if all the world were growing religious; so that one could not walk thro’ the town in an evening

¹² W. Reginald Ward, et al, eds. *The Works of John Wesley, Vol. 19: Journal and Diaries II* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 16.

¹³ Frank Baker, *From Wesley to Asbury* (Durham: Duke UP, 1976), 23, 71. This sense of commonality is also seen in the friendship and correspondence between Wesley and Virginia Presbyterian Samuel Davies, who succeeded Edwards as president of Princeton University. In 1754, Davies traveled to England with George Tennant seeking support for the college; they found a warm welcome and open purses among the Wesleyan Methodists. See Ian Murray, *Revival & Revivalism* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1994), 15; Wesley, *Works*, 21:21-22, 42-43, 84-85; and Mark Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (Downer’s Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2004), 175.

¹⁴ Franklin played no small part in Whitefield’s success and celebrity in America, publishing many books by, for and against the evangelist. See Frank Lambert, “Subscribing for Profits and Piety: The Friendship of Benjamin Franklin and George Whitefield” in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 50.3 (July 1993): 529-554.

without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street.¹⁵

It is unclear when Evans was converted. He could have met Whitefield on one of several occasions during the fall of 1739 when the evangelist reports attending the Quaker meeting, and Evans may well have been among the throng of 6,000—nearly half the population of the city—who turned out to hear him preach from the courtyard steps on November 8.¹⁶ Whatever the timing, however, it seems clear that Evans was, in the language of an earlier era, “soundly converted,” and he quickly became active in supporting Whitefield’s efforts to spread the revival. Frank Baker thought it “highly probable” that Evans was among a group Whitefield mentions in his journal on May 9, 1740: “Preached in the evening, and afterwards began a Society of young men, many of whom I trust, will prove good soldiers of Jesus Christ. Amen.”¹⁷ It may well be from this society that a group of trustees was formed to erect Whitefield’s preaching house and school (later called the Academy) on Fourth Street later that year.

By the spring of 1740, many churches were closed to Whitefield, who had offended established clergy by denouncing many of them as “unconverted.”¹⁸ A group of Whitefield’s supporters decided to erect a preaching house in Philadelphia that would always be available for his use, and also serve as a “Charity School for the Instruction of Poor Children Gratis in useful Literature and the Knowledge of the Christian Religion.”¹⁹ By June, a lot at Fourth and Arch Streets was located, and among the founding trustees was Edward Evans. The deed of trust charged the men with inviting “such Protestant ministers to preach the Gospel in the said House as they . . . shall judge to be sound in their Principles, Zealous and faithful in the Discharge of their Duty and acquainted with the Religion of the Heart and Experimental

¹⁵ See “Benjamin Franklin on George Whitefield” in *Annals of Eastern Pennsylvania* 2 (2005), 53-58.

¹⁶ *George Whitefield’s Journals* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 343; and Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 90. Even larger crowds were reported, including one of some ten to twelve thousand who gathered in April 1740 to hear Whitefield preach in Society Hill.

¹⁷ Baker, *From Wesley to Asbury*, 31.

¹⁸ Whitefield’s return to Philadelphia came amid a firestorm ignited by a sermon preached by Whitefield’s Presbyterian ally, Gilbert Tennant in March, “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry,” urging people to leave churches led by men not preaching the centrality of the new birth. Ben Franklin added fuel to the fire by printing one of Whitefield’s letters attacking the late, respected Archbishop of Canterbury, John Tillotson in the May 8, 1740, issue of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. See Stout, 95-97, 103.

¹⁹ Horace Mather Lippincott, *The University of Pennsylvania: Franklin’s College* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1919), 14-16.

Piety.”²⁰ The 100-foot long, 70-foot wide “New Building” was the largest structure in the city, and was not complete when Whitefield came to use it on November 9, recording in his journal: “Preached at eleven in the morning to several thousands, in a house built for that purpose since my departure It was never preached in before. The roof is not yet up, but the people raised a convenient pulpit and boarded the bottom.”²¹

The roof was still not in place the following June, when a notice appeared in the local papers, signed by Evans and four other trustees, announcing a date of June 15 for volunteers to gather at the site “in Order to Frame the roof of said building”²² The trustees discovered that the building was not only difficult to finish, but expensive to maintain, especially since it generally sat vacant whenever Whitefield was not in town. It would not be until after Benjamin Franklin joined the board and instigated a reorganization of its membership and mission that a school finally began; this marks the origin of today’s University of Pennsylvania. In part, this came about as a result of financial insolvency, but it also was partly due to conflict among the trustees. Within a few years of its founding, six of the original eleven trustees had become Moravians, prompting a fear that they intended to seize control of the property for the Moravian Church. Edward Evans was therefore likely at the center of this controversy, since he had united with the Moravian Church in 1743, and become its most prominent lay leader in Philadelphia.²³

Evans and the Moravians

By 1742, Evans increasingly felt drawn to the German Pietist group which had so profoundly influenced John and Charles Wesley. The Moravians seemed to embody a simple gospel spirituality Evans could not find else-

²⁰ J. A. Leo Lemay, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin, Vol. II: Printer and Publisher, 1730–1747* (Philadelphia: U. Pennsylvania P., 2006), 435-436; and Lippincott, 16-17. This statement of purpose is decidedly evangelical, if non-sectarian, and contradicts Benjamin Franklin’s recollection that the building would be open to any religious leader, “even if the Mufti of Constantinople were to send a Missionary to preach Mahometanism to us.” There were actually two boards of trustees; one held title to the land, and included Edmund Wooley, the builder of Independence Hall; John Coats, a brickmaker; John Howell, a tanner; and William Price, a carpenter. The second board “for Uses” consisting of Whitefield; his secretary, William Seward; John Stephen Benezet, a Philadelphia merchant; Thomas Noble, a Whitefield supporter from New York; Samuel Hazard, a local merchant; Robert Eastburne, a blacksmith; James Read, “gentleman;” Charles Brockden, “gentleman;” and Edward Evans.

²¹ Whitefield’s Journals, 489-490.

²² *American Weekly Mercury*, June 4-11, 1741.

