EDITED BY

WILLIAM J. ABRAHAM

JAMES E. KIRBY

The Oxford Handbook *of* METHODIST STUDIES

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Edited by

WILLIAM J. ABRAHAM

and

JAMES E. KIRBY

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To Frank Baker, Franz Hildebrandt, Albert Outler, and
David Shipley, pioneer scholars in Methodist Studies

Preface

WILLIAM J. ABRAHAM
JAMES E. KIRBY

Methodist Studies emerged as a fresh academic venture in the 1950s with the decision to provide a proper edition of the works of John Wesley. A network of scholars in Britain and the university-related Methodist seminaries in the USA led by Albert Outler of Southern Methodist University, and by Robert Cushman, and Frank Baker at Duke University set about creating what became the *Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*. This as yet incomplete effort will furnish the essential tools for future work. This pioneering endeavour has already become the fountainhead of various streams of investigation that have flowed unceasingly without coordination since then. A new generation of students and scholars is now firmly in place, and they are producing a steady stream of texts, university courses, seminars, and conferences watering the field.

Much of the early work has been historical in nature. However, given Albert Outler's ecumenical and broader theological interests, it was clear from the outset that the agenda was as much theological as historical, as much prescriptive as descriptive. Thus, in addition to the historians, there is now a lively, interdisciplinary band of scholars who are at work explaining and mining the history of Methodist ecclesial bodies and movements. Initially such activity was fed by a desire on the part of Methodists to explain themselves to other Christian bodies; more recently it is being motivated by the need for Methodists to find a new identity. The danger of internal schism and a lively debate about the nature of the tradition as a whole has increased the urgency of the enterprise.

Scholarly work on Methodism finds regular outlets in the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, the Wesleyan Theological Society, the American Academy of Religion, and a host of ad hoc conferences related to various institutions and celebrations. It spills over into labour on the origins and nature of Pentecostalism and it reaches backwards into exploration of the sources that fed John Wesley and the Methodist Movement as a whole. The work is genuinely ecumenical in nature. There is a spirited interest in Wesley within mainline

Christianity, within Evangelicalism, and within those Wesleyan groups that broke with the mainline in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While much of the scholarship has been carried out by scholars who are rooted in the Methodist traditions, non-Methodist scholars in college and university history departments are making a significant contribution as well. Historians are taking the impact of the Methodists seriously in their increasing interest in the society as a whole and its development.

Given the diversity of work being done and the variety of persons at work, summary statements are risky. However, it is fair to say that four features have marked the work as a whole. First, there has been a determined effort to provide a critical analysis of the life and work of John Wesley. There is also great interest in Charles Wesley and in some other early Methodist leaders, such as Fletcher of Madeley. Significant new biographies of Charles Wesley are now available. The primary interest has been in recovering the historical Wesleys over the hagiographical understanding of the brothers.

Second, considerable attention has focused on the Wesleyan contribution to the problem of authority, most notably on the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. While a few have challenged this notion both as a historical account of Wesley and as a prescriptive option in the epistemology of theology, the Quadrilateral continues to serve as an important legacy of the last generation.

Third, there has been great interest in the relation between Wesley and contemporary forms of liberation theology. This interest stems from Wesley's concern for the poor and from his wider commitment to reforming society; it has received extensive attention over the last thirty years in the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies.

Fourth, of late there has been a serious endeavour to explore the institutional configurations of Methodism. Methodists were very intentional about their structures and practices; these have naturally evolved over time; hence they are an obvious site of scholarly investigation. Duke Divinity School led a lengthy study that resulted in an important, five-volume set of texts.

It is now time to gather up the extensive work that has been done in the past half-century, to provide a map of the field as a whole, and to offer vistas for fresh work. *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies* was created with these goals in mind. It is our hope that it will evoke a lively discussion on the nature and future of Methodist Studies. While the historical side of the work is very important, we have asked our contributors to move beyond it to develop fresh insights, hypotheses, and perspectives. Each has been invited to speak out of his or her experience and to develop his or her own best judgements about the subject in hand. Many have been selected as representatives of the people called Methodists across the world and to represent in their work the global nature of Methodism today.

We have chosen to use the term 'Methodist Studies' over against, say, 'Wesley Studies' or 'Wesleyan Studies'. The term 'Methodist' was the preferred designation of Wesley and of the movement that he initiated. Hence it has deep historical precedent. Second, while the term 'Wesleyan' has been widely used, it tends to signify a more evangelical and conservative view of the tradition. While we readily acknowledge that this branch of the tradition is extremely important, we prefer a term that will be recognized by everyone but without partisan connotations. Moreover, we wish to signal the fresh departure in the field as a whole. Nothing is set in stone in terms of current designation, but the term 'Methodist' can both reach back into the history and reach forward into new perspectives.

The objectives of this *Handbook* we hope are clear. We sought first to locate the centre of Methodist gravity in John Wesley and the accomplishments of his movement in the history of the church; hence it is crucial to set the tone and direction of the work as a whole by determining how best to characterize his life and work. We are convinced that Wesley belongs first and foremost in the history of piety and holy living in the Protestant tradition. The primary categories that capture what Wesley was and did are those of evangelist, spiritual director, revivalist, and renewalist. This is clearly visible in a host of ways. It shows up in a theology that concentrates on the *via salutis*. It is visible in the plethora of practices, from field preaching to conferencing, that he utilized. It is manifest in his vision of the mission of the church as summed up in his passion to save souls. This vision of Wesley represents a fresh departure from accounts of him that focus on his work as a folk theologian, church reformer, social activist, proto-liberationist, ingenious organizer, and the like.

We attempted, in the second place, to develop an appropriate set of categories sufficient to permit a fruitful and coherent mapping of Methodist Studies as a whole in the present. There is a vast array of study in play, so it is important to provide an illuminating framework that will permit the maximizing of diversity with a minimum of confusion. Our judgement is that Wesley launched a spiritual movement within Western Christianity that continues to express itself along a network of specific channels. What started as a surprising accident in the eighteenth century expressed itself in ecclesial, theological, moral, and political commitments over space and time. Our assumption is that what started as a spiritual experience in Wesley and other early Methodists both evoked and coloured a complex and multifaceted experiment within Western Christianity. Thus Methodism spawned its own characteristic ecclesial forms, spiritual experiences, forms of liturgy and worship, hymnody, theological themes and configurations, evangelistic practices, moral ethos and convictions, social and political impulses, educational institutions, and missionary activities.

Such expressions of the Christian faith are available both as historical precedents and as issues of contemporary decision and debate and are expressed in the chapters of this book. We believe they accurately chart the field of Methodist

Studies in terms of these discrete areas of inquiry. Our aim is both to do justice to current trends and to create space for new trends in the future. Methodism remains a living, dynamic tradition with both a contested record and an unidentified future; we aim to make room for both in the internal organization deployed.

Finally, we sought to recognize and address the reality that Methodism has become a global expression of the Christian faith. While Methodism originated in eighteenth-century England, it spread rapidly in North America and elsewhere. David Hempton, one of our authors, has recently captured this dimension of Methodism as an 'Empire of the Spirit'. While we acknowledge that the primary motivation and resources for Methodist Studies has been strongest in Britain and in the USA, Methodism came to be a worldwide phenomenon that cannot be confined to Anglo-American realities. Today it is constituted by a family of churches with over 75 million members and adherents across the world. To reflect this reality we have drawn heavily on the scholarly expertise both of scholars in North America and the United Kingdom, and of the international representatives of Methodism. We have shied away from superficial surveys and turned to more in-depth studies of Methodism outside Britain and the USA. We are convinced that drilling deep gives a more interesting and illuminating profile of the terrain.

We have sought in each case to match the best scholars in the field with the subject matter in hand. Within these parameters we have taken into account the fact that scholarship has changed over the last generation and now includes a variety of voices that once were muted or ignored. Our desire was to develop a volume that will encourage the full range of talent and interests as scholars seek to unpack and develop the resources of Methodism.

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PART I

HISTORY OF METHODISM

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CHAPTER 1

THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CONTEXT

J. C. D. CLARK

Changes in the Received Model of the Eighteenth Century

Much has changed since 1965, when Sir Herbert Butterfield, introducing an official *History of the Methodist Church*, placed early Methodism in the context of a historical interpretation of its age (Butterfield 1965: 3–33). Then it seemed natural that the fragile experiment of eighteenth-century Methodism should be confidently presented in the light of the self-image, or myth of origins, established by Methodism's numerical explosion and denominational separation in the nineteenth. It seemed equally natural that Methodism should be interpreted against the eighteenth-century context constructed by a yet-unchallenged modernist historiography.

This historiography characterized eighteenth-century Britain in terms of growing secularism and self-interest in society; latitudinarianism and lukewarmness in the church; urbanization, industrialization, and alienation in the economy; the rise of class and of the 'working-class movement' in politics. Such assumptions, prevalent in 1965, differed little from those of the earlier official *History* of 1909 (Townsend 1909*a*: 77–133, 1909*b*: 335–78). As late as 1965 Methodist history was the preserve of present-day Methodists: it focused on the inner life of the denomination,

with little serious comparison against surrounding religion; it was dominated by a personality cult of John Wesley; and it was often written normatively, to celebrate the presumed action of the Holy Spirit (even Rupp 1986: 453), rather than analytically, to determine the historically accessible role of human agency in Methodism's rise and later decline.

Since 1965, our understanding of eighteenth-century Britain has greatly developed. Then, England was allowed to stand proxy for Wales, Scotland, and Ireland; now, historians explore the contrasts between those societies. By 1909, Methodism looked like a massive international movement, and its followers wished to explain its spread as the ubiquitous success of a consistent formula: the preaching of free grace and the new birth. Yet in the eighteenth century the Welsh, Irish, and Scottish experience showed Wesleyan Methodism to be highly culturally specific, an English formulation that had difficulty in establishing itself beyond the borders of Anglicanism, and showed Whitefield's Methodism to be most successful in colonial North America.

Anglicanism itself has been reassessed in its pastoral and intellectual effectiveness, and Methodism therefore increasingly appears as evidence of the Church's vitality rather than of its somnolence. Modernist historiography blocked an appreciation that the critical reaction of the eighteenth-century church to Methodism had been well-informed, insightful, and sophisticated, but this exclusion is now problematic. It has been shown that the eighteenth century did not see the rise of religious indifference, but of lasting religious conflict, partly between denominations, partly within them, as assertions of natural religion clashed with a still-vital Trinitarian religiosity. It is also clearer that the eighteenth century is not to be labelled 'the Age of Reason'. 'The Enlightenment' was a late nineteenth-century term, imposed retrospectively for reasons that initially had much to do with the attempts of nineteenth-century agnosticism to secure parity of esteem with the church. John Wesley never noticed or commented on any process of secularization at work in his society. On the contrary, he believed in, and saw evidence of, the mass conversion of sinners: this implied a popular psychology eager for religious experience, not indifferent to it. There is today a growing disbelief in the idea of a nascent secular society in which the church was increasingly irrelevant to the state. Of this older world, early Methodism was a part, not a negation.

Politics, too, has been reassessed. As historians have become more aware of the politicization of religion in the long eighteenth century, Wesleyan Methodism's suspected early association with Jacobitism, its opposition to the American Revolution, and its loyalism during the French Revolution now appear as evidence of its intrinsic churchmanship rather than as aberrations from which Methodism's later links with the Liberal and Labour Parties redeemed it. Historians often now downplay the sense in which the Revolution of 1688 marked a break with monarchical rule, signalled the arrival of the 'modern state', or heralded the advent of parliamentary government. There has been a growing acceptance that wars of

religion did not cease with the seventeenth century, and that 1688 did not signal any 'rise' of a 'middle class' which, in association with a 'scientific revolution', broke the intellectual hegemony of classical antiquity, of an aristocratic elite, or of hierarchical churches.

Economic historians have scaled down earlier estimates of the overall rate of economic growth; there is a growing acceptance that the 'Industrial Revolution' was another term of historiographical art retrospectively imposed on the eighteenth century in the late nineteenth. It is now appreciated that urbanization, with some exceptions, was not as extensive or as rapid in Wesley's lifetime as was once assumed, and that the age of the great industrial conurbation waited until the 1880s. There was, then, no clear transition to a new world in the eighteenth century; rather, 'modernity' was itself a late nineteenth-century project, retrospectively imposed on the eighteenth. No longer can it be in any broad sense assumed that eighteenth-century Methodism was aided by economic change while its rivals were not.

What this means for our understanding of Methodism has yet to be fully worked out. John Wesley's lifetime was a time of change (like all lifetimes), but not of change on a scale that transformed English society. He did not perceive an 'industrial revolution': although he preached regularly in such growing towns as Birmingham, Doncaster, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Rotherham, Sheffield, Warrington, and Wigan, he drew no connection between industry or urban growth and vital religion. When he commented in his *Journal* of 1 May 1776 that trade had 'amazingly increased' in 'these two last years', he referred by name to counties in the south and south-west of England, as well as to ones in the north associated with manufactures, and offered a non-industrial explanation echoing the perceptions of the 1720s and 1730s: 'such is the fruit of the entire civil and religious liberty which all England now enjoys!' Population increase, too, he recorded, was evident 'not only in every city and large town but in every village and hamlet' (John Wesley 1975– : xxiii. 11–12).

Wesley, like the commercial society of the old order, was not romantic about '*rural life*'. He satirized the Horatian idyll of rural self-sufficiency: 'Our eyes and ears may convince us, that there is not a less happy body of men in all England than the country farmers. In general their life is supremely dull, and it is usually unhappy, too. For of all people in the kingdom, they are most discontented, seldom satisfied either with God or man' (John Wesley 1975– : *Journal*, 5 November 1766, xxii. 66–7). Wesley's mission was often to towns, but not because he saw in towns the face of the future. Indeed his social views, like his politics, came from an older world only now being properly understood. In 1772 Wesley expressed early eighteenth-century attitudes in blaming high prices of foodstuffs on luxury, gin drinking, and 'the enormous taxes' needed to service 'the national debt' (Tyerman 1870–1: iii. 130–4); he did not attribute high prices to burgeoning consumer demand. John Wesley and George Whitefield, to take even the most original characters of early

Methodism, were more children of their age than has been appreciated. In their lifetimes England remained a politico-ecclesiastical society, church and state intimately associated both in high theory and in daily practice; even Wesley's ordination of Methodist preachers was not a thoughtless or merely pragmatic step, but came after long reading in, and debate over, the questions of ecclesiology that still exercised his fellow clergy.

It has been an unexplored paradox that the young John Wesley, although an Arminian, perceived the religious temper of his age in Calvinist or Puritan terms as profoundly corrupt, immoral, and impious. His stance is, however, explicable when compared to his political condemnation of Walpole and George II. As he wrote of Whig and Tory:

> How violent soever the conduct of either party seemed to be, yet their animosities were founded upon religion. It was now said, by the Tories, that impiety and heresy were daily gaining ground under a Whig administration. It was said, that the doctrines of the true religion, were left exposed on every side, and open to the attacks of the dissenters and Socinians on one part, and of the catholics on the other. The lower orders of clergy sided with the people in these complaints; while the ministry not only refused to punish the delinquents, but silenced the clergy themselves, and forbade their future disputations on such topics. This injunction answered the immediate purpose of the ministry; it put a stop to the clamours of the populace, but it produced a worse disorder; it produced a negligence in all religious concerns. (John Wesley 1776: iv. 112, 156–7, 160–1)

It was a perception derived from his parents, but John also echoed their tension between Hanoverian Toryism and Jacobite Toryism. There is still much that we do not know about the early Wesley. His 'new birth' at a religious society in Aldersgate Street, London, on 24 May 1738 is familiar, but little is known about that society. It was evidently formed by James Hutton, bookseller, soon better known as a Moravian; but Hutton was the son of a Nonjuring clergyman, John Hutton; what relation the son's religious society had to the Nonjuring congregation in Aldersgate Street served by John Lindsay remains a question, for Wesley's early spiritual experience has instead been reconstructed in relation to the Moravians (Podmore 1998: 34–6, 42). Wesley was also not alone in having a political past. The young Whitefield was patronized by the Philipps family, baronets and Welsh MPs, finally a Jacobite dynasty into the 1750s; the Stuart loyalties of the earl and countess of Huntingdon were dangerously overt (Schlenther 1997: 27–31). Political allegiances were often fluid, but early Methodism and its social constituencies had closer links to a still-widespread Jacobitism than has yet been appreciated. By the rising of 1745 Whitefield and the Wesleys openly professed loyalty to the Hanoverian monarch, but this did not wholly erase their earlier political predispositions. Early Methodism was not the spiritual arm of Jacobitism; but Methodism and Jacobitism both stemmed from a profound antecedent rejection of the Whig order in ways that scholarship has hardly yet recovered. The nature of threatened revolution in the 1740s, 1770s, and 1790s was very different.

