

## Methodism

(Taken from Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Christian Churches of America*)

One of the world's most energetic revivalists, whose eminence as an evangelist and reformer has been secured, is often honored as the founder of Methodism. Few men of the eighteenth century left such a visible mark of their achievements. Throughout the Christian world, among people of various religious persuasions, John Wesley is respected as a conscientious leader who influenced others to seek the light of Christ and to live according to that light.

The life of John Wesley spanned the eighteenth century (from 1703 to 1791); throughout most of these eighty-eight years, religion was a primary preoccupation of his thoughts and actions. He was reared in a deeply religious environment, probably influenced more by his mother, Susanna, than by his father, Reverend Samuel Wesley, an Anglican minister who served in Epworth, Lincolnshire, England. Susanna mastered Greek, Latin, and French, and developed an unusual capacity to express herself in speech and writing. Being endowed with natural beauty and a keen intellect, and personifying Christian ideals of integrity and love, Susanna Wesley became one of the outstanding women of her generation. This conscientious wife of a scholar and theologian was the mother of nineteen children, most of them dying in infancy. John was her second son and fifteenth child, her last child, Charles, another distinguished religious leader, aided John in establishing one of the world's largest religious societies.

Although John Wesley lacked material wealth, he succeeded in securing a good education, including instruction at one of the most prestigious schools in England. Shortly after completing the requirements for his first degree at Oxford, he was elected to a fellowship and appointed tutor and lecturer in Greek. Meanwhile, in 1725, he was ordained a deacon by the Bishop of Oxford and three years later a priest. After his ordinations, Wesley joined a group his brother Charles founded at Oxford that was designed to enrich the spiritual life of all members. Eventually John became the acknowledged leader of this small society in which individuals pledged to engage in regular Bible study and discussion, to partake of the sacrament of Holy Communion weekly, and to be involved in humanitarian activities, including visits to prisoners. Because these members disciplined themselves methodically, they were sometimes called "Methodists," and as another mark of opprobrium they were dubbed members of a "Holy Club" and were referred to as the "Bible Moths" and "the Enthusiasts."

During a visit to London in 1735, John Wesley was invited to be chaplain of the English community in Savannah, Georgia, and to labor as a missionary to the Indians. Accepting this call, Wesley journeyed to America and, after reviewing the religious situation existing among the whites of Georgia, directed the thrust of his mission to serving the immigrants. Wesley, however, was not a popular minister. His strictness and emphasis on sacramental observance annoyed many settlers. Friction developed and Wesley returned to England after serving less than two years, concluding that his experience in America was an utter failure.

Upon his return to his native land, Wesley reexamined his religious status and decided that he lacked spiritual vitality. He remembered when the German Moravians endeavored to show him "a more excellent way" during his voyage to America. Some of their teachings seemed foolish to him, for, as Wesley confessed sarcastically, he was too learned and too wise to become engulfed in their emphasis on faith and piety. He further recalled a recent conversation with Peter Bohler, a Moravian who visited London on his way to America. Bohler declared that Wesley's efforts for holiness were shallow because he lacked genuine faith in Jesus Christ. "Preach faith until you have it," Bohler advised, "and then because you have it, you will preach faith."

Shortly after his experience with Bohler, Wesley's life was dramatically changed as he experienced an "evangelical conversion." Recalling this event, he explained:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

Wesley's spiritual experience awakened him to the realization that many in England lacked faith and holiness. Consequently, this energetic preacher launched a crusade, encouraging others to seek faith in Christ and perfection as a child of God. Commencing a life of itinerant preaching, Wesley often traveled nearly 4,000 miles a year and averaged three sermons a day. Arising at four in the morning and traveling primarily on horseback, he preached throughout England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. Many Anglican clergymen objected to his revivalist techniques, did not approve of his preaching in their parishes without authorization, and closed their pulpits to him and his followers. Wesley, however, was not deterred by such opposition for he boldly proclaimed:

I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that, in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right, and my bounded duty, to declare unto all that are willing to hear the glad tidings of salvation.

