

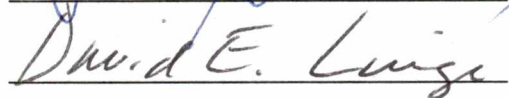
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Maynard W. Nordmoe entitled "The Methodist Challenge to the Established order in England, 1738-1791." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in history.



Dr. John Bohstedt

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:



Accepted for the Council:



Associate Vice Chancellor
and Dean of The Graduate School

The Methodist Challenge
to the Established Order
in England, 1738-1791

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Maynard W. Nordmoe

May, 1994

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the brave souls
of this modern age who judge their culture
according to Scripture instead of
judging Scripture according to culture.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my major professor, Dr. John Bohstedt, a scholar and a gentleman who holds unswervingly to high standards and yet is audacious enough to admit his own errors in front of his students. His faith and encouragement were crucial in seeing this work through to its conclusion. I thank also my wife and family who have been so patient with the demands of research and writing in the midst of family life.

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Introduction

The role of Methodism in pre-empting a violent and bloody revolution in England in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries has been a matter of historical debate ever since the work of Elie Halevy. Bernard Semmel feels, however, that since that time most historians dealing with the subject, whether pro or con, have pictured Methodism "as a regressive, repressive religion, in both doctrine and practice. It is an image common to Leslie Stephen, to the Hammonds, to E.J. Hobsbawm, and to E.P. Thompson, among others."¹

That Methodism did indeed throw all of its weight against any and all revolutionary violence is not in doubt. John Wesley's Toryism is renowned. What is not generally acknowledged is the revolutionary nature of Methodism itself because of its progressive and liberal character. Semmel has proposed that Methodism helped block a violent English counterpart to the French Revolution by pre-empting the critical appeal and objective of the Revolution. Methodism, thus, brought a liberal and egalitarian message to the rootless, disturbed, and "bruised" members of society and then integrated them into new families of the Methodist societies and bands. By so doing, the injustices of the present society were, in part, ameliorated or sublimated in such a way as to reduce the demand or need for radical change.

¹ Bernard Semmel, The Methodist Revolution (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), 3.

Semmel adequately addresses the way in which Methodist doctrine, evangelical Arminianism in particular, carried a democratic message and appealed to the masses. Yet this hardly seems adequate to explain a movement which was as much emotion as it was intellect. Doctrine alone is not adequate to explain the tremendous release of religious fervor nor are many of the novel innovations that greatly increased the appeal of Methodism peculiar to Arminianism only. In reviewing Semmel, R. J. Helmstadter observes that Semmel is "driven by the evidence to point out that at the time of Wesley's death, the position of many Methodist congregations and preachers seemed more Calvinist than Wesleyan."² It seems necessary, therefore, to cast the innovative and appealing aspects of Methodism in a broader perspective that incorporates both the Calvinistic and Arminian wings and examine the innovations common to both.

It also seems necessary to more closely examine the role of Methodist practices as they originated from below as well as the theology which came from above. Wesley's doctrines were as much tempered by experience as were the experiences of Methodism tempered by Wesley's doctrine. Gordon Rupp examines this phenomena as he quotes John Wesley's own response to the many signs and wonders of the Methodist revival, "What hath God wrought!"³ Innovation was a hallmark of the Methodist movement. David Hempton, in fact, denies that there is any 'essence' of Methodism in its social setting "apart from inspired innovation based on biblical ideas."⁴ A study of these innovations, both those from above and from below, would seem profitable with also a

² R.J. Helmstadter, book review, American Historical Review, Volume 81, December 1976, 1107.

³ Gordon Rupp, "Introductory Essay," R.E. Davies and E.G. Rupp, eds., A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, Vol. 1 (London: Epworth Press, 1965), xiv.

⁴ David Hempton, Methodism and Politics in British Society, 1750-1950 (London: Hutchinson, 1984), 29.

view to examining how these challenged the established order.

Robert Malcolmson, in his study of the Kingswood colliers, concluded that Methodism "brought to Kingswood, not only a compelling personal dynamism, but also a message of concern and compassion and personal salvation to people who had stood alone."⁵ The effect of this personal concern and compassion is also a force that Semmel and others have not fully addressed. Henry Abelove has noted the limits of Wesley's organizational abilities and the lack of uniqueness on the part of much of his doctrine and preaching. Yet he credits Wesley with "making his followers fall in love with him."⁶ Through the weaving of these bonds of caring and compassion, Wesley united his followers both to himself and to each other. This union was to be of precedent setting proportions for a hierarchial society that had no associational mechanisms available for the poor. This was especially true for the newly industrialized poor such as the Kingswood colliers who indeed "stood alone."

Hugh McLeod has well summarized the problems associated with any claims of influence of religion upon English society as a whole. Statistical data concerning church attendance can either be seen as evidence of widespread religious apathy or as an indicator of the tip of the iceberg of religious influence. McLeod affirms that "Christianity and the Christian churches had a pervasive influence in nineteenth-century British society, which was spread very widely, even if sometimes rather thinly."⁷ It is in this vein that Semmel argues for the ideological influence of Methodism towards his claim of a Methodist

⁵ Robert Malcolmson, "A Set of Ungovernable People: The Kingswood Colliers in the 18th Century," J. Brewer and J. Style, eds., An Ungovernable People (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1980), 126.,

⁶ Henry Abelove, The Evangelist of Desire (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990), xii.

⁷ Hugh McLeod, Religion and the Working Class in 19th Century Britain (Hong Kong: MacMillan Publishers Ltd., 1984), 15.

revolution. In other words, the influence of Methodist values permeated English society to an extent far exceeding any ratio of numerical adherents to the movement itself.

No such claims of 'revolution,' ideological or otherwise, shall be the concern of this study. Rather, I shall focus upon the innovative or 'revolutionary' aspects of Methodism. This is evidenced by the serious and substantial reaction which emanated from English society and the Anglican Church. I do not seek to identify winners and losers in that battle but rather concentrate upon the causes of the conflict. Why were these parties at odds? Can we summarize these many different points of disagreement into a scheme that reveals some basic fault lines? The grand and glorious debate of how much influence Methodism had upon English society is one which will be left to others and will, no doubt, remain a source of interest and speculation for some time to come.

What is not in doubt is that there was significant societal conflict surrounding the advent of Methodism. Chapter 1 will explore the range and depth of that conflict as it manifested itself in different ways. The remaining chapters will attempt to categorize three ways in which the message and character of Methodism engendered this opposition. Chapter 2 will examine how Methodism was a liberating force, breaking old molds and traditions. Chapter 3 will look for egalitarian tendencies in Methodism and the corrosive effect they might have upon a hierarchial society. Chapter 4 will explore the creation of new bands of association for a diverse but mainly lower class people. It is felt that the offenses of Methodism might be framed within these three categories for these are the basic ways in which Methodism challenged fundamental assumptions, norms, and social relationships of established 18th century English society and thus engendered opposition.

Chapter 1

Methodism as Provocateur

"It is always the lamb that troubles the water. Yesterday we were stoned as Popish incendiaries. To-day it is our turn to have favour with the people."

-Charles Wesley

Throughout the first thirty years of the Methodist Revival, violence and turmoil seemed to accompany many of its key leaders wherever they went. Bready notes, "During the first two or three decades of the Revival the ugly riotous interference of mobs was more or less continuous." Mobs hounded them, clergymen vilified them, magistrates ignored their pleas for justice, and the press published rumor and truth indiscriminately. Methodism was professedly a non-violent, peaceful movement which upheld Christian principles and avowed full allegiance to the Anglican Church of England. Its leaders were ordained clergymen of that church, and yet the movement provoked deep resentment and hostility. Just how deep was this reaction, and what extremes did it take? From what sources did the hostility emanate, and

1 Charles Wesley, Journal, July 25, 174(3), as quoted in Thomas Jackson, The Life of the Rev. Charles Wesley (London: John Mason, 1841), 1:343.

2 J.W. Bready, England: Before and After Wesley, 2nd. ed. (New York: Russell and Russell, 1971), 206.

in what ways did each source react differently? Who were the principal players in leading this reaction and how consistent were they? When did this hostility begin to moderate? These will be the questions that this chapter will attempt to answer. Some motivating factors will be identified, but causal analysis will, in large part, be delayed for examination in successive chapters.

To plumb the depths of conflict between Methodism and English society, therefore, it seems natural to go directly to an episode of such open conflict. Nothing seems to illustrate societal conflict better than a good riot. It reveals key players, the complicity of authorities, and demonstrates the depths of hostility of the people involved. A clearer picture can also be obtained when real names and faces are shown as the giving and receiving parties of open conflict.

One particularly revealing episode of violence took place in the county of Staffordshire and centered around the town of Wednesbury, a small coal mining community noted for its high quality coal and fighting cocks.³ The following accounts are a distillation of several deposition-type statements collected by the Methodists from the victims of the violence under the title of "Modern Christianity, Exemplified at Wednesbury, and Other Adjacent Places in Staffordshire."⁴ They offer a unique picture of events during the year 1743 by laboring-class Methodists in an unembellished style.

On Tuesday morning, February 6, 1743, Francis Ward, an underground coal mine manager for the notable John Wood, was busy removing anything of value from his home in Wednesbury. He had heard that a mob was on its way. He was not misinformed as a crowd of about three hundred persons soon assembled in "a riotous manner." They broke down his door,

3 John F. Ede, History of Wednesbury (Birmingham: Kynock Press, 1962), 118,153.

4 John Wesley, "Modern Christianity, Exemplified at Wednesbury, and Other Adjacent Places in Staffordshire," The Works of John Wesley (England: Wesleyan Conference Edition, 1872), 13:170.

smashed his firegrate and then "pulled down, took, and carried away all such goods as were left there, and which they were able to carry." The house of John Griffiths soon suffered the same fate. John Hammersley heard the crowd coming his way and withdrew into his house locking the door. The crowd demanded money or they would break down the door. Receiving none, they caved in the door with a great rail of wood. The mob then proceeded to break to pieces his goods and windows. They destroyed five stalls of bees, killed and took away his hens, threw the hay out of his barn, and carried away what they thought proper.

