

Antecedents and Influence of American Methodism*

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We now stand at the eve of the anniversary of the second century of Methodism in America. To understand the present, one needs to learn from the past. Nathan Bangs states that the first Methodist Society was established in New York in 1766.¹ This was accomplished by a small group of pious immigrants from Ireland, who previously had been members of a Methodist Society in that land. Among them was a local preacher whose name was Philip Embury, who is said to have had the honor of being the first preacher, the first class leader, the first treasurer, and the first trustee of the first Society of Methodism in the Western hemisphere.²

Bangs pictured the situation thus:

Though they had been attached to Wesleyan Methodism at home, it appears that, on arrival here, they came very near making "shipwreck of faith and a good conscience". They were strangers in a strange land; and not finding any pious acquaintances with whom they could associate, they gradually lost their relish for divine things, and sunk away into the spirit of the world. In this state of lukewarmness and worldly mindedness they were found the next year on the arrival of another family from Ireland, among whom was a pious "mother in Israel," to whose zeal in the cause of God they were all indebted for the revival of the spirit of piety among them. Soon after her arrival, she ascertained that those who had preceded her had so far departed from their "first love" as to be mingling in the frivolities and sinful amusements of life. The knowledge of this painful fact aroused her

* The general subject of American Methodism has been treated most lately and extensively in the very comprehensive three-volume work, *The History of American Methodism*, ed. Emory Stevens Bucke (Abingdon, 1964). This is a great work, combining the effort of forty-four scholars, and will undoubtedly maintain a place of high authority in its field for many years.

1. Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York, 1839), I, 47.
2. Abel Stevens, *The Centenary of American Methodism* (New York, 1866), p. 74.

indignation, and, with a zeal which deserves commemoration, she suddenly entered the room where they were assembled, seized the pack of cards with which they were playing, and threw them into the fire. Having thus unceremoniously destroyed their "playthings," she addressed herself to them in language of expostulation; and turning to Mr. Embury, she said, "You must preach to us, or we shall all go to hell together, and God will require our blood at your hands!" This pointed appeal had its intended effect, in awaking his attention to the perilousness of their condition. Yet, as if to excuse himself from the performance of an obvious duty, he tremblingly replied, "I cannot preach, for I have neither a house nor congregation." "Preach in your own house first, and to our own company," was the reply. Feeling the responsibility of his own situation, and not being able any longer to resist the importunities of his reprover, he consented to comply with her request; and accordingly preached his first sermon; in his own hired house; to five persons only. This, it is believed, was the first Methodist sermon ever preached in America.³

Many other historical events and theological factors must of necessity enter into the total picture of the origin and cause of American Methodism. There is the thrust and zeal of Wesley's spirit; the contemporary movements along with the little Irish Society in New York, such as that of Robert Strawbridge in Maryland; the abundant fruit of Whitefield's evangelistic leadership in America since 1739; the rapid rise of the native Methodist itinerate; and the providential preparation of the young man who would give such amazing spiritual and organizational leadership to American Methodism in its earliest stages, Francis Asbury.

However, the above narrative by Bangs suggests many representative characteristics of Methodism as it arose in America. First, this incident would suggest the importance of Methodism as a lay movement. It was not opposed to the established church, either its ministry or organization, as such. But it did seek to become a saving and purifying force within the life of that church.

Further, the responsibility of each Christian believer to live at his best and witness for Christ most effectively, was the practical ideal of one's daily work.

Another mark of this Methodist Society was the recognition of the need for spiritual watchfulness. The peril of declining faith, the loss of zeal, and the lessening of a daily religious discipline required the constant attention of the believer.

3. Bangs, *op. cit.*, I, 47 ff.

Likewise the social and spiritual responsibility of each member of the Society to every other member was recognized. Each one thus shared a mutual obligation for the strengthening of the whole community. This duty was fulfilled in many ways, such as: prayer, friendship, exhortation, rebuke, and so forth.

Finally, there was the recognition of the danger of the wrong use of worldly things. The "love of the world" which led to the diminishing of one's love for God was to be guarded against with all diligence. The follower of Christ, according to the standard of this Society, was to be engaged primarily in the work of God. It was the normal thing that his life and energy be completely consumed in the fulfillment of God's purpose.

These then are some of the marks of the first Methodist Society in America.

WHAT IS METHODISM?

We may now suggest certain leading questions. It is hoped that these may help toward a better understanding of the nature and meaning of Methodism. First we may ask, is it a revival of apostolic Christianity? Or again, is it a revival of medieval pietism? Or may it be a delayed and extensive expression of Puritanism? Or may one suggest that it is a reaction against the spiritual dearth and worldliness of Anglicanism? Or still another asks, is it an assertion (social and religious) of the lower economic classes? Or may it be seen as an English expression, in America, of the American Revolutionary spirit?

