

--- Who Are The Methodists? ---

This year has been widely noted and observed as an anniversary year in the history of Methodism. It was on a May evening, two hundred and twenty five years ago, that John Wesley, thirty -five years of age, and discouraged and frustrated because he had not yet had what he conceived a saving experience of God, went into a religious meeting in Aldersgate street in London, and there ~~had~~ ^{was converted} ~~such an experience~~. According to his Journal, he went "very unwillingly" to the meeting. Why he went "very unwillingly" he does not say. Perhaps it was that he was so methodical in his ways that he resented making any change in his planned program for the day; or perhaps it was that having sought such an experience many times before, he was greatly doubtful that he would find it by attending some more or less random meeting. Be that as it may, he did go, and someone read Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans, and Wesley felt his heart "strangely warmed". Writing in his Journal, he said,

"I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation... assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

This has been viewed as one of the great conversions of history, comparable to that of Paul on the Damascus Road. True, some have not accorded it that amount of significance. Thus, the Belgian Franciscan priest, Father Piette, in his volume "John Wesley in the Evolution of Protestantism", says:

"This famous conversion, which has been called upon to play so prom-

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inent a part in the doctrinal life of the Methodism of the nineteenth century, enjoyed but a very modest role in the founder's life and in that of his companions. In fact, whether it be considered in its preparation, or be studied in itself and its results, it would seem to have been merely a quite ordinary experience whose effects time was quickly to dull. Had it not been entered in the first extract of the Journal, it is quite possible that Wesley would have entirely forgotten about it. In any case, subsequent appraisals, made after the lapse of many years, reduce ~~to~~ pitiable proportions the song of praise and victory which first accompanied it."

This appraisal, itself, although corrective of exaggeration, appears to go too far in the opposite direction. A fairer and more tempered appraisal ~~has been~~ ^{has} been given by the English scholar, Henry Bett, ~~who, writing~~ ⁱⁿ in his volume, "The Spirit of Methodism", ~~remarks~~:

He writes

"Whatever you call the experience of 1738, it was that which made Wesley the man he was and enabled him to do the work he did. It really does not matter whether you call it his conversion or not. On any and every possible interpretation of it, it was a spiritual event that gave Wesley quite a new sort of religious experience, with an assurance and a power and a peace and a joy he had never known before, and it was this change which made him into the Apostle of England."

Certainly many, if not most Methodists, view the occurrence as rather highly significant in the life of Wesley, and pin-point it as the somewhat founding year for the development of Methodism. And, while it may be true, as an Episcopal layman writing in a recent issue of the Living Church suggests, that too many Methodists admire John Wesley for the wrong things --- as the founder of their church, forgetting his assertion "I live and die a member of the Church of England"; and as a reformer, when actually, with one major exception, he accepted almost without question the social and political institutions of his day--nevertheless his own life story was remarkable, and he did make a tremendous appeal to the lowly who felt excluded from the aristocratic Church of England, and the Methodist ^{movement}, which at least had its roots in his efforts, and has become, next to the Lutherans, the largest Protestant body in the world, constitutes a vastly interesting major chapter in the history and sociology of religion. It is from such aspects, rather than any polemical discussion of Methodist theology, that I would seek, as objectively as possible, to say something this morning about John Wesley and Methodism.

Born on the 17th. of June, 1703, at Epworth Rectory, John Wesley was the fifteenth of nineteen children born to his parents. He might have been one of the near half in number who died in infancy, but he managed to live to the rather ripe age of eighty-eight. His father, trained for the Non-conformist ministry, that is to say, non-conformist with respect to the Church of England, had