Changing Models of Methodism

Just as historians' views of Methodism's context have developed over time, so too have accounts of Methodism itself, each embodying some truth, each challenged by recent research. First was John Wesley's own image of Methodism as an unplanned development of 'what was afterwards called a *Society*' (John Wesley 1749: 256), its participants 'all zealous members of the Church of England', even when the breach with George Whitefield over the latter's Calvinism produced 'two sorts of Methodists' (John Wesley 1765: 368, 370); the movement being directed by 'many providential incidents', 'a strange chain of providences' (John Wesley 1781: 428, 437). This image was arguably at odds with John Wesley's practice, which involved both planning and an early implicit separation from the church.

Methodism was later explained within the context of an 'evangelical revival' in the English-speaking world, triggered in the late 1730s when 'a small group of men returned to the primitive faith of Christianity and evoked a fervent response in a largely unconverted population' (Kent 2002: 23–5). John Wesley's self-image of Methodism as representing a revival of 'real' or 'vital' religion in protest against the merely 'formal' religion of the church undoubtedly spread to constitute the vision of recent historians who knew little of either. It makes a difference to our analysis of Methodism's role if there was no such revival, but if that revival's alleged features were instead recurrent characteristics of a prevalent religiosity that underpinned Methodism and much else. Even the notion of 'new birth' was not unique to Wesley: the Presbyterian minister Samuel Wright's *A Treatise of Being Born Again: without which no man can be saved*, first appearing in 1715, had reached its sixteenth edition by 1738. Nor was John Wesley the first Methodist to have a conversion experience. His younger brother Charles, Whitefield, and Benjamin Ingham preceded him.

Methodism (and, later, Evangelicalism) may have retrospectively rewritten its own history by its doctrine of instantaneous spiritual justification and assurance. Yet Wesley himself had felt like that before his 'new birth' of 1738. On reading Law's *Serious Call* in 1729, he wrote: 'The light flowed in so mightily upon my soul that everything appeared in a new view' (John Wesley 1975– : xviii. 244). Wesley often later expressed doubts about his religious state: the symptoms of religious rebirth need historical interpretation. And it supports the view that an evangelical revival has been wrongly identified, that Old Dissent (Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists) did not expand in numbers, but contracted substantially, in *c.*1700–1750: Nonconformity was not carried forward by an evangelical tide.

The phenomena of violent conversion, 'strange fits' as Wesley described them (ibid. xix. 54), were not confined to the Methodists: they were present at 'revivals' in Northampton, New England in 1735 (of which Jonathan Edwards wrote); in Scotland at Cambuslang and Kilsyth in 1741, as a result of the preaching of Church of Scotland ministers; and elsewhere in the Church of England, for example at

Everton, where the minister, John Berridge, presided over a revival (ibid. xxi. 195–200, May 1759). They had already been seen in Wales. This disposition to emotional collapse in the face of preaching on sin was evidently widespread in Protestant culture for reasons yet to be fully ascertained.

Present-day historians often contend that they have superseded the model of Methodism as a providential deliverance of English religiosity by internationalizing Methodism, turning it into a particular case of an international evangelical revival (Bebbington 1989; Ward 1992; Noll, Bebbington, and Rawlyk 1994; Ditchfield 1998). It may be, however, that by internationalizing it they have provided a wider setting for an older scenario rather than answering the harder question: why simultaneously in such widely separated cultures? Perhaps 'vital religion' was not 'revived' because it had not previously declined. Whitefield began open-air preaching near Bristol on 17 February 1739. But how could thousands of people be assembled to hear him, and then to hear John Wesley on 2 April? It cannot have been that the church failed to reach the masses: it was ubiquitous, Methodists in the eighteenth century were few. The Wesleys' early ministry in Bristol and elsewhere could reach large numbers because it engaged with an already-existing religious infrastructure including the 'religious societies', flourishing from their foundation in late seventeenth-century high churchmanship. There were many ways in which Methodism drew strength from a prevalent Anglicanism; and John Walsh has argued that Whitefield had a particular role in revitalizing Old Dissent.

Over time, there developed an additional set of explanatory models of Methodism that partly became self-validating as life was drawn to imitate art. The second of these, in the early nineteenth century, was the early historiography of what Methodism had now become: an independent denomination, fuelled by Evangelicalism. This self-image was, however, at odds with earlier experience. There is little evidence that Wesley intended to found a widespread religious movement until after the breach in July 1740 in the religious society meeting at Fetter Lane; and the cause of this breach was a difference over theology, not ecclesiology. Only from the Conference of 1744 did John Wesley begin to regulate the discipline of those in what he now saw as his 'connexion', but the groups that he began to assemble into a network were the result of local initiatives by clergy and Anglican evangelicals, not just the Wesleys (Rack 2002: 213–22). Only from the covenantal agreement of 1752, annually renewed, did the signatories pledge allegiance to each other.

Third was the self-image of Methodism as a reaction to the phenomena of urbanization and industrialization (Townsend 1909*b*: 340–1). This self-image, too, was not present at the outset. By the Conference of 1791, when Methodist members (narrowly defined) were reported to number 72,476, and when Methodism clearly flourished most in 'the manufacturing and trading Towns', observers such as Joseph Benson, who wrote from Manchester, did not distinguish between the old phenomenon of trade and the new one of manufactures (Benson 1793*a*: 42). By 1937, however, it seemed self-evident that 'Methodism, on the human side, can be regarded as the child of

the Industrial Revolution . . . Its growth was slow in the decades when industrial endeavour was still sleepy and sluggish. Its expansion increased as the use of machinery extended' (Wearmouth 1947: 1). Methodism, as later historians expressed the same point, was a response to alienation, an attempt to construct order and belonging in a new, insecure, and changing world.

Yet this model did not square with the very diverse occupational make-up of early Methodists, who spanned the range of occupations of a long-established and complex commercial economy with its great numbers of artisans, craftsmen, miners, fishermen, and suchlike: Methodism developed within commerce, and did not wait for manufactures. Methodism was often described by historians in the twentieth century as offering something especially needed by people in a period of profound social and economic change. But no sense of any such function is revealed by John Wesley's or George Whitefield's *Journals*; these men treated the human condition as timeless, and more recent historians have questioned for how many people economic development in the eighteenth century changed life experiences. These two strands of history—the denominational and the economic—have not yet been brought together.

Fourth was the self-image of Methodism as a vehicle for working-class self-consciousness. Despite the continued official expressions of loyalty by Conference for the monarchy, and its keeping clear of party politics, grassroots evidence from the 1790s suggests a changing local reality: Methodist organization promoted democracy while its leaders condemned it. In 1831, William Lovett's National Union of the Working Classes copied its internal structure of class meetings direct from the Methodists; so did Chartism. Later, Methodists (especially Primitive Methodists) were prominent in the formation of non-revolutionary trade unions (Wearmouth 1947: 36–52, 92–3, 126–8, 139–57, 179–222; Moore 1974; Scotland 1981). Yet if 'class' as an idea emerged only in the 1820s and 1830s (Clark 2000: 164–200), it is not clear that the Methodism of the Wesleys and Whitefield had any necessary connection with it.

Fifth was the self-image of Methodism as a vehicle for individual protest. Its authorized history, in 1909, had presented Methodism in Hegelian terms as the embodiment of a 'primary *Idea*', namely 'its emphasis of experience', stemming from a view of the Reformation as 'the protest of individualism' (Workman 1909: 6–7). This developed by the 1960s into Gordon Rupp's formulation 'It *is* among rebel minds and minority groups that we find emerging values' (Davies, George, and Rupp (eds.) 1965–88: i. p. xv), and a characterization of Methodism as 'a concern for the souls and bodies of the disenfranchised' (Heitzenrater 1995: 1). Yet this image of individualism contrasted with the highly communal and coercive quality of the organization that John Wesley devised. Even conversion, which was presented as highly individual, followed highly stereotyped forms.

These historiographical models tended to persist over time, each overlaid but not erased by the next. E. P. Thompson, although famously critical of Methodism's

psychological impact on its followers, nevertheless accepted most of the structural analysis within which Methodism had by then been embedded (Thompson 1963). Since then, both elements, the nature of eighteenth-century society and the nature of Methodism within it, have been subject to revision. Especially, Methodism can now be seen as part of a movement occurring simultaneously across Europe and North America; it cannot be explained in English terms alone (Ward 2006).

Methodism, then, was successively redescribed in the light of a series of partly overlapping myths of origin, eventually united around the cult of John Wesley. It is currently in a phase of reassessment as these myths are identified and revised by historical research; as the handful of leading Methodists are reassessed in the context of larger numbers of evangelicals; as Methodism is compared with the church; and as English religion is replaced in an international context.

Founders and Boundaries

The historical analysis of Methodism depends on what is included under that label. As John Wesley conceded, by the 1760s the term 'Methodist' was applied to many people: to his followers and to seceders from him such as Thomas Maxfield; to followers of Whitefield and to antinomian seceders from Whitefield such as William Cudworth and James Relly; to evangelicals within the church such as Henry Venn, William Romaine, Martin Madan, and John Berridge; and to some Dissenters of evangelical tone ([John Wesley] 1765: 370–1). Yet their differences were great. Even Wesley and Whitefield differed over 'perfection, irresistible grace, the perseverance of the saints, imputed righteousness, and election and reprobation' (Nightingale 1807: 444–5). The 'movement' at the outset had lacked a clear founding moment and clear boundaries (Heitzenrater 1989). By 1749, however, Whitefield complained that John Wesley was 'monopolising the name Methodist to himself only' (Benyon 1960: 229), and this increasingly became the norm. John Wesley wrote the history of Methodism, and Whitefield was airbrushed out. Yet this was not hard, for Whitefield's legacy was revolution in the 1770s, not organization in the 1740s. Whitefield's own history of the operation of divine grace did not depict an organized movement and omitted the term 'Methodism' (Whitefield 1747).

Methodism had lacked a single founder. According to Charles Wesley, it was he who began the movement at Oxford, and was first called a Methodist; his brother John joined the society six months later (Charles Wesley to Dr. Thomas Bradbury Chandler, 28 April 1785, in Davies, George, and Rupp (eds.), 1965–88: iv. 204). Wesleyanism's history was determined by John's supplanting of Charles. Perhaps John Wesley really emerged as the archetypal English Methodist only with Whitefield's

absences in America in 1739–41 and 1744–8; by 1763 even Whitefield was writing of John Wesley as 'that famed leader of the Methodists' (Whitefield 1763: 34).

Yet John Wesley, despite his later personality cult, was not the first instance of a phenomenon that both preceded him and was international. There were earlier such phenomena in German-speaking central Europe, known as Pietism; their relation to Methodism is still being explored. Revivals that did not obviously trigger early English Methodism occurred in Britain's New England colonies (Ward 1992). Wales saw autonomous 'revivals' led by such men as Griffith Jones (1684–1761), Howel Harris (1714–73), and Daniel Rowland (1711?–90); Harris and Rowland both experienced spiritual rebirth in 1735, as did Whitefield; Charles and then John Wesley followed in 1738. A longer continuity has been proposed with similar 'revivals' extending back to early seventeenth-century Scotland (Schmidt 2001: 49, 215), of which the events at Cambuslang and Kilsyth in 1741 were only the latest. The larger question for historians, not yet fully answered, is why a shared religious experience was observed nearly simultaneously in some areas of Protestantism but not in others. This suggests that the commonalities between 'Protestant' churches have been exaggerated, but historians have seldom yet explored this possibility.

Even within England, many other evangelists were the catalysts for the emergence of religious societies, and built up connexions around themselves. One such group was served by Benjamin Ingham (1712–72), influenced by the Wesleys at Oxford, ordained in 1735 but pursuing an independent ministry as an itinerant evangelist in Yorkshire and the north from 1739. By 1756 he claimed six preachers serving some thousand members; in that year, although only in deacon's orders in the Church of England, he even ordained two preachers himself. John Wesley resisted his overtures for reunion (Baker 1970: 130; Charles Wesley 1849: ii. 122). John Cennick (1718–55), expelled by John Wesley from the connexion in 1741 for his Calvinism, responded with a preaching tour of his own that led to the formation of the Wiltshire Association, a Calvinist network, and another network in Ulster from 1746 (Lewis 1995). There were many more, and their experience of 'new birth' was normally independent, not owed to the influence of what came to be called Methodism.

Whitefield's followers also had a prominent role, overlapping with Lady Huntingdon's Connexion and the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists. Whitefield had a small scattering of chapels. The countess of Huntingdon had eight formally associated with her by her death in 1791, but between fifty-five and eighty that were informally associated and often later became Congregationalist. That Wesley's following eventually became far larger may be explained partly in terms of Whitefield's unstable character, bad judgement, and conflicts with potential allies: in 1748 he recorded that the thousands that flocked to hear him preach in the 1730s had dwindled to a hundred (Schlenther 2004); by the 1760s he had become a target of satire for the London stage and for William Hogarth, as he already had for the

novelist Henry Fielding. A comparison of John Wesley and Whitefield emphasizes how very mixed the fortunes of early Methodism were.

The greater historical problem is not the founding of Methodism in the 1730s, for many similar initiatives can be traced at that time, but the emergence of Wesley's connexion in the 1770s and 1780s as the paradigm case (the group to which the title 'Methodist' was often confined) and its later numerical growth. Despite John Wesley's outspoken loyalism during the American Revolution, it may be that this emerging prominence for his connexion had something to do with the rise of extra-parliamentary popular political activity from the 1760s, recently recovered by other historians but hardly yet integrated into Methodist history.

The Reception of Methodism

A historical appraisal of Methodism demands a serious comparison with the church; this has almost never been done (see, however, Baker 1970; Hempton 1996). Historians tended instead to identify Anglicanism with patriarchy and deference, to argue that these were in decline, and to treat Methodism as an agent of that decline. Yet it is now clear that most people continued in the church, despite other forms of religion on offer; that early industrial ventures were often patriarchal, but in a new way; and that early Methodism throve most within Anglicanism, whether in England, Ireland, or North America, extending Anglican religiosity more than negating it. Methodism's message was probably handicapped in its appeal within a predominant Anglicanism by its doctrines, widely regarded as implausible, of immediate conversion, Christian perfection, and (in Whitefield's case) final perseverance. That Methodist 'hearers' outnumbered 'members' by at least four to one is usually interpreted as a mark of Methodist strength; it might better be interpreted as a sign of the wide unacceptability of Methodism's peculiar doctrines and the disciplinary structure of band and class meetings, even among those impressed by Methodists' sincerity and piety. This ratio might be evidence that people shared Sydney Smith's complaint that Methodism coarsened and overfamiliarized the sacred truths of a shared faith (Smith 1808), or Sir Walter Scott's attitude in 1826: that Methodism was good because 'it introduces morality among people who would never practice it unless it came recommended by a faith which addresses itself to the passions. But [it] seems to [be] an awful priestcraft concern' (Scott 1932–7: ix. 400–2).

Methodism was indeed difficult to assess, then and later. Together with the dedication and the devotion went mass hysteria and, sometimes, fraud: on 5 August 1740 Charles Wesley reproved a girl, Jenny Deschamps, 'who confessed that her fits

and cryings out (above thirty of them) were all feigned, that Mr Wesley might take notice of her' (Charles Wesley 2008: i. 276). Methodism, like Old Dissent, was also an implicit challenge to social hierarchy. The Wesleys were respectable, but those caught up in the wider movement were very varied: one Wesleyan Methodist in *c.*1758–9, in Dover and Sandwich (and possibly in London in 1766–7) was evidently Thomas Paine (Keane 1995: 46–9, 61–2, 501, 544). Even John Wesley himself could arouse mixed reactions. On 26 April 1738, the month before his 'new birth', the trustees of the Georgia colony accepted his implicit resignation as their clergyman there, as Lord Egmont recorded 'with great pleasure, he appearing to us to be a very odd mixture of a man, an enthusiast and at the same time a hypocrite, wholly distasteful to the greater part of the inhabitants, and an incendiary of the people against the magistracy' (Egmont 1920–3: iii. 481).

