

WHEN DID METHODISM BEGIN? WHO CARES? QUESTIONS THAT WILL NOT GO AWAY

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When we write for a popular readership, that is when we have to be most passionately insistent on accuracy. Why? Because these are the words that will affect most people, and particularly those who will not have the chance to check what we say.¹ There are some theological issues, or issues of grave theological import, on which historians, simply as historians, will have something to say. We may also suggest that a historical question is never solely an antiquarian matter, never solely a matter of annalistic precision. History is story, and it is our story, and where there is identification, there is judgment, deny that how you will.

A personal record, to serve as illustration, may be pardoned. Visiting the churches in my last appointment (as a Superintendent) in England, I was welcomed by the stewards of the various congregations, who shared the histories of their local churches.

At a former Primitive Methodist church, I was asked, "Do you know the history of the Primitive Methodists?" I knew some of it, certainly, but was always grateful to learn more, I was told that I must understand that the first Primitive Methodists were driven out of the Church of England by persecution. I received this lesson with thanks and no further comment. Some virtual expulsion of this sort may indeed have happened at that neighborhood (Netherton, in the Black Country) in the 1820s, 1830s, or thereabouts, whether for doctrinal or class reasons, and, if so, the local resentments were thus projected onto the national canvas. In fact, of course, Primitive Methodism, partly under the influence of Lorenzo Dow, was a break-off, not from the Church of England, but from Wesleyan Methodism! The danger of the local myth was that misremembered history was ready to poison potential ecumenical growth: so great is the impact of our historical assumptions.

The Cokesbury Press brochure UM 0-733806, with the title, *The United Methodist Story -- Our History, Our Beliefs & Our Mission*, is one of a series "for interested visitors, new members, all who want to know what it means to be a United Methodist." Our story, it says, begins like this:

¹ This was most firmly and clearly pointed out by Eric Mascall in comments on Bishop John Robinson's *Honest to God and A New Reformation*.

In 1729 in England, a small group of Oxford University students were ridiculed as "Bible Bigots," the "Holy Club" and "Methodists" because they spent so much time in methodical prayer and Bible reading. Led by John and Charles Wesley, the students held their ground against jeering students and went out to preach and pray with those considered to be the underbelly of English society.

The Georgia interlude of January 1736 to January 1738 is not mentioned, nor are the Little Britain and Aldersgate events of May, 1738. The narrative leaps from the university city "branchy between towers" and the little band of struggling would-be saints to the statements that The United Methodist Church is the result of the 1939 union of the two Methodist Episcopal Churches and the Methodist Protestant Church, and then of the 1968 union of Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren Churches.

It is indeed arguable² that Methodism began with the Holy Club -- the "Methodist" nick-name that was to stick was indeed given then. However, the predominant view, on both sides of the Atlantic, until well into the 20th century has been that Methodism -- that is, the Methodism to which people of following generations could justifiably belong - was born in 1739. This was the start of the organization, "the people called Methodists," that was to develop, in North America into the Methodist Episcopal Church and its offspring, and in the British Isles into the Wesleyan Methodist Church and its British cognates, and so into the Methodist Church of Great Britain and the (American) United Methodist Church. 1739 saw the writing of the "General Rules" and the founding of the United Societies. Both in Britain and in the United States, 1839 was celebrated as a centennial year. The Wesleyan Conference of 1838 resolved:

That our President is requested to prepare and publish, with as little delay as possible, a brief but comprehensive work, on the subject of the Centenary', including, with succinct Notices of the origin, progress, and present state of Wesleyan Methodism, and of the leading facts in the life and history of the revered Founder of our societies, such remarks as may assist our friends in the devout improvement of the occasion.

The result was Thomas Jackson's *The Centenary of Wesleyan*

² Cf., Frank Baker, "When did Methodism begin? Sparked in 1729 by the Holy Club, Societies sprang up in many places," *Together* 7/7 (1963): 27-9, and the nuanced position of Richard P. Heitzenrater's "The Oxford Diaries and the First Rise of Methodism," in *A. M. E. ZION Quarterly Review / Methodist History* / [World Methodist Historical Society] *News Bulletin* [joint issue] (July, 1974): 110-135. See also, Richard P. Heitzenrater, *John Wesley and the People called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

*Methodism. A Brief Sketch of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Wesleyan-Methodist Societies throughout the World.*³

The American response is exemplified by the gently amusing reminiscences of Calvin Washington Ruter,⁴ who, despite his name, was an Elder of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and at this point in his fourth and final year as the Presiding Elder of the Charlestown District, in Indiana:

This, the fall of 1839, was regarded as the centenary of Methodism, and Bro. Ruter, by request delivered an address in about every charge in the District on the rise, progress, position, prospects &c. of Methodism. These addresses were highly eulogized, and by many thought to be more than equal, both in interest & in usefulness, to his Sermons. They doubtless tended to inspire a greater love for, & confidence in the Church and her institutions.