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changed his views, and had become a minister, or priest, of the Church of England. He was a man of ability, among other things a would-be-poet, who once produced a volume of poems bearing the rather strange title "Maggots". He was also apparently a man of obstinate opinions and tackless ways, who so infuriated and alienated his parishioners, that they retaliated by killing the family cow and made several attempts at burning down the parsonage. In the latter, they finally succeeded in ~~1720~~ seventeen hundred and nine, and the Wesley family barely managed to escape with their lives, and were left practically destitute. In the confusion of escaping from the building, six year old John was left behind, and there seemed no way of saving him from the blazing inferno, and the father went down on his knees in prayer for the doomed child. When the child was seen at a rear window, and through the forming of a human pyramid, he was just as the flaming roof gave way. brought down to safety. Both the father and mother looked upon this miraculous escape as a message from Providence. He was a brand who had literally been "plucked from the burning"; he must have been spared for some very special purpose.

from his father,

His mother was an even more amazing person, and it was she who had a much greater influence upon him. Herself, the twenty-fifth child born to her parents she was not only the mother of nineteen children between the time she was married at nineteen and the age of forty, but she was well versed in Greek, Latin, and French, and was a more competent theologian than her ministerial father, husband, and the most famous to be of her children. Still more it was

upon her that most of the management of the household fell, and she sought to impress upon all her children a disciplined methodical way of life."I insist she said "in conquering the will of children...because this is the only strong and rational foundation of a religious education, without which both precept and example will be ineffectual, but when this is done then is a child capable of being governed by the reason and piety of its parents, till its own understanding come to maturity, and the principles of religion have taken root in the mind." By one year of age, each was taught to fear the rod and to cry softly; and on each child's fifth birthday, he or she was taught the entire alphabet, and the next day was started in a reading of the Old Testament. The schedule was six hours a day, from nine to twelve and from two to five, which was a tough schedule even in those days. Young John, studious and thoughtful, fitted into the system very well, and the pattern of strictly budgeting his time remained with him all his life. Dr. Johnson was one time to complain about the matter in the following manner:

"I hate to meet John Wesley. The dog enchants you with his conversation, and then breaks away to go and visit some old woman...He is always obliged to go at a certain hour. This is very disagreeable to a man who loves to fold his legs and have his talk out, as I do..."

After six years at the charity school of Charterhouse in London, Wesley entered Oxford University on a small scholarship, and remained there as student, lecturer, and fellow for fifteen years, save for two years during which he

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served as curate or assistant to his aging father. Ordained into the Church of England in 1725, he was still greatly troubled about the state of his soul, and he made of life something of a torment for himself and for others with his unconscious egotism and uncompromising ascetic piety. Anything not having to do with the religious, he looked upon as a sinful waste of time, and he shut himself out from association with any, save such "as would help me on my way to heaven". He did join with a few other students, including his younger brother Charles, ^{who on 13 June 1729 formed the group known as the Holy Club} in forming a group called the Holy Club, which met regularly for Communion, fasted Wednesdays and Fridays, prayed two hours a day, visited the prisons and gave from their scanty resources to feed the poor. Other students referred to the Holy Club as the Bible Bigots, and then referred to its members as Methodists, in ridicule of their methodical ways. There was no particular direction about the little movement, and it might have withered on the vine, or it might have issued in an earlier version of the High Church Oxford Movement such as was to be associated with the figure of John Henry Newman in the nineteenth century. But a series of events turned it in a different direction, and led to what was to be a separate Methodist movement.

On a visit to London, for the purpose of presenting a dedicatory copy of his father's mammoth work on Job to Queen Caroline, which she accepted but placed unopened on the window-seat, John met James Oglethorpe who was about ~~ready~~ to sail with a shipload of emigrants for the new colony of Georgia in America. John, as also his brother Charles, was invited to come along; Charles

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would be Oglethorpe's secretary, while John would be chaplain and parson of the expedition and the colony, as well as missionary to the I'ndians. John dutifully asked his mother about going, and she answered: "If I had twenty sons, I should rejoice if they were all so employed, though I never saw them more." So they sailed in October of 1735, and John confided to his Journal the major reason for his going: "My chief motive is the hope of saving my own soul.... I cannot hope to attain the same degree of holiness here which I may there."