In 1965, Gordon Rupp, writing of the sermons of John Wesley and George Whitefield, phrased the central problem as it then appeared: 'Why should a set of ideas, none of them original, which had long been inert and dormant, be able to strike deeply into the minds of many thousands of men and women?' (Davies, George, and Rupp 1965–88: i. p. xviii). Today historians doubt whether those ideas had in fact been so 'inert and dormant' in the decades before Whitefield and Wesley. On the contrary, Methodism may be analysed as evidence of the strength of English popular religiosity rather than of a spiritual vacuum (Sommerville 1977; Jacob 1996). If so, it may be that in such a setting Methodism's special doctrines were more of a hindrance than a help.

A proper historical appraisal of Methodism would therefore need to give a balanced attention to the writings of Methodism's supporters and its critics (Green 1902; Lyles 1960; Roberts 1988; Field 1991); but this is almost never done. Opposition to Methodism has seldom been reconstructed from original sources, and so has often been parodied: the self-interest of corrupt churchmen, snobbery, a fear of levelling tendencies, or (inconsistently) an early fear of Jacobite associations. Yet although these themes might have appeared in mob passions, they seldom found their way into anti-Methodist writings. Nor were churchmen alone, for Old Dissent was equally critical: Richard Price, Nonconformist minister and Arian, deplored how 'the lower orders of people . . . are sinking into a barbarism in religion lately revived by Methodism, and mistaking, as the world has generally done, the service acceptable to God for a system of faith souring the temper, and a service of forms supplanting morality' (Price 1789: 16).

Methodism is also generally assessed with the benefit of hindsight, in the light of its later course as a respectable mass movement. But Whitefield's and Wesley's contemporaries reacted instead against a tiny minority taking extreme positions: a growing populist and anticlerical dismissal of the existing clergy, established and Dissenting, as ungodly; a denial that existing members of the church were really Christians at all; a latent promise, or threat, of social transformation; even what might seem to be a claim to work miracles. Parishioners often reacted with

indignation to the implication, or the rhetorically heightened allegation, that they were Godless, or that their good works were valueless. Methodist accounts of their own religious experience (for example, the knowable attainment of Christian perfection) might often have seemed implausible, and were sometimes rejected as hypocritical. If the church refused institutionally to adapt to Methodism, there were good reasons for not doing so. If parishioners rejected Methodism, they might soon find many of its more acceptable components within the Church in a burgeoning Evangelicalism whose moderate Calvinism may have set powerful limits to the expansion of Wesleyanism (Kent 2002: 140–86).

The critical reaction to John Wesley and George Whitefield in their lifetimes heavily outweighed the approval; and early criticisms came from an impressive array of scholars including Samuel Hallifax, Thomas Herring, George Horne, Thomas Randolph, Thomas Rutherforth, Richard Smalbroke, Henry Stebbing, Augustus Toplady, and Daniel Waterland. The seven volumes of Whitefield's *Journals* published between 1738 and 1741 gave his opponents ample ammunition. They made public what Whitefield had asserted in America: 'he took the Bishop of *London* [Edmund Gibson] to be no better a Judge, or knew more of Christianity, than *Mahomet*, or an Infidel; and that he was now proving him to be such'; that one of Gibson's books 'was sufficient to send Thousands to Hell; as also Archbishop *Tillotson*, and the Author of the *Whole Duty of Man*' (Stephens 1742: ii. 307–8). Charles Wesley recorded that his advice that Whitefield's journal not be published was 'overruled' (Charles Wesley 1849: i. 126). John Wesley followed suit, with two volumes of his *Journal* appearing in 1740, and more volumes in 1742, 1744, 1749, 1753, 1754, 1756, 1759, and later (John Wesley 1975– : xviii. 120, 217; xix. 1, 115, 225; xx. 1, 149, 291, 404). Only six months after ordination as a priest, Whitefield was claiming that 'the whole world is now my parish', defying the church's requirement for a call to a particular living. The open avowal of direct divine intervention in the world, and of diabolical intervention, ran counter to developing ideas on the nature of miracle and providence. To unpersuaded readers, these journals could be evidence of remarkable egotism and of implausible claims to direct divine commission that some churchmen, such as Joseph Trapp, even termed blasphemous.

Methodism can be analysed in several ways, but it seems less plausible to treat it as a challenge by reawakened faith to somnolence; increasingly it seems to have had elements of sectarian challenge to rational religion. Early Methodist religiosity may have been closer to the sectarian religion of the 1640s than it later appeared. In such a setting, often-quoted Anglican reactions become more intelligible. Joseph Butler, bishop of Bristol, who interviewed John Wesley three times in August 1739, cited Whitefield's published *Journal*, and (during lengthy and careful conversations) commented: 'Sir, the pretending to extraordinary revelations and gifts of the Holy Ghost is a horrid thing, a very horrid thing.' Wesley replied that Whitefield must answer for himself, and only countered that he, Wesley, did not pretend to such revelations or gifts 'but what every Christian may receive'. Where the bishop

complained that Wesley was not authorized to preach in Butler's diocese, Wesley replied that, having been ordained on the title of his Oxford fellowship, he had 'an indeterminate commission' to preach anywhere; again, this did not apply to Whitefield or to others. We have only Wesley's account of these meetings (John Wesley 1975– : xix. 471–4); but even there Butler, perhaps the most able Anglican theologian of his age, did not speak rashly.

Although Butler did not reply in print, his chaplain, Josiah Tucker, whom Wesley remarkably charged with holding that 'there needs no atonement for original sin', did so. Tucker's sophisticated analysis traced the problem to the contradictory borrowings from both Calvinism and Arminianism in William Law, Whitefield's and Wesley's common 'master', a theological confusion that they both failed to understand (Tucker 1742). Tucker's claim deserves historical investigation: that the schism between Wesley and Whitefield, immensely damaging as it was to the Methodist cause, was due not to a conflict between Arminianism and Calvinism but to a confusion over the content of those systems.

Butler had gone at once to what Anglicans meant by 'enthusiasm'. Samuel Johnson had a similarly insightful objection.

> Speaking of the *inward light*, to which some methodists pretended, he said, it was a principle utterly incompatible with social or civil security. 'If a man (said he,) pretends to a principle of action of which I can know nothing, nay, not so much as that he has it, but only that he pretends to it; how can I tell what that person may be prompted to do? When a person professes to be governed by a written ascertained law, I can then know where to find him'. (Boswell 1791: sub 1770, Dr. Maxwell's report)

An unknown churchman put the same point in a remarkably perceptive analysis, framed as anonymous private letters to Wesley in 1745–8. 'John Smith' showed how Wesley had given 'an evasive answer' to his critics and engaged in a 'shifting of the question'. Wesley's general response was indignantly to disclaim responsibility for Whitefield's teaching, and to complain that he was damned by association with others, also called Methodists; so that when a critic 'has linked them together by one *nickname* he may hang either instead of the other!' Smith replied that he had distinguished between Wesley and 'so weak and empty a person as Mr. Whitefield'. He pointed out that although Wesley claimed to have no 'singularities' in doctrine, Methodists in fact did, notably 'unconditional predestination, perceptible inspiration, and sinless perfection'; even Wesley denied the first. Yet, in debate, 'you distinguished away all that sounded peculiar, and pleaded that you maintained no singular doctrines at all'. As to instantaneous rebirth, Smith replied: 'the experience of mankind, the general tenor of the Word of God, and the nature of the thing, all in my opinion make evidently and flatly against you'. Wesley's position on 'perceptible inspiration' and salvation by faith, Smith argued, rested on the premise that the inner working of 'the divine Spirit on the human spirit' could be as clearly known as the outward fruits of such influence; Smith contended: 'I maintain that it

is a work so slow and gentle as to be altogether imperceptible.' To those who agreed, the claims of Methodists about the working of God in them might seem to be unprovable claims to special revelation (John Wesley 1975– : ii. 138–46, 153–61, 164–72, 175–90, 197–207, 209–15, 229–37, 238–42, 244–52, 258–61, 287–94, at 141, 170, 181, 183, 188, 213).

The writings of churchmen on the Methodist question were extensive, sophisticated, and continued for decades. One key pamphlet, attributed to Edmund Gibson, Bishop of London, took a legalistic approach, censuring Methodist preachers for not qualifying themselves under the Toleration Act; it warned of 'that Spirit, which had caused so much Confusion in the Kingdom' before the Restoration thanks to the 'unbounded Licentiousness in holding Assemblies for Divine Worship'. Field preaching was specifically forbidden by the Act of 22 Car. II, c. 1; the Toleration Act itself applied only to those who previously notified their fixed places of worship to the bishop, archdeacon, or JP. The Methodists' 'exalted' idea of religion would put it beyond reach of many, and negate 'a careful and sincere Observance of *Moral Duties*'. Regular religious observance was a better form of devotion than 'those sudden Agonies, Roarings and Screamings, Tremblings, Droppings-down, Ravings and Madnesses' referred to in Wesley's and Whitefield's *Journals*. The doctrine of perfection would only lead to 'a *Contempt*' of those who were 'gradually *working out* their Salvation', and leading 'the Inferiors' to 'a Disesteem of their Superiors' who were 'regular Attendants on the Ordinances of Religion'. Was 'a *sudden* and *instantaneous*' accession of grace really reliable? Were unlicensed itinerants, leading to 'a *Disesteem*' of parish clergy, in the best interests of religion? Was Whitefield right to call the clergy 'those blind Leaders of the Blind . . . no better than Wolves in Sheeps-cloathing', urge the burning of Archbishop Tillotson's works, and claim that 'Thousands' had been 'miserably deceived' by *The Whole Duty of Man*? Methodism was promoted by 'a few young Heads' who 'set up their own Schemes, as the great Standard of Christianity', persuading those who had lived 'from their Infancy under a Gospel Ministry' that they had not 'been instructed in the true Way of Salvation before'. Did Methodists not make '*extraordinary Pretences* of God directing and assisting them'? Were they not attempting 'to erect a new Church-Constitution, upon a *foreign* Plan'? An anthology of effusive and extravagant language, quoted from leading Methodist authors, provided impressive chapter and verse ([Gibson] 1744: 3–4, 9–13).

This pamphlet was anonymous, but Gibson had criticized Whitefield in a pastoral letter of 1739, and similar criticisms would appear in his *Charge* of 1746–7 (Gibson 1739, 1747). Wesley suspected Gibson to be the author of the pamphlet of 1744, and his reply was a careful response, item by item, in which he denied that the *Observations* had produced evidence to substantiate its claims. This was often true (the pamphlet was a brief one), but did not establish that such evidence did not exist. Wesley's other responses were more revealing. He insisted that he urged his followers to attend church, obey its ordinances, and receive 'the sacrament' there;

but his account of such 'attendance' was that he himself had practised it for many years, yet 'during that whole time I had no more of the love of God than a stone'. Wesley, indeed, had no real doctrine of the church. The extreme symptoms of his congregations he attributed to God's pleasure; 'I cannot hinder it.' The '*sudden* and *instantaneous* change' of the new birth can be 'distinguished from fancy and imagination' easily, 'Just as easily as light from darkness.'

On such key points, Wesley's position was a flat assertion, clarified and made plausible only by splitting the charges against him into their smallest components. Similarly Wesley defended himself against the allegation of 'enthusiasm', by which men meant 'a sort of religious madness; a *false imagination* of being inspired by God; and by an enthusiast, one that *fancies* himself under the influence of the Holy Ghost, when in fact he is not' by the bald statement: 'Let him prove me guilty of this who can.' Yet in defending the present-day operation of the Holy Ghost, Wesley only contended: 'I do not mean that Christians now receive the Holy Ghost in order to work miracles', as the apostles did at Pentecost; but he did not explain why not (John Wesley 1744–5: 121–2, 127, 170–2). John Wesley's own cast of mind was often coolly rational, but this was not a conclusive argument even in his case, let alone in the cases of undisciplined and emotional members of the wider movement. Indeed, Wesley struggled to purge his connexion of just such followers. But when he heard one such layman, Thomas Maxfield, preach, Wesley changed his mind, and accepted that laymen might be called of God to do just that.

In defending the movement as a whole, Wesley was on weaker ground. Smalbroke charged that Wesley and Whitefield disagreed; Wesley replied that in 'our fundamental doctrines . . . we do and have agreed for several years', ignoring the rending controversies that were lastingly to split Methodism and leave a large part of the evangelical movement within the church. Without any profound theological understanding of the nature of the church, Wesley insisted, in legalistic language, that his followers did not dissent from it, and so had no need of the Toleration Act, and, since they did not intend sedition, were not covered by 22 Car. II, c. 1. As to the effects of his teaching, Wesley stressed the political loyalty of Methodism and its effect in promoting respectable manners, but appealed explicitly to the subversive example of the apostles. Such were 'these "floods of ungodliness" that are still continually pouring in' that any conduct by Methodists, Wesley implied, was justified. As to doctrine, he insisted that it mattered not what his followers believed: 'Whether they embrace this religious opinion or that is no more concern to me than whether they embrace this or that system of astronomy.' But this was hardly the case, as his continued campaigns against Calvinist predestination showed (John Wesley 1744–5: 172–3, 180, 186–7, 318, 323).

Wesley's similarly passive-aggressive reply to Gibson of 1747 by implication shifted most of the blame for the excesses of Methodism onto Whitefield, and seemed to use refinements to avoid the allegation that he, Wesley, taught the possibility of sinless perfection. Wesley's defence was that he personally was not

guilty as charged, but he did not deny that the wider movement had the general features often attributed to it. He defended himself and his brother effectively against the allegation that their irregular ministry was for their own financial gain, but he omitted to mention his dubious fellow-labourer (John Wesley 1747: 336, 339, 344–5, 348). Once again, Whitefield, whose financial dealings were questioned, and nameless local Methodist preachers, were Wesley's great embarrassments.

Gibson's '*foreign* Plan' was made explicit by George Lavington, bishop of Exeter, in a best-selling work to which John Wesley felt obliged to write three replies (John Wesley 1975– : xi. 359, 377, 431). Lavington drew a comparison between the 'wild and pernicious *Enthusiasms*', the claims to '*Extraordinary Revelations*' and '*Extraordinary Assistance*' made by Methodists and 'Papists', thereby drawing on English memories of both Reformation and Civil War to argue that 'this *new dispensation* is a *Composition of Enthusiasm*, *Superstition*, and *Imposture*'. Methodists were evasive: sometimes 'they *seem* to *disclaim Miracles*', at other times 'they *seem* to *retain* them' ([Lavington] 1749–51: i. pp. iii, 58, 79; ii. 50). Lavington's lengthy comparison with 'Popery' seems, to present-day readers, laboured and protracted; in its time, it spoke effectively to still-powerful anti-Catholicism, a prejudice that John Wesley fully shared, and to anti-sectarianism.

This charge continued: the degree of authoritarian organization of Methodists was such, wrote another observer in 1830, that it could only be compared with the Jesuits ([Aspland] 1831: 3–4; *Methodism* 1779: 3; Douglas 1814: 5–6). The church's historical sense was well developed: one commentator in 1752 placed Methodism within a history of 'Enthusiasts' that included the Family of Love, the Covenanters, the sects of the 1640s, the New England persecutors of witches, Quakers, Cameronians, and Fifth Monarchy Men (Evans 1752: p. v). In 1820, another edition of Lavington appeared with a 312-page introduction in which the editor fitted Methodism into the history of Puritanism from the reign of Elizabeth I. But his assessment was not wholly negative: the main effect of Methodism, according to Richard Polwhele, an Anglican priest, had been to stimulate a rallying to the church and a reassertion of its doctrine (Polwhele 1820: pp. i–xxv, cxv–cxvi). This thesis deserves exploration.