As Wesley rode throughout the British Isles, he invited others to gather frequently, to pray, sing hymns, and study the word of God. Membership in these groups was open to all who desired spiritual edification. He also expected individuals who were influenced by his preaching to attend services of the Church of England on Sunday and to participate regularly in Holy Communion.

During his initial preaching excursions, Wesley did not attack any doctrines held by the church to which he belonged, but criticized the apathy, the worldliness, and the lack of faith and piety prevalent among many members of

that religious community. Rather than establish a new denomination, Wesley struggled to initiate a reformation among members of the Anglican communion. Such action, however, eventually led to a disruption of England's established church.

The transition from societies in which people gathered to study and pray to a new religious community was a gradual process which began in 1739 and continued until 1791. One of the first steps in this transition was Wesley's formation of "United Societies" in London and other communities and the preparation of rules for these groups. According to these guidelines, members gathered to seek the power of godliness, to pray together, and to be strengthened by listening to the word of God. Members were encouraged to serve mankind and to help others work out their salvation. They were not to purchase, sell, or consume alcoholic beverages except in extreme necessity. They were to observe the Sabbath day and avoid every kind of evil. Each society was divided into classes of about twelve with a leader who had the responsibility of contacting every member of his class at least once a week.

The movement from United Societies (which became known as Methodist societies) toward the creation of a new church continued during the 1740s. During that decade various elements of a missionary movement were initiated, including a "circuit system," "itinerant ministry," "class leaders," and "annual conferences"; Wesley appointed many lay leaders to direct the religious activities of congregations. These individuals did not claim authority to administer the sacraments, but they taught and counseled those who assembled together. When some of Wesley's followers were denied Holy Communion in the Church of England, he approved the administration of the Lord's Supper in the societies by Anglican priests who supported this religious movement. In 1746, Wesley read Peter King's *Account of the Primitive Church (1691)* which convinced him that bishops and presbyters were of the same order and that both these officers had the right to ordain. He further concluded that the scriptures did not advocate any specific form of church government.

In the 1780s Methodist societies took other major steps toward separation from the Church of England. On September 1, 1784, Wesley ordained two men as deacons and the following day ordained them presbyters and set apart Reverend Thomas Coke (who had been episcopally ordained) as superintendent of Methodist churches in America. Shortly thereafter these three men sailed across the Atlantic and, acting under the direction of Wesley (who remained in the British Isles), helped establish a Methodist church in the young republic. Toward the end of that decade Wesley ordained others as presbyters, thereby rejecting explicitly the Anglican position concerning authority that bishops alone have the right of ordination. Then in 1787 Wesley advised his followers to license all chapels and preachers, thereby admitting that they were dissenters, in order to receive the privileges guaranteed Trinitarian Protestants by the Act of Toleration. Although Wesley had in reality severed his connections with the established church, throughout his life he insisted that he was a loyal member of the Church of England and refused to allow Methodists in England to officially announce their independent status. The actions of this resolute reformer, however, had precipitated a schism;

shortly after Wesley's death in 1791 his followers in England acknowledged that the separation had been consummated.

While Methodism was emerging as a distinct faith in England, it was transplanted to the English mainland colonies. About 1760 a lay preacher, Robert Strawbridge, migrated from Ireland to Maryland and near Sam's Creek in Frederick County organized a society according to the rules outlined by John Wesley. His itinerant preaching extended into the neighboring colonies of Virginia, Delaware, and Pennsylvania, where additional classes were constituted. Meanwhile, Philip Embury organized a Methodist class in his home in New York about 1765 and from there the movement spread into other communities.

After a significant growth of Methodism occurred during the American Revolution, especially in Virginia under the leadership of Devereux Jarratt, many members of this organization desired to sever their identity with the Church of England, a society which had lost prestige and clergy during the war. At that time most Methodist leaders in the new nation were lay preachers who claimed no special authority to baptize or administer the Lord's Supper, and therefore members of this movement relied on Anglican priests to administer the sacraments. After several groups had initiated a schism, Methodists assembled in Baltimore; in the year 1784, the same year that Wesley had appointed Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury to be superintendents of Methodist bodies, delegates approved Wesley's plan of organization and formed the Methodist Episcopal Church. By refusing to accept Wesley's supervision of the church, approving Coke and Asbury as their leaders, and changing their titles to bishop, the Americans created a new church independent of the Methodist communities in England.

