
Were the First Methodists Like the Early Christians?

by George Allen Turner

The spiritual revival in eighteenth century England, especially that portion which resulted in Methodism, was widely believed to be a return to primitive Christianity. Few movements in church history have a sounder claim to this distinction. John Wesley was convinced that the movement he headed marked a return to primitive Christianity.¹

The results seem to sustain this judgment. The Revival transformed eighteenth century England in much the same way that the Second Great Awakening transformed nineteenth century America. Together this resulted in what Yale historian Latourette termed the “greatest century” in Christian history; it was led by English-speaking peoples of the world. This judgment is measured by three criteria: 1) renewed and revived churches; 2) by reform movements (temperance, abolition of slavery, Bible societies, prison reform, Sunday Schools, and child labor laws, for example); 3) home and foreign mission activity.

Despite its founder’s political conservatism, Methodism in North America was even more influential than in the British Isles. In a sense John Wesley built more wisely than he knew. During his long ministry Wesley witnessed a change in most of England from moral and spiritual decadence (resulting from the collapse of Puritanism and the Restoration of 1662) to a nation where Methodism was honored and its founder acknowledged as a revered churchman rather than a dangerous fanatic.

Methodism had a solid basis for its claim that it was a return to early Christianity. It did so by emphasizing a membership limited to believers, a radical departure from the national church. Rather than

Dr. George Allen Turner is professor emeritus of biblical literature at Asbury Theological Seminary, having retired in 1979 after 34 years of teaching at the seminary. Dr. Turner holds the Ph.D. from Harvard University.

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a nominal assent to creeds and liturgy, Methodists demanded evidence of a spiritual transformation effected by the Spirit of God with Jesus as Lord in fact as well as in name. The early Methodists took seriously the command to “love thy neighbor” by giving to the poor, “visiting the fatherless and widows in their affliction,” as well as keeping themselves “unspotted from the world.” While separation from “the world” was not as radical as among Quakers or Anabaptists, the Methodists avoided alcoholic beverages, dance halls, theaters, and gambling. They stressed using the “means of grace,” including the Lord’s Supper, public worship, prayer meetings, and house-to-house pastoral visitation. Nearly all historians applaud the changes for the better resulting from Methodism’s contribution to life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries among English-speaking peoples.²

To what extent, if any, did Wesley and his associates come short of a full return to Apostolic Christianity? In other words, to what extent did the Wesleys’ heritage and environment inhibit their grasp of the basic principles of the church as set forth by Jesus, Peter, John, and Paul?

The area in which John Wesley wrote least and was the least controversial was in the area of the sacraments: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. In this area he found little to debate. He accepted quite readily the teaching of his church — the Church of England — which differed little from the views of Martin Luther and John Calvin. The Church of England, like Roman Catholics and Lutherans, accepted the Augustinian doctrine of baptismal regeneration. Said Richard Hooker (1547?-1600), the first great Anglican churchman after the Reformation,

The infusion of grace . . . is applied to infants through baptism, without either faith or works, and in them it really taketh away original sin and the punishment due unto it.³

Wesley accepted without question this position of his church as defined in the *Articles of Religion*.

Wesley on Baptism

Perhaps the area in which Wesley was most vulnerable was with reference to baptism, especially infant baptism. In this latter area his ambiguity is the most in evidence. In his Sermon XLV, “The New

Birth,” he stressed the importance of repentance, faith, conscious regeneration, and the “assurance of sins forgiven.”⁴

He expressed himself quite differently in his abridgment of the “Treatise on Baptism” written by his father Samuel Wesley, prepared in 1756 and published in his *Works* (X, 188-201). In a prefatory statement Wesley states, “Three things are essential to Christian baptism: an episcopal administrator, the application of water and naming the Trinity (cf. Matt. 28:19).”⁵

The basis for the first, Wesley explained, is that the Lord commissioned “his apostles only.” This factor invalidates “dipping” (immersion) by Anabaptists and other independents, because, said Wesley, “They want episcopal administrators which are essential to Christian baptism.”⁶ Here Wesley’s high church convictions are in evidence. However, this preamble was omitted when the essay was printed in 1758.

At great length, the Wesleys argued for sprinkling rather than “dipping” or immersion. In support they cited such precedents as the 3,000 in Jerusalem and the baptism of the Philippian jailer and his family during the night — situations in which immersion seems less likely, if not impossible.