William Warburton, an aggressive satirist, by then bishop of Gloucester, pursued similar themes in 1763. He rehearsed some familiar points against Methodists in the central section of a treatise on the operation of grace, equally an attack on free-thinkers such as Conyers Middleton and on enthusiasts, primarily Wesley. Wesley, he claimed, pretended to 'some extraordinary measure of the Spirit', although such gifts had ceased with the early church (he thereby associated Wesley with contemporary 'Popery'); 'the features of modern Fanaticism' could be seen in 'the famed Leader of the Methodists, Mr. John Wesley . . . this extraordinary man hath, in fact, laid claim to almost every Apostolic gift and grace'. Wesley's '*Enthusiasm* consists in believing those *benefits*' received by his followers 'to be *miraculously* conferred, thro' a change in the established course of Nature'. Wesley went through the texts Warburton cited from his *Journal*, and replied: 'But what does all this prove? Not

that I claim any gift above other men; but only that I believe God now hears and answers prayer, even beyond the ordinary course of nature' but did not deal with the central point of the persistence to the present of direct divine and diabolical intervention in human affairs. Warburton complained of 'a *fanatic manner* of preaching', so that Wesley's sermons were 'attended with tumults and disorders'; Wesley only replied, without evidence, that field preaching 'has no such effect', and did not discuss the preaching of other Methodists. Warburton drew an analogy between Methodism and the Puritans and Independents of the seventeenth century, notably the testimony of the regicides on the eve of execution 'upon the subjects of Faith, Grace, Redemption, Regeneration, Justification, &c.'; Wesley refused to enter into historical analysis. Warburton put his finger on Wesley's passive-aggressive stance: 'He wanted to be persecuted', and was frustrated to live in a land of toleration (Warburton 1762: 116–17, 119, 169, 181, 186–7, 229; John Wesley 1763: 468, 474, 482, 484). In dialectical skill, the Oxford don had the better of his autodidact opponent; in point of substance, Methodism was neither fairly charged nor fully exonerated.

George Whitefield, whom Warburton termed 'much the madder of the two' (Warburton 1762: 250), also replied, not dealing with Warburton's arguments and only asserting, with loose rhetoric, that the bishop 'denies and ridicules the standing and unalterable operations of the Holy Ghost' in the present day (Whitefield 1763: 8, 31). Whitefield was wholly unable to deal with the formidable theological objections against Methodism. Only John Wesley, among early Methodists, had the intellectual calibre to do so, and his acute but sometimes evasive publications probably established his personal integrity more than they persuaded the intelligentsia of the truth of his theology. Far more typical was the repeated insistence by churchmen that 'sudden Conversion . . . is not the ordinary Method of God's Proceedings with those that have been regenerated by Baptism . . . the Purification of the Heart is a gradual work' (Tottie 1766: 19).

The reaction of Anglican theologians is understandable. But why did so many ordinary people react so violently against early Methodism? If the mobs that attacked Methodist preachers were sometimes encouraged to do so by gentry, clergy, or their agents, why did so many people answer that prompting? As we now appreciate, the claim of access to an inner light provided a discourse of social empowerment in the 1740s as much as in the 1640s, and this would be clearly understood by those who sided with custom as well as by those who sided with reason in opposing 'enthusiasm'. Increasingly, historians see Hanoverian Britain not as a somnolent and stable oligarchy, but as an unstable and divided society, keenly debating and seeking to solidify its grounds for stability; in such a setting Methodists would be resented by more than embraced their message. If Methodism was seen as the enemy within, this does not necessarily signal unthinking religious indifference.

When local populations turned violently on Methodist preachers, was this always the result of spiritual blindness or of violence (as the preachers memorably depicted it, and as it sometimes was) or sometimes of a realistic insight by those who were

part of a churchmanship that had already taken on the nature of a folk religion? Did they rightly see that Methodists were the disruptive force they claimed not to be? The riots were written up by Methodist itinerants as crude, unthinking violence; but the reassessment of popular action pioneered by historians in the 1960s and 1970s now calls these early accounts in question. It may be as noteworthy that mobs could be mobilized so easily against the Methodists as that Methodist preachers could assemble open-air congregations of thousands (Walsh 1972; Snape 1998).

We still lack studies of the response to Methodism by the church and by 'Old Dissent'. Although the Wesleys and the Whitefields had a high sense of their own importance, it is remarkable that Methodism still apparently attracted little attention from an efficient and industrious clergyman such as Thomas Secker, bishop of Bristol 1735–7 and of Oxford 1737–58, archbishop of Canterbury 1758–68. He did urge his clergy 'We have in Fact lost many of our People to Sectaries by not preaching in a Manner sufficiently evangelical', but did not name the Methodists (Secker 1766: 299; cf. id. 1988, 1991; Ingram 2007). Not until the 1790s did this clerical indifference change. Yet if the church failed to deal with Methodism, Methodists equally failed to deal with Anglican objections. It remains for historians to ask whether these objections were effective in limiting Methodist growth until the early nineteenth century. Even by that stage, doctrinal differences were held to be decisive. As a Methodist wrote in 1834, their doctrine required 'that *present* and *entire* sanctification of soul, which is absolutely necessary to our ultimate admission into the Kingdom of Heaven. The difference is so great that—unless the Clergy, as a body, are prepared to embrace the doctrinal views of the Methodists, on these essential points of Christian doctrine—there *can be no union*' (Vevers 1834: 13).

Historians have debated the arguments for Methodism's pastoral success without examining their major premise; but how successful was it? It is easy in retrospect to trace an exponential growth in Methodist numbers and to assume its inevitability, like figures for increasing cotton output. It may be asked whether this inevitability has been historically demonstrated. The first figures for overall Methodist membership numbers were given to the Conference of 1766. Although the Canterbury, Devon, London, and Oxfordshire circuits had failed to forward returns, the rest of England managed only 19,267 members. With the missing figures, the total for England was reported in 1767 as 25,211, Wales as 232, and Scotland as 468. Even by 1783, the figures were: England 38,932; Wales 487; Scotland 523; Ireland 6,053 (Kent 2002: 68). These were not impressive numbers for a movement whose starting point is conventionally set in 1738. Moreover, visitation returns sent to bishops of the established church often treated the early Methodist presence in the countryside tolerantly, describing it, where it existed, as small, under-resourced, and unimportant (ibid. 69).

It was initially unclear what Methodists' aims ultimately were: to reform the established church from within, or to create new alternative structures for Christian practice? Numerically, in the eighteenth century, Wesley's gains looked

impressive only because his starting point was so low. It was Evangelicalism within the church, by addressing the elite (which Wesley repudiated) that exercised the larger influence in England into the early nineteenth century (Brown 1961; Hilton 1988). Methodism's greatest numerical gains came after Wesley's death, and the greatest gains of all were overseas, especially in the new United States. But that cultural context was so different, and the American variant so distinctive, that it may not be historically justifiable to treat world 'Methodism' by *c.*1900 as being essentially the same phenomenon as that which John Wesley shaped in the 1740s in Bristol and London. The name remained; the reality changed.

Methodism and Revolution

Was Methodism's immediate political impact to avert revolution in the 1790s? This issue was familiar at the time. As a Methodist addressed a bishop in 1834,

> Your lordship cannot have forgotten the awful state of things in this country, at the period of the French Revolution, when the sentiments and maxims of the infidel writers of that country, were imbibed with voracious avidity by the peasantry of Great Britain; and when such was the excitement which pervaded the nation, that 'One part of the kingdom looked on the other with the stern and relentless glance of keepers, who are restraining madmen; while the others bent on them the furious glare of madmen conspiring revenge on the keepers' (Sir Walter Scott). At this crisis, my Lord, how did the successors of the patriotic Wesley act?

Their loyalty was apparent in the Conferences of 1792, 1793, 1798, 1812, 1817, and 1818 (Vevers 1834: 27–9).

In 1878, Lecky was clear about the role of Methodism in averting revolution, but argued that 'The Methodist movement was a purely religious one.' His explanations for it were wholly biographical, and that Methodism constituted 'an extraordinary revival of the grossest superstition', conducted by an 'appalling system of religious terrorism'. Nevertheless, Lecky considered that among the 'many causes' why 'England . . . escaped the contagion' of the 'revolutionary spirit' sweeping Europe 'a prominent place' must be given to 'the new and vehement religious enthusiasm', both within the church and in Methodism (Lecky 1878–90: ii. 598, 633, 637–7, 642, 691–2). Elie Halévy later attached his name to the same thesis (Halévy 1906, 1912, 1924, 1949: 424–5, 427–8; id. 1971; Olsen, 1990). He interpreted Methodism as a reassertion of the Puritanism that he believed to constitute the English national character, and he believed that the new industrial proletariat, susceptible to Methodism, was incapable of independent action. It needed leadership; the Methodists provided it. But Halévy offered only a few suggestions, with no worked-out

argument, no mass of evidence, no appreciation of religion as religion. His case was set out briefly, on the basis of almost no academic research into the local phenomena.

Without this research, historians usually agreed. But Bishop George Horne thought otherwise, arguing in 1800 that English Jacobins, deterred from open irreligion, were adopting a different strategy: 'to affect a great zeal for orthodoxy; to make great pretensions to an extraordinary measure of the Holy Spirit's influence; to alienate the minds of the people from the Established Clergy, by representing them as sordid worldlings'; meanwhile 'the real Methodist . . . is kept in utter ignorance' of this design (Horsley 1800: 19–20). Others wrote against Methodists in extreme terms (Walsh 1965: 303–4). If Methodists respected John Wesley's injunction to avoid politics, that did not make them active loyalists, like John Reeves's Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers; it made them quietists (Taylor 1935: 12). 'We endeavour to "lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty" ' (Bradburn 1794: 26). At most, they preached the acceptance of inequalities of property, even poverty, as a providential dispensation that made possible the practice of virtue; that the Methodists were the virtuous remnant in the nation who averted the wrath of God (Walsh 1965: 304–6). But this was not enough to shield Methodists from criticism in the 1790s. The *Anti-Jacobin* attacked them, as did many zealous friends of the established order; Methodists responded in kind, demanding religious liberty and invoking the rights of man. Alexander Kilham (1762–98), campaigning for democratic egalitarian reform within Methodism, argued that 'We all have an equal right to vote in these [denominational] matters'; the government of Methodism 'is not so perfect as it ought to be, and therefore must have a few more revolutions before it is fully established' (Kilham 1795: 36, 60).

There was a latent threat even within Wesleyan Methodism: its professions of loyalty to church and king in the 1790s could easily seem intended to disarm criticism rather than to meet the point that its critiques of the established clergy for enjoying '*affluence*, *ease* and *honour*' but not performing their duties (Benson 1793*a*: 33, 41, 55, 58) were not intended to reform the church but to redefine its relation to the state and even to deny the 'validity' of the ordination of at least one of its clergy compared with that of Methodist preachers. As Joseph Benson addressed the curate of Pershore, 'You know not yet what Christianity is!' (Benson 1793*b*: 62–4, 67, 71, 84). It is not clear that Methodism was the bulwark against revolution that Halévy depicted. In recent decades it has become apparent that the main bulwark against revolution was the church itself, and that a main engine of revolution in the English-speaking world remained denominational conflict.

If the Methodism of the 1740s is to be understood in part as an Anglican enterprise in social control, the evolution of Methodism in the direction of Dissent may have limited the movement's ability to provide an underpinning for society. Despite the formal loyalty of many of the leaders into the age of Jabez Bunting, many Methodists on the ground increasingly stood aside from the Anglican ascendancy and eventually became more hostile to it than was Old Dissent. Early Methodists often attended their

parish church with more regularity, but by 1781 it was objected that Methodists show 'an ill-placed, uncharitable severity and censoriousness . . . chiefly directed against the regular Clergy' (Mainwaring 1781: 16). By 1820, after John Wesley's restraining influence was no more, an Anglican vicar in Cornwall, a stronghold of Methodism, drew a comparison between Methodists and Cromwellians: 'We see the same levelling spirit, the same indifference to rank or station, the same insolent contempt of authority, the same disposition to riot and rebellion' (Polwhele 1820: p. cxcvi).

Historians of this question have focused too narrowly on the 1790s, and on Wesley. Whitefield's impact was quite different, but in the colonies: as early as in 1764 he had announced influentially in New England that 'My heart bleeds for *America* . . . There is a deep laid plot against both your civil and religious liberties, and they will be lost' (Gordon 1788: i. 143–4). He continued to denounce the policy of the metropolitan government, and from the 1740s he 'dominated American evangelical networks' (Andrews 2000: 31) until his death in Massachusetts in 1770. Whitefield, published by Benjamin Franklin, had a leading role in unifying a discourse of colonial revivalism, hitherto fragmented in widely separated colonies, and in giving anti-Anglican religious fervour a political application. He did so, moreover, on an interdenominational basis, laying a key foundation for cooperation between colonies in the Revolution (Mahaffey 2007). 'More than anyone else, Whitefield popularized the evangelical tradition that provided a moral framework and vocabulary permitting thousands of ordinary men and women to conceptualize and discuss revolutionary events.' Whitefield thereby achieved symbolic status. In the Revolution, soldiers from the Continental Army on one occasion entered his crypt, cut off pieces of his clothing, and carried into battle 'amulets taken from the body of one whose life and ministry had become a symbol of hope and salvation' (Lambert 1994: 198–225). Thomas Paine, formerly a Methodist, also acted as a political catalyst among colonists who were themselves neither Methodists nor freethinkers. Through such catalysis, the tyranny of sin was transmuted into the tyranny of kings and bishops; the spiritually empowered individual was given a politically redemptive role; the Thirteen Colonies experienced a collective 'new birth' to become a 'redeemer nation'. Nor did Irish Methodism avert an attempted revolution there in 1798. Methodism was a diverse phenomenon: its varieties both discouraged revolution and promoted it.

It is too soon to attempt a summing up of Methodism in general. William Law showed an early insight: the Methodists 'may be a Means of reforming a vicious World; and may rejoice in the Good they have done, perhaps *Half a Century* after most of their *Social* opponents, the gay Scoffers of the present Generation, are laid low, and forgotten, as if they had never been' ([Law] 1733: 20). Methodism, it was boasted in 1834, 'has already done more for the moral education of Great Britain, Ireland, and the West Indies, than any other system whose energies have been brought to bear upon the ignorance and misery of man' (Vevers 1834: 40). But against this we may set the prediction of John Wesley's insightful clerical opponent 'John Smith', describing in 1746 the ill effects of itinerant lay preachers: 'The very irregularity of their impetuous

zeal awakens some to seriousness, but at the same time it opens a door in the long run to the hurt of many more; and if we cast up the account at a hundred years' end we shall find the loss exceed the profit.' Wesley only replied: 'I am not careful for what may be a hundred years hence' (John Wesley 1975– : xxvi. 212, 235).

John Wesley tried to run Methodism as a proprietorial 'religious society', not an independent denomination, but its very growth gave it a developing life of its own. After his death in 1791, the nature of the movement was found to be, in important ways, undefined by its most famous founder (Bradburn 1792: 19); the early nineteenth century was to see Methodism fall into schism again and again, gravely weakening its effectiveness. Methodists disagreed on what 'Methodism' meant. Yet much of the historiography still depends implicitly on a normative view of the movement's outcomes, called in question by recent scholarship. Was Methodism really a success? Did it fail in its first purpose, to revitalize the church from within? Or did it provoke just such a revitalization, but itself disintegrate into a conflicting series of Nonconformist sects? Today, such historical questions can once again be asked.

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CHAPTER 2

THE FOUNDING BROTHERS

RICHARD P. HEITZENRATER

To write the history of early Methodism entails more than simply retelling the stories about the origin of the Wesleyan movement. It entails attention to several frequently ignored principles:

1. The Methodist movement developed and grew through the leadership of John Wesley, who envisioned the goal, synthesized suggestions, and drew together factions.
2. Brother Charles's involvement (even if indirectly) in the leadership of the movement helped shape the Wesleyan heritage.
3. The relationship between the brothers was one of love and respect, in spite of their differences, but was marked by Charles being the younger brother.
4. Methodism is more than the lengthened shadow of one man: it is a lay movement built around 'the people called Methodists'.
5. The attacks of the Wesleys' opponents should neither be accepted necessarily at face value nor be dismissed summarily as irrelevant polemics.
6. The Wesleys themselves were not reliable historians: their stories about early Methodism gave rise to many myths and legends.

