

## **A Brothers' Revival: The Story of the Wesleys**

by Ryan Krauss, 2003

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Churches litter the United States. In almost every town across the country, steeples rise into rural and urban skylines. Catholics, Baptists, Presbyterians, and others number among the multitudes that worship every Sunday. Another denomination, and also one of the largest Protestant groups, is Methodism. In 1969, with a total of eleven million people, Methodists boasted the second largest population of Protestant worshipers.<sup>1</sup> In 1961, ninety-five senators and representatives in Congress listed affiliation with Methodism – and this count was only three shy of the number for Roman Catholicism.<sup>2</sup> But Methodism has not always been so popular or so prominent, and its humble beginnings can be traced back to a religious club in eighteenth century England.

At this point in history, faith was utterly stagnant in Great Britain. Occurring at the same time was an industrial revolution that ushered in horrendous working conditions. Even the Church of England, a place that should have been a sanctuary from the harshness of English society, was “infected with indifference.”<sup>3</sup> The priesthood was lax, and the church was little more than an empty political play.<sup>4</sup> George Whitefield, an ordained Anglican priest, said that congregations were dead because the clergymen themselves were dead, spiritually speaking.<sup>5</sup>

As ordained priests in the Anglican faith, the Wesley brothers sought to change the stagnant churchmanship of their time. John Wesley's own opinion toward Anglican spirituality was that parishioners were ignorant in that common worshipers thought that salvation amounted only to forgiveness of

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Williams, *What Americans Believe and How They Worship*, New York: Harper (1969), page 286.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pages 287-288.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, New York: Abingdon Press (1970), page 3.

<sup>5</sup> Victor Shepherd, *The Life and Art of Charles Wesley*, [www.victorshepherd.on.ca](http://www.victorshepherd.on.ca) (29 Nov 2003), page 3.

sins and eventual entrance into heaven.<sup>6</sup> This was not surprising, as this attitude dominated English society. The Wesleys, through intimate conversion experiences that happened within days of each other, knew that salvation as declared in the Bible was given only by the grace of God. But the road of the Wesleyan Revival was not easy, and United Methodism is deeply indebted to both John and Charles Wesley for their courageous contributions to the founding of the denomination.

From boyhood, John Wesley, whom most revere as the founder of Methodism, seemed set for ecclesiastical greatness. He and all of his siblings had a very structured, religious home life. John was born in Epworth on the seventeenth of June in 1703 to Samuel and Susannah Wesley. The couple raised three sons, and Samuel's intention was that all three should grow up to be scholars and clergymen.<sup>7</sup> Mrs. Wesley played the initial role in helping to direct her boys on this course. She was in charge of the children's early education, which was highly religious in nature. The Lord's Prayer was memorized as soon as the children could speak, the Bible was their first and major source of reading, and everyone followed devotions as prescribed by the *Book of Common Prayer*.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Mrs. Wesley set aside a time in the week in which she would discuss general religion and social issues with each child. Later in life, John expressed much gratitude for these "Thursday meetings" with his mother.<sup>9</sup> John's spiritual growth was reinforced by his attendance at Charterhouse school and, later, Oxford University. At Oxford, he plunged himself into an extensive reading list which included *Imatio Christi*, *Christian Perfection*, *The Homilies*, and *Holy Living and Dying* – all of which were written by prominent Christian writers. In 1725 John was ordained deacon and elected a Fellow of Lincoln College, a very prestigious title. In 1727, as his father had desired, John was ordained a priest of the Anglican Church.

After returning to academia from a stay at Epworth in 1729, John stumbled upon the beginnings of Methodism. While he had been away, his brother Charles, who at the time was attending Oxford, had come together with other students at the college and formed the "Holy Club." John has often been given credit for starting the group, but since he was away at the time he could not possibly have been the founder. His brother Charles founded the club. Being more organized and the better leader, however, John was soon recognized as the club's head. Fellow students at Oxford gave the group other, derogatory names – like "Bible Moths," "The Enthusiasts," and "The

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<sup>6</sup> Randy L. Maddox, "Vital Orthodoxy: A Wesleyan Dynamic for Twenty-first Century Christianity," *Methodist History* 42:1 (2003), page 10.

