

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Help for today's churches, from John Wesley

Over my lifetime as a Methodist I've picked up a fair amount of information about John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, but lately some particular concerns have made me want to take a more thorough look at Wesley and at Methodist history and doctrine.



I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.
—John Wesley

Some practices that were important to Wesley and were prominent in early Methodism may need reconsideration by today's church. They include features whose loss may have contributed to our decrease in effectiveness. Many contemporary Christian groups—

not just United Methodists—might benefit from looking at what Wesley did, at how it differs from what mainline churches are doing today, and at whether the principles behind some of Wesley's practices could be applied in today's churches.



A life aimed at holiness

Born in 1703 in England, at Epworth, John Wesley was the fifteenth of nineteen children of Samuel Wesley, a Church of England rector, and his wife Susanna. John and his younger brother Charles attended a London school and then Oxford university. Reading Christian authors' works led John to see the careful use of time as essential for

A process of growing in God's grace

Wesley saw spiritual growth as growth in obedience and in receiving God's grace—God's unearned, undeserved favor.



▪ **Prevenient grace**, said Wesley, is God's love that surrounds us all, even before we become aware of it or move consciously toward God. It makes us aware of our sin and makes us want to please God. It awakens our desire to be delivered from sin and death, and begins moving us toward repentance and faith. We are free, however, to reject this grace.

▪ **Justifying grace** puts us into a new relationship with God when we turn to God. It makes us right with God and restores us to God's favor that sin would otherwise keep from us. God forgives us of our sin and gives us a fresh start—new life. Assurance from the Holy Spirit lets us know that we are children of God and that we are saved from our sin.



▪ **Sanctifying grace** nurtures our gradual growth after our new birth. Through the Holy Spirit's power, we can grow in our knowledge and love of God and our loving behavior toward people. Growth comes as we obey God.

▪ **Perfection** is Christian maturity. It means having a heart filled with the love of God and neighbor. It is mature discipleship in which obeying God has become a habit.

Wesley named several "means of grace"—practices that promote spiritual growth. They include regular worship; frequent observance of the Lord's Supper; private, family, and public prayer; reading, hearing, and meditating on Scripture; and fasting. He also felt God's grace was conveyed through weekly meetings with other Christians to hold each other accountable for Christian living.

Other means of grace, Wesley said, were self-denial, temperance, and what he called "Christian conference"—conversation aimed at spiritual growth and surrounded by prayer. To Wesley, Christian discipleship meant growth toward personal and social holiness.



Christianity is essentially a social religion; ...to turn it into a solitary religion, is indeed to destroy it. ... "Holy solitaires" is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness.
—John Wesley

holy living, and he began a lifelong practice of keeping a diary to record and measure his progress.



As Oxford tutors, John and Charles were in one of several small groups that met regularly for prayer, religious conversation, and study of the Bible, other religious writings, and the classics. The group soon began visiting prisons, teaching orphan children, and ministering to the poor and the aged, as they believed Christian discipleship required. Oxford colleagues made fun of the group, calling it the "Holy Club" and calling its members "Bible moths." Then people started calling them "Methodists" because of their methodical ways, and the name stuck.



Heartwarming assurance

After becoming a priest in the Anglican church (Church of England) in 1725, John sailed to America as a missionary to the new colony that became



I went very unwillingly that evening to a Society in Aldersgate Street ... I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that [Christ] had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

—John Wesley

Georgia. In a life-threatening storm during the ocean voyage, he was moved by the calm faith of some Moravian Christians. He saw their "heart theology" as a much-needed corrective to the more sterile, intellectual beliefs and practices of the Anglicans. At a 1738 meeting in London, Wesley found the assurance that he had previously felt was missing from his life.

"The world is my parish"

John began preaching in Anglican churches, but many banned him because of his nonconformist approach. He therefore began preaching outdoors.

Wesley didn't consider himself restricted to any one parish, assigned by the Anglican Church. He felt called by God to preach wherever the Spirit led him. Yet he never stopped seeing himself as an Anglican priest, and he saw his efforts only as a reform

or leavening movement within the Church of England. Wesley's followers brought Methodism to America and eventually established it as an organization here. To Wesley, however, Methodism's English participants were merely "the people called Methodist," not members of a new organization.

I look upon all the world as my parish ... in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty, to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation. This is the work which I know God has called me to ...

—John Wesley

We need Wesley's principles today

Today's world is very different from the world John Wesley lived in. The lifestyles of today's people are very different from those of 18th century England and America. It is not reasonable to expect that Wesley's methods could be used unchanged by today's church. However, we urgently need the results that his methods achieved. We need to find methods and church organizational structures that will work in today's world, but that also follow the principles that Wesley knew were essential.

▪ Going where the church's mission requires

Early Methodist preachers didn't expect non-Christians to come to traditional worship services in church buildings. Wesley preached at the entrances to coal mines, to reach the miners. He went wherever else he needed to, to reach non-churchgoers.