The warehouse of Benjamin Constable was an especially tempting target for the mob. After forcing iron bars and wrenching open some stout doors, they "broke to pieces and destroyed the goods therein, spilled the liquors therein placed, plundered and destroyed such goods as they could not carry away, both household goods and grocer goods and also chandler's ware."⁶ Afterwards they went to his house and gave it the same treatment. For six days, the rioters plundered and destroyed homes and property within Wednesbury and the vicinity. Thirty three households estimated losses of £504, 20^s of which was reported by Benjamin Constable.

The mobs proved to be discriminating in only one respect: all who were attacked were Methodists. When a mob arrived at the door of Thomas Parks, they demanded whether he would deny hearing "these Parsons," a reference to the Methodist preachers. He would not, and his house was pillaged. Mary Turner witnessed the destruction of Jonas Turner's house and the rioters' flinging out a Bible. One of the looters then "came out; and in a great rage cut it into pieces with his axe."⁷ John Turner

5 Ibid., 179.

6 Ibid., 180.

7 Ibid., 187.

8 Ibid., 185.

fled with his wife and two children. When they returned, they found their home in ruins. Wet and cold, they took refuge with a neighbor until his landlord forced him to turn them out the next day. John "expected there would not be a house to receive a Methodist in the whole country."

Not every Methodist was despoiled on the first of these Shrove-Tuesday (traditionally a time of devilment) riots as they became known. Humphrey Hands gives some indication of their numbers by describing how on February 6th, "sixty or more of us met at one, and joined in prayer."⁹ By so doing, they demonstrated a remarkable resiliency. "We keep meeting together morning and evening, are in great peace and love with each other, and are nothing terrified by our adversaries. God grant that we may endure to the end!"¹⁰ Humphrey's turn would not come until June of that same year when the mobs would come to his house.

That outbreak of further violence began with a small meeting of believers who had come to sing, pray, and read the Bible at the home of John Adams. A small mob assembled and broke out the windows and pelted the Methodists with stones and dirt as they dispersed. John was moved to seek redress from the local justice, but he was evidently fearful of facing the justice alone. As he assembled some friends on May 30, 1743, Mr. Taylor, the Curate of Walsal, also appeared with a few of his friends and began to insult the Methodists. The newly gathered mob followed John Adams and his group while throwing dirt and stones at them even in the very presence of Justice P_____ of Walsal. Francis Ward was there also with the Methodists and appealed for relief and protection from the attackers. The justice responded by swinging his hat round his

9 Ibid., 184.

10 Ibid., 180.

11 Ibid., 182.

head twice and crying out, "Huzza!" With this encouragement, the mob forced John and his friends to take shelter in a public house. Each time they ventured out they were beaten and pelted with whatever objects were at hand. Three times Francis Ward either tried to leave the house or was dragged from it, and each time he suffered beatings and abuse. He was struck on the eye and cut so badly he expected to lose his sight. At one point he so lost his strength that he fell and was not able to get up. A poor woman came to his assistance crying out to the mob, "Will ye kill the man?" With much difficulty he arrived at home and fell into a fever.¹²

That same day, the mobs ranged freely through the neighboring town of Darlaston breaking into houses, smashing windows, seizing goods, and extorting money from some thirty of Francis Ward's friends including the home and medicine shop of Humphrey Hands. James Foster, nailer, Sarah Hires, widow, and Jonathon Jones all had their windows broken and money extorted to save their houses. Elizabeth Lingham, a widow with five children, had her goods spoiled, her spinning-wheel (the support of her family) broken and her parish allowance reduced from 2s.6d. to 1s.6d. a week. Valentine Ambersley, collier, had his windows broken twice, his wife, big with child, abused and beat with clubs. Joseph Stubs had his windows broken twice, and his wife so frightened that she miscarried.

Three weeks later, Jonathon Jones and few others were gathered again at the house of John Adams singing a hymn when stones once again flew through the windows. This time John went to Squire P___ for justice to be served. The Squire insisted on meeting him in town where a great mob was found waiting. When the constable presented a warrant to the Squire, he responded, "What! I understand you are Methodists! I will not act for you."¹³ He then went to the door and told the mob that

12 Ibid., 172.

13 Ibid., 171.

they could do what they would, took off his hat and swung it about and went away. The mob gave a great shout and some of them swore bitterly they would murder them all.

Not surprisingly, another round of stone throwing mayhem commenced. Among those attacked were Mary Turner and her two daughters, all chased from their home by a rock throwing mob. After those attacks were made, Mumford Wilks heard the Rev. Mr. E_____ say to the mob at Darlaston, "Well my lads! He that has done it out of pure zeal for the church, I do not blame him."¹⁴

The position of the local justices was curiously exposed when in October, John Wesley himself came to town, staying at the home of Francis Ward. A mob convened and roughly carried Wesley for a couple of miles to the homes of two justices who had issued the following order:

"WHEREAS, WE, His Majesty's Justices of the Peace for the said County of Stafford, have received information that several disorderly persons, styling themselves Methodist Preachers, go about raising routs and riots, to the great damage of His Majesty's liege people, and against the peace of our Sovereign Lord the King:

"These are, in His Majesty's name, to command you and every one of you, within your respective districts, to make diligent search after the said Methodist Preachers and to bring him or them before some of us His said Majesty's Justices of the Peace, to be examined concerning their unlawful doings.

"Given under our hands and seals, this day of October, 1743.

"J. Lane.

"W. Persehouse."¹⁵

But now that the leader of all Methodism was deposited at their doorstep, the justices begged off facing their prey. Both excused themselves by saying they were in bed and told everyone to go home. Eventually, Wesley was released by the crowd after prolonged wanderings and some abuse.

14 Ibid., 175.

15 J. Wesley, "Journal," October 20, 1743, Works, 1:441.

His ability to navigate the treacherous waters of Wednesbury, however, did not mean that all persecution had come to an end. Mob violence began again in November, this time at the home of Line and Mare Green. The Greens had "long been noted for wickedness of every kind, for cursing and swearing, Sabbath-breaking, idleness, and all manner of debauchery." After hearing the Wesleys preach, they too had "a desire to flee from the wrath to come." They allowed meetings in their home and during one such evening "the revellers, finding their old companions had forsaken them, were enraged at them more and more." "They unroofed the shop that was aside the house and thrust down the walls." Undeterred, the Greens held meeting again only to be assailed in greater fury with great stones that collapsed the roof. They made a complaint to a Justice, Mr. W.G. who apprising himself of the situation reacted by saying, "What, you are Methodists! I am informed you are the vilest men that live."

The Wednesbury riots offer for study a rich variety of the many facets and participants involved in anti-Methodist violence. Certainly, there was no one principal cause for the violence or one particular party of opposition. In this case, there was a confluence of many tensions at different levels of village society in reaction to the various aspects of the local Methodist revival in Wednesbury. This, in turn, reflects the complexity of the Methodist movement as a whole and the opposition it encountered.

But first of all, just how reliable are the accounts of violence that have just been reviewed? Certainly, the Methodists were adept at producing journals and records, almost ad nauseum. Their writings are less noted for a flair for recording conflict and adventure than they are for containing a mass of hum-drum everyday detail. Leslie Church, in a major study of the early Methodist people, goes so far as to say:

16 J. Wesley, "Modern Christianity Exemplified," Works, 13:176.

As a rule, John Wesley himself is reticent about his own sufferings, and the ordinary Methodist people, in their diaries and memoirs, are often either too modest to write about personal hardships or too pre-occupied with their spiritual struggles and triumphs.¹⁷

Such content and orientation argues for the reliability of their writings rather than a bent for creative image-making.

While Church refers to the mass of evidence relating to the sustained persecution of the early Methodists as "embarrassing" and though he points to the availability of "local histories" as the most descriptive sources regarding riots, corroborating evidence for the Wednesbury violence in local newspapers is sparse. Aris's Birmingham Gazette of February 13, 1744, however, does carry a substantial report of mob action of "some hundreds of people, men and women" who gathered "last Tuesday" in Darlaston and moved on Wednesbury to the houses of the Methodist followers. Those who would not disavow "following the same Preacher again" suffered the ravages of the mob which "immediately broke their windows, went into their houses, took away what goods they could carry, and destroyed most of the rest." The Gazette was notably careful to defend the honor of the "neighboring gentlemen" who "did all they possibly could to make them [the mob] desist, by giving them Drink, and offering them money, and using every other means they thought might have any effect, but all to no purpose."¹⁸

Bready argues that the newsmen of that day were "in the pockets" of the clerical and ruling elites at the local level which generally insured a hostile press.¹⁹ This can be supported by the following report of the Wednesbury riots that John Wesley found so objectionable:

17 Leslie Church, More About the Early Methodist People (London: The Epworth Press, 1949), 57.

18 Aris's Birmingham Gazette, February 13, 1744, as quoted in W.C. Sheldon, "Newspaper Notices of Early Methodism and Methodists," Wesley Historical Society - Proceedings, 4:13.