<sup>7</sup> Alan C. Clifford, *Charles Wesley (1707-1788)*, [www.christian-bookstore.co.uk](http://www.christian-bookstore.co.uk) (29 Nov 2003), page 1.

<sup>8</sup> Baker, pages 8-9.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, page 10.

Reforming Club.”<sup>10</sup> The most memorable and most lasting nickname, though, was “Methodists.” All of these names point to one thing: the members of the Holy Club were very structured and methodical in their quest for religion. Individually, for example, members were expected to pray three times a day, pray silently every hour, visit the sick, teach the poor, and visit the imprisoned.

Even with all his fervor, John could not find religious peace. His search was vain; he could find no satisfaction in strictly following the rules and ordinances of the Church.<sup>11</sup> One promising enterprise arose in October of 1735. Along with his brother Charles, John had been asked to accompany James Oglethorpe on a trip to Georgia. The small colony had recently lost its minister, so this was a great opportunity for John to minister to a distant community. Here he put his parishioners into methodical habits similar to the Holy Club’s activities and engaged in two controversial practices. For the first time ever, John prayed *extempore* and preached without any prepared notes. Both acts were unheard of to the Anglicans. It was from the German Moravians in Georgia that he learned to practice extemporaneous prayer and was introduced to personal piety.

After returning to England in February 1738, John was still distressed as to his own spiritual condition. Peter Bohler, one of John and Charles’ Moravian friends, said of this period in John’s life, “John is a good-natured man; he knew he did not properly believe in our Saviour, and was willing to be taught.”<sup>12</sup> On May 24 of that year, however, John’s outlook changed. At the historic meeting on Aldersgate Street, he “felt his heart strangely warmed... felt for the first time that God truly loved him and had forgiven him.”<sup>13</sup> In that moment, the Methodist movement was born.

After his conversion, John began a revival by preaching under the conviction that it was possible to intimately experience God. Shortly after Aldersgate, he set up his first society at Fetter Lane in London. The essence of societies, small bands of like-minded worshipers, was that they should “pray together... and watch over one another in love.”<sup>14</sup> As the revival continued, John and his helpers set up many more societies. For his pointed message of conversion, John was marked by most other Anglican clergy as an “enthusiast” and many pulpits were closed to him. As a result, John began to imitate his friend George Whitefield and preach out of doors to the poor and unconverted. Even though opposition by the Church of England continued, John remained an Anglican priest and never wished to break ties with his mother church. His aim was not to reform doctrine in the Anglican Church, but to revitalize its

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<sup>10</sup> Warren C. Sweet, *Methodism in American History*, Nashville: Abingdon Press (1961), pages 30-31.

<sup>11</sup> Leo Rosten editor, *Religions in America*, New York: Simon (1963), page 122.

<sup>12</sup> Clifford, page 2.

<sup>13</sup> Ed D’Agostino, e-mail interview (21 Nov 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Rosten, pages 122-123.

“deadness.”<sup>15</sup> John took his message all over Great Britain, and it wasn’t until after his death in March of 1791 that the Church of England severed ties with the Methodist movement.

In all this history, Charles was also a prominent figure who was no less important than his more famous brother John. As previously stated, Charles was raised for scholarship and ordination. Born December 18, 1707, he was Samuel and Susannah’s eighteenth child. He attended Westminster school and won their noted “Challenge” – a scholastic competition based on stumping one’s opponent on Greek grammar. For this he was named “King’s Scholar.”<sup>16</sup> Like John, Charles also attended Oxford and was ordained an Anglican priest. Since he was the 1729 founder of the Holy Club, he was arguably the first Methodist. In company with John, Charles also went to Georgia to help General Oglethorpe administer his colony. This excursion was a disaster for Charles, and he wrote in his journal of those times that “life is bitterness to me.”<sup>17</sup> He returned to England in December 1736 and remained rather disheartened until his own conversion experience. In the company of Moravian friends, Charles “found rest for his soul” three days prior to John’s conversion.<sup>18</sup> Thus empowered, the Wesley brothers began the revival.