²³ The six board members were John Coats, John Stephen Benezet, Thomas Noble, James Read, Charles Brockden and Edward Evans (the total of eleven does not include Whitefield or William Seward, who died in 1740). See *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 21 (1897), 501, and Jacobson, 9. The conflict and subsequent reorganization of the board was precipitated by attempts to replace Thomas Noble after his death, who, according to Franklin, “happen’d not to please his colleagues . . . [who] resolved to have no other of that sect.” Franklin, who was “of no Sect at all,” was chosen to keep any one denominational group from predominating and possibly “appropriating the whole to the Use the use of such Sect”—and no doubt also because he was a close friend of Whitefield. None of the board members were Moravians when it had been formed in 1740; it is not clear when Evans left the board. See LeMay, 437-438.

where. As he later wrote to Wesley, “I was much pleased with them in many respects: their seeming deadness to the world, their plainness and self-denial, and great simplicity engaged me to them very close.”²⁴ Evans reported that his first acquaintance among the Moravians was none other than Peter Böhler, who famously had counseled John Wesley to “preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith.”²⁵ Instrumental in leading both Wesley brothers to their spiritual breakthroughs in May, 1738, Böhler had left England for the colonies before either’s heart-warming experience. He arrived on St. Simons Island in late September, and spent the next eighteen months ministering in Georgia and South Carolina among Moravians, English settlers and slaves.

Early in 1740, Whitefield invited Böhler to accompany him to Philadelphia, arriving in the city on April 25. Evans undoubtedly met Böhler soon after, and must have regarded the Moravian leader as a co-laborer in the gospel with Whitefield. Indeed, that spring, Whitefield entrusted Böhler and his Moravians with managing 5,000 acres the evangelist purchased near the Forks of the Delaware (today’s Nazareth, Pennsylvania), intended for an orphanage and school for black children.²⁶

By early 1742, Evans met Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760), who in the 1720s had granted asylum to refugees from Bohemia and Moravia at his Saxony estate. The refugees included members of the *Unitas Fratrum* (Unity of Brethren) or Moravians, who traced their origins to fifteenth-century reformer John Hus. Zinzendorf led a revival of the Moravian movement at the settlement he built for them on his estate called Herrnhut (the Lord’s Protection). John Wesley had traveled there in 1738, in the afterglow of his Aldersgate experience, to meet Zinzendorf and learn more about Moravian practices.

Zinzendorf arrived in Pennsylvania in December, 1741, in part to lend on-site guidance to Moravian missionary efforts, especially after the collapse of their colony in Georgia. But his main object was to implement a remarkable ecumenical vision among what he called the “Babel” of competing and disorganized churches in Pennsylvania. Guided by the belief that true Christians are those who enjoy an intimate communion with Jesus Christ and therefore may be found in every denomination, the Count attempted to create the “Congregation of God in the Spirit,” an organization that would respect

²⁴ Edward Evans, Letter to John Wesley, December 4, 1770 (Methodist Collection, University of Manchester, England). All subsequent quotes from Evans are from the same source.

²⁵ Wesley, *Works*, 18:228. On Peter Böhler (1712-1775), see Albert F. Jordan, “The Chronicle of Peter Böhler” in *Transactions of the Moravian Historical Society* 22.2 (1971), 116-121; and Noll, *Rise of Evangelicalism*, 94-95.

²⁶ Böhler surveyed the land and arranged for construction of the building. After a falling out with Whitefield, the Moravians left the property, and purchased 500 acres near the fork of the Monocacy Creek and Lehigh River, thus founded Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. In 1741, financial troubles compelled Whitefield to sell his 5,000-acre tract to the Moravians. The structure Whitefield began still stands, known as the Whitefield House, and is home to offices of the Moravian Church. See Beth Pearce, *The Whitefield House, 1740-1987* (Nazareth: Moravian Hall Square Museum, 1987), and Whitefield’s *Journals*, 411.

the integrity of denominational structures and practices, but unite them under a common umbrella to bring about unity, renewal and strengthened witness.²⁷ Zinzendorf saw no need to establish Moravian churches in the state, intending his Moravians could be a vehicle for renewal among those that already existed. He accepted preaching engagements among German Reformed and Lutheran groups, and in the spring of 1742 accepted a call to become the pastor of the fledgling Lutheran congregation in Philadelphia.²⁸

Zinzendorf led the first meeting of what became known as the “Pennsylvania Synod” in Germantown in January, 1742. More than one hundred people attended, including Lutherans, Quakers, Reformed, Episcopalians, Mennonites, Dunkers, Schwenkfelders and more, in the hope that (as the minutes later recorded) “with the Saviour’s blessing they could do away with . . . the judging and condemning, gossiping, injuring and defaming.” In the first half of 1742, seven of these meetings were convened in various places, and Edward Evans was deeply committed to this effort to bring together Christian believers around a common experience of grace. Evans in fact hosted the seventh synod in his home June 13-14, which by now was on Race Street (then called Sassafras) above Second.²⁹

This first attempt in America to create an evangelical alliance soon foundered on the shoals of sectarian loyalties and theological conflict. Zinzendorf’s efforts and his theology were bitterly denounced in print by Rev. John Philip Boehm (1683-1749), pioneer preacher and organizer of the Reformed Church in America.³⁰ Opposition also came from Henry Melchior Muhlenberg (1711-1787), the great Lutheran leader and organizer, who also

²⁷ See John Joseph Stoudt, “Count Zinzendorf and the Pennsylvania Congregation of God in the Spirit, The First American Oecumenical Movement,” in *Church History* 9 (Dec. 1940), 366-380; and A. J. Lewis, *Zinzendorf, The Ecumenical Pioneer* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 138-150. Zinzendorf had been encouraged to believe that Pennsylvania was fertile ground for his vision to take root by letters he received from August Spannenberg, who in 1736 began meeting regularly with a trans-denominational leaders in Montgomery County, as the “Associated Brethren of Skippack.”

²⁸ Zinzendorf was raised in the Lutheran Church, and maintained (at least in his own mind) a dual membership and ordination in both the Lutheran and Moravian churches. See Lewis, 145, 147; and Paul T. Warner, “History of the First Moravian Church in Philadelphia Pa.” in *Transactions of the Moravian Historical Society* 13 (1942), 65, 68. The Lutheran Church in Philadelphia shared space in a converted barn on Arch Street with a German Reformed congregation.

²⁹ Stoudt, 371; the minutes of the seven Pennsylvania Synod meetings were published that year in German by Benjamin Franklin. They continued for years, ostensibly as an “undenominational” group, but in reality a Moravian body. A synod in Bethlehem in November, 1748, was declared the first official synod of the Moravian Church in America, by Bishop John de Watteville.