19 Bready, England: Before and After Wesley, 210.

By a private letter from Staffordshire, we have Advice of an Insurrection of the People call'd Methodists; who upon some pretended Insults from the Church Party have assembled themselves in a riotous Manner; and having committed several Outrages, they proceeded at last to burn the House of one of their Adversaries.²⁰

Wesley responded with an indignant protest which can be found in his journals but not in the London Evening Post. Curiously though, that same London Evening Post just one year later carried a detailed account of attack upon Methodists in Exeter. It described how a house meeting was broken up by a mob which attacked the Methodists "with Dung, Potatoes, Mud, etc." The mob also:

...threw them in the Dirt, trampled on them, and beat all without Exception....the Women they us'd most inhumanly, some they lam'd, others stripped almost naked, and roll'd in the most indecent Manner in the Kennel, besmearing all their Faces with Lampblack, Flour, and Mud...."²¹

One week later, however, the Post reverted back to carrying a news note openly mocking a Methodist preacher who had been apprehended as a "vagrant" and committed to Bridewell.²²

This perhaps was typical of both the sphere of public information regarding the Methodist movement and the sphere of public reaction to the movement. Public opinion seemed to swing from condemnation of fanaticism to an appeal for mercy for the persecuted. Church writes that the anti-Methodist riots themselves had a particular English character:

Rioting of a peculiarly English type was no unusual occurrence. It had not the sinister significance which is typical of the action of mobs in many other parts of the world, for though it was brutal and uncontrolled for a short time, it soon spent itself, and became open to an appeal for fair play!²³

20 London Evening Post, February 18, 1744.

21 London Evening Post, May 16, 1745.

22 Ibid., May 23, 1745.

23 Church, More About Early Methodist People, 64.

Not all publications as the Post were of such a divided mind, however. The Weekly Miscellany was more or less a mouthpiece of the Anglican Church and maintained a steady drumbeat of criticism. Another tendency has been noted in the Gentleman's Magazine. While it was generally critical of Methodism, it spared John Wesley from personal attack out of a sense of respect for him as an individual. In contrast, George Whitefield, the other great leader of the Methodist revival, had a personality that lent itself to caricature, and this seemed to invite attack, especially on stage. For ten years, Samuel Foote's play, "The Minor," lampooned Whitefield and the Methodists at the Haymarket and Drury Lane.²⁴

At the higher levels of society and the governmental justice system, sympathetic judgements were more easily obtained. These took great efforts of both time and money, however, to obtain and were often too greatly removed to be of any immediate assistance. State Papers of George II reveal a letter from Mr. Sam Crossland to Sir Thomas Abney on February 13, 1744, which speaks of "the lowest Rank of People" round the villages of Walsall and W. Hampton who had "taken it into (or it has been put into) their Heads that Whitefield the Methodist and his Disciples preach and propagate Doctrines contrary to and Destructive of the Established Doctrine of the Church of England." He then described the resultant action:

...between 3 & 400 men and women ... went in a Body to the Houses of these unfortunate People which they plundered and carried away everything of value that was portable, and what they could not readily take away they destroyed in a Cruell and almost unheard of Manner. The damage already done by these Wicked people in Two Villages is computed at upward of L600.²⁵

24 Ibid., 69.

25 Sam Crossland to Sir Thomas Abney, February 13, 1743/44, in State Papers Domestic 36/63, in the Complete State Papers Domestic, series two, 1714-1782 (microfilm), ff. 63-64.

The letter went on to speculate on the source of the incitement to violence as being "some of the higher Rank who Keep Behind the Curtain at present." Mr. Crossland also doubted the claims of religious indignation on the part of the mobs. "As to their pretence of suppressing the Methodists, 'tis only a pretence, for these Mobsters Seldom frequent any place of worship." He concluded his letter by expressing the belief that Sir Abney "will think a Staffordshire Mob Comprised of Colliers Nailers and Brick Makers are But ill Judges in Matters of Religion."²⁶

One other piece of evidence is found in a statement by Edward Millington, a son of a Wednesbury witness. He states:

I do not personally recollect very much of Mr. John Wesley and the early Methodists, but my mother was intimately connected with them, and her father, John Hughes, suffered in the great riots (1743-1744). He was twice carried home disabled, from injuries inflicted by the mob. My mother was a little girl at the time, and she remembers that one of the mob struck Mr. Wesley on the mouth with a stone, whilst he was preaching in the open air. Notwithstanding the blow, however, he continued his sermon, and quietly wiped away the blood from his face.²⁷

Others were not quite so fortunate. In 1740, William Seward travelled to Hay and became the first Methodist Martyr. He died a few days after receiving a blow to the head in a mobbing.

Finally, the happenings at Wednesbury appear quite consistent with other well documented attacks upon Methodism. An anonymous writer published a pamphlet in 1745 describing similar rioting in Exeter which also parallels the London Evening Post account mentioned earlier. The author explains that he would not have "taken up his pen in defence of Methodists, had they not been daily and openly treated in Exeter with such rudeness, violence, and abuse as should have made even Indians or pagans to have blushed." He continues:

26 Ibid.

27 Edward Millington, statement to Samuel Lees, 1860, Journal of the Wesley Historical Society, 4:199, as quoted in Church, More About Early Methodist People, 76.

The rioters violently entered the Methodist meetinghouse, interrupted the minister with opprobrious and obscene language, and fell upon him in a most furious manner with blows and kicks. They treated every man they could lay their hands upon with such abuse and indignity as is not to be expressed. But what is more than all was their abominable rudeness to the poor women. Some were stripped quite naked.²⁸

The public nature of the affair was also noted as taking place "in the centre of the city, and in the presence of many thousands."

Writing such as this is also an example of the pamphleteering of the age which was engaged in by both Methodists and their critics alike. The most vitriolic attacks upon Methodism are found in this form as defenders of the faith and public order sought to unmask these "charlatans" and "deceivers." Richard Green catalogues 560 such anti-Methodist publications between 1740 and 1791, the height (or depth) of which was reached in 1778.²⁹

Many of these pamphlets were originated by the Anglican clergy whose hostility played a key role in the Wednesbury affair. The Staffordshire riots offer an interesting view of Anglican attitudes as they ranged from sympathetic encouragement to bitter opposition. Charles Wesley was the first to preach the Methodist message in Staffordshire, speaking at Wednesbury in November, 1742. Brother John followed in January, 1743, preaching eight sermons in four days and organizing a society of 100 persons. At this point, it would be well to note the rapid growth of Methodism in a small town that by 1800 barely numbered some 4000 inhabitants. The sudden impact of a new and large following of a new and strange "sect" was one which surely invoked attention and generated apprehension in the community. This is especially true considering the

28 Anonymous, "A brief Account of the Late Persecution and Barbarous Usage of the Methodists at Exeter, with a Vindication, etc., by and impartial Hand," 3ed. (1746), as quoted in Church, More About Early Methodist People, 66.

29 Richard Greene, Anti-Methodist Publications from the 18th Century, 2nd. ed. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1973).

record of religious dissent in Wednesbury. A sizeable congregation of dissenters in 1669 had, by 1729, totally evaporated. Community violence, again, seemed to have played a significant part as the dissenter's meeting houses were destroyed:

In 1710, at the time of the Sacherverell riots in London, the Meeting House in Cox's Court, High Street, Wassall, was destroyed by rioters and a similar fate befell the West Bromwich Meeting House five year later.³⁰

In spite of this background of community intolerance, it is most interesting to note the initial warm reception which Mr. Egginton, the local vicar, gave to John Wesley:

When I preached at Wednesbury first, Mr. Egginton (the Vicar) invited me to his house, and told me, that the oftener I came, the welcomer I should be: for I had done much good there already, and he doubted not but I should do much more. But the next year I found him another man.³¹

The sudden change in opinion which occurred reflects another interesting facet of Methodism. While the practice of using lay preachers is credited for substantially enlarging the scope of the ministry of John Wesley, it was not without its risks. Tyreman records the results when some lay ministers took up in Wednesbury where Wesley left off:

Wesley was followed by Mr. Williams, a Welshman, who, it is alleged, vilified the clergy, and called them dumb dogs that could not bark. After him came a bricklayer; then a plumber and a glazier, both sent from London; and, under their preaching, people fell down in fits, and made strange hideous noises. Malice, spleen, and feuds sprung up. The Methodists spoke ill natured things of their lawful minister, and told the members of the Church of England, that they would all be damned.³²

Probably in an attempt to steady this rocking boat, John Wesley paid a second visit to Wednesbury on April 15th. Wesley later wrote, "The inexcusable folly of Mr. Williams had so provoked Mr. Egginton,

30 Ede, History of Wednesbury, 204.

31 J. Wesley, "Letter to Mr. John Smith," Works, 12:79-80.

32 Luke Tyreman, The Life and Times of Rev. John Wesley (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1870), 1:407.

that his former love was turned into bitter hatred."³³ Wesley further writes of Mr. Egginton's changed opinion:

From this time, we found more and more effects of his unwearied labours, public and private, in stirring up the people on every side, "to drive these fellows out of the country." One of his sermons I heard with my own ears. I pray God I may never hear such another! The Minister of Darlaston, and the Curate of Walsal, trod in the same steps. And these were they who (not undesignedly) occasioned all the disorders which followed there.³⁴

In June of that same year upon hearing news of renewed rioting in Staffordshire, Wesley records:

I was not surprised at all: neither should I have wondered if, after the advices they had so often received from the pulpit, as well as from the episcopal chair, the zealous High Churchmen had rose, and cut all that were Methodists in pieces.

