

If we are true to the *United Methodist Church* history, we want to acknowledge that John Wesley and his brother Charles never intended to build a separate denomination from the Church of England. What Wesley truly intended was to reform the Church of England and spread Scriptural holiness as he called it. What they did was begin the Wesleyan Revival of the Church of England. I can give you all sorts of dates about the progression of the United Methodist Church, however, witnessing to the faith of the founder of the United Methodist Church as it is known today tells more the story of how this Christian denomination came into existence.

In 1729, Charles Wesley while studying at Oxford started a Bible Study group. When his brother John joined him at Oxford, Charles gave way to John in leadership. Within 5 years a few of their pupils asked to join them. Methodism developed over time through the emergence and interdependence of theological, organizational and missional developments. The name “The Holy Club” stuck with them likely as an insult from another classmate, due to their regular and ongoing religious studies, fasting, regular Communion taking and caring for the poor and imprisoned.

John Wesley wrote on how the term Methodist came to be associated with them. “The exact regularity of their lives, as well as studies, occasioned a young gentleman of Christ Church (a college of Oxford University) to say, "Here is a new set of Methodists sprung up;" alluding to some ancient Physicians who were so called. The name was new and quaint; so, it took immediately, and the Methodists were known all over the University.”<sup>i</sup>

Wesley, in his later reflections upon the rise and growth of Methodism, emphasized the spontaneity of its origins and the open-endedness of its development (see his *Short History of Methodism*). In Wesley’s view, God raised up the people called Methodists for a purpose that was specific and appropriate but in a manner that was not necessarily predictable or predetermined.<sup>ii</sup>

This small group grew as the brothers and their compatriots began teaching, preaching and praying with people of various parishes, believing that all could experience life on God’s terms, as Paul writes in his letter to the Romans bringing each person alive as God did Jesus. After their father, Samuel, a priest of the Church of England died in 1735, Col. Oglethorpe, the head of the Georgia colony in what is now the US of A, encouraged John and Charles to come and lead the spiritual lives of the people of Georgia, to awaken them to God’s Spirit, as well as to teach the indigenous peoples of the land. They failed in their efforts and returned to England a mere 2 ½ years later. It was during his trip to Georgia that John had a close encounter with a religious group called “The Moravians”, a sect in the Church of England, whom John experienced had a deep sense of calm and inner peace, especially during a dangerous storm on the ocean. This experience of faith John Wesley hungered for but would not find for a few

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more years. What John Wesley grew up with in the Church of England was a theology that held that 1) Scripture was the main source of truth and Christian veracity, that 2) the tradition of the faith that provided the authoritative explanation of Scriptural truths, especially the first centuries of the Church and 3) reason furnished the means by which Scripture and tradition could be scrutinized and understood through thoughtful study to come to know the truths of the faith. John Wesley was an intellectual and knew that he was saved through his faith, yet did not experience it in the way he hungered. Romans 8:9-17 was scripture that John often preached on because it expressed the life-giving and life-affirming Spirit of God, that called people to live fully in all ways and all times their faith in Jesus Christ.

Shortly after their return from Georgia, a friend encouraged John to attend a Moravian gathering on May 24, 1738 at Aldersgate St. in London. Wesley's intellectual conviction was transformed into a personal experience while Luther's preface to the commentary to the Letter of Paul to the Romans was being read. John wrote in his journal: "while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." His brother, Charles, had a similar experience a few years earlier about which is poem "Glory to God, and Praise and Love" published on page 58 of *The United Methodist Hymnal*, seven of those 17 verses became our 'denominational' hymn, "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing, the first hymn in *The United Methodist Hymnal*.

After this, the Wesley brothers preached, taught and prayed with many people, especially in the working-class communities of Bristol and Cornwall England, southwest of London, which they believed the Church of England had abandoned. John was encouraged by a friend and colleague to preach outside to the multitudes, and the multitudes came. The numbers of those wanting to join the Methodist societies of the Church of England, both to the dismay of some priests and to the joy of other priests grew enormously. John also believed that music would enhance the Scriptural understanding and spiritual growth of these "Methodists" and Charles a prolific poet would put his poems to familiar tunes for the people to sing.