In a larger sense it may be considered all of these, and more. However, let us seek to get more closely to the center of the movement and see what may be discovered there.

First let us look for the answer historically. Several authorities may bear a good witness in this area. Wesley⁴ himself at the age of sixty-two speaks very clearly about the nature of Methodism. At his conference held at Manchester, August 20-23, 1765, Wesley asked, "What was the rise of Methodism?" and answered,

In 1729 my brother and I read the Bible; saw inward and outward holiness therein; followed after it, and incited others so to do. In 1737 we saw this holiness comes by faith. In 1738 we saw we must be justified before we are sanctified. But still holiness was our point; inward and outward holiness. God then thrust us out to raise up a holy people.

Bangs, in describing the life of that first Methodist Society in America, wrote,

4. Luke Tyerman, *Life and Times of John Wesley* (New York, 1872), II, 540.

But what greatly encouraged them in their work of faith and labor of love was, that sinners were awakened and converted to God, and added to the Society. These, continuing to walk in the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, were much strengthened and comforted, while others who beheld their godly conversation were convinced of the power and excellence of their religion.⁵

Bishop Simpson portrays the nature of Methodism when he says it commenced in 1729 among a few students in Oxford University, who formed a society to read the Holy Scriptures in the original languages, and to aid each other in mutual spiritual improvement. They sincerely desired to please God and to conform their lives strictly to the precepts of His Word. They received the Lord's Supper weekly and fasted twice a week; they systematically arranged their time for self-examination, meditation, prayer, and religious reading. They attended scrupulously upon public worship and all the ordinances of the church; they also stimulated each other to active benevolence; they instructed the children of the neglected poor, visited the sick and the inmates of prisons and almshouses, and gave to them, to the utmost of their power, temporal as well as spiritual aid. Simpson concludes his evaluation by saying,

In its widest signification Methodism was simply a revival of Christian earnestness, simplicity, and power: and to this day, 1878 and in nearly all countries, wherever men preach among the various denominations with unusual earnestness, and wherever they seek the recovery of the outcasts by going from the churches into the open air, and by making extraordinary efforts in their behalf, they are said to preach or act like Methodists.

Holland N. McTyeire⁶ gives witness to the nature of Methodism when he says it was not new doctrine but new life which the first Methodists sought for themselves and for others. To realize in the hearts and conduct of men the true ideal of Christianity, to maintain its personal experience, and to extend it—this was their design; and their system of government grew up out of this, and was accordingly shaped by it. The mission of Luther was to reform a corrupted Christianity; that of Wesley, to revive a dying one.⁷

The final witness in the historical area may be received from the latest edition of the Methodist *Discipline*,⁸ in its historical statement.

5. Bangs, *op. cit.*, 50.

6. Matthew Simpson, *Cyclopaedia of Methodism* (Philadelphia, 1878), p. 587.

7. Holland N. McTyeire, *A History of Methodism* (Nashville, 1898), p. 13.

8. *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Church* (Nashville, 1964), p. 10.

The Methodist Church believes today, as Methodism has from the first, that the only infallible proof of a true church of Christ is its ability to seek and to save the lost, to disseminate the Pentecostal spirit and life, to spread scriptural holiness, and to transform all peoples and nations through the gospel of Christ. The sole object of the rules, regulations, and usages of the Methodist Church is to aid the church in fulfilling its divine commission. . . Its spirit is still expressed in Wesley's word: "I desire to have a league, offensive and defensive, with every soldier of Christ."

H. Vincent has epitomized Methodism in what he calls the ten doctrines of grace. They are as follows:

1. I believe that all men are sinners.
2. I believe that God the Father loves all men and hates all sin.
3. I believe that Jesus Christ died for all men to make possible their salvation from sin, and to make sure the salvation of all who believe in Him.
4. I believe that the Holy Spirit is given to all men to enlighten and to incline them to repent of their sins and to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.
5. I believe that all who repent of their sins and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ receive the forgiveness of sin. This is Justification.
6. I believe that all who receive the forgiveness of sin are at the same time made new creatures in Christ Jesus. This is Regeneration.
7. I believe that all who are made new creatures in Christ Jesus are accepted as the children of God. This is Adoption.
8. I believe that all who are accepted as children of God may receive the inward assurance of the Holy Spirit to that fact. This is the Witness of the Spirit.
9. I believe that all who truly desire and seek it may love God with all their heart and soul, mind and strength, and their neighbors as themselves. This is Entire Sanctification.
10. I believe that all who persevere to the end, and only those, shall be saved in heaven forever. This is the true Final Perseverance.