Church writes that the eighteenth century was "notorious for the bitterness of its controversies. Differences of opinion in matters political and religious were expressed with a torrent of abuse."³⁵ Numerous recorded examples of Anglican invective both preached and printed can be found which illustrate the use of inflammatory language by Anglican clergy. Ralph Skerrett, chaplain to Henry, Earl of Grantham, spoke of the Methodists as "restless deceivers of the people, who make it their daily business to fill the heads of the ignorant and unwary with wild and perplexing notions."³⁷ John Wilder, Rector of St. Aldates, called them "deceivers," "babblers," "insolent pretenders," "men of capricious humors, spiritual sleight, and canting craftiness."³⁸

33 J. Wesley, "Journal," April 15, 1743, Works, 1:419.

34 J. Wesley, "Letter to Mr. John Smith," Works, 12:80.

35 Ibid., June 18, 1743, 1:422.

36 Church, More About Early Methodist People, 66.

37 Ralph Skerret, "The Nature and Proper Evidence of Regeneration" (London, 1739), as quoted in Greene, Anti-Methodist Publications, 4.

38 John Wilder, "The Trial of the Spirits," (Sermon, 1739), Greene, Anti-Methodist Publications, 8.

The Rector of St. Michael's, John Downes, claims in a 1759 pamphlet, "I have shewed you that their [the Methodists'] Doctrines or Notions square or coincide with many of the oldest and rankest Heresies that ever defiled the Purity, and disturbed the Peace of the Christian Church from its first Institution."³⁹

Besides the incitement and encouragement given to riotous mobs and the savage disparagement delivered in sermon and pamphlet, the Methodists suffered other forms of active opposition from the Anglican Church. Wesley's first sermon on salvation by faith came on June 11, 1738, in the year of his conversion experience. Reaction was swift as most pulpits were soon closed to both John and Charles that same year essentially locking them out of ministerial practice.⁴⁰ This was easily accomplished as the local Bishop had the authority to issue or revoke in his diocese any minister's license to preach.

Exclusion from the sacraments was another form of discrimination used against many Methodists for some time though it was sporadically applied. In January, 1743, John Wesley was turned away from receiving Holy Communion at Epworth, the very church where his father had served for years.⁴¹ Wesley writes of another case of exclusion in 1768:

It seems, the behaviour of the society in this town has convinced all the people in it but the Curate, who still refuses to give the sacrament to any that will not promise to hear these preachers no more.⁴²

Opposition and criticism also came from former friends as well as total strangers. James Hervey, a former member of the Oxford Holy Club, contributed to the opposition with a number of letters and commentaries

39 John Downes, "Methodism Examined and Disposed," (London, 1759), as quoted in Albert Lyles, Methodism Mocked (London: Epworth Press, 1960), 46.

40 Frank Baker, John Wesley and the Church of England (New York: Abingdon, 1970), 67.

41 J. Wesley, "Journal," January 1, 1743, Works, 1:408.

42 J. Wesley, Journal, March 25, 1769, Works, 3:314.

including one which questioned Wesley's right to invade another man's parish. This provoked Wesley's famous response, "I look upon all the world as my parish."⁴³

The Wesleys actively sought to maintain a good relationship with former friends and the influential hierarchy of the Church in the early years of the Methodist movement. At that time, the two most influential Anglican leaders, John Potter, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and Edmund Gibson, first Bishop of London, were both well acquainted with John and Charles. Dr. Potter had ordained both of the Wesleys as deacons and John as priest, and he had been John's confidant during his Holy Club days as an Oxford student. The Wesleys were fortunate to retain Dr. Potter's good will as he was inclined to avoid fruitless controversies and emphasize, rather, personal spirituality. He remained sympathetic to the Wesleys noting, "You are irregular, but God bless you!"⁴⁴

Bishop Gibson was also well acquainted with the Wesleys having ordained Charles to the priesthood in 1735. It was with high hopes that John and Charles met with Gibson in latter 1738 in an attempt to obtain his acquiescence if not his approval to their vision of ministry. Several meetings followed marked by differing degrees of rapprochement. Of special concern to John Wesley was whether or not Gibson felt that home meetings were considered Conventicles and thus illegal. The work of the societies was centered in private homes and was in danger of running afoul of the Conventicle Act which forbade unofficial religious gatherings. Gibson sidestepped the issue at the time but eventually threw in with the opposition saying, "Why can't the Wesleys get out of

⁴³ J. Wesley, "Letter to James Hervey," March 20, 1749, The Rise of Methodism: A Source Book (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), Richard Cameron, ed., 281.

⁴⁴ John Potter, as quoted in Baker, J. Wesley and the Church of England, 88.

the church and do no more harm!"⁴⁵ Gibson finally declared in 1744 that even field-preaching was a violation of the Conventicle Act. In 1747, he came out with a forceful indictment charging:

There is another species of enemies who give shameful disturbance to the parochial Clergy, and use very unwarrantable methods to prejudice their people against them, and to seduce their flocks from them; the Methodists and Moravians, who agree in annoying the established ministry, and is drawing over to themselves the lowest and most ignorant of the people, by pretences to greater sanctity.⁴⁶

These pronouncements at the highest levels of institutional Anglicanism blocked the reforming zeal of the Wesleys from penetrating the Church and did much to turn opinion against them.

The question arises, though, that if there was this much opposition, why did not the church take some official action and excommunicate the Wesleys? The answer can partly be found in a letter written by John's older brother, the Rev. Samuel Wesley Jr., scholar and high churchman. In the month before his death in 1739, Samuel Jr. wrote his mother concerning John's activities. "As I told Jack, I am not afraid the church should excommunicate him - discipline is at too low an ebb - but that he should excommunicate the church."⁴⁷

The discipline he was referring to involved both the machinery of Anglicanism and the will to use it. Convocation, the official gathering of Church leaders for conducting Church business, had been suspended in 1717, and apart from one attempt in 1741, did not debate at all until 1852.⁴⁸ This did not please Gibson who greatly desired a convening of

⁴⁵ Edmund Gibson, as quoted in Baker, J. Wesley and the Church of England, 88.

⁴⁶ Edmund Gibson, "A Charge to the Clergy" (London, 1747), as quoted in Greene, Anti-Methodist Publications, 55.

⁴⁷ Samuel Wesley, "Letter," October 20, 1739, Original Letters by the Rev. John Wesley and his Friends, (Birmingham: Pearson, 1791) Joseph Priestly, ed., as quoted in Baker, J. Wesley and the Church of England, 58.

⁴⁸ Anthony Armstrong, The Church of England, Methodists, and Society, 1700-1850 (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973), 109.

church authority and subsequent action. Secker, the archbishop of Canterbury from 1758 to 1768, opposed this maneuver afraid that such a meeting would reveal divided opinion on the issue of Methodism and lead to an embarrassing stalemate. Apparently, there was a fear that the Wesleys had a sufficient number of silent sympathizers to leave the issue of official censure in doubt. Secker's tendency to avoid confrontation, though, is apparent from his 1738 "Charge to the Clergy."

For there is no Manner of need, that we should give either so much Advantage or so much Pleasure to the Adversaries of Religion, as to let them see those, who should be the joint-defenders of it, engaged in domestick Wars: and bringing such Charges, and railing such Prejudices, one against another, that it is hard to say, whether believing or disbelieving our mutual Accusations will make the World think worse of us.⁴⁹

Simon feels that the bishops purposively adopted a policy of "masterly inaction." "If they had stopped his [Wesley's] 'irregularities,' he would have snapped the link that bound him to the Church." In this view, the ecclesiastical authorities were "too wise" to bring him under discipline.

In lieu of any official act of a church council or convocation, the opponents of Methodism made numerous attempts to utilize the existing available legal tools at their disposal in blocking the spread of Methodism. Attempts were made in many areas of the country to curtail the activities of Methodist preachers and societies by invoking the penal provisions of the Uniformity Laws, and in 1791 this reactionary policy was endorsed by an act of Parliament affirming that earlier legislation prescribing regular Anglican practice 'should still be in force and executed.'⁵⁰

49 Thomas Secker, "The Charge of Thomas Lord Bishop of Oxford to the Clergy of his Diocese, in His Primary Visitation 1738" (London: John Rivington, 1758), 30.

50 John Simon, The Revival of Religion in England in the Eighteenth Century (New York: Eaton and Mains, n.d.), 288.

51 Parliamentary Papers (1865), 1:128, as quoted in A.D. Gilbert, Religion and Society in Industrial England (New York: Longman, 1976), 78.

The Conventicle Acts of 1664 and 1670 were powerful weapons of the government against non-conformity and were in effect throughout John Wesley's lifetime. The 1664 Act declared that if any person over the age of sixteen shall be "present at any unlawful assembly, conventicle or meeting, under colour or pretence of any exercise of religion; that every person so offending, and lawfully convicted, shall be committed to prison without bail, till they shall conform and yield themselves to come to church."⁵² It further specified a conventicle as being "any exercise of religion in other manner than is allowed by the liturgy or practice of the Church of England" where "there shall be five persons or more assembled together, over and above those of the same household."⁵³ It was duly noted that:

...every person who shall wittingly and willingly suffer any such conventicle, unlawful assembly or meeting aforesaid to be held in his or her house, outhouse, barn or room, yard or backside, woods or grounds, shall incur the same penalties and forfeitures as any other offender against this Act ought to incur.⁵⁴

The first Conventicle Act of 1664 had a three year time limit after which it expired. Realizing that this legislation had failed in stamping out religious dissent, Parliament enacted a new act in 1670 which had no time limitation. The 1670 Act contained all the same restrictions as the old one but added several new stipulations which would increase its oppressive capabilities. The location clause of a conventicle was enlarged to include houses, fields, or places "where there is no family inhabiting."⁵⁵ Imprisonment, banishment and execution were eliminated from the lists of punishments and, instead, a system of fines and seizures was instituted. The fines of poor people

52 Conventicle Act of 1664, as quoted in John S. Simon, "The Conventicle Act and its Relation to the Early Methodists," Journal of the Wesley Historical Society (1917), 11:86.