In support of sprinkling in Jerusalem he quotes Mr. Fuller — “no water mills in Jerusalem ‘because of’ insufficient water.” Wesley may not have known of the existence of Hezekiah’s Pool, near the Joppa Gate, and the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-10). Also he ignores the Pauline metaphor of being “buried with Christ in baptism” (Rom. 6:1-3; Col. 2:12) and being risen with Christ into newness of life, where immersion seems to be the mode envisioned. The Apostolic fathers recommended baptism in “living” (running) water and reserved pouring or sprinkling (“clinical baptism”) for those unable to be immersed.⁷

The benefits of baptism are said to be more than a public testimony to a new life in Christ. “Primarily,” affirms Wesley, it is “the washing away of the guilt of original sin by the application of the merits of Christ’s death.”⁸ Authority for this is to be found in the *Book of Common Prayer* (Article nine). Obviously infants share this “guilt.”

This free gift . . . is applied to us in baptism . . . the ordinary instrument of our justification. [The proof of this lies] in the rubric at the end of the office . . . children who are baptized, dying before they commit actual sin, are saved . . . this is agree-

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able to the unanimous judgment of all the ancient Fathers.”⁹

Wesley overlooked the testimonies of Tertullian (fl. A.D. 200) who opposed the baptism of infants.¹⁰

Omitted here is any reference to repentance and faith as the conditions for baptism. It must be by ordained clergymen, and water must be applied. Otherwise the merits of Christ’s death are not applicable — such are his underlying assumptions. Here Wesley writes as the high churchmen in the Anglo-Catholic “tradition of the fathers,” not as an evangelical revivalist in the New Testament tradition. On what basis is water necessary to make Christ’s atonement applicable and effectual? Where is this stated in Scripture? How can they come from “east, west, north, and south to sit down in the kingdom” (cf. Matt. 8:11; Luke 13:29) if they have not been “properly” baptized?

Wesley apparently never doubted that baptized infants are thereby truly regenerated but was quick to admit that subsequent sin nullified the benefits (sermon on the “New Birth”).¹¹ He does not envision parents dedicating infants and deferring baptism until the candidate is mature enough to make it a personal decision, thus giving baptism its maximum significance. The question is: Does the application of water do more than dedicaton without water? If so, how or on what biblical grounds? Here Wesley, like many others, sees baptism as a continuation of circumcision which admitted infants to the patriarchal covenant relationship with God. This is superficially based on only one text (Col. 2:11-13), which, in metaphorical language, describes Christians as having a “circumcision made without hands,” once dead, buried, and now raised with Christ. When Paul uses circumcision positively, as here, he invariably means a spiritual transformation, an ethical renewal, not something physical. In this he agrees with Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6 and the prophets: Jeremiah 4:4; 6:10; 9:24, 25. For Paul to indicate that physical baptism (of infants) is to replace physical circumcision (of infants) would destroy his central thesis, that is, that grace comes by faith in Christ and not through physical acts and ordinances. The only circumcision Paul urges is “of the heart” (Rom. 2:25-29). Paul came “not to baptize but to preach the gospel” (I Cor. 1:17; I Cor. 7:19; Gal. 5:6; 6:15; Phil. 3:3; Col. 2:1; 3:11).

In his “notes” on Colossians 2:11-13 Wesley does not argue that baptism replaces circumcision. Curiously, he admits baptism by

immersion is implied here (contrary to his statement in the treatise on baptism) but he balances it by an allusion to sprinkling in Hebrews 10:22. He overlooks the fact that in Colossians 2:12 the term is “baptism” (*baptismas*) while in Hebrews the term is “sprinkled” (*leloumenos*) a term often linked with washing the whole body (in contrast to feet only) before entering the temple.¹² Ignored is the distinction between the old and new covenants in which the emphasis is on individual commitment, not on family connection (Ezek. 18:5-28; Deut. 10:16; Jer. 32:39; Matt. 3:9; Rom. 2:29).

In further elaboration on the fit subjects for baptism, Wesley is eager to prove it includes infants. As noted previously he writes,

... infants are guilty of original sin. . . they cannot be saved unless this is washed away by baptism. . . they are children of wrath and liable to eternal damnation.¹³

The only exceptions are those for whom Christian baptism is not available, but he does not elaborate. The contrast with Jesus' statement and attitude is evident (cf. Mark 10:13-16). He continues, “Infants are capable of making a covenant” and hence, fit subjects for baptism. Again casuistry prevails over common sense. Since baptism replaces circumcision and since infants were circumcised, it follows he argues, that infants are fit subjects for baptism.