Even though they worked side by side, the Wesleys each had their own strengths and special contributions to the Methodist movement. John was definitely the more able leader and better organizer. The entire organization was his idea, including name the Methodist.<sup>19</sup> Noteworthy, too, is that even though Charles started the Holy Club, John became the established leader. Charles, on the other hand, is most famous for his poetry and hymn writing. He wrote about nine thousand works, including six thousand hymns. This count is three times that of William Wordsworth.<sup>20</sup> When inspiration hit, Charles would become insanely preoccupied; if he was on horseback, he would yell “Pen and ink!” until he had written his verse down.<sup>21</sup> Written largely after his conversion, his hymns played an important role in the Wesleyan Revival. Charles would take his “message” and place the lyrics to pub tunes.<sup>22</sup> The songs were sung lustily and courageously; in fact, an old saying maintained that “you could tell a Methodist was coming by his singing.”<sup>23</sup>

Neither were the Wesleys always of a like mind. John and Charles often had different opinions. One instance of this occurred when some extremists arose within the movement. These “prophets” believed in their own

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<sup>15</sup> Maddox, page 4.

<sup>16</sup> Shepherd, page 2.

<sup>17</sup> Clifford, page 2.

<sup>18</sup> Sweet, page 35.

<sup>19</sup> Jeff Welsch, e-mail interview (22 Nov 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Shepherd, page 1.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> D. Guy Carrigan, telephone interview, 12 Dec 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Clifford, pages 3-4.

sinless nature and continually predicted the apocalypse. John brushed them aside, predicting their following would fizzle. Charles, however, directly confronted the extremists and warned Methodists to guard against the false doctrines.<sup>24</sup> The brothers also sharply disagreed on the issue of lay preaching. Because very few Anglican clergy supported the Methodist movement, the whole revival seemed to be without ecclesiastical help. Into this gap, however, stepped dedicated lay men. Though unordained and unschooled, they provided the backbone for the movement. John readily accepted their help, but Charles was of a different mind. Regardless of the vigor with which they preached, the younger Wesley found the messages to be hollow “nonsense” with “no doctrine at all.”<sup>25</sup> But despite their differences, the brothers truly did “work in perfect harmony.”<sup>26</sup>

Beyond his hymnology, Charles was also a devoted pastor and excellent preacher. John himself made the comment that his brother’s “least” talent was his poetry.<sup>27</sup> Based this comment, Charles must have had exceptional preaching and pastoral talents to complement his considerable poetical abilities. Indeed, Joseph Williams, after hearing the younger brother preach, said that the sermon was like nothing he had ever heard before.<sup>28</sup> Charles was so enthusiastic in his delivery that he was accustomed to getting nose bleeds while preaching, and there is evidence that the crowds would become thoroughly wrapped up in his words.<sup>29</sup> Surely his speaking must have been powerful. He was also a dutiful pastor, addressing most of his congregations out in the open and making particular points to visit people on their deathbeds. Eventually the life of an itinerant minister became too stressful for Charles, and he married Sarah Gwynne in 1749. His traveling ministry ended in the fall of 1759.

Not surprisingly, the works of these two men are easily identifiable in the present day workings of the United Methodist Church. John’s methodical ways are an integral part of Methodist practice and belief. His early writings indicate that sermons, scripture reading, prayer, fasting, love feasts, and the Eucharist are all essential to Christian life.<sup>30</sup> These same writings indicate the job of pastors should include visitation, scripture study, sermon preparation, funerals, weddings, and administrative duties.