Methodist preachers traveled, usually on horseback, around a "circuit" of several churches, often widely separated. Wesley saw this system as best for putting the church where it needed to be, to accomplish its mission. As one Methodist historian points out, "It took advantage of the variety of leaders' talents; it minimized the effect of individual limitations (preaching, education, etc.); it let the Methodists spread resources over a broader area (unattractive areas, remote circuits)." (Richard P. Heitzenrater, in *Connectionalism*, ed. Russell E. Richey *et al*; Abingdon, 1997)



The United Methodist Church uses an updated version of this system now. However, most early Methodist preachers were unmarried men who



willingly signed on for a life of hardship. Their pay was based on their common calling, not on the relative size, prestige, or wealth of their place of appointment. Most of today's clergy, by contrast, are married, sometimes to each other, and like the rest of us, few of them look kindly on hardship. Today's itinerancy is therefore very different from the itinerancy of Wesley's day.

• **Bold, powerful preaching despite opposition**

When they were forbidden to preach from Anglican pulpits, early Methodists began preaching all over England wherever a crowd could gather, often in town squares, cemeteries, and other outdoor spots. Thousands attended and responded positively, but many opponents rioted and physically attacked Wesley and his preachers. Anglican officials constantly opposed them. Despite this, however, they kept speaking boldly. Wesley even preached against slavery in Bristol, the center of the slave trade. When he was forbidden to preach in the Anglican church in Epworth, his former home, he preached from his father's gravestone in the churchyard, the only territory that he could claim.



Though the Wesleys and some other early Methodist preachers were well educated, many were not. Some were recruited from the bands and classes, and at first none was ordained. Preaching ability was the main qualification. "Essential to selection," one church historian emphasizes, "was the power to move people to the affectionate sensibility so valued by the movement." (Donald



G. Mathews, in *The People Called Methodist*, ed. Wm. B. Lawrence *et al*; Abingdon, 1998)

• **Lay-led groups for nurture and accountability**

Religious groups called "societies" were common in England in John Wesley's time. Christians created them in an effort to combat the spiritual lethargy and declining morality of their time—features that seem to be characteristic of our time, too. The societies featured Bible study, mutual encouragement, promotion of personal holiness, and help for the poor and others in need.

Wherever Wesley went, he set up Methodist societies that met weekly for prayer, self-examination, encouraging each other, and holding each other accountable for observing Christian disciplines. As the Methodist movement grew, Wesley developed a network of societies. He expected their members to attend public worship; to read, hear, and meditate on Scripture; to observe the Lord's



Supper (in an Anglican church) at every opportunity; to practice public, family and private prayer; and to fast every Friday.

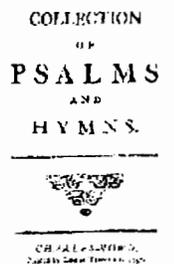
At first the only requirement for joining a Methodist society was the desire "to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from sin." Wesley later began giving "tickets," however, to members who he felt were living up to the requirements, and continued participation then required having a ticket.

Some members of the societies also met in groups called "bands." In these, members reported the state of their souls and the temptations they had faced since the previous meeting, and confessed their faults. There were special bands for backsliders and for people who were mature in their faith.

Before long, Wesley appointed lay leaders. Each of them guided a group of society members by meeting with each one weekly. These leaders asked members about the state of their souls and about their obedience during the week. The leader advised, encouraged, exhorted, or reproved the member, as appropriate, and collected the member's gifts for the poor. Eventually these groups, called "classes," started meeting weekly as groups instead of merely being contacted individually.

• **Singing for worship and learning**

Singing was essential in early Methodist gatherings. To reach people whom formal Anglican worship wasn't reaching, Charles Wesley composed many hymns. Some used the tunes of popular songs, even drinking songs. The Wesleys published dozens of hymn books and pamphlets. Their hymns were designed to teach Christian beliefs and practices in a form that people would remember, and to help people worship God.





To a great extent today's church has lost this valuable emphasis on singing. The style of the words and music of the Wesleys' hymns doesn't always speak effectively today to the people that more formal church music also doesn't reach, especially the non-churchgoers. Yet few contemporary Christian songs have the theological or musical depth that the Wesleys knew was important for communicating God's nature and for promoting growth in faith and discipleship.

▪ **Warm, exciting gatherings**

People flocked to early Methodist gatherings—conferences, camp meetings, love feasts, and watch-night services. Today's church could benefit by looking at what these gatherings' attractions were, and at whether we could include features that would have a similarly strong attraction in our gatherings without sacrificing integrity. In a future *Connections* I'll write more about that and about how we might apply other strengths of early Methodism to today's churches.



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Oops!

For some unknown reason, part of the account of Jesus' life in the May *Connections* came out scrambled and thus incorrect, making it appear that Herod condemned Jesus to death. Pontius Pilate, of course, was the Roman governor who tried Jesus and condemned him to death by crucifixion. I don't know what happened to my brain when I was writing and proofreading that section last month.



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