³⁰ See Clara A. Beck, “An Honest Effort to ‘Save Pennsylvania from the Moravians,’” in *Transactions of the Moravian Historical Society* 11 (1936), 189-198. See also William J. Hinke, *Life and Letters of Rev. John Phillip Boehm, Founder of the Reformed Church in America* (Philadelphia: Publication and Sunday School Board of the Reformed Church in the United States, 1916), 80-108. In the summer of 1742, Boehm published a ninety-six page volume entitled (in part) *Faithful Letter of Warning . . . Against the People known as Herrn-Hutters*, in which he criticized in detail each of the seven synod meetings held that year. Boehm’s UCC Church in Whippen Township, Montgomery County is named for Boehm, where he is also buried.

criticized Zinzendorf's theology, and also suspected that the Count was only interested in taking over the poorly organized and largely leader-less Lutheran congregations in America.³¹ Zinzendorf's imperious (if magnetic) personality did not help matters, and by the summer of 1742, the Pennsylvania Synod had been abandoned by most other churches. Growing hostility toward the Moravians prompted Zinzendorf, despite earlier statements, to charter a congregation in town. He acquired a lot on the north side of Race Street, between Second and Third, and erected a building facing a narrow connecting lane, which became known as "Moravian Alley" (today's Bread Street). Zinzendorf dedicated the building on November 25, 1742, and in January he officially organized the first Moravian Church in Philadelphia with thirty-four members.³²

As Evans wrestled with whether or not to join the Moravians, he evidently sent a letter to Whitefield asking his advice; this is inferred by a letter of Whitefield's, preserved in his published works, addressed simply to "Mr. E— of Philadelphia," but which from internal evidence suggests was in fact Edward Evans.³³ In the letter, Whitefield counsels Evans that "the M[oravia]n Brethren shew a better and milder spirit in the general; but many of their principles are as far from the truths of Jesus Christ as the east is from the west . . ." Whitefield took particular aim at Moravian perfectionist tendencies, remarking tartly, "I find that they are as weak and fallible as those whom they judge not to have drunk so deeply of the spirit of Christ . . ." Perhaps sensing Evans had grown disillusioned with him, Whitefield complained about those who "prejudice my friends against me," and cautions Evans, "when you are brought off from idolizing one creature, take care that you do not insensibly fall into idolizing another."

By now, however, Evans was already beginning to question the judgment of his mentor, later saying of the evangelist, "Mr. Whitefield, though a good man, yet in many respects [was] a weak and a vain man." Particularly disturbing to Evans was Whitefield's increasing public defense of Calvinist doctrines on predestination. Evans later wrote that Whitefield had

sunk entirely into what is called Calvin opinion, with which I was not satisfied, and

³¹ Muhlenberg arrived in Pennsylvania in late 1742, and his labors to establish the Lutheran Church in America were in no small measure motivated and lent urgency by the inroads Moravians had made among existing Lutheran congregations. See Leonard R. Riforgiato, *Missionary of Moderation: Henry Melchior Muhlenberg* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1980), 77-107.

³² Warner, 68. The congregation moved from this site to a new building at Franklin and Wood Streets in 1856, and again in 1892 to Fairmount Avenue near Seventeenth; First Moravian Church closed in 1966.

³³ My argument for regarding the letter, dated September 25, 1742, as directed to Evans is as follows. First, as a trustee of the academy, Evans was a key person with whom Whitefield would have corresponded. Indeed, the letter refers to trustee matters in a manner that suggests the recipient was a member. Second, the letter's main concern is to counsel its recipient about how to regard Moravianism, and caution him about uniting with them—exactly the question Evans was struggling with at the time. Whitefield remarks "I wish you may have not gone a step too far." By the end of the year Evans did unite with the Moravians. See *The Letters of George Whitefield, for the Period 1734-1742* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 444.

falling into acquaintance with the people called Moravians, they took with me, and thereby my affections became loose to Mr. Whitefield as they were increased to them . . . I blessed God for these people more than for any I had known. Surely said I, these are the people, and I will go with them.

And go with them he did. Evans was among the charter members of the First Moravian Church in Philadelphia organized in 1743, and was on the founding board of trustees.³⁴ From its beginning, the body was unique among Moravian churches. “The membership of the new congregation was composed of English, Germans and Swedes, . . . all of whom had been formerly connected with the Church of England, Friends, German or Swedish Lutheran, Reformed, Presbyterian or Roman Catholic denominations.”³⁵ Moreover, it was dominated at first by English converts, and the official church records, which still exist, were kept in English from 1743 to 1751. The congregation continued to exhibit the character of a trans-denominational movement, and records show that at various times George Whitefield and Gilbert Tennant were invited to share in its services, which attracted diverse groups of curious seekers.³⁶

Evans soon became its most prominent lay leader, “filling many important offices, and . . . held in high esteem.” A note in the church record reads, “Bro[ther] Evans is the best of the crew, because he strives to live in the Word and works.”³⁷ He also became a lay preacher, traveling widely in the Philadelphia region, as described by a nineteenth-century Moravian historian:

Mr. Evans . . . itinerated among the English in the rural districts surrounding the capital of the province, and in West Jersey and Delaware. His tours in West Jersey extended to beyond Trenton on the north, and through Delaware to Lewes on the south. He was intensely devoted to his evangelical labors, and so favorable was the impression he made, that crowds would assemble to hear him, and even the meeting-houses of the Quakers in West Jersey were offered for his use.³⁸

The entire family became immersed in the life of the Moravian Church. In April, 1747, Rebecca Evans was baptized at a service in Bethlehem, a handwritten account of which has been preserved and is in the collection at

³⁴ The original trustees were Samuel Powell, Joseph Powell, Edward Evans, William Rice, John Okley and Owen Rice. Abraham Ritter, *History of the First Moravian Church in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Hayes & Zell, 1857), 42.

³⁵ John W. Jordan, *Bits of History in the First Decade of the Moravian Church in Philadelphia, 1743-1749* (handwritten volume, 1892) in possession of the Moravian Historical Society, Nazareth, Pennsylvania; 3-4.

³⁶ John W. Jordan, *Bits of History*, 9, 22, 37-38; see also William H. Jordan, *Reminiscences of the First Moravian Church of Philadelphia, 1747-1901* (Philadelphia: 1901), 6.

³⁷ John W. Jordan, *Bits of History*, 25, 27.

³⁸ John W. Jordan, quoted by George W. Lybrand in “Rev. Edward Evans: Co Laborer with Rev. Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmoor, 1769-71” in *The Philadelphia Methodist*, December 1, 1888. The handwritten “Diary,” or minutes, of the First Moravian Church, first record Evans preaching “at the Ridge” in April, 1743, “from the words ‘The Lord Said unto his serv.t, ‘go into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in that my house may be filled.’ Luke 14:23.” The same record shows him preaching regularly in Neshaminy, and at other times at Skippack and as far as Burlington, New Jersey.