Present United Methodist Church structure also follows the Wesleys’ patterns. From the very beginning of the revival, societies were grouped into circuits with itinerant ministers traveling within a certain area for a specified

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<sup>24</sup> Kenneth G.C. Newport, “Charles Wesley and the Articulation of Faith, *Methodist History* 42:1 (2003), page 38.

<sup>25</sup> Shepherd, page 5.

<sup>26</sup> Clifford, pages 3-4.

<sup>27</sup> Newport, page 33.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, page 46.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, page 45.

<sup>30</sup> Maddox, pages 12-13.

number of months. Levels of administration were developed to keep lines of communication open, and each year a General Conference was held to discuss issues that pertained to the movement. Though old-style circuits are no longer used, geographic regions are still divided into districts, conferences and jurisdictions. As with the itinerants of old, ministers are appointed at each of these levels. And the idea of a General Conference is still in place. Every four years movement-wide issues of doctrine and polity are discussed and determined.

Another direct idea of Wesley is the apportionment. Originally, societies were separated into classes within which members would be able to financially cover each other. The concept logically extended to all levels of the movement. Apportionments are “monies used in all areas of need; with all churches joining together to get things done [that] an individual church might not otherwise be able to accomplish.”<sup>31</sup>

Another key feature of the Wesleyan movement still encouraged in the United Methodist Church is lay speaking. As previously stated, little help was given to the Wesleys by the Church of England. Without clerical aid, John turned to lay speakers. They were common men with a desire to spread the Wesleyan message. In the present-day, lay speaking in churches is encouraged and arguably very important to the continuation of the United Methodist Church.<sup>32</sup> The local church is responsible for identifying laity suitable for this level of involvement, and formal training of lay persons is provided by each district.<sup>33</sup>

With respect to missions, United Methodists generally share John Wesley’s view of the world. During the Methodist revival, Anglican clergy labeled John and his helpers as enthusiasts. Consequently, a majority of the priests closed their pulpits to the Wesleys and the movement turned to field preaching. John defended this by stating that “I look upon all the world as my parish.”<sup>34</sup> All of this has made the United Methodist Church very mission-oriented. Ministries like LOVE Inc, UMCOR, and Mission Central are active in bringing aid, disaster relief, and the Gospel to the world. John Wesley’s second General Rule for being a Methodist was to “do as much good as you can for others,”<sup>35</sup> and United Methodists still hold this as a high ideal for missions. In the words of one of the denomination’s current pastors, “United Methodists believe that we must live our faith... we get involved with people... we ‘get our hands dirty’ working to make the world a better place.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> D’Agostino.

<sup>32</sup> Welsch

<sup>33</sup> Carrigan

<sup>34</sup> Baker, page 63.

<sup>35</sup> Maddox, page 12.

<sup>36</sup> D’Agostino.

Concerning faith, John said that religion, and Jesus for that matter, was not a research topic or a theological puzzle – but a personal experience.<sup>37</sup> He “stressed the ‘witness of the spirit,’ an impression upon the soul given by the Spirit of God that I am His child.”<sup>38</sup> With “experience” at the core of Methodism, revivals and personal testimonies assumed prominent roles in the movement. This emphasis continues today in events such as Impact, The Great Escape and summer church camps. Because theological trivialities are not the focus, United Methodists enjoy much religious freedom. Local churches exercise this liberty by adopting their own mission projects and worship styles. Parishioners are encouraged to use this freedom in reading the Bible for themselves and cultivating a personal relationship with God.

One aspect of Methodism of which John was especially proud was the fact that membership required no tests of doctrine.<sup>39</sup> There was only one requirement. John said, “I do not impose...any opinions whatsoever... Let them be churchmen, or dissenters, Presbyterians or Independents... It is no bar to their admission... one condition and one only... a real desire to save the soul.”<sup>40</sup> United Methodists still take these words to heart, as reflected in the denomination’s unofficial motto that “Our hearts, our minds, our doors are always open.”