Wesley acknowledged that original guilt originated with Adam and that the remedy is provided by the second Adam (cf. Rom. 5:12-21; I Cor. 15:22-49). He adds the unscriptural dogma that baptism is the means by which the remedy is made effective.

The third reason given is that Jesus invited children to come. Children cannot be brought to Jesus except by baptism. Again what is the scriptural basis for this? Is not this done by parental dedication? Is water essential in bringing them to Jesus?

Fourth, he argues on the basis of inference that apostles baptized infants since they baptized entire families. Presumably infants were included. He cites “the unanimous testimony of their most ancient learned and authentic (Jewish) writers,” as evidence that male infants were both circumcised and baptized.¹⁴ Actually, the only evidence of Jewish practice prior to John the Baptist is the testimony of the medieval philosopher Maimonides that proselytes were accepted into Judaism by circumcision for males and baptism for females.¹⁵ Both males and females were accepted by immersion.¹⁶

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Wesley makes the unwarranted assumption that the Jews accepted *infants* as proselytes. The reverse seems to be the truth. Finally, he concludes that since “the Christian Church in all places and in all ages” baptized infants as its “general practice” then the practice must have been apostolic, hence authorized by Jesus. Thus he argues from Christian history to apostolic rather than vice versa. He conveniently ignores Tertullian (A.D. 200) perhaps because not considered “orthodox?” Tertullian advised: “a postponement of Baptism is most advantageous, particularly in the case of children. . . let them become Christians when they have been able to know Christ.”¹⁷

Ignored also are the Quakers, the Anabaptists, and Brethern movements of the previous two centuries (perhaps because not “regular churches”). Obviously, he has these exceptions in mind. Because he feels that he has the burden of proof, he spends much space and effort in his defense of infant baptism. He does not face the question of what infant baptism does that the dedication of infants by parents fails to do (reserving baptism to those who repent and believe, thus giving baptism maximum significance.).

He continues by attempting to refute arguments against infant baptism advanced by “some not very holy men in Germany,” a probable allusion to Anabaptists.

He seeks to make void the argument that repentance and faith precede baptism by insisting that since circumcision was preceded by repentance (?) the same is true of baptism which replaces circumcision. Of what do infants repent? Such is the casuistry by which a distorted logic is forced to defend an absurdity, set forth by Samuel and repeated by his son John Wesley. ¹⁸

This argument ignores the emphases in both Gospels and Epistles that in the New Covenant group, morality of the Old Testament is replaced in the New Testament by individual responsibility for one’s actions, not parents or ancestor’s (Ezek. 18:30; Rom. 2:1-3:31; Gal. 3: 15-29).

Wesley was convinced that since women were included in gatherings of believers without specific mention of them, so infants were also included in public baptisms.

How could Wesley remain to the end of life oblivious of the contradiction between his high-church Anglo-Catholic view of infant baptism and the gospel’s emphasis on conscious regeneration prior to baptism? Thus the tension between the sacramental and evangelical (biblical) view of baptism continued to plague British

Methodism for decades.

The Anglican, "Office for Baptism," affirmed baptismal regeneration. It reads in part, "Give Thy Holy Spirit to this infant, that he may be *born again*." After baptism the priest declares, "Seeing this child is *regenerate* and grafted into the body of Christ's church, let us give thanks to Almighty God. . . . it both pleased Thee to *regenerate* this infant with thy Holy Spirit." Sugden comments, "Wesley was trained up to accept this view."¹⁹

Years later, after much discussion, British Methodists, in 1882, made revisions in the *Book of Offices* in which language supporting baptismal regeneration was omitted, thus "repudiating the view that the infant is born again in baptism."²⁰

This writer agrees with Sugden that Methodism should either abandon infant baptism (in favor of dedication) OR reintroduce confirmation as having at least equal importance.

Wesley on "Constant Communion"

Outler observes that with reference to the Lord's Supper, Wesley followed a middle path between "extreme eucharistic realism" and "its allegorical opposite."²¹ For the Wesleys the eucharist was "God's love in action," the "chief actual means of grace," hence, "indispensable" for Christians.

Wesley recommended that communicants "prepare themselves for this solemn ordinance by self-examination and prayer," as the Puritans emphasized. But, he added, "this is not absolutely necessary" (p. 337). "What is important," he continues, "is a resolve to keep the commandments and to 'receive all his promises.'"