53 Ibid., 87.

54 Ibid.

55 Conventicle Act of 1670, Ibid., 88.

or preachers that fled the scene would be borne by the other convicted attendees to a maximum of 10 pounds. Justices and magistrates were empowered to issue warrants to constables, head boroughs, and tithing men "with what aid, force, and assistance they shall think fit, for the better execution of this Act to go to any house or other place where they shall be informed any conventicle is or shall be held."⁵⁶ Furthermore, it allowed any local authority to react to an impending conventicle and if:

...he, with such assistance as he can get together, is not able to dissolve it, then the other sheriffs and other ministers of justice named shall and may and are hereby enjoined to repair unto the place where such meetings are so held, or to be held, and by the best means they can to dissolve, dissipate, or prevent all such unlawful meetings....⁵⁷

In the opinion of John Simon, this particular clause "was the exciting cause of many of the disgraceful riots in which preachers were assaulted and dragged before magistrates and private houses were battered and wrecked."⁵⁸ These uniformity laws were more than mere 17th Century fossils. As late as 1791 Parliament affirmed their existence and enforcement. It is no wonder that its worrisome presence should be a central topic of discussion in Wesley's earliest discussions with Bishop Gibson.

There were exceptions to the Conventicle Act which exempted dissenters who were willing to register with the authorities. The place of such a meeting was to be "certified to the bishop" and "registered in the said bishop's or archdeacon's court" and a certificate issued for the sum of sixpence.⁵⁹ To the Wesleys, however, registering as a

56 Ibid., 90.

57 Ibid., 90.

58 John Simon, "The Conventicle Act," 88.

59 "An Act for Exempting their Majesties Protestant Subjects, Dissenting from the Church of England, from the Penalties of certain laws," (May 24, 1689), as quoted in Simon, "The Conventicle Act," 91.

dissenter was anathema as they steadfastly proclaimed their loyalty to the Church of England. This was an ironic and self-defeating predicament. As long as they professed their loyalty to the mother-church they were liable to legal persecution. As soon as they would declare in opposition, they would be protected. When the storm of persecution under the Conventicle Act finally broke upon the Methodists in force, Wesley had to abandon his position. On November 3, 1787, he notes:

I had a long conversation with Mr. Clulow on that execrable Act, called the Conventicle Act. After consulting the Act of Toleration...we were both clearly convinced that it was the safest way to license all our chapels, and all our Travelling Preachers, not as Dissenters but simply 'preachers of the gospel'....⁶⁰

Not only did the Methodists have to bear the opposition of the clerical authorities, they also had to deal with considerable hostility from the gentry as well. This would include squires and landowners, magistrates and justices, and other propertied "gentlemen." Their opposition was at times implicit and sometimes overt in the Wednesbury riots. Generally, they had little sympathy for the Methodists. A diary account of James Jones of Wednesbury records:

...some of the gentlemen who had set the mob to work, or threatened to turn away collier or miner out of their service, that did not come and do his part, now drew up a paper for those of the society to sign, importing, that they would never invite or receive any Methodist Preacher more. On this condition, they told them they would stop the mob at once; otherwise they must take what followed."

John Wesley clearly suspected this particular group to be responsible for much of the opposition he and his people faced. Numerous journal entries refer to the role or presence of "gentlemen" in mob action (May 7, 1743; July 3, 1745; June 13, 1763). One entry states directly that "when the gentry would neither head nor pay the mob anymore, the poor

60 J. Wesley, Journal, November 3, 1787, Works, 4:403.

61 James Jones, diary account, February 6, 1744, as quoted in J. Wesley, "Journal," February 18, 1744, Works, 1:452-3.

rabble were quiet as lambs."⁶² Henry Moore, Wesley's early biographer claims, "The lower orders of the people would never become riotous on account of religion, were they not excited to it under false pretenses by persons who have some influence over them and who endeavor to keep behind the scene."⁶³ This would include the clergy as well, yet it would be proper to note with Bready that, "Throughout most of the 18th Century at least two-thirds of the parish clergy were at the mercy of lay patrons who controlled their livings."⁶⁴ Perhaps much of this clerical antagonism towards the Methodist movement could also be laid at the feet of these "gentlemen" landowners and squires whom the clergy were anxious to please. Gilbert writes that these "arbiters of local culture and social behavior" sought to mitigate "the unwelcome consequences of Whig policies" and limit "the spread of voluntarist attitudes towards religious behaviour."⁶⁵ This close relationship between church and local authority was, in the long term, harmful to the Church. Gilbert concludes:

The history of the previous 200 years had left the parochial system of the Hanoverian Church almost totally dependent on the patronage of a class whose position, based on landed wealth and inherited political influence, was to come under mounting pressure from alternative economic and political forces.⁶⁶

While the Methodists placed a great deal of responsibility for the Staffordshire riots on the encouragement of the local authorities, it is quite apparent that this was not always the case across the country. Quoting from Methodist literature, John Walsh states:

62 John Wesley, "Journal," as quoted in John Walsh, "Methodism and the Mob in the 18th Century," G.J. Cuming and Derek Baker, eds., Popular Belief and Practice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 217.

63 H. Moore, The Life of the Rev. John Wesley (London, 1825), 2:269, as quoted in Walsh, "Methodism and the Mob," 216.

64 Bready, England: Before and After Wesley, 208.

65 Gilbert, Religion and Society in Industrial England, 13.

66 Ibid.

By no means all those who engaged in the harassment of Methodists were hirelings and mercenaries, or acting merely out of deference to social superiors. Mobbing might take place against the wishes of the local landlord - as with the crowd that dared to disturb worship at Lady Huntingdon's house in Ashby de la Zouch; or against the will of the parish minister - as with the enraged men who prevented Wesley from walking up to the pulpit of his friend John Milner of Chipping.⁶⁷

Methodist literature also plainly acknowledges times and places when the legal authorities did come to their defense. John Whitehead, the composer of Wesley's eulogy and early biographer, records:

The rioters in Bristol, who had long disturbed the Methodists, being emboldened by impunity, were so increased as to fill, not only the court, but a considerable part of the street. The mayor sent them an order to disperse: but they set him at defiance. At length he sent several of his officers, who took the ringleaders into custody. The next day they were brought into court, it being the time of the quarter-sessions. There they received a severe reprimand, and the Methodists were molested no more.⁶⁸

Armstrong also characterizes much of the violence as being "without any kind of religious explanation. It is the horseplay of an ignorant crowd in search of sport, a crowd inadequately controlled by the creaking machinery of law and order."⁶⁹ Church writes, "More than once in the middle of a mobbing, they turned on their own leaders and ducked them in the pond with the rest."⁷⁰

One possible rationale for the hostility of the magistrates is offered by Armstrong. He suggests the rather circular argument that they could have reacted out of ignorant fear that "the presence of Methodist preachers in a town offered for some years the possibility that order could not be maintained."⁷¹ He offers as evidence Wesley's

67 Walsh, "Methodism and the Mob in the 18th Century," 221.

68 John Whitehead, The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A., Some Time Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford (London: Stephen Couchman, 1796), reprinted by J. McLeish (Boston: 1844), 2:81.

69 Armstrong, The Church of England, the Methodists and Society, 106.

70 Church, More About Early Methodist People, 64.

71 Ibid.

encounter with the two justices who had issued an arrest order and then refused to see him when he was apprehended. Armstrong suggests that their public "wanted poster" was merely an attempt to scare off the Methodist preachers from appearing. This does not, however, explain the justice in Wednesbury who was convinced that Methodists were "the vilest men alive."

Besides the opposition of clergy and gentry, a mutually antagonistic relationship with the theatre seems to have developed as well. As early as 1740, Charles Wesley records his lodgings being besieged by "those sons of Belial, the players" who threatened to burn his house down and murder him. He noted that "the ground of their quarrel with me is this, that the Gospel has starved them," and so he infers (or claims?) that the religious revival had destroyed their business.⁷² A similar accusation was made by George Whitefield who described the activities of the Methodist preacher Howell Harris in Wales who "made it his business to go to wakes, etc., to turn people from such lying vanities. Many alehouse people, fiddlers, harpers etc., (Demetrius-like) sadly cry out against him for spoiling their business."⁷³

A play by Israel Pottinger in 1761 entitled "The Methodist, A Comedy" perhaps best reveals the relationship between Methodism and the established Theatre. A satiric song sung by Dr. Squintum (a sobriquet given to Whitefield because of his dramatic squint) offers this parody of Methodist attitudes:

I
Ye pious servants that resort
Where Faith a precious harvest yields,
Who sweetly grunt at Tottenham-Court,
Or loudly snivel at Moorfields.

⁷² Charles Wesley, The Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley, intr. by Thomas Jackson (London, 1849), 1:261, as quoted in Walsh, "Methodism and the Mob," 220-1.

⁷³ George Whitefield, Whitefield's Journals, (Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1960), 229, as quoted in Walsh, "Methodism and the Mob," 220.

II

In me securely put your Trust,
And I shall still direct your Ways;
But then you must renounce the Lust,
The fond Desire of seeing Plays.

III

For Satan in this wicked Age
Employs the Force of all his Arts,
And makes that cursed Place the Stage,
A Bait to snap up Human Hearts.

IV

To see an idle Fellow play,
The giddy town unthinking runs;
Who leads our Daughters all astray,
And hurts the Morals of our Sons.