The voyage was marked by heavy storms, which terrified most of the passengers, including John Wesley. The only exception was a small group of Moravians, followers of John Hus, who remained calm and tranquil, even to the point of singing hymns. This made a great impression on Wesley, and when he asked them how they could remain so calm and they told him they were not afraid to die because they knew they were saved, he wondered where and how they had found such assurance. He spent two years in Georgia, and they were two unhappy years, in which he was very much a failure. He was a failure as a parson. The English colonists told him he was too strict and High Church for the frontier, which was ironical since in time Methodism in America was to mushroom with the advancing frontier. And he was told by the Indians that they didn't want to be Christians because virtually all the Christians they had met were liars and thieves. He was likewise a failure as a would-be husband. In love with a Miss Sophy Hopkey, and she with him, he was torn between love and profession, and more than half convinced that celibacy was his duty, he put both of them through

months of torturing indecision. Finally some few friends that he had intervened and persuaded him to resort to sortilege, the casting of lots to determine God's will in the matter. Several decisions were written on slips of paper, and he was to ^{select} ~~xxxxxx~~ one. The one he ~~xxxxxx~~ selected read "Think no more of it." So he gave up the idea of marrying her, and four days later she married a Mr. Williamson, "a person" wrote Wesley in his Journal, "not remarkable for Handsomeness, neither for Genteelness, neither for Wit, or Knowledge or Sense, and least of all, for Religion". Wesley still expected the bride ~~to~~ to meet with him for long sessions of spiritual advice and the reading together of pious books, something to which her husband rather naturally objected, and when she sided with her husband, Wesley publicly excluded her from communion. This did not endear him to the little colony, who already weary of his punctiliousness, now also looked upon him as an ungallant and poor loser.

So, with no likelihood of success in Georgia, he sailed in the month of December for home. On the way, incidentally, his ship was driven by storm into Boston Harbor and he was invited to preach to the people of Boston, and it is very likely, though not definitely established, that he preached in King's Chapel which not too many years later was to become the first professing Unitarian Church on the North American continent. Much more important in the life of Wesley and the history of Methodism was the admission in his Journal, shortly before he reached England, of another failure in Georgia, and the one that bothered him most. He had not found the certainty of ~~his~~ salvation of his own soul. "I went to

America "he worte" to convert the Indians; but O! who shall convert me?"

Not too surprisingly, it came through the Moravians about whom he had thought a great deal. Back in London, ~~xxx~~ only four days after landing, he met a young Moravian missionary enroute to the Carolinas. With him he spent many hours, absorbing the central doctrines of the Moravians, namely the Lutheran doctrine of "justification by faith", the acceptance of the love of God in Christ through which all fear of eternal damnation was destroyed, and ~~that~~ the finding of such faith ~~was~~ something sudden, almost instantaneous in the heart, and not dependent upon reason and philosophy. Then followed the ^{Gammon} attendance at the ^{Moravian} meeting in Aldersgate Street at which Wesley felt his heart "strangely warmed", and this was followed three weeks later by an extended visit to a Moravian settlement in Germany which completed his personal conversion, and brought him back to England with an evangelistic zeal ~~which~~ ^{the} never left him.

With no intent of abandoning the Church of England or openly attacking the sacraments, he was nevertheless rather quickly up against the problem of finding a place from which to preach. Within a year virtually every Anglican pulpit was closed to him. Not only was his enthusiasms held to be in bad taste, but his message of anyone being able to enter into salvation through an immediate act of conversion was held to be highly upsetting to the liturgical and sacramental procedures of the Anglican Church. And still more this all seemed to be to an affront ~~xxxxxx~~ the advantages of superior rank. A somewhat typical attitude of the Anglican- upper classes was ~~xxxx~~ expressed ~~in~~ by the Duchess of

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Buckingham in a letter to Lady Huntingdon, who was one of the very few of wealth and prestige to ^{early} give support to the movement:

"I thank your ladyship " she wrote "for the information concerning the Methodist preachers. Their doctrines are most repulsive and tinged with impertinence and disrespect towards their superiors, in perpetually endeavoring to level all ranks and do away with all distinctions. It is monstrous to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl the earth. This is highly offensive and insulting, and I cannot but wonder that your ladyship should relish any sentiments so much at variance with high rank and good breeding."