Undoubtedly Vincent here in a very brief compass has given expression to the general beliefs of Methodism with special reference to Christian experience. Without dealing with some of the minor points, and without working out many of the theological details, the above ten propositions would find common acceptance among the majority of the people called Methodists.

EXTENSION OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

Let us further consider American Methodism in relation to Protestantism. All of the great and thorough-going Protestant movements in England were delayed by political involvements, and thus appear there considerably later than those on the Continent under Luther and his associates. Methodism became a vital part of these later developments and incorporated into its life and spirit some of the elements of reform which were impossible to be realized during the earlier days of the Reformation. In this sense, Methodism is properly classified among the radicals of the eighteenth century. Christianity in earnest, an expression by which early Methodism was described, has too often in our world been considered as extreme or radical. But this was a part of Methodism's life and genius. It measured itself by the Word of God rather than the religious status quo by which it was surrounded. Enthusiasm in spiritual life and achievement in piety became the norm rather than the exception. In this Methodism represents an attempt to recover apostolic Christianity.

As has been indicated above, the primary purpose of Luther was to reform a corrupt Christianity whereas Wesley was called to restore a dying life. The great emphasis of his ministry, therefore, was upon Christian experience and practical dynamic life in the believers' relationship to God.⁹

In the whole history of Christian thought Wesley scarcely has his equal as a practical counselor in the experience of salvation. Thus everything moves in the end to a deep and final unity.

Schmidt believes that an important contribution has been made to the life of Wesley, and thus to Methodism as a whole, by the writings of Henry Scongal. In his work entitled *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, he asserts that the four most characteristic attitudes of the Christian are: (1) Resignation, (2) Love, (3) Purity, and (4) Humility. Undoubtedly from these basic ideas of this English Puritan, Wesley was profoundly influenced. He saw in such writings much that was to be identified with the simplicity of apostolic faith, and these were to be continued in the life and spirit of Methodism in modern times.

There was thus given by Wesley a new emphasis upon certain elements of Christian faith and life. The witness of the Spirit, accompanied by a sense of satisfaction, assurance, and joy became one of the major subjects of his teaching and preaching. The be-

9. Martin Schmidt, *John Wesley* (London: Epworth Press, 1962), I, 15.

liever's knowledge of salvation was likewise an important rediscovery to the Christian world. That one could be sure of his acceptance with God became a much cherished belief of the Methodist movement.

Wesley also proclaimed the possibility of perfection in Christian love. His treatment of the subject in his book *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* presents it as a reasonable and scriptural way of life. In fact it is clear from his teaching that herein lies the norm of Christian discipleship. It is the good privilege of every child of God. Wesley was insistent that his preachers proclaim this doctrine to people everywhere and call upon them to enter into such a state of grace by faith.

Emphasis was also placed upon the unity of the Spirit. This was seen as the only power by which believers could be made one in Christ. The leadership of the Holy Spirit was necessary not only in the life of the individual but also within the total life of the congregation and upon the corporate life of the Christian community at large.

There was also evidence of a real concern for the salvation of all the world. Methodism has distinguished itself not only as a world church, but also as a world redemptive force at the heart of which there is genuine concern and compassion for the saving of all nations.

INTO THE NEW WORLD

The transfer of the movement from England to America marks a most significant chapter in the history of modern Christianity. Early in the seventeenth century many branches of the Christian community began to occupy the various sections of North America. This new opportunity was especially significant to Protestantism, because of a completely new state-church relation which was to be found in this new land. The achievements of Protestantism in Europe and in England had only been partial. The limitation of state by religion, and of religion by state had not been completely removed. Long-honored traditions persisted which prevented the realization of the Protestant ideal of complete separation of church and state. The greatest advance in this progressive movement was to be realized only when the Christian community could be planted in a new and free geographical environment. It was in America that Protestantism would win this battle. The achievement of this freedom for church and state alike had been accomplished before Methodism was planted in America. But the advantages of such an atmosphere into which Wesley's followers were soon to come cannot be overlooked.

Methodism came to the new world on the eve of the American Revolution. There was much in common between the two movements—the one political, the other religious. Though Methodism, because

it was a part of the Anglican Church up until 1784, was looked upon with much suspicion during the Revolution, yet ultimately it was seen to have much in common with the ideas of the new nation. It was a common gospel which the itinerant preached. It placed all men on a level before God, and recognized no spiritual or ecclesiastical rights of one man above another whether he be lord or commoner. This was a democratic gospel, proclaiming a free salvation for all and denying any favored class whose salvation had been determined from the beginning of the world.