Interpretations of early Wesleyan Methodism have varied over the last two centuries. The story told here will attempt to dispel the myths with information gleaned from the most recent research and create a picture that makes sense both internally and in its eighteenth-century context. The movement unfolds from year to year

without a previously conceived master plan, as Wesley would say, under the watchful providence of God.

A number of factors shaped the Methodist movement, including the attempts by John and Charles Wesley to renew the Church of England to be a more vital means of promoting holy living in society. Although the brothers shared many goals, their methods and emphases often brought them into conflict—sometimes in public, but more often behind the scenes. The role and influence of these two brothers, and their continuing relationship to each other and to the Methodist movement, however, have resulted in a variety of differing interpretations.

Childhood, Youth, and Early Education

As rector of Epworth, Samuel Wesley senior served a remote parish of somewhat primitive country people. His parishioners often did not appreciate his interests in philosophy, theology, politics, and literature. His wife, Susanna, did her best to protect their offspring from the crudities of the neighbouring children by limiting their outdoor playtime and teaching them strict rules of conduct. Unfortunately, two rectory fires forced Susanna to send some of her children to stay with neighbours, resulting in a subsequent need to reform the children's manners and language.

As the fifteenth child in the Wesley family, John (b. 1703) was four and a half years older than Charles (b. 1707). When Charles was beginning to read at age 5, John was about a year from leaving for school in London. They had little time together, then, as young siblings to become close. John was nearer in age to two of his sisters, Anne (b. 1702) and Martha ('Patty', b. 1706), for whom he developed a lasting fondness (Heitzenrater 2003: 41–6).

Although Susanna provided her children's basic education, Samuel was also influential in shaping their religious and theological perspectives. All the children, including the girls, learned the three Rs in weekly tutorial sessions with Susanna, but they also heard their father's sermons on Sunday mornings. Samuel's personal library also provided resources for shaping their religious and intellectual interests. More careful study of the theology of Samuel and Susanna would contribute to a fuller understanding of the Wesleyan heritage.

John and Charles both attended school in London, John at Charterhouse School (1713–20), and Charles several miles away at Westminster School (1716–26). No evidence suggests that they spent much time together while at school. John seems to have broadened his religious perspective from his strict Anglican upbringing to include more knowledge of the Continental reformed traditions and may have

developed some musical tastes from the tune books of John Patrick, former preacher of Charterhouse, whose tune books were presumably still in use at the school. Charles studied biblical languages at Westminster with his older brother, Samuel, who was an Usher (teacher) at that school. Very little evidence has survived from this formative period in both brothers' lives, and little Methodist attention has focused on the nature of education at those two eighteenth-century institutions.

Oxford, the First Rise of Methodism

John matriculated at Christ Church, Oxford, and had finished his baccalaureate degree (1724) and had been elected Fellow of Lincoln College (1726) by the time Charles arrived as a student. Eight months later, John earned his master's degree (1727) and soon moved north to become curate for his father in the Epworth living, which then included the parish of Wroot. At that time, Charles seems to have looked upon his older brother as a model student and Christian, and frequently appealed to him for advice.

John Wesley became more serious spiritually when he decided, after receiving his baccalaureate degree, to continue at Oxford as a tutor, necessitating that he become an ordained clergyman. This daunting prospect led John by early 1725 to focus upon his manner of Christian living, following the advice of his parents and several authors in the holy living tradition, especially Thomas à Kempis and Jeremy Taylor. His attempts to implement his new vision of Christian living, aided now by keeping a diary, included trying to convince friends to follow suit, usually without success. When Charles came to the University, he was not inclined to pursue this same manner of serious religion.

While John was in Epworth as curate, the University officials began to encourage tutors to enforce the school's statutes, which expected study of the Scriptures and classic divinity, as well as practical implementation of religion in the students' lives. In that context, Charles had a 'religious reformation' that he described in a letter to John early in 1729, asking for advice on how to proceed: what to read, what to do, and how to keep a diary. When Charles noted in May that he was trying to adopt this new programme and had convinced a classmate to study and attend Sunday services with him, John became excited enough to leave the north country for a summer visit to Oxford.

No organized activities developed during the summer before the brothers went north for the holidays in August. Certainly, no contemporary evidence exists that Charles started a group that was identifiable or regular, as is often claimed (Heitzenrater 1989: 68–9 and n.). But when the brothers returned to Oxford in

the late autumn, a pattern of activities begins to develop that takes a recognizable shape by the following spring (1730). The Wesleys and two or three others begin to meet as a study group, rotating among their rooms, reading and discussing the typical Oxford curriculum: classics on three evenings during the week and works of divinity on Sunday evening. They were neither the first nor the only group at that time to have such an agenda at Oxford. During the autumn and early winter of that year, one of the group, William Morgan, convinced them to assist him in visiting the prisoners at the city jail and county prison, as well as to help him teach some orphans and to supply several poor widows and children with food, clothes, and other necessities. During that year, the small band of friends, under John's leadership, had begun to take on a recognizable identity (Heitzenrater 1995: 39–43). A careful study of their reading programme might help unfold the development of Wesleyan theology during this period.

The organizational structure of Oxford Methodism was similar to the religious society pattern of the time: the centrality of a small group around their leader, John Wesley, with peripheral groups formed around individuals from the central group. The network of cell groups derived its rules and patterns of activity from the leading group: lists of questions, ciphers for diary entries, books for study, and schedules for visiting needy people. Several of these Wesleyan groups seem to have existed around the University and in the city in the months after mid-1732 (Heitzenrater 1995: 6–14).

The group's social outreach gained it additional public notice, and its name shifted briefly from 'Sacramentarians' (due to their regular church attendance) to 'Holy Club' (because of their assistance to the needy). According to John, this name (which he especially disliked because of the implications of being a social 'club') was superseded within six months by 'Godly Club', 'Supererogation Men', 'Bible Moths'—epithets that caricatured their various attempts at holy living. By 1732, they were called 'Methodists' by an observer at Christ Church, who may have noticed that the theology in John's sermons exhibited an Arminian flavour typical of the 'New Methodists' of the previous generation (Heitzenrater 1989: 13–32).

The theology of these Wesleyans has often been mistakenly described as semi-pelagian—trying to earn salvation by doing good works. John's sermons during this period clearly diffuse such criticism, especially his 1733 sermon before the University, 'The Circumcision of the Heart'. The inward focus, indicated by both his title and text (Rom. 2: 29), displayed a meditative piety oriented on a virtue ethic. The Methodists' interest was not earning salvation by doing good things, but rather allowing God's grace to help them become like Christ, filling them with Christlike virtues that would free them from sinfulness and allow them to have the mind of their Saviour and walk as he walked (Phil. 2: 15). Their reliance on God's prevenient grace as the starting point of this process betrays Wesley's lifetime theological stance against the predeterminism of the Calvinists and the semi-pelagian moral rectitude of some Anglicans.

Oxford Methodism manifested a double focus on loving God and neighbour, the sum of what the Wesleys always considered to be the purpose of the Christian life, the mark of a genuine Methodist, and the promise of the New Testament—Christian perfection. The importance of both Christian fellowship ('social holiness') and outreach ('social concern') demonstrated the Methodist double emphasis on works of piety and mercy. Their broad range of activities with the sick and poor, young and old, imprisoned and needy, followed the pattern of their Master, who 'went about doing good'. Members of the groups suggested many of the specific activities to Wesley, and not every group followed the same pattern. But they all followed the Wesleyan scheme of testing their actions by the Scriptures and trying to implement holy living in the academy, the church, and the community.

Georgia, the Second Rise of Methodism

The death of Samuel Wesley senior in early 1735 was a life-changing event for John and Charles. Samuel had wanted to become a missionary to America, and his sons soon took the endeavour upon themselves. John was not certain that this mission was providential—even the recommendation of his mother did not end his round of enquiries to friends. But once convinced, he exerted every effort to persuade Charles to accompany him. A contemporary observed that Charles always held John in deference, and in this case Charles succumbed, over his oldest brother's (Samuel's) objections (Heitzenrater 2003: 235).

The Georgia mission is often portrayed as a total failure for the Wesleys. Some evidence supports that view—the brothers' unfortunate encounters with designing women, their clash with the colonial authorities in Savannah, Charles's poor health and early return to England, John's failed romance with Sophy Hopkey, and the indictment of John (by a 'packed jury') on ten counts of maladministration and malfeasance. However, one should not overlook the importance of this period for the Wesleys' development and the shaping of Methodism.

While the Wesleys' contact with the Moravians during this period and John's interview with August Spangenberg have gained biographical notoriety, as has Wesley's contact with the slaves in South Carolina, other signs also indicate that the Wesleyan mindset was expanding. Charles encountered the duties of parish ministry, including preaching (on shipboard in both directions, he copied many of John's sermons for his own use (Heitzenrater 2003: 153)), and began exercising a latent talent for writing poetry. John refined his own perspectives on theology and mission. Attendance at public worship in Savannah grew under John's leadership, the American church gained its first printed book of *Psalms and Hymns* (published

by John in Charleston in 1737), and the new settlement in Frederica experienced the first 'Methodist' meeting in America in June 1737 (Heitzenrater 1995: 62–4). Additionally, John's linguistic abilities expanded into German, French, Spanish, and Italian, and his private writings began to exhibit (at Charles's suggestion) his use of Byrom's shorthand as a method of 'covered' correspondence.

In the midst of colonial turmoil, the brothers' support of each other drew them closer together in new ways. For weeks in Georgia, they travelled together, helped and defended each other, and confided in each other. Nevertheless, Charles left the colony after less than half a year, discouraged and in weak health. John left at the end of 1737 under threat of a trial. The reflections of despair in John's journal for January 1738 questioning his state of salvation, however, are subsequent insertions (when he edited the material for publication two years later) and demonstrate a viewpoint more typical of the influence of Peter Boehler, a post-Georgia friend. His Moravian perspective refracted Wesley's own view of his life up to that point and has thus skewed the interpretations of Methodist historians for generations.

London, the Third Rise of Methodism

John Wesley's contemporary ambivalence towards his time spent in America emerges while he is still on his docked ship in the arrival port in Portsmouth. Discovering that George Whitefield was about to sail for America on another ship in the same harbour, John sent him a note to dissuade him. Whitefield was not diverted from his intentions to assume the Wesleys' mission in Georgia and proceeded on the first of his seven trips to America. However, neither of the Wesleys ever returned to the New World.

The German pietists in Georgia, especially Spangenberg, had turned John Wesley's attention to the need for personal appropriation of the scriptural truths that were at the heart of Anglican soteriology. Now in England, Boehler continued to press the need for a personal faith that would dispense any doubt, fear, and sin. When Wesley despaired of ever having that level of faith, Boehler encouraged him to continue preaching faith until he actually received an assurance of it within himself, which the Moravians claimed would be accompanied by complete love, peace, and joy.

At this point, both Wesley brothers, under the spiritual tutelage of the Moravians, were active in the religious societies of London. This disparate network of small groups consisted of various evangelicals associated with a diverse group of leaders, including George Whitefield, James Hutton, Peter Boehler, and some former Oxford Methodists, many of whom were Anglicans. On 1 May 1738, Boehler

began a small fellowship at Hutton's house that became the Fetter Lane Society. John Wesley, visiting Hutton that evening, attended the meeting. Boehler soon left town, however, and Wesley began to exercise more leadership in the society, though never as its primary leader. Nevertheless, he later viewed the establishment of this society as the 'third rise' of Methodism.

Wesley's relationship with this group was rocky at best. Besides noting theological differences, the Moravian leadership also expressed some concern that the Wesley brothers' attraction to women in the group (and vice versa) was a divisive distraction. At the same time, John challenged their growing emphasis on 'quietism', which countered his emphasis on constant use of the various means of grace through works of piety and mercy—opportunities for persons to open themselves to the presence and power of God in their lives. His growing disenchantment with that society led Wesley to separate from them, followed by a small clutch of friends, and form a new society in November 1739 at the Foundery, the site that became the primary home of Methodism in London.

The Moravians also played an important role in the Wesleys' spiritual development. On Pentecost Sunday 1738, Charles experienced the 'assurance of salvation' that Boehler had been prescribing for weeks, sensing a 'strange palpitation of heart' that signalled his acceptance by God as a child of faith. Three days later on 24 May, John experienced a similar sense of assurance of faith during a society meeting on Aldersgate Street. John's descriptive language similarly reflected the Moravian heart theology—'my heart was strangely warmed'. The Wesleys had both experienced a personal appropriation of the faith they had been preaching. John saw now beyond the theological affirmation that Christ had died for the sins of the world, which was the truth that he could affirm to Spangenberg in Georgia. Now he realized that Christ had died 'for *me*' and had taken away '*my* sins'. Although the Wesleys continued to have theological disputes with the Moravians, continued to refine their understanding of faith, maintained their emphasis on the necessity of being active in doing good, and eventually discarded much of the Moravian theology, these spiritual experiences in May 1738 were a crucial step for each of them in his spiritual pilgrimage towards becoming a mature Christian (Heitzenrater 1989: 126–39).

This period also witnessed the beginning of Charles's poetical endeavours. He finished writing a hymn on 22 May in response to his spiritual experience and even left some blank space in his manuscript journal to enter the verses. But he never entered the hymn or indicated which one it was (probably either 'And Can It Be' or 'Where Shall my Wondering Soul Begin'). In any case, rhyming lines began to pour out of Charles's heart as he began to exercise his talent for expressing in poetry the spiritual core of the Methodist message.

During the remaining fifty years of his life, Charles produced verse at an amazing rate. The total has been estimated as high as 9,000 poems, although that number seems to include duplicates that appeared in different publications (Kimbrough 1990: i. 17–18). Hundreds of these poems have been put to music, old and new, and sung

in religious services for generations. The list of well-known Wesleyan hymns is long, typified by such favourites as 'Hark, the Herald Angels Sing', 'O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing', 'Love Divine, All Loves Excelling', and 'Christ the Lord is Risen Today'.

John and Charles had differences of opinion on what constituted appropriate wording for Methodist hymnody. John was the final editor of most of the hymn publications and on occasion either changed or omitted some of Charles's work. John did not allow 'Jesus, Lover of My Soul' into the main collection of 1780 and changed such phrases as 'Dear Saviour' because they echoed the sentimental language and 'coarse expressions' typical of the Moravian hymns. At times, Charles published small hymn tracts on his own, such as the 'Hymns on God's Everlasting Love' (1741). At stake was not only a certain sensitivity to language but also a concern for theological expression. Despite the more recent opinion that the hymns were the primary vehicle of Wesleyan theology during the revival, one must recognize that poetry is not an ideal form by which to express the carefully nuanced theological concepts that John was constantly forced to define and refine.

Music presented another issue regarding the Wesleyan hymnody. Charles was not a musician—he neither composed tunes nor played the organ or harpsichord. A few hundred of his poems became sung hymns, and the music that accompanied them was largely taken from the repertoire of contemporary hymn tunes. A few were composed for his words by popular composers of the day, such as George Frederick Handel and John Frederick Lampe. Some were adapted from popular tunes by earlier composers such as Henry Purcell. The current idea that some of the music came from tavern songs perhaps results from a misunderstanding of the concept of the 'bar form' of some songs, which refers to the repetition of melodic patterns, not to drunken ditties.

The poetic work of John and Charles Wesley not only contributed significantly to the development of hymnody in the eighteenth century but also provided a lasting expression of and contribution to the vital spiritual experiences of millions of people in denominations across the wide spread of Christianity.

The Early Methodist Revival

The Methodist movement had become visible on the British scene by 1740. However, the most noticeable 'Methodist' in London until halfway through that decade was George Whitefield. When various people wrote tracts and pamphlets attacking the Methodists, more often than not they aimed their barbs at Whitefield. He was the most notable orator of the time, he was the most notorious rabble-rouser among the religious societies, and he was most likely to get the attention of both

the curious public and the church leadership. Calvinism became his cause, and he carried on an extensive public battle with John Wesley, his personal friend and former mentor. Their meeting houses, the Wesleys' Foundery and Whitefield's Tabernacle, were on the same street north of Moorfields in Greater London.