St. George's.³⁹ Edward and Rebeccah's son Nathaniel, born in 1742, was enrolled as a boy in an academy founded by the Moravians in Germantown. Records of the Moravian Church show Evans making visits to their headquarters in Bethlehem, and he became closely associated with August Spangenberg, who had met and spiritually challenged John Wesley in Georgia in 1735. Spangenberg baptized Evans' newborn daughter Rebeccah in the Philadelphia Church in 1747. As Evans later recalled "[the Moravians] fully engaged my time and attention amongst them for about twelve years."

Disillusionment and Separation

Evans soon became embroiled in controversy, however, as a division formed in the congregation between English members and the growing number of German immigrants. By 1747 there were two pastors, Thomas Yarrell who ministered primarily among the English, and Matthew Reutz among the Germans. Remembered as a "strict disciplinarian," Reutz disapproved of the way he believed Yarrell "humored" his English-speaking congregants, and indulged their "love of the world."⁴⁰ When Moravian authorities attempted to remove both men and send Abraham Reinke to act as sole pastor, conflict erupted which exposed long-simmering grievances. The Germans accused the English of embracing "a certain principle of false liberty," cloaking the sins of "half-mindedness, pride" and the desire to get rich quick. The English, with Evans as a leading spokesman, complained they were being forced to submit to a dictatorial "German yoke." They charged that Reutz was attempting to "dutchify" the congregation, giving preference to Germans in all important leadership roles, and even contended that Evans' son, Nathaniel, a student at the Moravian school in Germantown, was being discriminated against and denied adequate food.

August Spangenberg visited the congregation to impose Moravian discipline, and among other actions, relieved Evans and other outspoken dissenters of their leadership posts. Despite this action, Evans remained with the congregation;⁴¹ but grew increasingly disturbed by what he regarded as the arbitrary power exercised by Moravian leaders, and a church culture that

³⁹ *A Short Account of the Blessed Baptism Bestowed Upon Rebecca Evans of Philadelphia in Bethlehem the 27th of Apl. 1746* (handwritten document, in the archives at St. George's, Philadelphia). The handwritten account records the hymns and prayers that were used, as well as a lengthy synopsis of the sermon of a Moravian minister identified as "Brother Joseph."

⁴⁰ Sources for the description of the conflict are: Jacobsen, 13-14; John W. Jordan, *Bits of History*, 34-39; Lybrand "Edward Evans;" and *Relation of the Synod Held at Bethlehem in the year 1747 from 3/14 September to 8/19 September 1747* (Manuscript document at the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania). According to the latter, Moravian leaders upheld the enforcement of discipline. While acknowledging a tendency among the German members "to judge one another and to be offended at one another and by so doing forget the chief matter," nonetheless, they adjudged the English members as guilty of "insincere and carnal doings."

⁴¹ Moravian historical accounts say Evans withdrew at this time, but the church register clearly shows his daughter being baptized by Spangenberg the following November, and Evans' own account says he was a Moravian "about twelve years," which would indicate he remained with them until about 1754.

gave undue authority to charismatic personalities, especially Zinzendorf. As Evans later wrote:

The Count was a warm-spirited man, and having the absolute rule and direction over all their affairs, did as came to his mind, and all his dogma and notion[s], of which he was ever full of coming over successively, must be implicitly observed and followed, as the Bulls or Decretals of the Pope. These things with grief I often noticed, and many Jesuitical evasions and tricks sometimes played on one or another, [and they] made me often stare and think ‘surely I was mistaken; these were not the people I expected.’

Discouraged and “sick of disappointment,” Evans withdrew from the Moravians about 1754, intending to “retire and spend the remainder of my days in a separated way, [and] cleave to Jesus only.” But the call of gospel preaching—and perhaps also appeals by those whom he had served in his itinerant travels—were too strong to resist. “My Master called me out again,” he testified, “and in a more public manner than heretofore.” Within a few years, he had resumed his itinerant preaching tours “[outside] the city mostly. . . into the lanes and highways of the country to compel sinners to come in. . . .”

Independent Evangelist

For more than a decade, Evans engaged in an independent, itinerant ministry of evangelism. While no record of Evans’ labors exists, nonetheless traces remain of his work, which suggest that it was far-ranging and effective.

In his 1859 *History of the Rise of Methodism in America*, John Lednum indicates that one of Evans’ converts was William Demour of Berks County. Demour organized and shepherded a society, which in 1773 erected a stone meeting house that became known as Old Forest Chapel. After Demour’s death in 1776, the congregation began to dwindle, until the early Methodist preachers added it to their circuit and revived it. Old Forest Chapel is the direct ancestor of today’s St. Paul’s United Methodist Church in Geigertown.⁴²

Another possible preaching place for Evans may have been in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, where a society had been formed under the leadership of the Supplee family. The group erected a chapel in 1770, which remained independent for years, but welcomed the early Methodist itinerants. Though no explicit reference links Evans to the society’s founding (its origin is obscure), it is noteworthy that Evans and Joseph Pilmore dedicated the chapel together on October 13, 1770, with Pilmore recording in his journal, “Mr. Evans gave an excellent Exhortation, and I concluded with solemn prayer.”⁴³ In the 1780s, Supplee’s Chapel came fully under the Methodist system and

⁴² See John Lednum, *History of the Rise of Methodism in America* (Philadelphia, 1859), 240; also Anna H. Witman, *The Church in the Forest* (Booklet, 1973). A trustee named in the 1780 deed was Evan Evans, who may have been a relative of Edward’s.

⁴³ Frederick E. Maser and Harold T. Maag, eds, *The Journal of Joseph Pilmore, Methodist Itinerant* (Philadelphia: Message, 1969), 62. The area was known as Metchin or Metuchen Hill during the Colonial and Revolutionary period.

is today's Bethel Hill United Methodist Church.

It seems that in the mid-eighteenth century, independent societies and chapels popped up in various places as outgrowths of the Great Awakening. Various referred to as "Methodists" or "New Lights," these chapel societies welcomed evangelical preachers of various stripes, and eventually either faded or were folded into a denomination. In New England, some became Congregational churches, while elsewhere they affiliated with the Methodists, as in the cases of Old Forest and Supplee's.⁴⁴ One such independent chapel society documented to have been on Edward Evans' preaching circuit was in Greenwich Township, Gloucester County, New Jersey.