Wesley himself was a conservative by background, and a stickler for propriety, and as he confessed in his ~~Journal~~ ^{Journal} he still looked upon the saving of souls as being almost a sin if it were not done in a church. He was far from wanting to become what was to be commonly called a "shouting Methodist". But with no church in which to preach, and with the example immediately at hand of George Whitefield, another member of the Holy Club of Oxford who had gone to Georgia just when Wesley was leaving and had had great success with his "evangelism" and now back in ~~England~~ ^{England}, and likewise barred from the churches, was preaching to vast multitudes in the open air, Wesley somewhat reluctantly embarked on the same path. Once started, however, his courage, as someone has said, was magnificent, and his energy inexhaustible. Not allowed to speak in Anglican churches, denied the use of town halls, rotten-egged, stoned, and threatened with lyn-

ching, he held indomitably to his course. Uⁿ every morning at four, traveling annually an average of four thousand miles on horseback, preaching usually three sermons a day, establishing societies and S^unday schools wherever he went, and , although persisting in regarding himself as an Aⁿglican clergyman, still taking upon himself to ordain ministers, appoint lay preachers, establish circuits, and formulate codes of duties, diversions and dress, ~~xxxxx~~ ^{he} was one if not the most effective most effective of all protestant revivalists. of the ~~greatxxxxxifnotxthexgreatxtest,xxf~~

True, he was accused, and not without some cause, of being domineering and arbitrary, and in some quarters was even referred to as "Pope John". And in the rules formulated by him for the Kingswood School, which he founded for the children of his lay preachers, he even outdid the strictness of his own schooling, with the assertion "We have no play days....neither do we allow any time for play on any day; for he that plays as a child will play as a man". And accepting the revivalist standards of success, he was not beyond rather proudly reporting in 1743 that in the four previous years ~~his~~ preaching had caused two hundred and thirty four cases of hysteria, fourteen of temporary insanity, and nine of permanent insanity. And he was neither able nor willing to develop the democratic implications of his theology. As he grew older, he became more and more of a Tory, denouncing John Wilkes, disapproving of Burke and Pitt, and condemning any concession that might ~~have~~ been made by George the Third to the American colonies.

Still there was a considerable amount of liberalism in his views. Over

against the stern and terrifying doctrine of predestination, which held that some are predestined by God to be saved, and others to be lost, he preached the doctrine that salvation is free to any and all who will believe. And although he and Whitefield were in disagreement on this point, nevertheless, Wesley, following his life-motto of "Think and let think" remained a friend of Whitefield and when Whitefield's body was buried beneath the pulpit of the Presbyterian Church at Newburyport, Massachusetts, his funeral sermon, at his own previous request, was preached by Wesley in London. And although in his theology he was far from being a Unitarian or a Roman Catholic, still he admitted to the fact that even they might lead pious lives, and he recommended to his Methodist followers that they read biographies of good men, even if they were not Methodists. And after he himself had read the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius, he said that he had no doubt that that noble Roman would be in heaven, whereas some nominal Christians would not. And although other Methodist preachers might resort to sermons on hell in an effort to scare sinners into line, of Wesley himself it is said that he preached but one sermon on hell and forty thousand on the love of God. The essence of the Methodist religion as Wesley preached it was "God loves us. And we should love Him and each other." With all its rigors, Methodism was intended to be a religion of inward joy and liberation. And for many of the lowly and others who felt uncomfortable or unwanted in the Church of England, it provided them with a religious certainty and assurance.