The close association between Whitefield and the Wesleys began at Oxford, where George had first become acquainted with Charles and then came to know John about the time the Wesleys were leaving Oxford. Whitefield also considered himself as successor to the Wesleys' work, first at Oxford and then in Georgia, where he followed Charles's advice and started an orphanage, called Bethesda. In 1739, when they were all back in England, Whitefield convinced John Wesley to take over his work with two of the religious societies in Bristol (Baldwin Street and Tabernacle Street Societies). Wesley soon built a 'New Room', or preaching house, for the combined groups, which he then called the 'United Societies'. Whitefield suggested that Wesley take sole proprietorship of the building, so as not to fall prey to the doctrinal and missional demands of financiers (J. Wesley 1975– (1990), xix. 56). Whitefield also turned over to the Wesleys his work in a school among the mining families at nearby Kingswood.

This working relationship was sorely tested when Wesley preached 'Free Grace' in Bristol, which directly attacked the Calvinism that Whitefield supported. Wesley's publication of the sermon brought on a heated controversy that followed Whitefield to America again. Whitefield's counterblast, 'Free Grace, Indeed!' argued that free grace meant that God was free to choose the elect, not that humankind was free to choose God's salvation. Several attempts at compromise between the Wesleys and Whitefield, sometimes including other evangelical leaders, failed to resolve the basic tensions between the general Arminianism of the Wesleyans and the Calvinism of Whitefield and his supporters. At one such meeting, the participants agreed not to attack each other in public and not to use inflammatory terms (such as 'sinless perfection' or 'predestination')—an agreement that Charles soon ignored in some of his poetry (J. Wesley 1975– (1991), xx. 295).

The organization of Methodism developed in response to needs rather than from a preconceived plan. Wesley was convinced that God had raised up the Methodist preachers to spread scriptural holiness across the land. The singularity with which he pressed the fulfilment of this goal—holy living, love of God and neighbour, having the mind of Christ and walking as he walked—gives an impression of the implementation of a general design. But the particulars of the organization and mission arose in response to practical circumstances that required a timely solution, which Wesley usually provided in consultation with Scripture, his friends, and eventually his preachers. During the early years of these developments, Charles remained largely in the background, still functioning as the younger brother and trusted (though subordinate) colleague. John seemed to be very self-confident but at the same time appeared to rely on his brother's support.

John had developed a network of friends at Oxford that continued to provide a matrix for his pattern of activities even after his return from Georgia. The network grew as his acquaintances broadened and his activities widened throughout England. In 1739, one gathering of these friends resulted in a resolution to meet every three months to encourage each other, with an annual meeting in the summer in London. No evidence confirms whether these conferences ever happened during the next three years. But the pattern was eventually implemented within the developing movement. The first instance of a subsequent meeting of this sort occurred in 1743, when John sent word to Charles to make his way quickly from Cornwall to London for a conference among the Wesley brothers, Whitefield, Spangenberg, and John Nelson. The intent was to have a theological conversation to work out some of the differences between the Wesleyan, Moravian, and Calvinist perspectives of the participants. This attempt failed to materialize fully when the Moravians discouraged Spangenberg from attending and Whitefield failed to appear (C. Wesley 2008: 369–70). The conversation between the remaining three has never been viewed as an official conference—apparently no minutes were kept and no major decisions were recorded by the participants. But it did provide the pattern and rationale for succeeding conferences, which began to meet annually at Wesley's behest the following summer.

Spread and Organization of Methodist Movement

This period of 'evangelical revival' in the eighteenth century witnessed a series of spiritual awakenings in many parts of the world. In the British Isles, many local revivals blossomed. The leadership of these small movements ranged across the religious spectrum, from established church to radical Dissenters. Several of these local revivals were led by persons who knew Wesley, either by previous association (especially at Oxford) or by reputation, as Wesley's notoriety grew.

There was no 'wildfire' spread of Methodism, as is often claimed, but the movement did spread throughout the three kingdoms during the 1740s, as some of these local revivals came into association with the Wesleys. This amalgamation of revivals contributed to the growth of the Wesleyan movement to over 20,000 members by the 1760s, at which point Methodists started keeping careful records. That is a relatively small number, considering that the population of England then was nearly ten million and compared with the numbers that purportedly attended Methodist outdoor preaching occasions at the time—often reported to be 20,000–30,000 people on some weekends. Curiosity seekers often attended the Societies then, but could only visit three times without joining the group.

The relatively slow growth also resulted from the membership process. The only requirement for joining the United Societies of People Called Methodists was 'a desire to flee from the wrath to come and be saved from your sins'. But the requirements for retaining a membership card (class ticket) included an examination every three months that tested a continuing desire for salvation—were members still following the three 'General Rules': do all the good you can, avoid evil of every kind, and attend to the ordinances of God (use the means of grace). These rules entailed specific examples of 'good' and 'evil' behaviour and a list of the means of grace, including religious conversation, the Lord's Supper, fasting, praying, and Scripture reading. On some occasions, these examinations resulted in the expulsion of a large proportion of a local society, who either left the movement or were required to join a 'penitential band' (similar to the 'probationary band', an initial requirement for each new member) for at least three months. This tight discipline resulted in a membership limited to those who were serious about Christian living and were able to demonstrate that concern in specific ways (Heitzenrater 1995: 138–9).

The local Methodist societies were composed of and led by laypeople who were committed to the Wesleys' vision of holy living. Similar to the earlier religious societies, they benefited from the strengths of the small group concept. Each local society was divided into 'classes' or neighbourhood groups of about a dozen people, each with a leader (layperson) who was responsible for nurturing the spiritual well-being of the members. The 'bands' however, were voluntary groups that furthered more intimate spiritual nurture by their homogenous composition, determined by gender, age, and marital status—single young men, married older women, and the like. Laity also held other positions in each society, such as 'stewards' to handle the money, 'trustees' to manage the property, and 'visitors' to care for the sick (Heitzenrater 1995: 117–19). Even the preachers who led these societies were laypeople, picked and 'set apart' by the Wesleys as 'helpers' and 'assistants'. Preaching was the regular feature of the society meeting, held in buildings known as 'preaching houses'. The meetings also included special events such as watch nights, love feasts, and letter days (when they read personal descriptions of religious experiences that exemplified holy living and holy dying). As the connexion developed 'circuits' within regions—groups of societies within a geographic region that could be served by a group of preachers who circulated around the circuit—the term 'Assistant' came to designate the supervising preacher on a circuit.

Besides leading exemplary lives, the members were also expected to contribute to the local and connectional programmes of the society, which came to include the establishment of educational institutions, medical clinics, housing subsidies, loan funds, and other forms of assistance designed primarily for the members, many of whom were poor. The Methodists were representative of the general population in that two-thirds of them could be classified as 'poor' by government standards since

their annual worth was less than £30. At the same time, Wesley's movement had attracted approximately twice the proportion from the top 2 per cent on the economic ladder. It was these 'rich' persons to whom Wesley looked for funding of programmes to assist the poor. When he went 'begging' through the streets of London, he was not standing on a street corner with a tin cup, but was knocking on the doors of people that he felt would provide aid for specific needs (J. Wesley 1975–(2003), xiv. 2–3). On one occasion, he raised only a disappointing £200 in a week, but that amount converted into today's currency would top £12,000.

While this ministry to the rich on behalf of the poor was an essential part of the programme, Wesley's principle of philanthropy, or Christian charity, extended across the economic spectrum. Any persons who had more than the 'necessities' of life were expected to contribute of their 'superfluities' to those who were in need. As the economic level of the Methodists improved throughout the century, 'necessities' were fleshed out adjectivally by somewhat generous terms as 'decent' clothing, 'suitable' housing, and 'nutritious' food. A few people in England may have lived on the rock-bottom level of 'extremities'—everyone else was expected to help those who were worse off than they were. The biblical story of the widow's mite was Wesley's model for this principle, which he universalized to all levels of society. Some of Charles's most powerful lines describe not only Christ as the 'sinner's friend' but also 'the poor as Jesus' bosom-friends' (Kimbrough 1990: 2, 404).

Preaching and Publications

The printed word became as important as the preached and sung word among the Methodists. Both of the Wesleys kept cryptic notes in daily diaries, from which they developed narrative accounts in manuscript journals. They wrote each other journal letters, which were narratives of their own and others' experiences. These were often read on 'letter days' in the society meetings. The Wesleys later abridged these documents into the more familiar journals associated with each. They also collected prayers, poetry, various contemporary religious writings, and historical classics in divinity. John Wesley published dozens of these abridged and 'collected' works, many of which he had prepared in the 1720s and 30s while at Oxford. Not only did he publish these works singly, often anonymously, but he also included many, along with his own writings, in a multi-volume edition of 'Wesley's Tracts' sold in the mid-1740s. He placed many in his 50-volume *Christian Library* in the mid-1750s, and even included several in the publication of his 32-volume collected *Works* in the 1770s. Some of them he also published in his monthly journal,

The Arminian Magazine, begun in the late 1770s. Wesley considered these published materials collected from other writings as part of his own works and every bit as important for his people as the sermons and treatises that he himself had composed. His primary intent was to spread scriptural holiness across the land, which seems to have included making a great variety of religious literature, past and present, available to people at a reasonable price.

One of the staple items in the Wesleyan corpus is the published sermons. Preaching was a hallmark of the Methodist revival. Whitefield was often seen as the epitome of the Methodist preacher, though his theology was not fully Wesleyan. John on the other hand was not known as a dynamic speaker—eyewitnesses report that his voice was clear and his message was pointed, but his method was not remarkable. One woman reported that if Wesley had not occasionally reached up and turned the page of his manuscript, one would have thought he was a 'speaking marble statue' (Heitzenrater 1989: 162–73). Nevertheless, the message affected the hearers powerfully, which was also the intent of the published works.

The published sermons were primarily intended to help the preachers and people understand the principles of the Christian life as seen in Scripture. The first volume, written during the height of the field-preaching revivals of the mid-1740s, focused on themes related to conversion—salvation, faith, and justification. The preachers at the earliest conferences asked Wesley to publish some sermons, which he did in 1746. But soon the Wesleys decided to focus on the establishment of societies rather than on field-preaching, and the second volume in 1748 shifts towards the principles of the Christian life, such as Christian perfection and themes from Christ's Sermon on the Mount. In 1750, John completed his original design to produce three volumes of sermons. This design not only expanded to include a fourth volume in 1760, but within thirty years, Wesley had written a hundred more sermons and produced an eight-volume set of these homiletical treatises.

These *Sermons on Several Occasions*, however, were not the sermons he preached daily. His favourite preaching texts are not represented in the published collection, and a large percentage of the published sermons were apparently never preached—they were written treatises elucidating the scriptural principles that undergird the Christian life (Heitzenrater 1989: 179–82). His anecdotal oral style contrasted remarkably with the written sermons, according to first-hand accounts (J. Wesley 1975– (1987), iv. 515–16).

Preaching was the hallmark of the Methodist movement, both out of doors and in society meetings. The gathering places were called 'preaching houses', as distinguished from the consecrated 'chapels' of the Church of England and the registered 'meeting houses' of the Dissenters. The great numbers of people who attended these occasions, a notable feature of the movement, became a matter of contention. Charles betrays some scepticism in 1739 concerning the 'innumerable multitude' that reportedly gathered in Moorfields to hear Whitefield, and also mistrusted the more specific number that came to hear his brother John—'above ten thousand (as was supposed)',

he records in his journal. But when Charles decided to enter the ranks of field preachers a week later, he noted (with tongue in cheek) that he 'found ten thousand helpless sinners waiting for the word in Moorfields' (C. Wesley 2008: 179–80).

Sometimes the numbers raise serious questions. How would the 34,000 people whom John recorded at Gwennap Pit have fit into the topography of the area? Where would that many people have come from in rural Cornwall? How would that many people have travelled to such a remote area? How were they accommodated for food and lodging? And where were that many horses kept?

Nevertheless, Wesley was indeed concerned about numbers. Beginning in 1770, the membership list in the annual *Minutes* has an asterisk beside those societies that decreased in size, usually about a quarter of the four or five dozen groups in the British Isles. As the percentage of asterisks increased, the method switched in 1781 to a more positive approach, indicating those societies that increased in size during the year—often less than half of them. By 1785, the asterisks had been dropped completely from the membership records. By 1791, nevertheless, the British Methodist movement had 72,476 members, an average annual increase of about 2,000 members during the previous twenty years (more rapid growth than during the first thirty years).

The various connectional funds had also increased proportionally: the annual Kingswood School Collection from about £200 to over £1,000; the Preachers' (pension) Fund from under £50 to over £700; and the contributions for Yearly Expenses (for building debt reduction and active preachers' support) nearly tripled to over £1,200. These funds alone represent a contribution of nearly a shilling per member every year, which (according to Wesley's personal financial records) was equivalent to the cost of a cloak, a pair of children's shoes, a good book, or two bottles of ink.

Although the membership in the Methodist societies did not grow exponentially, the need for preachers in the movement outstripped the supply of ordained Anglicans interested in associating with Methodists. The question of using lay preachers arose early: Charles declared against it as early as 1739. John succumbed to the need for such assistance when convinced that their work bore spiritual fruit. The tension between the brothers on this issue (and several others) presented a continuing source of friction. Charles worried that John would take some action that would result in separation from the church. The pressure from the lay preachers for ordination and permission to administer the sacraments presented a threat in that direction, as did the scheduling of society meetings at 11 a.m. on Sunday mornings, conflicting with the local parish church services (which the Wesleys hoped Methodists would attend). Charles was a 'Church Methodist' and was much more willing to abandon Methodism before he would separate from the church. John worried about having enough leaders among the societies, however, and was less concerned than Charles about their talents and theological sophistication. He generally opposed separation, but felt there were only two ways that such a cleavage would happen: if the hierarchy of the church kicked them out, or if they declared themselves Dissenters and left—neither of which he thought would happen.

Ecclesiology and Ministry

John Fletcher, one of the Wesleys' trusted allies among the ranks of Anglican clergy, and Joseph Benson, one of the Wesleyan preachers, presented a compromise plan in the mid-1770s. They proposed the creation of Methodism as a 'daughter church' of the Church of England, with the doctrinal standards altered to reflect the Wesleyan emphases—the Articles of Faith 'rectified' by Scripture, and the Book of Common Prayer and Homilies likewise receiving 'needful alterations'. Wesley rejected the plan, although a decade later he provided American Methodists with a similar set of standards for their new denomination (Heitzenrater 1995: 256–7).

Methodist women's call to preach tested Wesley's attempts to correlate principle and practicality. He consistently held the principle that 'Methodists admit of no women preachers'. This view was necessary to prevent separation from the Church of England, which had a strong bias against having women in leadership positions, especially ordained ministry. But he also recognized that some women were adept at speaking to the societies and felt a strong call to do so. Mary Bosanquet convinced him that such an 'extraordinary call' was not unlike that of the male lay preachers in the connexion. Wesley therefore allowed selected women to lead services in the societies, within strict limits—they were not to 'preach' on a text or speak continually for twenty minutes, but were simply to hold Bible studies or exhort their listeners, interspersing their discourse with occasional prayers. These women were not 'set apart' as members of the Conference, but were simply given the personal permission of Wesley to provide assistance in the societies. In only one instance was a woman (Sarah Mallet) actually granted written permission to preach in her circuit, under a 1787 provision that required non-connexional preachers to be approved by Wesley and the Conference (Heitzenrater 1995: 298).