In 1766, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) sent a young priest named Nathaniel Evans to establish an Anglican mission in the area. He was none other than the son of Edward Evans. Nathaniel was an early student of the University of Pennsylvania, where he made a name for himself as a promising young poet, and came under the wing of Dr. William Smith, the school's first president (then called provost). As Smith's biographer later noted, Evans was "a favorite pupil of Dr. Smith, who regarded him with great interest as likely to be useful in the Church, an ornament to American Letters, and a pride to his family and friends."⁴⁵ It is likely that Dr. Smith influenced Evans to take orders in the Anglican Church, which he did in London in September, 1765. Nathaniel nonetheless reveals something of the "Methodistic" influence of his father in his sole surviving sermon, "The Love of the World incompatible with the Love of God:"

'Tis our duty to wage war against vicious habits, to endeavor, with the aids of God's Grace, after an upright and blameless conduct, and to convince the world, by the force of our example, that our religion is more than a name, and that we are really in love with the beauty of holiness.⁴⁶

Nathaniel began his ministry in New Jersey in February 1766, in a parish he described in a letter as "thirty miles long and sixty miles wide and occupied by 6,000 souls, white and black, the greater part of which were Quakers, and the rest equally divided between the established Church, Swedish Lutherans and Presbyterians."⁴⁷ The younger Evans labored in his mission for some eighteen months, and successfully gathered several small congregations, including one in Greenwich Township, which met for worship in various homes. In his off-time, Evans continued to pursue his other vocation

⁴⁴ Tees, *Beginnings*, 75. This may also be the origin of the old Stone Chapel in Leesburg, Virginia (which is speculated to have been founded by Robert Strawbridge), a church and graveyard of unspecified denomination in 1766, and two years later referred to as a "Methodist Meeting House." See Baker, *From Wesley to Asbury*, 35.

⁴⁵ Horace W. Smith, *Life and Correspondence of Rev. William Smith, D.D. First Provost of the College and Academy of Philadelphia* 2 vols. (Philadelphia: S. A. George & Co., 1879), 1:479.

⁴⁶ *Sermons on Various Occasions*, 12; bound with Nathaniel Evans, *Poems On Several Occasions with Some Other Compositions* (Philadelphia: John Dunlap, 1772).

⁴⁷ Nathaniel Evans, Letter to SPG, London, quoted in Hazel Simpson et al., *The History and Records of Saint Peter's Episcopal Church at Berkley and Clarksboro* (Woodbury: Gloucester County Historical Society, 1974), 2.

as a poet, and corresponded with noted colonial writer, Elizabeth Graeme Ferguson (1737-1801), who wrote a poem about the young minister:

How happy is the country Parson’s lot?
 Forgetting Bishops, as by them forgot;
 To all his Vestry’s votes he sits resign’d
 Of manners gentle, and of temper even,
 He jogs his flocks, with easy pace, to heaven.
 In Greek and Latin, pious books he keeps;
 And while his clerk sings Psalms, he—soundly sleeps.⁴⁸

Nathaniel Evans fell ill in the fall of 1767, and died on October 29, just twenty-five years old. He was buried in the graveyard at Christ Church, Philadelphia. Notices in the city’s newspapers describe the wide esteem in which the young man was held, and made a point to mention that his casket was carried by “clergy of different denominations.”⁴⁹ After Nathaniel’s death, the SPG did not immediately send a successor, and the patchwork congregation in Greenwich invited his father Edward to preach and minister among them. As Pilmore later testified, the people became “exceedingly fond of him,” and in November, 1770, acquired a lot near the Mantua Creek, in today’s Mount Royal along the King’s Highway, for a church and cemetery. The property was deeded to twelve trustees, with Edward Evans listed first. There, as Pilmore later wrote, “the people . . . built a pretty little chapel and insisted on having him [Evans] as their minister.”⁵⁰

In that same month of November, 1770, a new SPG missionary named David Griffith finally arrived, and reported that the congregation at Gloucester had soured on the Anglican Church, where “not more than three families . . . [have] continued steadfast in the interest of the established Church.” Griffith explained, “this revolt seemed to have been occasioned by the frequent visits of the late Mr. Evans’ father and other Methodist preachers among them.”⁵¹ The chapel society in Greenwich continued to welcome Methodist preachers for several years, including at least five visits by Francis Asbury.⁵² In his 1860 history of New Jersey Methodism, John Atkinson, though ignorant of Edward Evans, concluded that the chapel in Greenwich should be considered “the first Methodist Meeting House or Church in New Jersey.”⁵³

About this time, a Swedish Lutheran minister named Nicholas Collin

⁴⁸ Evans, *Poems on Several Occasions*, 149.

⁴⁹ *Pennsylvania Chronicle*, November 2, 1767, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, November 5, 1767; also in a 1768 letter to the SPG, Rev. Jonathan Odell wrote that Nathaniel’s “memory [is] highly esteemed by people of all denominations, wherever he was known.” See Edgar Legare Pennington, *Nathaniel Evans, A Poet of Colonial America* (Ocala, FL: Taylor Printing Company, 1935), 26-27.

⁵⁰ Pilmore, 104-105; and Simpson, 2. The site of the chapel is marked by today’s Colonial or St. Peter’s Cemetery.

⁵¹ Simpson, 4. Griffith, unable to support himself, left in April, 1771; he later was elected an Episcopal bishop in Virginia.

⁵² Pilmore, 106, relates traveling with Asbury to the chapel on October 29, 1771. In his journal, Asbury also records preaching there on May 14, May 24, June 4 and July 14, 1772.

⁵³ John Atkinson, *Memorials of Methodism in New Jersey* (Philadelphia: Perkinpine and Higgins, 1860), 144-145.

came to America and began to preach among the Swedish population in the area. Collins makes reference to Evans and the congregation in Greenwich. Though disdainful of Methodist preachers as “course and insolent,” his description of Evans contains something of a backhanded compliment:

These Methodists, together with other people, half Quakers, members of the Church of England, and also a few Swedes . . . built a meeting house during the time I was assistant pastor Their pastor was a good old simple-minded man, who had not been ordained nor of any particular religion. Within a short time they quarreled, and the others compensated the Methodists for their expenses, and got a missionary from the Episcopal Church, who officiated in this congregation and two others [F]rivolous people in this country run from one sect to the other.⁵⁴

Collin refers to SPG missionary Robert Blackwell, who came to Gloucester in November 1773, and won the majority of people back to the Anglican Church. The following June the managers of the mission chapel passed a rule declaring that “no person whatsoever [may] preach in this house except the clergy of the church of England,” and that the body be established as an Anglican Church. Evidently there was some negotiation with Thomas Rankin on behalf of members who were Methodists, and an agreement was reached that the Methodist dissenters would have their contributions to the chapel refunded to them.⁵⁵ Today’s St. Peter’s Episcopal Church of Clarksboro is a direct descendant of the Chapel society, as is Zion United Methodist Church of Clarksboro.⁵⁶

Yet another enduring fruit of Evans’ ministry in Greenwich was in the person of John Early, one of the earliest Methodists in the state of New Jersey. Early emigrated from Ireland as a lapsed Methodist in 1764, and settled in Greenwich Township. Though the earliest sources are cloudy, Early evidently was part of the mixed chapel society in Greenwich, and was re-awakened to an active Methodist piety about 1768, almost certainly through the agency of Edward Evans. Early would go on to serve as a class leader for forty years, lend his name to the founding boards of trustees of a number of area Methodist Churches, and give a son to the itinerant ministry of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Rev. William Early.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Amandus Johnson, *The Journal and Biography of Nicholas Collin, 1746-1831* (Philadelphia: The New Jersey Society of Pennsylvania, 1936), 225-226.