The communicant is bidden to come as a sinner to repent in the Anglican ritual, making the sacrament a channel of pardoning grace. This is more in the Roman Catholic tradition in which the mass is the indispensable channel of grace. In the New Testament and in evangelical perspective, Holy Communion is a feast of gratitude by saints whose sins are previously "covered with the blood." (Cf. "This do in remembrance of me," Luke 22:19; I Cor. 11:24, 25; the "cup of blessing," I Cor. 10:16; "You proclaim the Lord's death till he come," I Cor. 11:26.) The Eastern Orthodox seems closer than the Anglo-Catholic liturgy to the New Testament. They refer to the Lord's Supper as the Eucharist (thanksgiving). The term "communion" connotes fellowship of those already reconciled rather than a means by which the sinner receives pardon. The Anglican liturgy assumes a life

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of continual sinning and repenting with no real lasting victory over sin in this life. Wesley never seriously attempted to harmonize the sacramental theology he inherited with the evangelical theology which he rediscovered and which he articulated so accurately and effectively.

Wesley skillfully and judiciously sought to give both sacraments validity without succumbing to “cheap grace” (Bonhoeffer). He did so by insisting that neither sacrament by itself brought assurance, and that faith in Christ and the transforming work of the Spirit is indispensable.

Commendably, Wesley interpreted the Eucharist as significant in three ways:

(1) As a memorial of Jesus’ death and vicarious atonement: “Ye do show forth the Lord’s death; do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19): “You proclaim the Lord’s death” (cf. I Cor. 11:26). The communicant is reminded of Calvary and its significance now personally.

(2) A channel or avenue of present grace and spiritual renewal. In Wesley’s words,

He will meet me there, because He has promised so to do. I do expect that He will fulfill his Word, that he will meet and bless me in this way. Yet, not for the sake of any works which I have done . . . but merely through the merits, and sufferings, and love of His Son.²²

Faith is essential if the sacraments are a means of grace as Wesley continued,

The *opus operatum*, the mere *work done*, profiteth nothing; . . . there is no *power* but in the Spirit of God; no *merit* but in the blood of Christ, . . . consequently, even what God ordains, conveys no grace to the soul, if you trust not in Him alone.²³

(3) The Eucharist looks forward to the future (cf. “the Lord’s death until he comes,” I Cor. 11:26). It anticipates participation in the “marriage supper of the Lamb,” (cf. “I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom,” Matt. 26:29).

Wesley differed from the Puritans who stressed self-examination

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prior to communion and Low-churchmen who took communion thrice yearly. Instead, with the High-churchmen he stressed frequent or “constant” communion. Wesley would have none of the casual or infrequent communicant. Part of this theological concern was for reasons of expediency. He wanted to integrate his evangelical piety with liturgical piety and resist the inclination of many Methodists who cherished independence from the State church. In his advanced years he exhorted (or commanded) his Methodist congregation to commune at every opportunity. Years before he had exhorted students at Oxford to commune daily or at least every week. He rejected the “frequent” and insisted on “constant” instead.

He dwells at length on the Sacrament as a command of God and also as an expression of God’s mercy. In pursuit of this theme, the young cleric ignores the fact that *grace* comes by faith from Christ and that the Sacrament reflects inward grace rather than an essential channel of that grace. The veteran revivalist finds no reason to change or qualify the language of this pre-conversion theology. This tension between liturgical or sacrament theology, and evangelical or biblical theology, Wesley never resolved. Practical consideration seems to have led to this ambiguity and continuing tension. His brother, Charles, insisted on adherence to the National Church. Secondly, he was being true to his heritage. Third, he needed no more controversy which would imperil the Evangelical Revival. He was not in a position to make an objective decision based on Scripture alone. If there had been less at stake, he might have agreed with those evangelicals who decided on a free church and individual conversion, as many of his spiritual heirs did later.

Theological tensions about these sacraments were muted during Wesley’s lifetime. They surfaced soon after his passing. Infant baptism was challenged and debated in the latter half of the following century. Holy Communion was usually observed four times each year rather than “constantly.” Free from these restrictions, Methodism flourished in North America more than in the country of its origin. As Methodism became less episcopal, it became more evangelical and vigorous. Conversely, as the movement became less evangelistic it gradually became more ritualistic. This is the phenomenon common to virtually all groups and is in evidence even among the recent new Pentecostal groups.