V

Three Shillings! what a sum you pay,
A single Play with Ease to see;
When half the Money will defray
Three Months Expense in hearing me.⁷⁴

It appears that this was the product of a deteriorating relationship in which both sides contributed freely.

On the other extreme of the social spectrum, Methodists at times encountered opposition from dissenters. Though many took a distinct interest in Methodism and even invited Methodist preachers into their pulpits, a significant number of dissenters took severe exception to Methodism. Some even appeared in a few English and Irish mobs attacking the Methodists. Dissenters were separated from the Methodists by theological differences stemming from some Calvinistic strictures and also by their view of evangelism. They believed in presenting a winsome and orderly scene that would draw people to faith. R. W. Dale writes:

They did not deny the possibility of sudden conversion; but they were unfamiliar with it. They found it hard to believe that a man might go into a Methodist meeting a swearer and a drunkard, and be 'born again,' and 'find peace,' and rejoice in 'the full assurance' of his salvation, before the meeting broke up.⁷⁵

Simon writes, "The Dissenters were conscious and careful of their 'respectability,' and, in their view, the Methodists were vulgar,

⁷⁴ Pottinger, "The Methodist, A Comedy," 1761, as quoted in Lyles, Methodism Mocked, 162.

⁷⁵ R.W. Dale, History of English Congregationalism, 583-4, as quoted in Simon, Revival of Religion, 284.

violent, and illiterate."⁷⁶ The dissenters may also have feared for their own tenuous minority status and did not want any new group to upset the delicate balance.

Further complicating the tides of opposition was the frequent divisiveness which Methodism itself introduced within families. One report credits in part the outbreak of violence in Wednesbury in 1744 to "a local man, who had missed his wife for some days, had found her with a favorite preacher at a Methodist meeting."⁷⁷ Feeding this division was the liability imposed by the Conventicle Acts upon husbands for any fines incurred by a married woman found present at a conventicle.

Wesley describes in his journal a public confrontation concerning another husband finding his wife in a Methodist meeting. The husband entered "like a madman, and swore he would be the death of her." After days of much familial distress and prayer by the concerned, the husband repented and "now ran to his wife, not to kill her, but to catch her in his arms, that they might praise God, and weep over one another with tears of joy and love."⁷⁸ While this conflict was settled happily enough, it can be safely assumed many others were not which produced a literal fulfillment to the prophecy of Luke 12:51-3: "Suppose ye that I came to send peace upon earth? I tell you nay, but rather division. For from henceforth there shall be five divided in one house; three against two, and two against three." Indeed; the estrangement of families over the issue of Methodism is a recurring theme among Methodist biographers.

The whole scene of the Methodist revival was thus marked by conflict of varying degrees and among various strata as well as by

76 Simon, Revival of Religion, 285.

77 "Some Papers Giving an Account of the Rise and Progress of Methodism in Wednesbury" (London, 1744), 21-22, as quoted in Walsh, "Methodism and the Mob," 223.

78 J. Wesley, "Journal," June 12, 1763, Works, 3:138.

remarkable conversions which tamed notorious heathens. Methodists acclaimed how the peace of Christ was made real to restless souls, but deep societal conflict was also a continuous reality. Opposition could be destructive and vengeful as when both house and living could be suddenly destroyed by a roving mob. Bodily injury oftentimes resulted from mob actions and some fatalities were recorded. While these were usually the work of ruffians and lower class citizens, it is unlikely that they could have acted so spontaneously at times or so freely at others without the support or tacit approval of the local authorities both civil and clerical. The statements and actions implicating these authorities are, in many cases, clear and documentable. Methodism did have friends and sympathizers in high places, but the opposition among this group was far more active and vocal. Articulate attacks in the press, in tracts, and in sermons were pointed, abusive, and quite often scathingly perverse. The theatre especially enjoyed mocking Methodism in no uncertain terms. Strong legal strictures were available and in many cases exercised against Methodists in the form of fines and seizures.

All of these active persecutions took place at a time when established dissent was otherwise enjoying a time of relative peace and the protection of law. The advent of Methodism was, thus, sharply noted by the established culture. Those who did not flock to its banner were often inclined to be violently opposed. Methodism was a polarizing force that either attracted or repulsed with equal intensity. The tension was both explosive and persistent.

Gordon Rupp describes the growth of Methodism in a graphic manner that seems almost more apropos in portraying the conflict and opposition that Methodism encountered:

What went on is better described by the image of the volcanic region of Rotorua in New Zealand. Below the surface in unceasing ferment. Today a hot spring or a pool of boiling mud may appear at your door, tomorrow others

arise half a mile away, and always there is steam in the air and an acrid smell about the place.⁷⁹

The following chapters will attempt to examine some of the 'steam and smell' surrounding this conflict by first of all looking for ways in which Methodism broke old and cherished traditions with powerful new innovations.

⁷⁹ Gordon Rupp, Religion in England (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 399.

Chapter 2

Methodism as Liberator

"he hath sent me...to set at liberty them that are bruised."

-Jesus (Luke 4:18)

These words of Jesus are part of the text which John Wesley took for his first experience in field preaching. Wesley, like Jesus, did not in any way preach about political or economic liberty in that sermon but rather spoke to the spiritual needs of a people oppressed by sin and the bondage of fear. The message of Methodism was one of salvation from the wages of sin and escape from 'the wrath to come.' Leslie Church maintains that the Methodists "proclaimed a freedom of the spirit as opposed to the bondage of an organization."¹ It was this freedom of spirit that created a liberating movement for many in matters of religious faith and practice. To explore some of the ways this freedom expressed itself and liberated many from the old forms and ways of Anglican orthodoxy is the object of this chapter.

It is plainly paradoxical. in a sense, to frame a discussion of Methodism and religious liberty in that John Wesley wielded autocratic

¹ Leslie Church, The Early Methodist People (London: Epworth Press, 1948), 2.

power over the organization he formed virtually up until his death. In this, Wesley was clear and unashamed. In his eighty-seventh year he wrote:

As long as I live, the people shall have no share in choosing either stewards or leaders among the Methodists. We have not, and never had, any such custom. We are no republicans and never intend to be.²

In the small bands and select societies where Methodists exercised extreme self-scrutiny, all forms of sins and secrets were to be divulged. Thus, Lecky caustically observes:

The members sometimes passed the whole night in the most passionate devotions, and voluntarily submitted to a spiritual tyranny that could hardly be surpassed in a Catholic monastery.³

Methodism was built upon voluntary membership in para-church societies organized and ruled by John Wesley. He remained the revered and unquestioned head of these groups until his death in 1791. Such a leadership style was unquestionably autocratic yet the structure he created afforded new freedoms for religious life and experience not available within the Anglican church. He set the limits, rules, and procedures, but they were of a far more liberal character in several important respects than those of the established Church. This paper will concern itself with exploring five of these provisions in which Methodism:

1. Created a precedent and rationale for preaching with feeling and conviction in a way that directly challenged old conceptions of style.
2. Removed the restrictions of the parish system through the institution of field preaching.
3. Allowed for a much greater expression of the emotional side of faith.

² John Wesley, "Letter to Mr. John Mason," January 13, 1790, The Works of John Wesley, (England: Wesleyan Conference Edition, 1872), 12:455.

³ W.E.H. Lecky, A History of England in the Eighteenth Century (New York: D. Appleton and Co.), 2:608.

4. Encouraged the full and contemporary expression of faith through music.
5. Successfully defended itself against the old reproach and castigation of 'religious enthusiasm.'

Other aspects of Methodism may also be seen as 'liberating,' but this study will limit itself to a study of these five themes. Just how innovative these measures were will be seen through the response of various critics within the established Church who took serious note of these developments.

John Wesley viewed himself not as a revolutionary bent on destruction but rather as a reformer attempting to bring a much-loved church back to the original New Testament intent and focus as he saw it. In this sense, the Methodists were traditionalists only in that they were looking back to a tradition which predated that of the Anglican Church. In so doing, they broke a host of contemporary molds which had encrusted the Anglican Church. This gave the Methodists the appearance of either innovative reformers or schismatic scoundrels, all depending upon one's perspective.

One of the first traditions to be broken was the style or manner of pulpit delivery that had become so familiar to Anglican tradition. Typically, sermons were highly polished pieces of rational and scholastic rhetoric that were read verbatim. Many sermons were of someone else's construction and simply borrowed or else delivered at the instruction of a higher authority.⁴ Methodism's founding fathers, George Whitefield and John and Charles Wesley, were to begin a new tradition that not only would result in a highly extemporaneous style but one that was colored by emotional language and dramatic gestures. These changes did not go unnoticed or without criticism.

John Wesley's preaching engendered some opposition even before his 'burning bush' experience at Aldersgate. On February 15, 1738, two old

⁴ R.A. Knox, Enthusiasm, A Chapter in the History of Religion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 514.

friends, Clayton and Byrom, heard him preach in Manchester and responded with letters admonishing him. Clayton writes: "Your using no notes, and so very much action...has established your reputation for...ostentation...and prodigious singularities." Byrom urged him to cut his hair and to curb his "action and vehement emphasis."⁵ Rupp cautions, "It is important to note that well before 24 May (1738) John Wesley's preaching was such that he was banned from several City churches."⁶ Historian Albert Lyles also notes:

Even before the Methodist leaders, George Whitefield and John Wesley, embarked in 1739 upon the precedent of preaching in the fields in direct violation of the Conventicle Act, they inspired a flood of attacks, satiric and non-satiric, which, although it abated occasionally, was to continue into the nineteenth century.⁷

In 1759, John Downes urged the expulsion of all Methodist clergy from the church and offered the following criteria for identifying those suspected of Methodist tendencies or sympathies.