⁵⁵ Simpson, 6-9. In his unpublished journal, Thomas Rankin records preaching “in Greenwich Chapel” on August 17, 1774. The Methodists had apparently left the premises by November 21 when he records holding quarterly conference “at Brother Chew’s near the head of Mantua Creek.” Chew was one of the original trustees of the property listed on the 1770 deed with Edward Evans, and later one of the dissenters who left. Rankin also mentions preaching at Jesse Chew’s on September 21, 1775. *Transcript of the Dairy of Thomas Rankin*; original in possession of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary.

⁵⁶ On Zion United Methodist Church see Frank Bateman Stanger, *The Methodist Trail in New Jersey* (Camden: I. F. Huntzinger, 1961) 138-139; and “History of Zion Methodist Church, Clarksboro, NJ” at <http://nj.searchroots.com/EG/zion.htm>.

⁵⁷ Atkinson, 25-26; see also Charles Earley, “John Early: Pioneer Methodist in New Jersey,” in *The Historical Trail* (1963), 5-7; and Robert Steelman, *What God Has Wrought, A History of the Southern New Jersey Conference of the United Methodist Church* (Rutland, VT: Academy Books, 1986), 11.

Evans the Methodist

By 1769, Evans had united with the early Wesleyan connection in America. That year, in response to urgent pleas from colonial Methodists, John Wesley sent two missionaries charged with organizing the fledgling Methodist societies dotting the eastern seaboard into what the London minutes of 1770 record as circuit number 50—“America.” Joseph Pilmore and Richard Boardman arrived in Philadelphia in late October, 1769, and were surprised to discover a Methodist society organized two years earlier by Captain Thomas Webb. The society was meeting in a tavern on Loxley Court, and numbered about 100 members, among them Edward Evans. Within a week of his arrival, Pilmore records meeting Evans, on October 27, 1769: “I spent an hour in the morning very comfortably with Mr. Edward Evans, an old Disciple of Jesus, and one who has stood fast in the faith for near thirty years. He is a man of good understanding, and sound experience in the things of God, and his conversation was both entertaining and profitable.”⁵⁸ Evidently already a leader in the society, Evans is named as a member of the founding board of trustees in the deed for the St. George’s building on Fourth Street, acquired later that year.⁵⁹

Evans, however, may have played a much larger role in the origin of St. George’s. The society’s first class leader was James Emerson, an Irish immigrant and “dealer in orange and lemon shrub” who lived on Market Street, and was another convert of Whitefield’s from 1740. A tantalizing scrap of tradition asserts that Emerson, aided by Evans, had held together a small fellowship group who called themselves “Methidies” for decades, which became the nucleus of the society organized by Webb in 1767.⁶⁰ If so, it is safe to assume that Evans, the itinerant gospel preacher, would have exercised his gifts among this group that met so near his home.

As Pilmore later wrote, “When Providence brought Mr. Boardman and me to America, he [Evans] united with us most heartily, and was made a most useful instrument amongst us.”⁶¹ Evans continued his itinerant travels, and also shared regularly in the preaching responsibilities at St. George’s. Pilmore records several occasions where he was present for a service where Evans was the preacher, including this comment from Sunday, March 3, 1771: “Brother Evans preached in the morning with great sweetness of spirit.

⁵⁸ Pilmore, 24.

⁵⁹ St. George’s was purchased November 23, 1769, by Miles Pennington, representing the Methodists, but not conveyed by deed to the trustees until September 14, 1770. In addition to Evans, the other trustees named are Richard Boardman, Joseph Pilmore, Thomas Webb, Daniel Montgomery, John Dowers, Edward Beach, Robert Fitzgerald and James Emerson. See Francis Tees, *The Ancient Landmark of American Methodism or Historic St. George’s* (Philadelphia: Message, 1951), 44-45. To this day, a small wooden bench known as the “Cordwainer’s Bench” is in the museum of St. George’s, held by tradition to have belonged to one of the original trustees.

⁶⁰ Tees, *Beginnings*, 89-90; and Albert W. Cliffe, *The Glory of Our Methodist Heritage* (Philadelphia: 1957), 107. Frank Baker, in *From Wesley to Asbury*, 32, says Emerson and Evans were both probably in the society mentioned by Whitefield on May 9, 1740.

⁶¹ Pilmore, 105.

He truly loves the Saviour; hence he can always speak to his praise.” Two weeks later Pilmore again heard Evans on a Sunday morning, after which he calls his older colleague, “that Dear Man of God.”⁶²

For his part, Evans was delighted with the two young English preachers; “Brother Boardman and brother Pilmore . . . are very dear to me, and much beloved,” he wrote in 1770; “I find them truly sincere, and heartily concerned for the good cause. Their fervency and labour therein greatly delights me. The Lord is with them, and owns and blesses them greatly to the people.”

Evans’ association with the fledgling Methodist connection rekindled a long-suppressed desire to open a correspondence with the movement’s leader. In November of 1770, he wrote a lengthy autobiographical letter to John Wesley.⁶³ He opened by saying that he had felt a spiritual kinship with the Wesley brothers from the time of his conversion thirty years before, and had wanted even then “to be known to you by cordial correspondence of mutual love.” However, he had been dissuaded, first by Whitefield and later by Bohler, both of whom suggested that Wesley was not theologically sound. “But now, behold, when I least expected it, what God has done—inclined your heart to send two dear young men from your conference to us, by which means my old desire is renewed, as I now perform what I long intended, namely of writing to you and acquainting you that I am one with you in the Lord.”