The influence of Charles Wesley, though arguably less extensive, is no less important. History remembers him as “the greatest hymn writer ever.”<sup>41</sup> What John and the other preachers could not say in sermons, Charles expressed in hymns. Without that music, a number of people probably would not have come to the revival meetings in the first place.<sup>42</sup> Present United Methodists and worshippers from other denominations are also indebted to Charles, for many of today’s church hymns were written by him. His works include such standards as “Jesus, Lover of My Soul,” “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing,” and “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing.”

Despite John’s desire to keep the Methodist revival as a renewal movement within the Church of England, the Anglican bishops strongly opposed Wesley and refused to ordain any of his laymen. Eventually, and despite the strong disapproval of Charles, John authorized Anglican priest Thomas Coke to assume the role of Methodist Bishop in the American Colonies. United Methodism, though now separate from the Church of England, still employs the office of bishop and retains many other parallels to the mother church. In fact most Methodist beliefs and structure, and many of the Articles of Religion, have their roots in the Anglican Church.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Williams, page 292.

<sup>38</sup> Rosten, page 129.

<sup>39</sup> Sweet, page 41.

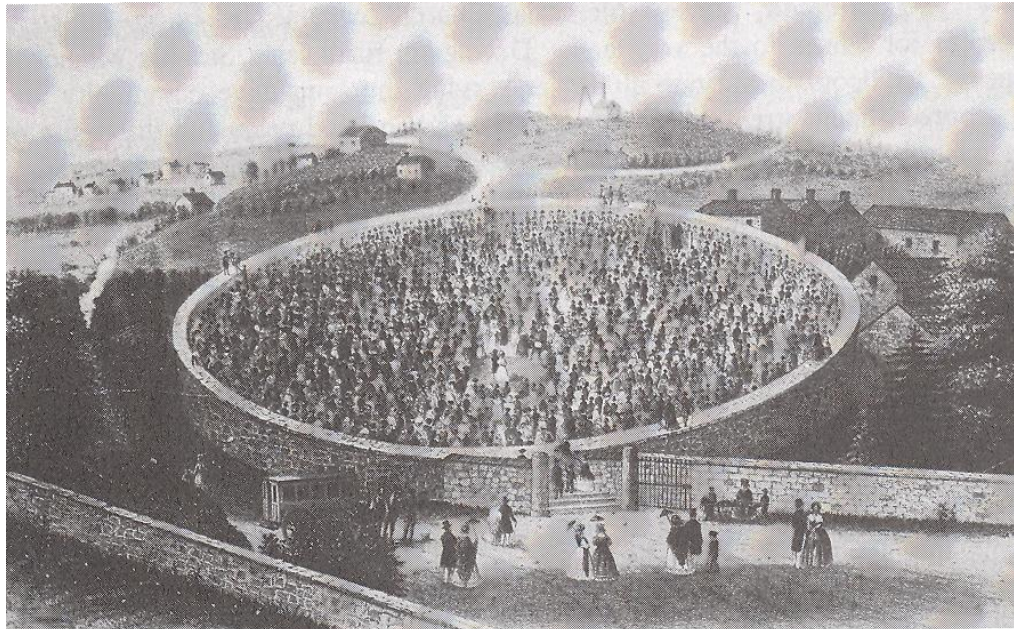
<sup>40</sup> Ibid, pages 41-42.

<sup>41</sup> Clifford, page 1.

<sup>42</sup> Welsch

<sup>43</sup> D’Agostino

John and Charles are both deceased, but they continue to live in word and song in the United Methodist Church. From a small club, the Wesley brothers ignited a revival that still burns strong. Their church of more than eleven million worshippers has become world-wide, reaching across the oceans through such agencies as its Board of Global Ministry and the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR). Much has changed as the church has adapted its ways over the years, and no one can predict what the future holds for those people called Methodists. The main goal of United Methodism, the goal of the Wesleys, however, will never change. The mission of the United Methodist Church will always be “to make disciples of Jesus Christ.”<sup>44</sup>



John Wesley Preaching in Gwennap Pit, Cornwall

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<sup>44</sup> Carrigan