Since the "rediscovery" of John Wesley and the intensification of interest in his evangelical conversion,⁵ there has been a natural tendency to see the experience of Pentecost, 1738, and the following days, as the beginning of Methodism as an effective force and a distinctive community. This also is

³ (London: John Mason, 1839). For the Conference resolution, see his Preface, [v.].

⁴ From his manuscript memoirs, *Brief sketch of his Life and Itinerant Labours*, Book 2, 116 [continuous pagination], in the Archives of Indiana United Methodism held by the Archives & Special Collections Department, Roy O. West Library, DePauw University, Greencastle, Indiana. This memoir has been edited by the present writer, for publication in connection with the 2001 bicentenary of Indiana Methodism. Ruter (1794-1859) was an early circuit rider in the Indiana Conference. In this citation, the abbreviations have been expanded and the punctuation modernized.

⁵ The Aldersgate event (though, symptomatically, hardly ever the conversion of Charles on May 21) is the subject of a vast literature. E.g., W. J. Bashford, "John Wesley's Conversion," *Methodist Review* LXXXV (September 1903): 775-789; Richard Green, *The Conversion of John Wesley* (1908, repr. London: Epworth Press 1937); Charles Edwin Schofield, *Aldersgate and After* (USA edn., 1937, repr. London: Epworth Press, 1938); J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Conversion of the Wesleys: A Critical Study* (London: Epworth Press, 1938); Richard M. Cameron, "John Wesley's Aldersgate Experience," *The Drew Gateway* XXV/4 (Summer 1955): 210-8; Frank Baker, "Aldersgate 1738- 1963: The Challenge of Aldersgate," *The Duke Divinity School Bulletin*, 28/2 (May 1963): 67-80; John Lawson, "The Conversion of the Wesleys," *Asbury Theological Journal* 43/2 (1988): 7-44; Theodore W. Jennings, "John Wesley Against Aldersgate," *Quarterly Review* 8/3 (Fall 1988): 3-22; Kenneth Collins, "The Continuing Significance of Aldersgate: A Response to 'John Wesley Against Aldersgate'," *Quarterly Review* 8/4 (Winter 1988/9): 90-99, and "Theodore Jennings Replies," *Quarterly Review* 8/4 (Winter 1988/9): 100-104; Randy L. Maddox, "Celebrating Wesley -- When?" *Methodist History* 29/2 (January 1991): 63-75; Theodore Wesley Jennings, Jr., "John Wesley on the Origin of Methodism," *Methodist History* 29/2 (January 1991): 76-86; Kenneth J. Collins, "Other Thoughts on Aldersgate: has the Conversionist Paradigm Collapsed?," *Methodist History* 30/1 (October 1991): 10-25; John A. Vickers, "Bicentenary Issue: A Response," *Methodist History* 30/1 (October 1991): 26-30; Donald English, "Rivisitazione di Aldersgate: storia e teologia della missione metodista," *Protestantesimo* 47/2 (1992): 82-95; Randy L. Maddox, "Continuing the Conversation," *Methodist History* 30/4 (July 1992): 235-241; Kenneth J. Collins, "A Reply to Randy Maddox," *Methodist History* 31/1 (October 1992): 51-54.

a defensible position, as is well shown by Henry Carter's exposition⁶ of those days as the point at which the Wesley brothers entered definitively into an inheritance from the Apostolic Church which made possible the emergence of Methodism as an authentic church within the One Church.

If we want to argue the case for identifying the Oxford "Holy Club" as the beginning of Methodism, we might appeal to John Wesley himself; for, in his pamphlet, *A Short History of Methodism*,⁷ published in or around 1764, the story (para. 4) opens like this:

In November, 1729, four young gentlemen of Oxford, -- Mr. John Wesley, Fellow of Lincoln College; Mr. Charles Wesley, Student of Christ Church; Mr. Morgan, Commoner of Christ Church; and Mr. Kirkham, of Merton College, -- began to spend some evenings in a week together, in reading, chiefly, the Greek Testament.

In para. 7, he hints merely that these zealous young men, a combination of undergraduates and dons -- in modern American terms, faculty members -- did not yet understand justification by faith.