Evans describes his spiritual journey, and his happy union with Pilmore and Boardman, assuring Wesley, “I . . . do what I can in encouraging them and strengthening their hand in the Lord.” He declares that “many doors are opened and many more are opening for the preached word,” and finally came to the point of his letter: to encourage Wesley to visit America. “This I can assure you, that you will be received with the greatest love by the generality of the people, for well I know the mind of the people toward you. They love your name.” Evans was lending his own voice to similar appeals for help coming from Pilmore and Boardman, who were overwhelmed with the work in New York and Philadelphia, and unable to press on to more distant points. With no additional English preachers willing to answer the call to go, Wesley was already considering a return to the colonies, despite his sixty-seven years. He wrote in December, 1770, “If I live till spring, and should have a clear pressing call, I am ready to embark for America.”⁶⁴ Evans’ letter must have strengthened Wesley’s resolve to go, but two men finally stepped forward: Richard Wright would turn out on balance to be a disappointment;

⁶² Pilmore, 80-81. Pilmore notes Evans taking the lead in Sunday services on two other occasions as well, on August 19, 1770 and on May 12, 1771. The “Steward’s Book” of St. George’s also records several instances of Evans’ preaching.

⁶³ The letter, dated December 4, 1770, is preserved in the John Rylands University Library at the University of Manchester, England. A transcription was published by Frank Baker in the “Discovery” column of *Methodist History* 14 (October 1975): 56-59. A notation in Wesley’s hand indicates that he replied to Evans in a letter dated February 7, 1771, though this response has not survived.

⁶⁴ Baker, *Wesley to Asbury*, 92.

but the other, Francis Asbury, would prove a worthy alternative to Father Wesley himself.

Evans’ glad association with the Wesleyan Methodists, however, would not last long. The congregation in Greenwich, which had built its chapel under his leadership, prevailed upon him to move there in the summer of 1771 to assume full pastoral responsibilities, but as Pilmore reports, “[a]fter he had been with them a few months, he took the fall-fever, which soon brought him to his grave.”⁶⁵ Edward Evans died October 12, 1771; upon hearing the news the next day, Joseph Pilmore recorded in his journal, “My heart was greatly affected at the loss of my Friend,” whom he described as “full of faith, and full of obedient love.” On Monday, Pilmore preached Evans’ funeral service at St. George’s to a “crowded Church.” The next day Pilmore rode through a steady rain to Greenwich to preach a second funeral sermon to Evans’ “poor disconsolate flock.”⁶⁶ A notice of Evans’ death appeared in the *Pennsylvania Chronicle* of October 21, 1771, describing him as “a Gentlemen of exemplary Piety and Virtue,” and noted his burial in the Quaker cemetery on Arch Street.⁶⁷

In 1772, a year after Edward’s death, a book of poems written by his son Nathaniel was published by his mentor, Dr. William Smith. One of the poems is entitled “To Benjamin Franklin, Esq; LLD, Occasioned by Hearing him play on the Harmonica.” Among the subscribers who financed the publication by ordering advance copies were many leading citizens of the region. They included Benjamin Franklin’s wife Deborah; Benjamin and Deborah’s son William, then governor of New Jersey (three copies); future Revolutionary War general Anthony Wayne; and, down for two copies, the friend and colleague of Nathaniel’s father, Joseph Pilmore.⁶⁸

Methodism as a Movement

Evans’ journey from follower of Whitefield to Moravian to independent preacher and finally to Methodist might appear to indicate an unstable personality. Yet, considered in his own context, Evans probably thought of him-

⁶⁵ Pilmore, 105.

⁶⁶ Pilmore, 105.

⁶⁷ The date of Evans’ death is recorded as October 12 in the *Pennsylvania Chronicle* notice, and his interment in the Friends Cemetery the next day is confirmed in *Philadelphia Monthly Meeting, Births and Deaths, 1677-1826*, 294. Evans died without a will, and the record of his estate, valued at more than £569, is recorded in *Philadelphia Wills and Administrations*, file 34, book H, page 97 (1771), and was inventoried by Lambert Wilmer, another early leader of St. George’s.

⁶⁸ Richard Boardman is also listed for one copy. Evans, *Poems on Several Occasions*, xii, xvi, xxii and xxvi. Rebeccah Evans survived her husband by thirteen years. The *Philadelphia Monthly Meeting, Births and Deaths, 1677-1826*, 316, records the date of her burial on January 1, 1785, probably the day after her death, and includes the notation “ab[ou]t 80 y[ears], Widow of Edward.” A record of her will is preserved in *Abstracts of Philadelphia County Wills, Book T: 1784-1787*, page 535, recorded August 17, 1787, and notes that her grandfather was named William Clark, and her sister Elizabeth Clark. Pilmore records visiting with Rebeccah in Greenwich several weeks after Edwards’s death in 1771.

self as a fairly consistent “Methodist” all along. In the mid-eighteenth century, the term Methodist was used to describe those who were seeking and promoting “experimental Christianity”—which was less concerned about denominational distinctives, than with (in Wesley’s term) the “essentials” of Christian faith common to any truly Christian group, with a central focus on the heart, or personal experience of justification and assurance.

Whitefield was regularly referred to as a “Methodist;” a term that was similarly applied in polemical contexts to Jonathan Edwards (a Congregationalist) and Gilbert Tennant (a Presbyterian). Perhaps he had the peripatetic Edward Evans in mind in 1764 when SPG missionary Thomas Barton, after a decade of service in Pennsylvania, wrote: “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.”⁶⁹ It was possible in the mid-eighteenth century to speak of “Calvinist Methodists,” because in the early days the commonality was the emphasis on new birth and assurance, coupled with an earnest seeking after holiness. Indeed, as historian Dee Andrews has noted, into the late 1760s, when Americans heard the term “Methodist,” they would have thought of George Whitefield.⁷⁰

Thus Methodism was perceived as a movement transcending denomination, which in the popular mind included Whitefield and the Moravians, as well as the Wesleys. Indeed, Evans later wrote Wesley that from the very start of his newfound faith in 1740, he had felt a spiritual kinship to John and Charles. When the Moravians came to Philadelphia with a similar emphasis on heart-felt faith and assurance, it seemed to Evans (and others) all to be part of the same movement. Similarly, when Pilmore and Boardman arrived in 1769, Evans saw them as kindred spirits, seeking to foster revival across denominational lines—as Pilmore made explicit when he publicly announced the purpose and design of Methodism in America on December 3, 1769:

1. That the Methodist Society was never designed to make a Separation from the Church of England or be looked upon as a Church.
2. That it was at first and is still intended for the benefit of all those of every Denomination who being truly [*sic*] convinced of sin, and the danger they are exposed to, earnestly desire to flee from the wrath to come⁷¹

There was another reason Evans was drawn to the Moravians: there was simply nowhere else to go. In the words of a Moravian historian, Whitefield “lacked the talent for administration and organization necessary to establish and maintain congregations, and many of his followers later joined Moravian and other established churches.”⁷² In contrast to Whitefield, Wesley’s genius lay in organizing his converts into classes, societies and circuits to nurture growth and discipleship. These were designed as adjuncts to the established

⁶⁹ C. F. Pascoe, *Two Hundred Years of the S.P.G.* (London, 1901), 37.