I am not ignorant upon what weak and slender Grounds a Suspicion of that sort is apt to be founded.--Sometimes a Preacher unhappily incurs it by his Voice, Manner, Gestures, Pronunciation, nay, even by his very Countenance. --Sometimes by the Pathos of his Stile, and the Vehemency of his Address. ...But then sometimes again, he brings it upon himself; as by heaping Scripture upon Scripture, either foreign to his Subject, or unconnected with his Matter; by a studied and more frequent Repetition, or hackneyed use of the adorable name of Jesus, than is either prudent or decent; by being fond of rapturous Expressions, and high Flights of Piety, soaring quite beyond the Regions of Reason and Common Sense.⁸

This gives a fair indication of the powerful sense of tradition which had evolved which dictated that an acceptable eighteenth century sermon should be delivered with little show of emotion, preferably read rather than preached, and be based on rational argument. This practice even

5 Gordon Rupp, Religion in England, 1688-1791 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 356.

6 Ibid., 356.

7 Albert Lyles, Methodism Mocked (London: Epworth Press, 1960), 15.

8 John Downes, "Methodism Examined and Disposed" (London: 1759), quoted in Albert Lyles, Methodism Mocked, 22.

prompted Oliver Goldsmith, a firm supporter and son of the Anglican Church, to hold the clergy very much responsible for the low state of morals and manners of English commoners because of the inert oratory coming from the pulpits. Complaining in 1759, he writes:

The vulgar of England are, without exception, the most barbarous and the most unknowing of any in Europe. A great part of their ignorance may be chiefly ascribed to their teachers, who with the most petty gentlemanlike serenity, deliver their cool discourses, and address the reason of men, who have never reasoned in all their lives. ...The spruce [wooden] preacher reads his lucubration without lifting his nose from the text, and never ventures to earn the shame of an enthusiast."⁹

Goldsmith speculated openly at what happy and wise results would flow if only the learned and gentlemen clergy would "testify the same fervor, and entreat their hearers" as well as the Methodists did. While he admired their oratorical sincerity, Goldsmith had otherwise little patience with the Methodists. He thought that they were seldom "embued with common sense" or "even the meanest share of understanding."¹⁰

Goldsmith sadly concluded, though, that the average Anglican clergyman would not jeopardize his good living and position to pursue his mission to 'improve society' with a little of the same passion as exhibited by the Methodists.

...he will hardly, therefore, venture all this to be called, perhaps, an enthusiast; nor will he depart from customs established by the brotherhood, when by such a conduct, he only singles himself out for their contempt.¹¹

William Hogarth satirically mirrors these sentiments by portraying a lifeless Anglican service in "The Sleeping Congregation" (illustration

⁹ Oliver Goldsmith, The Miscellaneous Works of Oliver Goldsmith, James Pryor, ed. (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen, and Haffelfinger, 1875), 1:128.

¹⁰ Ibid., 130.

¹¹ Ibid., 132.



Illustration 3.1

2.1).¹² The cleric has put everyone to sleep with his text, "Come unto me all ye that Labour and are Heavy Laden, and I shall give you Rest (Matthew 11.28)." The clerk remains awake in order to ogle a young girl who holds a prayer book open at the service "Of Matrimony." Words inscribed upon the pulpit declare, "I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain (Galatians 4:11)" indicating a superior or patronizing attitude of the clergy.

By contrast, the typical Methodist sermon, as it evolved, was extemporaneous with dramatic highlights of emotional language and direct appeals to the audience. Lecky records:

It was their main object, by gesture, by look, by the constant use of the singular pronoun, to preach so that each member of the congregation might imagine the whole force of the denunciations or of the pleadings of the preacher was directed individually to himself.¹³

On one occasion, Whitefield asked a negro congregation whether they wanted to go to heaven. The audience became amused when one old negro answered audibly, "Yes, sir." Afterwards, the old man explained, "The gentleman put the question once or twice till at last he seemed to point to me, and I was ashamed that nobody should answer him, and therefore I did."¹⁴ Charles Wesley, whose journals describe his transition to extemporaneous speaking,¹⁵ describes a similar incident:

I was convincing the natural man of sin, when a poor sinner cried out vehemently, "What do you mean by looking at me, and directing yourself to me, and telling me I shall be damned?" I did then address myself to him; but he hurried away with the utmost precipitation.¹⁶

¹² William Hogarth, "The Sleeping Congregation," Hogarth: The Complete Engravings, Joseph Burke and Colin Caldwell, eds. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., n.d.), 164.

¹³ Lecky, A History of England, 2:619.

¹⁴ Ibid., 2:619-620.

¹⁵ John R. Tyson, ed., Charles Wesley, A Reader (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 15-16.

¹⁶ Charles Wesley, Journal, July 16, 1740, as quoted in Charles Wesley, A Reader, J.R. Tyson, ed., 188.

This direct approach was considered pandering to the 'great vulgar,' and satirists took great delight in characterizing Methodist preachers in extreme shades of calculated knavery. One such satirist pictures the instruction of Methodist preachers at the Foundery, Wesley's London Chapel:

In holy Go-Carts there, by due Degrees,
They're taught to snivel, groan, cant, whine, and wheeze,
Heart-melting Tones of wheedling Intercession,
Boanergy, on Mobs to make Impression;
Stage-Tricks, to fill the gloomy Soul with Fear,
And wring from Guilt a Shilling, and a Tear.¹⁷

Hogarth does not pass up the opportunity to satirize the Methodists as he richly serves up an engraving in 1762 entitled "Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism." (illustration 2.2)¹⁸ Instead of a sleeping congregation, Hogarth presents us with a circus-like spectacle. The preacher, modelled on George Whitefield, has a harlequin's outfit underneath his gown symbolizing the entertainer turned clergyman but still given to trickery and subterfuge. The text is "I speak as a fool!" from 2 Corinthians 11:23. (Whitefield was indeed the most colorful and forceful of all the Methodist preachers and was known to stamp loudly and passionately and to weep 'exceedingly' to the point of making his recovery a matter of doubt.)¹⁹ The use of puppets can be seen as the manipulation of biblical characters as rhetorical tools to play upon the emotions. The hourglass of the Anglican service has been replaced by a thermometer which indicates the temperature of the audience in terms of the emotional effect the speaker desires to generate. Its ambient reading is 'luke warm' and ranges upwards through 'lust' and 'convulsive fits' and likewise downwards through 'agony, despair, and suicide.' The artist strongly implies that the Methodists

17 Lyles, Methodism Mocked, 74.

18 William Hogarth, "Enthusiasm Delineated," Joseph Burke and Colin Caldwell, eds., Hogarth: The Complete Engravings, 253.

19 Lecky, A History of England, 2:619.



Illustration 3.2

measured their speaking success by the amount of frenzy they could induce in their audience. A more charitable interpretation would ascribe an effort on the part of the speaker to hold his audience in a sense of dialogue. The clerical wig is seeing flying off because of the animation of the speaker revealing the hair style of a Jesuit, thus equating Methodists and Catholics according to a popular prejudice of the time. The angel is from the Stanza d'Elidoro in the vatican and provides a convenient prompting to remember the collection, a standard jibe picturing Methodists as shysters. The congregation represent a cross section of some notorious cases of delusion and emotionalism. The woman fallen in a convulsion fit is offered a mouthpiece and is giving birth to rabbits in reference to Mary Tofts. In 1726, Mrs. Tofts caused a sensation by claiming to have given birth to a number of rabbits at the rate of one a day. Eminent doctors from London came to verify the event and the publicity caused a temporary decline in the consumption of rabbits and hares at the dinner table. The poor woman eventually confessed to fraud. At the window, a Muslim peers in with amusement to see such a scene of Christian piety and disorder.²⁰

It would be unfair to accept this characterization uncritically and to picture early Methodist preachers as bellowing beasts foaming at the mouth who took great delight in generating scenes of emotional confusion. On the first point, John Wesley continuously asserted his opposition to excessive ranting and emphasized plain language and plain speech. A letter reproving a fellow preacher gives adequate insight.

Scream no more, at the peril of your soul. God now warns you by me, whom he has set over you. Speak as earnestly as you can; but do not scream. Speak with all your heart; but with a moderate voice. ...I often speak loud; often vehemently; but I never scream; I never strain myself. I dare not: I know it would be a sin against God and my own soul.²¹

20 Burke and Caldwell, "Notes on the Plates," Hogarth: The Complete Engravings, no. 252.

21 Wesley, "Letter to John King," July 28, 1775, Works, 12:331.

But speaking vehemently with all of one's heart was evidently revolutionary enough to evoke astonishment and censure of the church clergy. Not all clergy were totally opposed to some changes in style. Thomas Secker, the Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote in a 1766 charge to his clergy some extensive instructions on sermon delivery. Urging them to speak loud enough to be heard, he writes:

...speaking too low argues indolence and indifference; whereas an audible exertion is a mark of earnestness: and the common people are peculiarly pleased, when their minister appears to take pains about them.²²

These remarks may be taken to indicate that Secker was well aware of the problem that Goldsmith identified earlier. The date may reflect the sense of competition which the Methodists had injected onto the scene by that time. It is also interesting to note Secker's observation on the responsiveness of the common people to some degree of energy on the part of the speaker. Perhaps, this, more than anything else marks the difference that made Methodist preachers so threatening to the established order. It appears that in that traditional hierarchial society, the "people" were to be addressed as a passive, subordinate objects who were to listen obediently. The Methodists addressed them more as individuals in dialogue, hence more as equals, where communication was judged as ineffective if there was not some cognizant sign that the message had been received as is signaled by the 'thermometer' in Hogarth's print. Language was used not as a means of separating the learned from the unlearned but as a tool whose usefulness was honed by the restraints of commonality. If the words were not in common usage among common people, such words were not to be used. The common people responded in alarming numbers with uncommon zeal. Religious sermonizing was suddenly freed from the hindrances of social tradition to become a real and viable force in the life of common

²² Thomas Secker, "A Bishop's Charge to His Clergy," Works of Thomas Secker (Edinburgh: Printed for James Dickson, 1792), 4:200.