However, this is not the end of the story. Wesley went on to add that he and Charles had set sail for Georgia in 1735, and that by 1737 the Holy Club had nearly all left Oxford. He described a new beginning early in 1738, marked by a meeting with some other Anglican clergy, "resolved to be Bible-Christians at all events, . . . and to preach with all their might plain, old, Bible Christianity" (para. 9: note that the crucial turning-point is a new, co-operative, work of preaching, not any individual experience of conversion). "The former ['Methodist'] name was then revived" (para. 10) -- but a change had supervened, for this new group had come to appreciate justification by faith, with these implications: "(1.) That men are all, by nature, 'dead in sin' and, consequently, 'children of wrath,' (2.) That they are 'justified by faith alone.' (3.) That faith produces inward and outward holiness."

Wesley began this "Short History of Methodism" with the Holy Club, not because the United Societies of 1739 and the following years were a continuation of it, nor to suggest that the preaching which began after May 1738 was the same as the teaching of the embattled Oxford days, but because the accusations made against the Holy Club were repeated in application to the later work, even though a major doctrinal shift separated the later from the earlier phenomenon. The tract is however instructive precisely because of this challenge, which could not be ignored. The history of "the people called Methodists" (and of the Church Universal) is a theological history, and it has an underlying theological drive, both motive and *motif*.⁸

An interesting and challenging paper by Philip Wingeier-Rayo on "The Early Methodist Revival, Base Christian Communities and Pentecostalism

⁶ Henry Carter, *The Methodist Heritage* (London: Epworth Press, 1951), esp. 24-33.

⁷ In the 1872 reprint of Wesley's *Works*, VIII 347 - 351.

⁸ Not to be ignored is, Russell E. Richey, "American Methodism: A Bicentennial Review," *Drew Gateway* 54/2-3 (Winter-spring 1984): 130-142.

in Latin America: A Comparison of Ecclesiology"⁹ obliges us to ask whether Mr. Wesley's other "Short History of the People Called Methodists," written in 1781 as an appendix to his "Concise History of the Church,"¹⁰ offers a view inconsistent with our interpretation. Wingeir-Rayo invokes John Wesley's authority for a three-fold "rise" of Methodism, in the Holy Club, in Georgia, and (apparently) in Bristol, where Wesley "repeated the Fetter Lane experiment" experienced with the Moravians. This analysis needs to be carefully checked against Wesley's exact wording (paras.8-9):

[After the return to London], I preached in many churches, though I did not yet see the nature of saving faith. . . . But as soon as I saw this clearly, namely on Monday, March 6, I declared it without delay; and God then began to work in my ministry, as he never had done before. On Monday, May 1, our little society began in London. But it may be observed, the first rise of Methodism, so called, was in November, 1729, when four of us met together at Oxford; the second was at Savannah, in April 1736, when twenty or thirty persons met at my house; the last was at London, on this day, when forty or fifty of us agreed to meet together every Wednesday evening, in order to a free conversation, begun and ended with singing and prayer.

A key phrase in this summary is "Methodism, so called." The three "rises" are of a name (used as obloquy) and of a method of association; but the definitive "rise" takes place only when a crucial theological shift takes place -- a shift, not so much in one man's experience as in the new insistence on faith.

The history of the Holy Club tells us where the name "Methodism" originated. The story of 1738 tells us of the beginning of the Methodism which had something worth sharing with everybody, of the Methodism worth joining.

The later choice of 1739 as the date to be commemorated as the start of Methodism is surely dictated by another writing, *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies, in London, Bristol, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, &c.*, which appeared, dated May 1, 1743, over the names of John and Charles Wesley.¹¹ "In the latter end of the year 1739, eight or ten persons came to me in London, who appeared to be deeply convinced of sin, and earnestly groaning for redemption. They desired (as did two or three more the next day) that I would spend some time with them in prayer, and advise them how to flee from the wrath to come; which they saw continually hang-

⁹ *Apuntes* 21/4 (Winter, 2000-2001): 132-147.

¹⁰ Wesley's *Works*, XIII, 301-381. The key passages cited here are from pp. 307 and 306.

¹¹ In the 1872 reprint of Wesley's *Works*, Vol. VIII, 269-271.

ing over their heads" (para. 1). "This was the rise of the United Societies, first in London, and then in other places" (para. 2).

Under this artless narrative also a theological program may be detected. The societies were, we are to infer, not the result of Wesley's initiative, but arose at the request of others. The sense of impending wrath which they expressed, we are further to infer, was the result of God's pressure upon them. Hence, Methodism is not of human but of divine origination.