A leadership crisis arose in the early 1750s when some of the preachers demonstrated a lack of both competence and basic morality. Charges of adultery against one preacher resulted in his claiming that other preachers were likewise complicit. John recognized an opportunity for Charles to become more involved in the guidance of the connexion and thus asked Charles to examine the preachers and determine which ones should be dismissed. Charles's journal letters to John during the visitations of 1751 exhibit him exercising independent judgement and contain some ebullient references to his own travail among the societies. Such a view of his own importance in the movement provided undergirding for Charles's continuing struggles with John over their different emphases on 'gifts' or 'grace'. By the end of the year, the brothers submitted some of their differences to arbitration (the third party was Mr Perronet), and the covenants that they drew up attempted to move towards personal

agreement on key issues as well as to promote a supportive covenant relationship among the preachers (Newport 2007: 502–4). Charles's attempts to control John—such as expecting to have equal say in who was accepted or dismissed from the ranks of preachers—was not matched by a willingness to participate equally in the ongoing daily administration of the connexion. John's occasional pleas for a show of unity between the brothers were not heeded; Charles even stopped attending the annual conference. In 1785, John recognized that he could have benefited from a closer partnership with Charles: 'Perhaps if you had kept close to me, I might have done better. However, with or without help, I creep on.'

The ordination problem heightened when the American colonies became a separate nation after their Revolutionary War. Wesley never fully understood the New World, given his limited, off-putting experience in Georgia. His ambiguous attitude towards their cause became explicit in his *Calm Address to Our American Colonies*, a plagiarized version of Samuel Johnson's pamphlet supporting British taxation of the colonies to help pay for their military protection. When hostilities broke out and the Anglican clergy returned to England, the Methodists were left without access to the sacraments. John Wesley, who had denied the requests of English Methodist preachers for ordination, saw this as a 'case of necessity' that required exceptional action, against the advice of his brother and other advisers in the Methodist Conference in England. His was a definitive, though not hasty, reaction to the need, and the setting apart of Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury as 'general superintendents' for America provided the core of an ecclesiological framework for a new denomination in the new country. That Wesley 'ordained' Coke to his episcopal office, as Wesley recorded in his diary, is in keeping with the Anglican view of three orders of ministry: deacon, priest, and bishop (J. Wesley 1975– (1995), xxiii. 497). That Wesley reacted against the Americans adopting the term 'bishop' is in keeping with his own view that the Methodists there were still under his own leadership.

Wesley's actions with regard to American political and ecclesiastical freedom demonstrate a continuing tendency on his part towards synthetic and reactive leadership. He was a master of analysing a situation, perceiving needs, putting together solutions, and guiding the momentum in a direction that he felt was productive, if not providential. His action is often precipitated by the insistence of those more directly involved, and his positions are often expressed in terms of those who have dealt with the problem more thoroughly. But he realized that by adding the weight of his reputation at crucial moments on the side of what was 'right', he might be able to sway both public opinion and official action, as in the case of his opposition to the slave trade in England and America. Although his views are certainly in keeping with many of the social causes of the present day, his own position should not be extended beyond the boundaries of the somewhat limited social consciousness of the eighteenth century.

Theology and Soteriology

The precise meaning and limits of eighteenth-century language and concepts must be carefully considered when Wesley's views are appropriated in the present. Wesley often uses the term 'conversion', for instance, in the sense of assurance rather than the specific initial soteriological transformation from heathen to Christian. When he first claims that he was 'converted' on 24 May 1738, in Aldersgate Street, a close examination of the text of his explanation reveals a discussion of the meaning and place of 'assurance' and 'faith' in the Christian life. Any assumption that he was describing an initial experience of justification (being 'saved') causes confusion when in the following months he feels that he is not really a Christian any longer. The picture that emerges from this period, then, is not of a watershed event on a particular day but the beginning of a decade-long process of crises and developments that unfold the meaning and significance of his pneumatological epistemology relative to justification, sanctification, faith, and assurance (Heitzenrater 1989: 146–9).

Similarly, his mention of 'converting ordinance' should be understood in the context of his opposition to Moravian 'quietism'—the extreme view that prior to receiving full assurance of salvation, one is not a Christian and should not use prayer, Bible reading, church attendance, and other such opportunities for spiritual improvement. Wesley illustrates his contrary position by explaining that his mother had experienced assurance of salvation while attending the Eucharist—that it was thus a converting ordinance. He was not claiming that she had never before been a Christian. In fact, to understand this example of conversion in terms of transformation from heathen to Christian would have Wesley referring to his mother Susanna Wesley as being a non-Christian until shortly before her death. No one would suggest that John and Charles were raised, taught, nurtured, and supported by a heathen mother. Similarly, in Wesleyan terms, one should not suggest that assurance of salvation is necessarily equivalent to becoming a Christian or initial justification, which Wesley felt could be coincident with infant baptism. An appreciation of the terminology of the eighteenth century and its specific usage by Wesley and others is crucial to a full understanding of their various theological positions.

The key to understanding Wesley's soteriology is his use of the concepts of prevenient grace and of backsliding. Wesley agrees with the traditional Christian view that humanity is tainted by sin and has the tendency towards sin. The gospel of salvation explains how a person can overcome that situation. The idea that God's presence and power precede any human effort towards salvation is a crucial element of Wesley's answer to the Calvinist position called predestination—the idea that God's sovereignty requires that God decrees who shall be elect or damned. Wesley affirms that God indeed takes the first action, but disagrees with the idea of divine fiat. He holds, rather, that the precedent divine action illuminates the human mind concerning good and evil and gives the person the freedom to choose.

Thus, a free human response to God's preceding action is crucial to salvation from sin. The relationship of this Wesleyan view to the larger framework of the Arminian–Calvinist theological controversies is a matter of continuing discussion and nuanced work.

In many instances, Wesley appears to understand the history of and implications behind the various positions that he adopts, such as atonement or anthropology. But his main concern in working with the Methodists is to raise up the scriptural implications for holy Christian living—how a particular theological issue relates to the Great Commandment to love God and love neighbour, to have the mind that was in Christ and walk as he walked.

Wesley insisted that assurance is a daily framework for understanding one's salvation. Assurance is never a conviction or guarantee of final perseverance or a place in heaven. The central concern is a daily evaluation of one's relationship to God—assurance is a conviction that one is presently a child of God, responding in faith to God's direction. This condition is always susceptible to backsliding, however—falling from grace, not responding in faith, slacking in one's attempts to be loving (Maddox 1994: 164). This inherent tension in the Wesleyan view, which necessitates a disciplined life that daily demonstrates a desire for salvation, gives vitality rather than size to the movement. Wesley was always concerned that Methodism should maintain the power as well as the form of religion, lest it become a dead sect.

This central operating principle, putting Scripture into practice, rests behind the 'practical divinity', the heart of a distinctive Wesleyan theology. Wesley felt that God raised up the Methodist preachers 'to reform the nation, especially the Church, and spread scriptural holiness across the land'. For Wesley, holiness is simply pure love—love of God and neighbour. Theologically, he uses terms such as sanctification, entire sanctification, and Christian perfection to explicate the centrality of this position, but those terms all come back to the same thing—love.

Wesley felt that this distinctive idea, though foundational to the character of a Methodist, was not uniquely Methodist but simply the mark of a genuine Christian. While very particular in his explanation of the central Christian doctrines, Wesley was open to the variety of expressions of Christian thought and practice evident within the ecumenical church. Although not part of his vocabulary, he would agree with the motto of the Dissenters who desired unity in essentials, liberty in non-essentials, and charity in all things. The crucial question in such instances, however, is the matter of distinguishing between essentials and non-essentials, between matters of doctrine to be held fast and matters of opinion that are indifferent. Wesley would certainly place the 'three grand doctrines' of Methodism—repentance, faith (justification), and holiness (sanctification)—in the first category, along with others such as the Trinity, original sin, and the new birth. At the same time, his 'catholic spirit' would allow for some differences of opinion between denominations on modes of baptism, forms of worship, and

other secondary matters (Heitzenrater 1995: 219–24). Obviously, not every group (such as the Baptists) would agree with this particular distinction, which is why Wesley could sound so tolerant on the one hand and be so firm on the other.

End of the Century

Well into old age, Wesley celebrated his birthdays by reflecting upon the goodness of God's providence in preserving his health and strength. Some of his journal comments on those occasions seem hyperbolic—his health has never been better, his eyesight is as good as ever (J. Wesley 1975– (1995), xxiii. 369). Charles's recapitulations on such occasions were quite different—how is it that I am still alive, having suffered so many trials and tribulations? (C. Wesley 2008: 484; 586). Thus, in 1788 when John received word that his younger brother was sick in bed yet again, he replied that good exercise would do more good than staying in bed. In this instance, however, John miscalculated the seriousness of the illness. The next letter broke the bad news that Charles had died. The depth of their relationship, in spite of the continuing tensions and outward conflicts, emerged in the next service that day, when John was lining out the hymn for the people to sing (Charles's 'Come, Thou Traveller Unknown'). He valiantly proceeded halfway through the first verse to the lines, 'My company before is gone, and I am left alone with thee', before he broke down crying, unable to continue. Charles's death had little other impact at the time on the continuing political development of the Methodist connexion. But his hymns have had a lasting impact, not only upon the Methodists but also upon worldwide Christianity.

John knew that his own end was approaching. He did everything necessary to prepare for the continuation of the movement—organizing the Conference as an official body through the Deed of Declaration, registered at the Public Records Office in Chancery Lane; providing for continued leadership through selected ordinations; designating in his will special committees to carry out tasks relating to the publishing concerns and his own books and manuscripts. Anticipating that some preachers would become Dissenters and some others might become Church of England priests, he also tried to entice some to remain faithful to Methodism by promising that any preacher who remained in the connexion for at least six months after Wesley's death should receive a copy of the eight-volume collection of his sermons (Heitzenrater 2003: 208).

The anticipated divisions and controversies at his death, though causing numerable debates and hard feelings, brought only one major split in the first decade. And even the turmoil caused by that division did not prevent an acceleration in the growth of membership in the Wesleyan body, which passed 100,000 well before the

turn of the century (Heitzenrater 1995: 264). The Plan of Pacification in 1795 acknowledged that the Methodist movement was indeed a separate body from the Church of England. It would take another two generations to work out the implications of that development, but by that time Methodism was a growing influence in the society of Great Britain, developing a self-understanding that began to move beyond its eighteenth-century roots.

The strength of the Wesleyan heritage has been the close interaction of its theology, organization, and mission. The spiritual quest of the Wesley brothers provides the central image of the spiritual pilgrimage at the heart of the movement—a quest to discover how the disciple of Christ can best love God and neighbour. The Wesleyan focus has always been on practice rather than theory, and practical divinity manifests itself primarily in vital Christian living. The implicit ecclesiology underlying such an approach has been elusive, if not ignored. The mission of Methodism has grown out of an attempt to relate faith and works as equally important means of grace—opportunities for experiencing the presence and power of God in human life. To understand the implications of this theological emphasis is to catch the significance of the impulse that motivated the Wesley brothers to renew the church.

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CHAPTER 3

FRANCIS ASBURY AND AMERICAN METHODISM

JOHN H. WIGGER

Francis Asbury came to America in 1771 with high hopes, and by the end of 1776 there was much that he could feel good about. A revival in the South had swept thousands of new believers into the fold, offsetting the challenges that the impending revolution would undoubtedly present. 'God is at work in this part of the country; and my soul catches the holy fire already', he wrote (F. Asbury 1958: i. 166) when he first entered the Brunswick circuit, the heart of the revival in southern Virginia and North Carolina, in October 1775. By January 1776 he could write that 'Virginia pleases me in preference to all other places where I have been' (ibid. 178). Despite its raucous emotionalism, the revival was exactly what he had been praying and working for since his arrival in America.

Others were not so sure. Thomas Rankin, Wesley's senior preacher in America since 1773, had joined with Asbury to enforce the discipline of the class meeting and love feast and extend circuit preaching beyond the cities. Yet when Rankin journeyed through Virginia during the summer of 1776 he was dismayed by the emotionalism of southern worship. At a conference of the preachers soon afterward, Rankin launched into a tirade against 'the spirit of the Americans', criticizing the preachers for allowing 'noise' and 'wild enthusiasm' in their meetings and for becoming 'infected with it' themselves. As he listened, Asbury 'became alarmed, and deemed it absolutely necessary that a stop should be put to the debate',

according to Thomas Ware, who witnessed the event. Jumping up, Asbury pointed across the room and said, 'I thought,—I thought,—I thought', to which Rankin asked, 'pray... what did you thought?' [*sic*] 'I thought I saw a mouse!' exclaimed Asbury. This joke 'electrified' the preachers, and in the ensuing laughter Rankin realized that he had lost. The result was 'alike gratifying to the preachers generally, and mortifying to the person concerned [Rankin]', according to Ware (Ware 1832: 102; 1840: 252–3). Asbury's timing must have been prefect to get such a big laugh from 'I thought I saw a mouse!' But the deeper significance of this story has to do with his understanding of the intersection of faith and culture.

Upbringing and Early Career

Francis Asbury was born about 20 August 1745 in a cottage in the parish of Handsworth, Staffordshire, about four miles outside Birmingham. His parents were Joseph Asbury and Elizabeth Rogers Asbury, known as Eliza. Joseph was a farm labourer and gardener employed by two wealthy families in the parish. While Francis was still quite young the family moved to a cottage in nearby Great Barr, which at the time was attached to a brewery and is still standing. In all likelihood Joseph worked for the brewery and the cottage was part of his compensation (Hallam 2003: 2–4). By age 6 Asbury could read the Bible, and he attended a charity school at Sneal's Green, about a quarter of a mile from the family's cottage. But, as Asbury later remembered, the schoolmaster was 'a great churl, and used to beat me cruelly' (F. Asbury 1958: i. 721). His severity filled Asbury 'with such horrible dread, that with me anything was preferable to going to school'. So he left school at about age 13 and was soon apprenticed to a local metalworker, slipping into the rapidly expanding metalworking industry that made Birmingham an early centre of the industrial revolution. As a metalworker's apprentice and the son of a gardener, Asbury understood the lives of working people, which later enabled him to forge a bond with American Methodists, most of whom came from the lower and middle ranks of society. This was particularly true of the American preachers, almost all of whom came from artisan and farming backgrounds with little formal education. They accepted Asbury so easily because he was one of them.

The death of Asbury's sister Sarah in May 1749 at the age of 6 was a severe blow to Elizabeth Asbury, but also the root of her spiritual awakening. According to Asbury his mother sank 'into deep distress at the loss of a darling child, from which she was not relieved for many years' (ibid.). The tragedy of Sarah's death drove Elizabeth to search for deeper spiritual meaning in life. Elizabeth soon gained a reputation for seeking out almost anyone with evangelical inclinations, including local

Methodists. Asbury's religious convictions grew along with his mother's, who directed him to Methodist meetings in nearby West Bromwich and Wednesbury. Asbury was impressed by the zeal of the preachers and their audience. After an intense search for the assurance of salvation, he experienced conversion at about age 15 and sanctification, or something close to it, a year or so later.

Asbury soon joined a class meeting and a band, and at about age 17 he began to exhort and then preach in public. At 21 he took the place of the travelling preacher assigned to the Staffordshire circuit. In August 1767 he was admitted on trial (a probationary period for new itinerant preachers) and assigned to the Bedfordshire circuit. In August 1768 he was admitted into full connexion and over the next three years rode the Colchester, Bedfordshire, and Wiltshire circuits, none of which were particularly easy. Nevertheless Asbury stuck with it, demonstrating a resiliency that characterized his entire career. At the Bristol Annual Conference in August 1771 he answered Wesley's call for volunteers to go to America.

Under Asbury's leadership Methodism in America grew at an unprecedented rate, rising from a few hundred members in 1771 to more than 200,000 in 1816, the year of his death (Methodist Episcopal Church 1840: 5. 282). Methodism was the largest and most dynamic popular religious movement in America between the Revolution and the Civil War. In 1775, fewer than one out of every 800 Americans was a Methodist; by 1812 Methodists numbered one out of every 36 Americans. These figures are even more impressive given the movement's wider influence. Many more Americans attended Methodist gatherings than actually joined the church, particularly during this early, volatile period of growth.

As the movement's leader Asbury had a hand in shaping the religious lives of more people than probably any other American of his generation. Yet his dedication to the ministry cost him dearly, requiring that he set aside more worldly desires. During his forty-five-year career in America he never married, and never owned a home or much more than he could carry on horseback. He travelled at least 130,000 miles by horse and crossed the Allegheny Mountains some sixty times. He was more widely recognized face to face than any person of his generation, including such national figures as Thomas Jefferson and George Washington. Landlords and tavern keepers, not to mention ordinary Methodists, knew him on sight in every region.