⁷⁰ Andrews, 31, 38.

⁷¹ Pilmore, 29.

⁷² Jordan, 129.

churches, to which people often already belonged. In the colonies of the 1740s, however, no Wesleyan societies yet existed. So when Whitefield left town, converts like Evans were faced with returning to the churches of their origin, which in many cases they thought spiritually lifeless.⁷³

In fact, the Moravians envisioned themselves as playing a role analogous to that of Wesley’s societies in England: as a vehicle of renewal for established churches. This idea was behind Zinzendorf’s failed “Pennsylvania Synod” experiment in 1742. As late as 1754, Böhler instructed Moravian pastors not to baptize the children of persons who were members of another denomination, but instead to encourage them to stay involved in their home church as well as attend the Moravian services.⁷⁴ Of course, the idea of the Moravians functioning as *ecclesiola in ecclesia* was a harder sell in America since they, unlike Wesley’s societies in England, *were* an established church, with ordained ministers, bishops and a sacramental life. But it is noteworthy that Evans united with its decidedly irregular Philadelphia congregation, and only became disillusioned after Moravian authorities clamped down.

It is worth noting that Pilmore preached Evans’ funeral service at St. George’s on October 14, 1771; just two weeks later, Francis Asbury arrived to preach his very first sermon in the new world from the same pulpit. It is interesting to speculate on how Asbury and Evans might have gotten along. We do know that Asbury was critical of Pilmore for being lax about discipline, and had difficult relations with Strawbridge, who famously remained an independent spirit (some might say a loose cannon), unwilling to submit to the authority of the fledgling connection, especially as it was embodied in Asbury. For his part, Asbury did not bother to disguise his relief at hearing of the Marylander’s death in 1784.⁷⁵ It may well be that Evans might have had yet another disillusionment as the developing Methodist connection, and later church, sought to reign in and impose discipline upon its preachers.

Legacy/Conclusion

What then is the legacy of Edward Evans? I would suggest that he de-

⁷³ Evans left the Quakers, and likely shared Whitefield’s assessment: “I fear numbers amongst them, as amongst us, can give no other reason why they are Quakers than that their fathers were so before them. I say this, because I find little of the Divine Power stirring amongst them; and most of them are too stiff and rigid about external things” Whitefield’s *Journals*, 387.

⁷⁴ J. R. Weinlick, “Colonial Moravians, Their Status Among the Churches,” in *Pennsylvania History* 26 (July 1959): 219-220; and David A. Schattschneider, “Moravianism as an American Denomination” in *Methodist History* 24.3 (April 1986): 157-170.

⁷⁵ In his journal, Asbury said of Strawbridge’s death, “I am inclined to think the Lord took him away in judgment, because he was in a way to do hurt to his cause.” Elmer S. Clark, ed., *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), I:411. A description of the Greenwich Chapel survives which specifically mentions a communion table; as the outgrowth of an Anglican mission this is not surprising; but since it was built for Edward Evans, it does raise the interesting question of whether the lay evangelist took it on himself to administer the sacraments—as Strawbridge did, precipitating a crisis in early pre-church Methodism which lay at the heart of the conflict between him and Asbury.

serves a place alongside that of Robert Strawbridge as a founder and pioneer of American Methodism, whose labors contributed directly to the formation of an organized Wesleyan connection in the new world. Consider that Evans in the Philadelphia region was engaged in exactly the same kind of activity that Strawbridge was pursuing in Maryland, and at the same time. Both men were self-motivated, self-directed itinerant evangelists, who were working outside of any organized, accountable network for years to promote the cause of “heart-religion.” Both had undergone Methodist conversion experiences, Strawbridge under Wesley’s preaching in Ireland before emigrating, and Evans under that of Whitefield in America, and both preached a gospel with an Arminian emphasis on the universality of grace. Both traveled widely, nurturing converts and societies that continued to flourish after their demise. And both quickly associated themselves with the first efforts to create an organized connection of Wesleyan preachers and societies in the late 1760s. A major difference between them was simply that Evans died so soon afterward—and before any minutes were kept—that the memory of his contributions quickly faded.

In his 1810 history of American Methodism, Jesse Lee wrote that it was due to the labors of George Whitefield that “the way was opened for our preachers to travel and preach the gospel in different parts of the country. And in most places where the people were lively in religion, they were fond of having itinerant preachers to visit them.”⁷⁶ As one whose own itinerant travels were an extension of Whitefield’s, providing regular preaching in the Philadelphia region for years, Evans surely deserves recognition as another who prepared the way.

There is, of course, the legacy of at least five churches still in existence today (St. Peter’s Episcopal, Clarksboro United Methodist Church, St. George’s, St. Paul’s, and Bethel Hill) which owe something of their earliest establishment to Evans’ ministry. There is his role, however unintended, in laying the groundwork for the University of Pennsylvania as an original trustee of Whitefield’s Charity School—not to mention the unnumbered souls whom his preaching touched with the transforming grace of God. And if, as Proverbs 22:1 insists, “A good name is more desirable than great riches,” there is the unanimous testimony across all lines—Anglican, Moravian, Swedish Lutheran, Methodist and secular—of what Pilmore called Evans’ “unspotted character.”⁷⁷

But perhaps where Edward Evans’ life can still speak most powerfully to us today is by the challenge it poses to consider afresh what, at the core, Methodism is all about—and by extension, where we might focus efforts for renewal. If we conceive of Methodism, at its base, in terms of it being a church—an ecclesiastical organization—then our attention will likely focus on institutional and ecclesial issues, such as defining the orders of ministry or

⁷⁶ Jesse Lee, *A Short History of the Methodism The United States of America* (Baltimore: Magill and Clime, 1810), 38.

⁷⁷ Pilmore, 105.

the meaning of membership. If, by contrast, we understand Methodism primarily in terms of its unique organizational genius—the connection—then our energies probably will be directed primarily to strengthening the itinerancy, and rethinking the meaning of a “sent” ministry.

But what if we dare to peel back all those layers to the Methodism Evans knew, and conceive of this great communion, first and foremost, as a movement of God’s Spirit intended to be an agent of renewal and revival throughout the land? Then we may well conclude that the path to renewed vigor and growth will be found in a recovery of that same evangelical zeal to call nominal Christians and sluggish institutional churches to the lived experience of new life in Christ, and the passionate pursuit of holiness. May we share the resolution of the mourners at Evans’ funeral in 1771, whom Pilmore described as “determined to follow the example of Edward Evans, as he followed Christ”