What, then, shall we make of a popular publication which identifies the definitive start of the Methodist sub-tradition in the Oxford Holy Club? This is not a trivial question, for the pamphlet UM 0-73886 will be put in the hands of many inquirers and confirmands. It will be made the text for crucial phases of membership preparation classes. Its influence may be immense. What is the subliminal theological teaching of this little brochure?

The Oxford "Holy Club" was intensely aware of the necessity of a holiness without which none may come to the beatific vision of God (Hebrews 12:14), but they had not learned the even more vital lesson that all this is a free gift, bestowed through faith. None of them could have written or delivered, or even tolerated Standard Sermon No. I, on "Salvation by Faith," based on Ephesians 2:9. The tension between this and the original version of Standard Sermon No. XIII, "On the Circumcision of the Heart," is palpable.¹⁰ In my submission, the way in which John Wesley later used Sermon XIII is most significant, both where he gave it its lasting place, and what he did with the text. In what he later singled out as a touchstone of Methodist preaching, the first four volumes of his sermons, John Wesley placed this pre-Aldersgate work after Sermon XII, "On the Means of Grace." In Sermon XII, obedience is interpreted as an act of faith, not of merit, and the sacraments and other means of grace as divinely appointed, and divine acts of grace.¹² Since Oxford, the Wesleys had learned that justification by unmerited grace, given through God's own gift of faith, is the *articulus vel stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae*, "the article of doctrine by which the church stands or falls."

The uncompromising challenge to the circumcision of the heart is placed after the insistence that God's grace is sovereign, and works through faith; and the sermon itself is given a new center of gravity in the half-paragraph which John Wesley added (Section I, para. 7), on "the revelation of Christ in our hearts; a divine evidence or conviction of his love, his free unmerited love to me a sinner; a sure confidence in his pardoning mercy, wrought in us by the Holy Ghost."

¹² No. XIII in the 1944 British edition (still in print), *Sermons on Several Occasions*, 151-162. Heitzenrater (as n.1: pp. 121-122, 132-133) reads this sermon, delivered before the University in 1733, as a definitive statement of the program of "Oxford Methodism," but also notes (133-1355) that "Oxford Methodism" left John Wesley himself in a state of deep depression.

If we ignore John Wesley's own corrections to his earlier teaching, and ignore his own statement that something new and definitive happened in 1738/1739, and treat the Holy Club as the real beginning of our denominational identity, tradition, and heritage, then we are making works-righteousness our platform. That at least is how it will seem, especially to Pelagian Anglo-Saxons, British and American, and to other North Americans too. The authors of UM 0-73386 surely did not intend to give this impression, for when they turn to matters of doctrine they firmly assert that salvation is from grace, "the undeserved, unmerited and loving action of God." But the effects of the opening historical sketch will not be fully undone by these words, clear, careful, and forceful though they are. Frighteningly often, our deeds and our words have effects which we did not plan, and those results, also too often, reveal assumptions of our own which we have not tested or have not wished to admit to ourselves, and which we have passed on through subliminal suggestion,

Now, in our confirmation classes it may be necessary to throw continuance into the deep end of the pool, into the inexorable demands of the Law, to confront them with the terrifying realities of sin and human depravity, after which we pray that they come through into the delivering knowledge of faith -- even if they do not have to struggle like the Wesleys and their Oxford friends in frantic efforts not to drown. But that means still making 1738 our decisive beginning, not the Holy Club.

There are other views as to Methodism's origins which we must notice in closing. The Victorian Wesleyan Methodist leader, Henry J. Pope, observed (this is a scrap of British Methodist oral tradition) that the real founder of Methodism was not John or Charles Wesley, but Jesus Christ. His point was that Methodism is just one phase of a strand of renewal that runs throughout all Christian history, and that this continuing renewal is the gracious act of God. More recently, we have to contend with other public statements which may get much more attention even than UM 0-73386. In a recent column by Ann Landers, under the title, "Religions' Foundings May Surprise Some," we find, among a collection of categorical statements which Ms. Landers received, these: "If you are Roman Catholic, Jesus Christ founded your religion in the year 33. . . . If you are a Methodist, your religion was founded by John and Charles Wesley in 1744." So now we know.

¹³ On the Wesleyan insistence that sacraments are God's acts before they are ours, see Ole E. Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments: A Theological Study* (Zurich, 1972, reissued 1985 by Asbury Press [Zondervan], Grand Rapids MI); and James F. White, *Sacraments as God's Self-Giving: Sacramental Practice and Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983).