The Methodist Church was organized in America during an era when there were fewer churches and ministers per total number of people than in any other age since the European colonization of this land. Recognizing the skepticism and indifference toward organized religion which prevailed in the new nation, and knowing that large numbers were unable to attend church because there was no organized religious society in the community where they lived, vigorous Methodist leaders launched an effective missionary program designed to plant Christianity in the homes of the unconverted and those who did not belong to a church. These Protestants solved, in part, the problem of the shortage of ministers by not requiring their preachers to be college graduates, and many dedicated Americans sacrificed the comforts of life to serve as itinerant preachers. Before their appointments Methodists were generally asked to answer four questions in the affirmative: (1) Are you converted? (2) Do you know and are you willing to abide by the rules of the society? (3) Can you preach adequately? (4) Have you a horse?

In addition to calling large numbers of preachers to travel throughout America, Methodists inaugurated an ingenious system enabling vast numbers living in rural communities to receive regular spiritual edification. These Protestants divided the country into conferences and districts and then subdivided the districts into stations and circuits. Preaching locations were determined within the circuits, and itinerant ministers were assigned to preach regularly in the designated places of worship. The circuits were called two-week, three-

week, or four-week circuits depending on the period required to preach in each location. Traveling preachers, who almost lived on the back of a horse and generally slept in the homes of settlers living along established trails, were usually assigned to a circuit for only one or at the most two years and were given a small substance for their services. In areas where there was a Methodist meetinghouse, stationed preachers were appointed who in most instances derived much of their support from their own industry. But prior to the Civil War most communities were served by traveling ministers who had no secular employment.

One of the most famous circuit riders of the early republic was Peter Cartwright. At the age of sixty-eight, this itinerant had a circuit almost 500 miles by 100 miles. In order to carry his gospel message to the pioneers of frontier America, he rode through blinding snow storms and treacherous floods, and followed dusty trails in the burning summer heat. He traveled from forts to camps and from tents to log cabins. He preached in towns, villages, and farm communities, in homes, schools, and courthouses, and declared a message of salvation to innumerable farmers who gathered in the fields and groves of the old Northwest.

Although Methodists were energetic supporters of a variety of interdenominational missionary programs, such as camp meetings, Sunday Schools, and Bible and tract societies, in most communities camp meetings were regularly conducted by Methodists themselves without the cooperation of other Protestants. In fact, Methodists sponsored more camp meetings than did members of any other denomination. Frequently camp meetings erupted into exciting spectacles in which enthusiasts demonstrated their emotional aspirations with a variety of physical demonstrations. During the exuberant meetings of the Second Great Awakening, people sometimes went into trances, jerked, rolled and crawled on the ground, barked like dogs, and fell to the ground as though they had been hit by a piercing cannon ball. Peter Cartwright declared that he had seen "more than a hundred sinners fall like dead men under one powerful sermon," and that he witnessed more than 500 people shouting in unison their praises to God.

While some Americans defended the physical demonstrations as evidence of the power of the Almighty, others condemned the emotionalism as unhealthy hysteria, noting that while one group was supposedly being saved others were being intoxicated by the spirits-alcohol or possibly evil spirits. No one, however, doubted that the camp meetings had a profound impact on many participants. After returning to their homes from an exciting religious experience, many settlers of the early republic decided to join one of the Protestant churches, and united with the Methodists more than any other denomination.

The tremendous success of the Methodists during the early nineteenth century is partly reflected in an examination of the annual reports of church membership. In 1786 the Methodists claimed a membership of 20,600. Twenty years later, in 1806, the membership had increased to about 130,600. Following the War of 1812, the increase was even more remarkable than the earlier growth, for in 1816, there were 215,000 Methodists, and by 1836 approximately 650,000. In one year, 1833, there was an increase in membership of 51,143; and in one ten-year period, 1826 to

1836, the growth was nearly 300,000. By 1850, approximately one-third of American Protestants were Methodists and for one century, from about 1820 to 1920, the Methodist Church was the largest Protestant community in the United States. Currently, this denomination stands second among Protestant groups in this country.