To what extent was Wesley correct in viewing early Methodism as a return to New Testament Christianity? His judgment is valid,

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despite the retention of the hierarchical elements just noted. It is seen in several respects: 1) Early Methodism placed the stress on a transformed life, victory over sin, and service to humanity. It is significant that Methodists adopted the *doctrines* of the English Reformation as preserved in the Anglican Church. Their constitution was the Methodist *Discipline*, not a confessional creed and formed a pattern of life more than a pattern of thought. The doctrine was there but subordinate to a life-style consistent thereto. 2) The most distinctive doctrines of early Methodism were (a) *assurance* of personal acceptance in Christ, and (b) holiness of heart and life. The Wesleys broke new ground in these areas, or at least brought into prominence what earlier saints had discovered and witnessed. Many streams found a confluence in the Methodist Revival. Mysticism, Pietism, Protestantism, Catholicism, are among the chief components selected carefully. Methodism transformed England more effectively than Puritanism because it was less dogmatic, did not directly challenge the institution of the State, and did not resort to force to advance its aims. Primitive Christianity sought to transform the Roman world by suffering and faith rather than political or military force. Methodism, unlike Puritanism, relied on preaching and social service alone to effect its leavening influences on society.

It was in the area of holy living that the Wesleys were most distinctive and nearest to the genius of the New Covenant. To have the “mind of Christ,” and “to walk as He walked,” to love God with all one’s being and neighbor as one’s self were their central concerns. They differed from the Calvinists in offering free salvation to all — not just the elect. Unlike the Established Church, they brought good news to the poor and unwashed rather than waiting for them to attend houses of worship. The innovative Class Meeting served admirably to foster personal holiness, social concern, and spiritual discipline. They insisted on discipline for the individual and also for the group (“class” or “society”) — like the Anabaptists. They insisted on personal regeneration and sanctification — like the Pietists. They went beyond progressive sanctification to entire sanctification, verifiable by a holy life — like the Quakers.

Footnotes

¹See his sermon CXXXII, “What Hath God Wrought,” preached at the chapel near City-Road, London, April 21, 1777, explaining why “Methodism is the religion of the Bible,” *Works*, VII, 423-428. (Grand Rapids, MI, *Works of John Wesley* (Third

The Asbury Seminarian

Edition) Baker Book House, reprinted 1978).

²For example, J.W. Bready, *England before and after Wesley*, (London, 1938).

³Richard Hooker, "A Learned Discourse of Justification," *Ecclesiastical Polity*, (*Everyman's Library*) I. 19. Edited by Ernest Rhys. (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1925 reprint.)

⁴*Works* VI, pp. 65-76.

⁵From Wesley's manuscript in Epworth House, London, cited in A.E. Outler, *John Wesley*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 318.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 318.

⁷*Didache*, VII, 1-4; cf. *Barnabas* XI, 8-10, *The Apostolic Fathers* I, pp. 321, 383, translated by Kirsopp Lake. (London: Wm. Heinemann, 1930).

⁸J. Wesley, "Treatise on Baptism," *Works*, X, 190.

⁹*Book of Common Prayer*, p. 388; cited in *Works* X, 191.

¹⁰Tertullian, *De Baptismo*, C. XVIII. *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Church*, Edited by B.J. Kidd, I, pp. 149, 150 (citing A. Souter, *Tertullian's Treatises on Prayer and on Baptism*, p. 6959.) New York: MacMillan Co., 1938.

¹¹*Works*, VI, pp. 75, 76.

¹²William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Second edition, revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 481.

¹³J. Wesley, "Treatise on Baptism," *Works*, X, 193.

¹⁴*Works*, X, 197.

¹⁵G.F. Moore, *Judaism*, I, 330-335 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946).

¹⁶After a "confession of faith" the candidate was "then immersed completely," and later given "exhortations and benedictions" — Edersheim, "Baptism of Proselytes" in *Life and Times Of Jesus The Messiah*, II, 746. (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1899).

¹⁷Tertullian, *De Baptismo*, C. XVIII, sup. p. 8.

¹⁸*Works*, X, 199.

¹⁹*The Standard Sermons of John Wesley*, E.H. Sugden, editor, I, 280,281 (Nashville: Lamar and Barton, Agents, no date).

²⁰*Ibid.*, I, 282.

²¹A. Outler, *John Wesley*, p. 333.

²²Sermon: "The Means of Grace," Sugden, I, 254.

²³Op. cit. 259.