One of the most important aspects of the transition of Methodism to the new world was the shifting of leadership from Wesley to Asbury. This does not represent a discounting or even a diminishing of Wesley's leadership, but rather a supplementing of that leadership by the appearing of the young Francis Asbury upon the American scene. Perhaps it can best be expressed by saying that the theology of Wesley was now to be administered and directed by Asbury. Undoubtedly this was the one whom God in His wisdom had chosen for the task. He is the one best suited both by native ability and divine grace. While on ship coming to America in 1771, the one who was destined to become the leader of American Methodism until the time of his death in 1816, wrote in his Journal:

Whither am I going? To the New World. What to do? To gain honor? No, if I know my own heart. To get money? No, I am going to live to God and to bring others so to do. In America there has been a work of God: some moving first among the Friends, but in time it declined; likewise by the Presbyterians, but amongst them also it declined. The people God owns in England are the Methodists. The doctrines they preach, and the discipline they enforce, are, I believe, the purest of any people now in the world. The Lord has greatly blessed these doctrines and this discipline in three kingdoms: they must therefore be pleasing to Him. If God does not acknowledge me in America, I will soon return to England.¹⁰

Asbury at this time was only twenty-six years of age. He was far more ready to listen to the demands of the revolutionary leaders of the new nation than Wesley would have been. He was able to accommodate himself to the democratic spirit of America without compromising any theological or religious convictions. His understanding of the needs and rights of the new Republic were such as

10. Francis Asbury, *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), I, 4.

to put him in command of Methodism as a vital part of the new society.

An illustration of the wise leadership of Asbury is seen in the procedures of the organizational conference in 1784. Wesley had sent his representatives to ordain and appoint Asbury as a general superintendent of the work in America. Asbury, however, refused to accept such authority until it had been approved by all the Methodist ministers in America. By this act he laid the groundwork for a representative and democratic form of government, the principle of which was infused into the constitution of American Methodism at the very beginning of its life, and has remained one of its great strengths to the present time.

AN ABUNDANT HARVEST

If success can be measured by increase of numbers and expansion of organization, the early years of American Methodism can properly be recognized as outstandingly successful. The achievement of these early years has often been compared with the successes of the Christian community of the first generation following Pentecost.

The statistics of this forward movement between the years 1790 and 1865 bear eloquent testimony. Goss¹¹ makes the following observations, comparing the increase in the United States population with that of American Methodism.

Population in the United States	
<u>1790</u>	<u>1865</u>
3,929,827	37,126,637
Membership in American Methodism	
<u>1790</u>	<u>1865</u>
57,631	929,259

The above figures indicate that during this period of seventy-five years the average increase of population each decade was 35 per cent, whereas the average increase of membership of Methodism each decade was 56 per cent.

11. C.C. Goss, *Statistical History of the First Century of American Methodism*, (New York, 1866).

The author lists eight unique characteristics of Methodism during this period, and suggests that these were the direct causes of its remarkable success.

1. Its mode of preaching. The Methodist preacher appealed to the heart as well as to the mind of his hearers. As Broadus has suggested in his volume *Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, the sermon must be different from every other kind of literature in that it accomplishes three ends: it informs the mind, stirs the emotions, and moves the will to action. Methodist preaching thus appealed to the whole personality.

Also they were identified with the people. They went from their people to the pulpit. They understood their people's needs and brought the truth of God to bear upon them.

They also preached out of the overflow of their own experience. They had been with God as well as the people. They thus spoke to God in behalf of the people and to the people in behalf of God.

2. The self-sacrificing spirit of its ministry.

3. Its system of free churches. There was a connection between a free gospel and "free seats." They believed that in the Methodist church rich and poor must meet and worship together.

4. Its frequent revivals. Times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord were regularly sought and anticipated.

5. Its lay efforts. The class leader was the key person in leading new converts into mature Christian living. The class unit was the church's great program of assimilation. Laymen were encouraged to assume major responsibility for leadership in spiritual service.

6. Its missionary spirit. A world church with a deep concern for the saving of all.

7. Its positive Christian experience.

8. Its doctrine of sanctification. This is not needed simply as a doctrine believed and preached, but inwardly experienced; then it will be preached both in the pulpit and in the life.

It would seem that in the light of these achievements one would find it easy to believe that Methodism was fulfilling in very large measure the purpose of its founder when he said God had raised up the people called Methodists to spread scriptural holiness and reform the nation.