Here in America it was a woman apparently who started organized Methodism on its way. To be sure, George Whitefield, on several visits to this country, had somewhat paved the way, preaching up and down the seaboard to great congregations. But he was always the traveling evangelist, and still more with his acceptance of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination he was not really a spokesman for Methodism. At least he left no American Methodist churches behind him. It was a Barbara Heck who was responsible for drawing together the first Methodist congregation in America. She and a cousin, by name Philip Embury, had come from Germany, by way of Ireland, where they had heard Wesley preach and had become Methodists, and landed in New York they made the acquaintance of a few other Methodist immigrants. In time she gathered them together, and insisted that ^{her} cousin, who had become something of a local preacher in Ireland, preach to them. They rather quickly outgrew the house in which they met, and built a meeting house, and they sent word to England to send preachers to gather the American harvest. And such were sent by Wesley. With the American Revolution, however, the harvest almost came to an end. Wesley's opposition to the American Revolution set a stigma upon Methodism, and virtually every Methodist clergyman who had been sent over was either recalled or else voluntarily returned to England. The one outstanding exception was Francis Asbury, who by his loyalty to the American cause and by his tremendous amount of energy, enabled Methodism to grow and to grow very rapidly after the Revolution. At a

conference called in Baltimore in 1784, the conference wisely organized itself into an independent body under the name of the Methodist Episcopal Church of America, and elected Asbury as the first bishop. Asbury devoted his attention chiefly to the frontier. New England and other parts of the seaboard already had long established churches and settled ministers, and furthermore they were heavily Calvinist and antagonistic to dissenters. The whole developing frontier however was open, and for this crusading task the Methodists were better fitted than almost anyone else. First, the system of itinerant preachers, that had been revived and developed by Wesley, was precisely suited to the needs of the American wilderness. Circuit riders carried the glad news of salvation to isolated villages and lonely settlements everywhere, and in many instances they were even ahead of the settlements. Nor did they come only once and pass on; they had a regular itinerary, they created classes and societies in a cellular organization bound together in larger units under a centralized direction. Methodism conquered the wilderness in a methodical manner. And second, its use of a lay-ministry was neither hampered nor thwarted by requirements of academic education. Education was held to be, ^{primarily} with self-justification ⁱⁿ ~~ration~~ ^{indication} ~~rationalized~~ to be, a real detriment to preaching. If God called a man to preach he would qualify him with special gifts. Thus, one Methodist preacher said in a sermon:

"What I insist upon, my brethren and sisters, is this: learning isn't

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religion, and edification don't give a man the power of the spirit.

It is grace and gifts that furnish the real live coals from off the altar. St. Peter was a fisherman-- do you think he ever went to Yale College? Yet he was the rock upon which Christ built his church. No, no, beloved brethren and sisters. When the Lord wanted to blow down the walls of Jericho, he didn't take a brass trumpet, or a polished French horn; no such thing; he took a ram's horn--- a plain, natural ram's horn sort of a man like me."

The result was that on the frontier, in particular, there was much that was rough and homespun about Methodism, much that was highly emotional and subject to criticism and abuse, and the ministers themselves sometimes had to be real fighting parsons; but still, the Methodists were highly successful in winning converts and establishing churches across the whole breadth of the country. And in time they were to establish a good number of excellent schools ~~across~~ the country, and to turn increasingly to an educated ministry.

The American Methodists have not been without some splits and dissensions. The most serious split occurred over the issue of slavery. Wesley had early published a treatise giving his Thoughts Upon Slavery, in which he minced no words: "I absolutely deny all slave-holding to be consistent with any degree of even natural justice.....slave-owners, kidnappers, murderers....Thy hands, thy bed, thy furniture, thy house thy lands are at present stained with blood.. whether you are a Christian or not, show yourself a man." In the States, the

Northern Methodist churches, for the most part, were loyal to his attitude, but in the South where even some Methodist ministers themselves owned slaves, the interests of economic class broke the ethics asunder, and there was formed the Methodist Episcopal Church South, separate from the parent body.