John Wesley was very specific in his belief of what made someone a Methodist and was strict in his control over how members studied, prayed, discerned their growing faith, and their service to the poor. The definition of Methodists John Wesley would say begins with "the holiness of heart and life which consisted of "conformity in all things to the revealed will of God." A Methodist is one whose life is conforming to God's life so that they not only act as God would act in their place, but they think and feel as God would think and feel in their place. Methodists pursue this conformity. Methodists are being conformed inwardly and outwardly to

the will of God. Those who desired to become Methodists were given instructions on “‘becoming Methodists.’

**If** you continually and constantly seek to know, love, become like, and obey ‘the great God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’...

**If** you ‘abstain from all evil, and labour, as you have opportunity, to do good to all men, friends or enemies’...

**If** you join together ‘to encourage and help each other in thus working out your salvation, and for that end watch over one another in love’...

Then and only then, ‘you are they whom I mean by Methodists.’” It was clear that one must meet every part of the definition, not only some parts of it.<sup>iii</sup>

John and Charles were strong and ardent believers of the Church of England and required that all members of the Methodist societies attend worship in the church. There were no options. Because only bishops could ordain priests in the Church of England, John, as a priest himself, consecrated many lay preachers, whom he believed satisfied all but the educational requirements to become preachers, though not offer the sacraments.

The Methodist societies grew both in England and in the colonies and when the Revolutionary War broke out in the colonies, most of the priests returned to England, leaving the Methodist societies without someone to offer the sacraments, a most important aspect of the Methodist societies.

After the bruising loss of the Revolutionary War, the bishops of the Church of England, refused to ordain priests in the United States of America. John Wesley was greatly grieved over the lack of priests to provide the essential sacrament of Holy Communion or Holy Eucharist and after much discernment ordained Thomas Coke as a superintendent of the Methodist Societies. who in turn, and only at the direction of John Wesley, ordained Francis Asbury as a Superintendent. John had written a book of rules based on the Church of England’s which we call our Book of Discipline. He sent this and a revised prayer book with Coke to America. On Christmas Day 1784 at a church called Lovely Lane in Baltimore, Coke ordained Francis Asbury as a priest and superintendent, at the request of John Wesley, also a noted lay preacher, as a deacon. As the Church of England disestablished in the US of A, this ordination led to the establishment of the first Methodist Episcopal Church on February 28, 1784. Soon after, much to Wesley’s dismay, Coke and Asbury convinced their followers to refer to them as Bishops.

Never intending to form a new denomination, but rather to revive the church, Wesley remained a priest faithful to the Church of England until his death. The Methodist Episcopal Church grew as our nation grew. Methodist preachers moved with the pioneers establishing churches in the new territories. In the 20th century the Methodist church was the largest denomination in our country.

The Methodist Episcopal Church has many dark stages, up to today. Many forced indigenous children, by convincing their parents or kidnapping the children and placing them in schools which were really concentration camps, where the children's names were changed, taught to be ashamed of their spiritual ancestry, beaten, starved, sexually abused, their own babies either killed or given away. The Methodist Episcopal refused to allow Blacks, free or enslaved to sit anywhere in worship except the balconies and while some Black men were ordained to preach, they could do so only to Blacks and only with the permission and oftentimes in the presence of White priests.

This led to the split, led by preachers such as Richard Allen led the way to form the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) in New York; and James Varick helped begin the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AMEZ) in Philadelphia.

In 1830 seven pastors left the Methodist Episcopal Church to form the Methodist Protestant Church, believing that the church should not have a bishop and that laity ought to have equal voting rights during Conferences.

The Civil War caused another split in the Methodist Episcopal Church as the nation was splitting over the right of freedom for Blacks, and thusly, we became two denominations, the North and South Methodist Episcopal Churches. In 1939, nearly 100 years later the North and South Methodist Episcopal Churches and the Methodist Protestant Church reconciled to form the Methodist Church, no 'Episcopal' with a compromise to have bishops and allow both clergy and laity equal voting rights at our conferences. In 1969 the Methodist Church and the United Brethren church joined together, ending the racial segregation of what is called the Central Conference.

John Wesley and Charles Wesley's belief that all could experience the power of the Spirit of God, and in so experiencing her, would confirm whom they really are, part of the Body of Christ who go forth, as Paul writes, not with a not with a timid, grave-tending life, rather with a passion for being God through Christ, sharing, serving and loving all whom they encounter.

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<sup>i</sup> A Short History of Methodism by John Wesley

<sup>ii</sup> Heitzenrater, Richard P.. Wesley and the People Called Methodists. Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>iii</sup> Advice to the People Called Methodists by John Wesley