During the era of spectacular Methodist growth there were a number of divisions in the movement. While some of these schisms have been healed, many have remained permanent. Currently there are more than twenty different bodies in America whose historical roots stem back to John Wesley.

A number of the divisions in Methodism occurred as a consequence of racial discrimination or the desire of blacks to unite in their own church. In 1787 a group of blacks in Philadelphia withdrew from the Methodist Church and in 1816 formed what is currently the second largest body of Methodists in the United States, the African Methodist Episcopal Church whose membership is more than 2 million. Another group, currently reporting more than a million members, separated from the mother church in 1796 in New York City and in 1848 adopted the name African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Shortly after the Civil War a number of free blacks living in the South desired to form their own religious society and, with the approval of the parent group, organized in 1870 the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, currently the fourth largest body of Methodists, with a membership of about half a million. Two other Methodist bodies consisting of black members are the Union American Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Union First Colored Methodist Protestant Church, Inc.

The most serious rupture in this religious movement occurred as a consequence of the slavery issue. In 1844 the main body was split into a northern and a southern church: the Methodist Episcopal Church was the northern branch and the southerners adopted the name Methodist Episcopal Church, South. It was not until 1939 that the two societies reunited, forming the Methodist Protestant Church. In 1968 this religious community merged with the United Brethren Church, creating the United Methodist Church. This is the largest numerical group in this family of churches with approximately eighty percent of all Methodists belonging to this communion.

The issues of discrimination and slavery were not the only divisive forces of this faith. Many schisms have resulted from groups rebelling against what they consider doctrinal innovations in the mother church. Other groups criticized the Methodist pattern of government, with some rejecting what they considered to be an autocratic polity in favor of a Congregational system providing for the autonomy of each congregation. The largest of these predominantly white churches, currently known for its theological conservatism, is the Free Methodist Church of North America. While many have classified the predominant Methodist system of government as Episcopal because of the power extended to bishops, Methodists seek for equal representation of clergy and lay members in policy-making procedures, extending much authority to the Quarterly, Annual, and General Conferences. In the United Methodist Church the Quarterly Conference is the governing body of the local churches and consists of all the officials of a congregation. This assembly discusses future plans and programs, determines budgets,

elects church officers, and sends delegates to the Annual Conference. At the Annual Conference all of the ministers and at least one lay member from each congregation meet to determine individuals who should be ordained to the ministry, vote on constitutional questions, and elect lay and ministerial delegates to the General Conference. The highest policy-making body is the General Conference, which meets every four years. While a bishop presides, most business is conducted by committees. Reports of these groups become binding when adopted by the General Conference. Although there appears to be less freedom in this pattern of government than the local autonomy which exists in many other Protestant churches, Methodists believe that a genuine democratic spirit permeates their decision-making process.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Methodism in modern America is that in most congregations a wide latitude of belief exists. Much freedom is apparent in the interpretation of basic Methodist beliefs; and in most congregations, liberal and orthodox members work harmoniously on a variety of church programs. In many congregations ministers do not require subscription to a specified creed by individuals requesting membership. But while there are practically no membership requirements in some local societies, many ministers specify that individuals desiring to unite with Methodists should indicate that they have committed their life to Christ. Since most Methodists reject many beliefs popularized by John Wesley and are known for their efforts to reinterpret the classical faith, there is currently no precise answer to the question, "What do Methodists believe?" Many ministers and laity would respond to this question by saying that they believe in Christ. Many would add that they believe Christians should express their faith by supporting a variety of social welfare programs and working conscientiously to solve the problems confronting men and women of the twentieth century.

The inclusive nature of this religious community is aptly summarized in a series of statements which appear on printed programs circulated by members of the largest body of Methodists:

- If the United Methodist Church had no white members, it would be the seventh largest Negro denomination in the country....
- If the United Methodist Church had no white members and no black members it would be the largest red denomination in the country. More American Indians belong to our church than to any other.
- If the United Methodist church had no white, black, or red members, it would be the largest yellow denomination in the country. Onehalf of all Japanese Americans who are Christians belong to our church.
- If the United Methodist Church had no English-speaking members, it would be the third largest Spanish-speaking denomination in the country.
- Our great church not only sings but demonstrates, "In Christ there is no east or west, in Him no south or north."