Again there early developed a struggle for more democracy in church government. There was ~~opposition~~ to the rule of bishops, and there was insistence on lay representation in the Annual and General Conferences. ~~Those opposing with-~~ ^{Some opposed} drew in 1830 and formed the Methodist Protestant Church.

In 1939 these three divisions finally reunited in one church now called simply Methodist, with a membership of some ten million people. Still there are a number of independent Methodist bodies, such as the Wesleyan Methodist Church of America and the Free Methodist Church of North America, and although many Negro churches and several ~~xxxx~~ Negro Annual Conferences belong in the United Methodist Church proper, ~~xxxx~~ the majority of Negro Methodist churches still have a separate denominational existence. This latter has caused much concern among the Methodists, and at a recent Methodist Conference on Human Relations held in Chicago, there was drawn up a statement for the forthcoming 1964 Methodist General Conference, which calls for changes which would eliminate most if not all institutional expressions of discrimination within Methodism.

And in England there is another issue that is creating a considerable stir. This year which marks the 225th anniversary of John Wesley's Aldersgate expe-

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rience, ~~has~~ also ~~seen~~ the publication of a report on conversations between the Church of England and the Methodist Church, looking toward possible re-union. This falls into the assumed virtue of church re-union that is so prevalent today, ~~xxxxxx~~ but many Methodists, including some who have taken part in the conversations, are greatly fearful that Methodism, if re-united with the Church of England, ~~and~~ even with a moderated type of episcopacy, will become even less democratic than it now is, will ~~tend~~ towards an even greater emphasis on liturgy and form, will depart ~~further~~ from the spirit of Wesley's Methodism, will lose some of its missionary zeal and will forget some of the radical social concern that on occasion it has shown.

Some counterpart of this has been even more pronounced here in the United States. The Methodist church, which started as it were, on the other side of the tracks, and once was proud to call itself the poor man's church, has long since, in considerable degree, crossed over the tracks, and while not necessarily boasting of its wealth, has more and more fallen into talk of the "sanctification of wealth", and of "consecrated power". Not only has this led to the somewhat ironical situation that the Methodist church, which was once mainly the church of the dispossessed and the lowly, has become so increasingly wealthy and formal that many feel uncomfortable, if not unwanted, by it, but with respectability and the climate of opinion usually associated with wealth, there has been a progressive tendency to soft-pedal, and even to smother, any really radical social message. ~~Thisxxx~~ All this, of course, has been a general

tendency with various church bodies which have moved up the ladder of social respectability and the influence of wealth, but it is most conspicuous in the case of Methodism, by virtue of its pronouncedly different background. And in some considerable measure it explains why the Methodist Church, after a remarkable growth has gone into a considerable slippage, not only in relative numbers but also in social influence. According to Dr. Franklin H. Littell of Chicago Theological Seminary "No church has suffered a more sensational decline, in terms both of public influence and of internal energy and discipline."

Wesley himself foresaw the problem. "Wherever riches have increased" he wrote "the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion.

Therefore I do not see how it is possible in the nature of things for any revival of religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce

riches. But as riches increase so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches. How then is it possible that Methodism, that is, a religion of the heart, though it flourishes now as a green bay

tree, should continue in this state? For the Methodists in every place are diligent and frugal; consequently they increase in goods. Hence

they proportionately increase in pride, anger, in the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes and the pride of life. So, although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away. Is there

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no way to prevent this-- this continual decay of pure religion?"

Wesley's own personal answer was to give away virtually everything he had, in order to lay up more treasures in heaven. The motivation was not particularly noble, and the answer is not particularly practical. But the essence of the problem ~~does not~~ remain, not only for the Methodists, but for other denominations as well---

-- as a matter of fact it is a problem for every individual, whether he is associated with some religious body or not.