Asbury's Method

Asbury communicated his vision for Methodism in four enduring ways that came to define much of evangelical culture in America. The first was through his legendary piety and perseverance, rooted in a classically evangelical conversion

experience. No other Methodist, perhaps few other Americans, maintained as spiritually disciplined a life over such a long period of time as did Asbury. Where most Methodists, even most preachers, settled for a serviceable faith, he strove for a life of extraordinary devotion. Despite a gruelling schedule, he usually rose at 4 or 5 a.m. to pray for an hour in the morning stillness. During his forty-five years in America he essentially lived as a houseguest in thousands of other people's homes across the land. This manner of life 'exposed him, continually, to public or private observation and inspection, and subjected him to a constant and critical review; and that from day to day, and from year to year', wrote Ezekiel Cooper (1819: 21), who knew Asbury for more than thirty years. He had no private life beyond the confines of his mind.

Asbury's spiritual purity produced a 'confidence in the uprightness of his intentions and wisdom of his plans, which gave him such a control over both preachers and people as enabled him to discharge the high trusts confided to him, with so much facility and to such general satisfaction', observed one contemporary (Bangs 1839: ii. 401). Perseverance counted for much among evangelicals, and on this score Asbury had few equals. He relentlessly pushed himself to the breaking point of his health, seldom asking more of other Methodists than he was willing to do. From 1793 on he suffered from progressively worsening congestive heart failure, probably brought on by bouts of streptococcal pharyngitis (strep throat) and rheumatic fever that damaged his heart valves. As a result, he suffered from oedema in his feet made worse by endless hours on horseback with his feet dangling until they were too swollen to fit in the stirrups. Towards the end of his life he often had to be carried from his horse to his preaching appointments because he could not bear the pain of walking, which must have been an inspiring, if bizarre, sight. It left one observer who saw him preach in this condition in 'breathless awe and silent astonishment' (ibid. 364). Asbury's piety brought him respect, even renown, based on sacrifice rather than accumulation of buildings, money, or other trappings of power. 'It was almost impossible to approach, and converse with him, without feeling the strong influence of his spirit and presence. . . . There was something, in the remarkable fact, almost inexplicable, and indescribable', wrote Ezekiel Cooper (1819: 25–6) shortly after Asbury's death. Even James O'Kelly (1801: 61), who, in 1792, led the most bitter schism from the Methodist church in Asbury's lifetime, and acknowledged his 'cogent zeal, and unwearied diligence, in spite of every disappointment'. One lesson of Asbury's life is that mass religious movements are built on the backs of those who are willing to sacrifice body and soul to 'the work', as early Methodists would have said.

The second way that Asbury communicated his vision was through his ability to connect with ordinary people. 'Connexion' was an important word for early Methodists, and Asbury embodied its meaning better than anyone. As he criss-crossed the nation from year to year he conversed with countless thousands, demonstrating a gift for building relationships face to face or in small groups.

It is remarkable how many of those he met became permanent friends, even after a single conversation. Asbury often chided himself for talking too much and too freely, especially late at night. He considered this love of close, often lighthearted, conversation a drain on his piety. In reality it was one of his greatest strengths, allowing him to build deep and lasting relationships and to feel closely the pulse of the church and the nation. Henry Boehm (1866: 443), who travelled some 25,000 miles with Asbury from 1808 to 1813, recalled that 'in private circles he would unbend, and relate amusing incidents and laugh most heartily'. Asbury once told the Ohio preacher James Quinn, 'if I were not sometimes to be gay with my friends, I should have died in gloom long ago'. Quinn also remembered that in frontier cabins, 'the good Bishop always made himself pleasant and cheerful with the families, so that they soon forgot all embarrassment' (Wright 1851: 164, 245). In these settings Asbury felt most at home. 'His conversational powers were great. He was full of interesting anecdotes, and could entertain people for hours', Boehm (1866: 447) remembered. 'As a road-companion, no man could be more agreeable; he was cheerful almost to gaiety; his conversation was sprightly, and sufficiently seasoned with wit and anecdote', wrote Nicholas Snethen (1816: 9), who was Asbury's travelling companion for several years beginning in 1800. People found him approachable and willing to listen to their concerns more than they found him full of inspiring ideas. 'He was charitable, almost to excess, of the experience of others', remembered Snethen (ibid. 4).

Many recognized Asbury's ability to connect with people on a personal level, though few found it easy to explain. The dissident Methodist preacher Jeremiah Minter (1814: 7, 10, 11) concluded that Asbury must have been a 'sorcerer', 'in league with the devil' to have 'enchanted [and] deceived' so many who 'thought him a good man'. Asbury's only equal in this regard, Minter believed, was the famous evangelist Lorenzo Dow. 'With their *sorcery* and enchantments', Asbury and Dow had 'bewitched multitudes, who take them to be, as it were, the great power of God', Minter wrote in 1814, two years before Asbury's death. Few would have agreed with Minter's analysis, but many would have recognized what it was about Asbury that so annoyed Minter. Even James O'Kelly (1801: 61) confessed a 'disagreeable jealousy' over Asbury's ability to influence those closest to him.

The third conduit of Asbury's vision was the way that he understood and used popular culture. John Wesley and Asbury were alike in their willingness to negotiate between competing religious and cultural worlds. In his biography of Wesley, Henry Rack (1989: 352) argues persuasively that Wesley acted as a 'cultural middleman' between Methodists on the one hand and clergymen and educated gentlemen in England on the other. If so, then Asbury acted as a mediator between Wesley and common Americans. Wesley and Asbury came from significantly different backgrounds, but they shared a realization that the dominant religious institutions of their day were failing to reach most common people. The great question they both addressed was how to make the gospel socially and culturally relevant in their time

and place. The audience was never far from their minds. This led Asbury to do things in America that he would not have done in England, some of which Wesley disapproved. Asbury, for example, accepted the emotionalism of southern worship in the 1770s, promoted camp meetings in the early 1800s, and reluctantly acquiesced to southern Methodists holding slaves. This mediating impulse, transmitted from Wesley through Asbury, became a trademark of American Methodism.

Yet Asbury did not accept American culture without reservation and never simply identified the mission of Methodism with that of America. He grew dismayed at the presence of slavery in the church, a reality that he tacitly accepted, but which haunted him for the last thirty years of his life. Furthermore, cultural adaptation is never a static thing, since both the church and the broader culture are constantly changing. Asbury was remarkably well informed (the product of his travels and love of conversation) and flexible in keeping up with these changes, but everyone has their limits. Though the American Revolution led to a good deal of persecution of American Methodists, Asbury fretted that its end would produce too much prosperity and thereby dampen Methodist zeal. Later he worried that the availability of cheap land in the West would have the same effect, drawing people's attention from spiritual concerns to the cares of this world. As long as they were poor, most Methodists agreed with Asbury that wealth was a snare. But as Methodists became generally more prosperous they became less concerned about the dangers of wealth, much to Asbury's dismay. By the end of his career he was largely out of step with the church that he was so instrumental in creating. This, in the end, seemed to him a great tragedy.

The fourth way that Asbury communicated his message was through his organization of the Methodist church. He was a brilliant administrator, and a keen judge of human motivations. He had a 'superior talent to read men', as Peter Cartwright ([1856]: 155) put it. As Asbury crisscrossed the nation year in and year out, he attended to countless details of doctrine, finance, discipline, and staffing. Yet he never lost sight of the people involved. The system he crafted made it possible to keep tabs on thousands of preachers and lay workers. By 1812 Asbury had nearly 700 itinerant preachers under his supervision (Methodist Episcopal Church 1840: 211).

At the centre of Asbury's system was the itinerant connexion. Asbury learned the itinerant system in England under John Wesley, bringing it to America where it worked even better than it had in England. Methodist itinerant preachers, or circuit riders, did not serve a single congregation or parish, but rather ministered to a number of congregations spread out along a circuit that the preacher continually rode. Under Asbury, the typical American itinerant rode a predominantly rural circuit 200 to 600 miles in circumference, typically with twenty-five to thirty preaching appointments per round. He completed the circuit every two to six weeks, with the standard being a four weeks' circuit of 400 miles. This meant that circuit riders had to travel and preach nearly every day, with only a few days for rest each month. Often they were assigned a partner, but even so, they usually started

at opposite ends of the circuit instead of travelling together (Wigger 1998; 2001: 56–62). The itinerant system worked well for reaching post-revolutionary America's rapidly expanding population. In 1795, 95 per cent of Americans lived in places with fewer than 2,500 inhabitants; by 1830 this proportion was still 91 per cent. While Methodism retained a stronghold in the seaports of the middle states, Asbury hammered its organization into one that had a distinctly rural orientation adept at expanding into newly populated areas. 'We must draw resources from the centre to the circumference', he wrote in 1797 (F. Asbury 1958: iii. 332).

Despite its success, keeping the itinerant system intact proved the greatest challenge of Asbury's career. From the beginning he faced opposition from those unhappy with its demands and constraints. Some, like Joseph Pilmore, wanted to focus Methodist resources more on the cities of the Atlantic seaboard, where they believed it was important for Methodism to build a base of influence and social respectability. Others, like James O'Kelly, wanted to make Methodist polity more congregational, allowing preachers who had built up a local following to remain on the same circuit indefinitely. Asbury believed that all such proposals would ultimately limit the movement's ability to reach the most people with the gospel. He maintained that sending preachers where they would have the most telling impact, rather than leaving them where they were most comfortable, was crucial to the success of the Methodist system. For the most part Asbury succeeded in defending the itinerant system until the last decade of his life. By then a new generation of Methodists, one accustomed to a higher social status than their parents had enjoyed, had begun to chip away at his cherished itinerant connexion. For all its usefulness, the itinerant system was rooted in a particular place and time, something that Asbury couldn't fully understand.

There was another, less obvious but equally important, component of Asbury's system that went to the heart of what it meant to be a Methodist: to practise a method; the necessity of a culture of discipline. As individuals and communities, believers had to take it upon themselves to regulate their spiritual lives. Neither Asbury nor his preachers could be everywhere at once. This is why, from his first days in America, he insisted on upholding the requirement that all members attend class meetings, and that love feasts be limited to active members, creating an atmosphere of mutual trust and support. He delegated authority to others, recognizing that a voluntary system would not work if it relied on coercion from above. It needed to become a central component of people's world-view. Though there were plenty of disagreements along the way, Methodists succeeded where other religious groups failed in large measure because they were more disciplined. This culture of discipline nonetheless changed over time, much to Asbury's chagrin, as the church itself became more respectable and less countercultural (Wigger 1998; 2001: 173–90).

For all his focus on a single goal, Asbury remained a complex figure. At the core of his personality was a fear of rejection that at times made him seem aloof or

severe in settings he found intimidating. He tended to hold others at arm's length until he could be sure of their intentions. John Wesley Bond ([1817]) remembered that Asbury himself believed 'that by nature he was suspicious'. Henry Boehm recalled that at a distance Asbury often seemed 'rough, unfeeling, harsh, and stoical'. While rarely mean-spirited, he feared being taken for a fool. 'I grant he had a rather rough exterior, that he was sometimes stern; but under that roughness and sternness of manner beat a heart as feeling as ever dwelt in human bosom', Boehm (1866: 451) asserted. Nicholas Snethen, who often opposed Asbury's policies after 1812 and later left the Methodist Episcopal Church, was not as forgiving as Boehm. Snethen believed that Asbury's 'suspicious disposition' stemmed 'from his well known irritability, his faculty of obtaining the most secret information, and the quickness and penetration of his genius'. Yet even Snethen did not believe that Asbury's 'ambition' flowed from 'a criminal nature'. Like nearly everyone who knew Asbury well, Snethen acknowledged his ability to assess human motivations, or, as he said, to judge 'human nature'. 'In what related to ecclesiastical men, and things, he was all eye, and ear; and what he saw and heard he never forgot. The tenacity of his memory was surprising. His knowledge of human nature was penetrating and extensive', wrote Snethen (1816: 6, 9). Asbury was a keen observer of the human heart, and it often left him melancholy.

For all his insight, Asbury was not a good preacher. His sermons were often disjointed and nearly impossible to follow. 'This excessive delicacy of feeling, which shuts my mouth so often, may appear strange to those who do not know me', he wrote in August 1806, and it did (F. Asbury 1958: ii. 515). Nathan Bangs heard him for the first time in New York in June 1804. 'His preaching was quite discursive, if not disconnected, a fact attributed to his many cares and unintermitted travels, which admitted of little or no study . . . He slid from one subject to another without system. He abounded in illustrations and anecdotes', remembered Bangs (Stevens 1863: 128). This was more or less what everyone said about Asbury's preaching.

Asbury's inability to speak clearly in formal settings led him to work through proxies. He was the quintessential backroom negotiator, perhaps his least admirable trait. 'In a judicial or legislative capacity he seemed not to excel, and hence he did not often appear to the best advantage in the chair of conferences', recalled Snethen, who observed Asbury at many conferences from 1794 to 1814. 'He knew also the art of governing, and seldom trusted to the naked force of authority. Indeed, the majesty of command, was almost wholly concealed, or superceded by that wonderful faculty, which belongs to this class of human geniuses, and which enables them to inspire their own disposition for action, into the breasts of others', concluded Snethen (1816: 6).

Wesleyan perfectionism—his belief that it was the duty of all believers to seek perfection in this life—also coloured Asbury's personality. It heightened his resolve but also his insecurities. His failings instilled in him a genuine humility. By the end of his career any number of churches had been named for him, but 'he did not

approve of this, and called it folly', according to Boehm (1866: 446). He did not expect great rewards in this life because he did not believe he deserved them.

Yet Wesleyan perfectionism was not a theology of despair. With diligence, holiness was attainable in this life, if only for brief periods. Ultimately, believers could be confident of God's grace if their resolve did not waver. Guiding the church towards this goal became an all-consuming passion for Asbury. 'His patience in bearing disappointments was equal if not superior to that of any man I ever knew', remembered Bond ([1817]). According to Bond, Asbury rarely allowed himself to 'repine' or 'brood' over past difficulties, instead he turned them over in his mind, thinking 'How shall I mend it:—How can things be made better?'. In fact, Asbury did brood and fret, but it did not define him. He could sink deep within himself when concentrating on a problem, but this was not the same thing. 'At times he appeared unsociable, for his mind was engrossed with his work', recalled Boehm (1866: 448). Or, as Bond ([1817]) put it, Asbury 'thrust himself into every part of his charge; lest something might be wrong—lest some part of the cause of God might suffer'. Asbury had a thorough and even subtle mind, but he was often slow in formulating his ideas. He could work his way through thorny problems, but it took time. The long hours he spent on horseback gave him the space for reflection, prayer, and meditation he needed. Those who did not know him sometimes mistook his preoccupation for severity.

Coupled with Asbury's fear of rejection was a genuine compassion for others, especially the downtrodden. He believed that true religion embraced the suffering of the poor and did all that was possible to alleviate it. Resources should be channelled to those most in need, not squandered on luxuries, he believed. This is why he allowed himself few comforts. His clothes were cheap and plain, though he took some care to appear presentable. He often said 'that the equipment of a Methodist minister consisted of a horse, saddle and bridle, one suit of clothes, a watch, a pocket Bible, and a hymn book. Anything else would be an encumbrance' (Boehm 1866: 445; Smith 1848: 34). Indeed, Asbury rarely owned much more than this. At the same time, he gave away nearly all the money that came his way. Both Boehm and Bond kept track of Asbury's funds while travelling with him as assistants. 'He would divide his last dollar with a Methodist preacher', Boehm (1866: 454–5) recalled. 'He was restless till it was gone, so anxious was he to do good with it.' Once, in Ohio, Asbury and Boehm came across a widow whose only cow was about to be sold for debt. Determining that 'It must not be', Asbury gave what he had and solicited enough from bystanders to pay the woman's bills. 'His charity knew no bounds but the limits of its resources; nor did I ever know him let an object of charity pass without contributing something for their relief', wrote Bond ([1817]). He recalled that Asbury often gave money to strangers he met on the road whose circumstances seemed dire, especially widows. He had his share of failings, but the love of money wasn't one of them. This won him a great deal of respect from almost everyone who knew him.