#### *Distinguishing Beliefs*

Traditionally, Methodists have emphasized the five points of Arminianism, especially that man plays a vital role in the

salvation experience. He has the capacity, John Wesley taught, to accept or reject the gift of salvation when God offers this gift to mankind. God desires to save all mankind, Wesley added, but only those who accept Christ and do not fall will benefit from the atonement.

Sanctification is another doctrine that represents the historical tradition of this faith. Protestant reformers, including Luther and Calvin, did not make a sharp distinction between justification and sanctification. They considered justification not only as God's forgiveness of man and establishment of a new relationship with him, but also as the involvement of the Holy Spirit operating within man to produce a new holiness. According to most reformers, justification occurred when man obtained forgiveness of sins and righteousness. John Wesley, however, emphasized justification and sanctification in separate classifications and taught that there is a possibility of complete sanctification or final perfection in this life. It is possible, Wesley added, for man to live a sinless life and be made perfect in love in this life. Wesley also emphasized that the Holy Ghost gives to individuals an assurance that they are children of God.

While describing their position concerning baptism, Methodists explain that baptism marks the beginning of growth in the Christian faith, and is the gateway into the Christian Church. Through infant baptism, they add, parents dedicate their children to God. Ministers instruct parents that the baptized infant is consecrated to God and that the parents or sponsors have a responsibility to bring up the child in the Christian faith.

There are a few differences in the beliefs of Methodists and doctrines generally held by Episcopalians. Unlike Episcopalians, Methodists do not generally endorse sponsors who act as spiritual parents and who are not physically related to the infants at baptism. Another difference in the faith of these religious communities is that Methodists do not endorse confirmation as practiced by Episcopalians. Instead of a service consisting of the laying on of hands of a bishop, in the Methodist Church there is a service of reception in which candidates renew vows made in their name at baptism. A third difference is that Methodists hold that the Lord's Supper is a memorial in which Christians remember the sacrifice of Jesus and promise to serve him. The bread and grape juice (Episcopalians use wine) signify the body and blood of Christ. The Lord's Supper is also considered by Methodists as a living experience, for this sacrament becomes a blessing and comfort to all worthy communicants.

Another basic difference in the beliefs of Methodists and Episcopalians is that while Episcopalians believe in apostolic succession, Methodists affirm that every man is his own priest. In harmony with most Protestants, Methodists teach that all believers constitute a priesthood whose influence and leadership help each to live closer to God. Methodists further assert that individuals should not administer the sacraments unless they have been ordained or appointed to serve as pastor to a church or circuit. A call from God is also deemed essential prior to ordination, and each preacher, it is believed, should declare publicly his faith in God before teaching others. According to Methodists, there are two orders: the office of deacon and the office of elder. Unlike Episcopalians, Methodists teach that the bishop is not a third

order but is an elder set apart for a peculiar administrative task. In the Methodist church the bishop is not ordained but is consecrated.

Methodist church government is more like the Presbyterian system than the Congregational. Local congregations do not select ministers, and ministers are bound to serve where directed by bishops. Generally, the bishop, the congregation, and the minister approve an appointment before the minister becomes the spiritual leader of a congregation. The governing bodies of this church consist of lay and clerical representatives.

#### *Miscellaneous Beliefs and Characteristics*

Methodists are known for their emphasis on a triune God, evangelism, education, separation of church and state, freedom for all men, a concern and responsibility for the spiritual and temporal affairs of others, and for their opposition to the sale, distribution and consumption of alcoholic beverages. Methodist ministers are currently taking a more flexible attitude toward alcohol, there being a steady movement away from total abstinence. Some of the younger clergy will now accept an occasional social drink.

Methodists are also known for their reinterpretation of classical Protestant theology. Most have rejected many elements of the traditional faith, including the traditional belief concerning the virgin birth of Christ, the fall, the atonement, and life beyond the grave.