English people. Perfunctory speeches were replaced by informative and life challenging messages. The Methodist preachers were not interested in conformity but rather confrontation. Whitefield's favorite maxim was that "a preacher, whenever he entered the pulpit, should look upon it as the last time he might preach, and the last time his people might hear."²³ It is no wonder that these populist preachers evoked such criticism from the clergy and the local gentry. The Methodists had become loose canons upon the social and ecclesiastical decks. The remarkable success that they enjoyed in gathering a following only magnified the problem.

Their popularity was especially alarming when Whitefield and the Wesleys took their message into the open fields thereby bypassing the traditional parish system that gave local clergy a monopoly upon all proselytizing within a community. On Saturday, February 17, 1739, George Whitefield, frustrated with the lack of access to local pulpits, visited the Kingswood colliers. He stood upon a 'mount' (small hill) and preached to upwards of two hundred people who gathered about. Kingswood, a close neighbor to Bristol, was the scene of rapid growth in the coal mining industry as coal was discovered in a broad belt under an old forest. When Whitefield visited, thousands of colliers lived within the boundaries of the former woodlands and had generated a largely lawless culture similar to that found in any boom-town mining camp. Simon writes that they were the terror of Bristol especially in times of unemployment and high bread prices. It was then that the colliers were known to have marched into town which "caused a shudder among the shopkeepers, and stirred the civic authorities into wild activity."²⁴ Malcolmson, in fact, concludes that "the Kingswood colliers may well

²³George Whitefield, as quoted by Lecky, A History of England, 619.

²⁴ John S. Simon, Revival of Religion in England in the Eighteenth Century (New York: Eaton and Mains, n.d.), 206.

have been the most rebellious group of labouring men in the country between the 1720s and the 1750s."²⁵

No church or school were to be found in Kingswood which points out the tendency of the Anglican Church to lag behind in reaching out to newly developing centers of population. It is known, however, that prior to Whitefield's indiscretion, a Mr. Morgan, described as "a serious and awakened (Anglican) clergyman," took pity upon the condition of the people and preached to them in the fields. Mr. Morgan subsequently joined the Quakers, though, and became well known in Bristol among the "Friends."²⁶

Mr. Morgan's venture into the fields presented little challenge to the system, however, as he was operating within his own parish territory. Whitefield had no such authority and, in fact, was waiting out an application for a license to preach in the diocese. A brief interlude of permission to speak in some churches in Bristol resulted in exclusion from those churches and threats of suspension and excommunication. After some correspondence with the Bishop of Bristol, Whitefield "...saw clearly that he must set his face in the direction of the Religious Societies, and of field preaching."²⁷ Returning to Kingswood, he preached some twenty times to ever increasing numbers of colliers and significant numbers of people from Bristol. Gentleman's Magazine describes one such scene where Whitefield preached at Hanham Mount to five or six thousand people. That evening, he moved on a half mile to "the Common" where "the plains around were crowded with so great a multitude of coaches, foot and horsemen, that they covered three

25 Robert W. Malcolmson, "'A set of ungovernable people': the Kingswood colliers in the eighteenth century," John Brewer and John Styles, eds., An Ungovernable People (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1980), 89.

26 Ibid., 206.

27 Ibid., 207.

acres, and were computed at twenty thousand people."²⁸ Criticism was not long in arriving as an April 19th edition of Common Sense contained the charge:

If one man like Mr. Whitefield should have it in his power, by his preaching, to detain five or six thousand of the vulgar from their labour, what a loss in a little time may this bring to the public! For my part, I shall expect to hear of a prodigious rise in the price of coals about the city of Bristol, if this gentleman proceeds with his charitable lectures to the colliers of Kingswood.²⁹

By this time, Whitefield had left his entire following in the hands of the Wesley brothers. On April 2, 1739, the day of Whitefield's departure, John Wesley "submitted to be more vile (outrageous), and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining to the city, to about three thousand people." His text was:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor. He hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted; to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind: To set at liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.³⁰

Dr. Joseph Trapp, a London minister, was quick to respond to the work of Whitefield and Wesley and expressed his umbrage over the precedent of field preaching:

But for a clergyman of the Church of England to pray and preach in the fields in the country, or in the streets in the city, is perfectly new, never heard of before; a fresh honour to the blessed age, in which we ... live. To pray, preach, and sing psalms in the streets and fields is worse, if possible, than intruding into pulpits by downright violence and breach of the peace.... I ... am quite ashamed to speak upon a subject which is a shame and reproach, not only to our Church and country, but to human nature itself. Can it promote the Christian religion, to turn it into riot, tumult, and confusion?--to make it ridiculous and contemptible, and expose it to the scorn and scoffs of

28 Gentleman's Magazine, 1739, 162.

29 Common Sense, 19 April 1739, quoted in Luke Tyreman, Life of George Whitefield (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1890), 1:194.

30 J. Wesley, Journal, April 2, 1739, Works, 1:185, (Scripture reference: Luke 4:18-19).

infidels and atheists? ...Go not after these impostors and seducers; but shun them as you would the plague.³¹

Dr. Trapp adequately represented the opinion of church leaders who reacted sharply to the precedent which flouted the age old parish system. Every true minister of the gospel was required to have a license to preach from the Bishop of the diocese as well as the permission of the local parish incumbent. Cameron notes that field preaching "was a grievous offense, because that (parish) system was basic to the Establishment."³² Just weeks before Wesley's first field sermon, he had already addressed the parish question in answering a critical letter on that account from James Hervey, a former member of the Holy Club.

God in Scripture commands me, according to my power, to instruct the ignorant, reform the wicked, confirm the virtuous. Man forbids me to do this in another's parish: that is, in effect, to do it at all; seeing I have now no parish of my own, nor probably ever shall. Whom, then, shall I hear, God or man? ...I look upon all the world as my parish....³³

Later, in 1747, Wesley passionately relayed his burden for lost souls as reason for violating the parish boundaries at Moorfields.

Our one aim is, to proselyte sinners. If this be not done, we will stand condemned; not as well meaning fools, but as devils incarnate.... There are, in and near Moorfields, ten thousand poor souls, for whom Christ dies, rushing headlong into hell. Is Dr. Bulkeley, the parochial minister, both willing and able to stop them: If so, let it be done, and I have no place in these parts. I go, and call other sinners to repentance. But if, after all that he has done, and all he can do, they are still in the broad way to destruction, let me see if God will put a word even in my mouth. My lord, the time is short.³⁴

31 Joseph Trapp, "The Nature, Folly, Sin, and Danger of being Righteous Over-Much," quoted in Tyreman, Life of George Whitefield, 1:210.

32 Richard Cameron, The Rise of Methodism: A Source Book (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), 226.

33 J.Wesley, "Letter to James Hervey," March 20, 1749, as quoted in Cameron, The Rise of Methodism, 281.

34 J.Wesley, "Letter to the Bishop of London," Works, 8:494.

The clergy were not the only ones concerned about the specter of field preaching as numerous civil authorities feared any unauthorized public gathering involving religion. A grand jury of Brecon County called for the suppression of such meetings (very possible under the Conventicle Acts) in September of 1744.

...it being too well known that there are several ...illegal Field and other Meetings of Persons, styl'd Methodists, whose Preachers pretend to expound the holy Scriptures by Vertue of Inspiration, by which Means they collect together great Numbers of disorderly Persons, very much endangering the Peace of our Sovereign Lord the King; which Proceedings, unless timely suppress'd may endanger the Peace of the Kingdom in general....³⁵

There is no doubt that field preaching was absolutely unconventional and a direct challenge to the Conventicle Acts. It was a noisy and irregular means of dispensing the gospel, but it was the only way, in many cases, of reaching vast numbers of people outside the lagging parish system. In many instances, it was simply a matter of mechanics. No existing building would handle the crowds that gathered to hear the new preachers. As a result of both their impudence and courage, the Methodists liberated the Christian message from the confines of chapel walls and parish territories to bring it literally into the marketplaces of Moorfields and Kingswood. In so doing, they made a statement about the relevancy and immediacy of the Christian message that profoundly moved multitudes of new believers.

For, not only were the outdoor meetings a severe wrinkle in English conventionality, but the emotional outbursts that began to accompany them attracted considerable criticism as well. Religious shouting, fainting, seizures, and fits were all in evidence at various times and places and sometimes referred to as "stricken cases." Tyreman summarizes one such scene from John Wesley's journal describing a revival service under the ministry of preachers Berridge and Hicks.

35 London Evening Post, September 6-8, 1744.

The church was crowded, the windows filled within and without, and also the pulpit steps up to the pulpit door. Three fourths of the congregation were men. Thirty of them had come thirteen miles, and, in order to be on time, had started at two o'clock in the morning. Some shrieked, others roared, but the most general sound was a loud breathing, like that of people half strangled. Numbers fell down as dead; some sinking in silence, and some in the utmost agitation. ...A little girl was thrown into violent contortions, and wept aloud incessantly.³⁶

Similar cases accompanied the ministry of John Wesley during the early years of his preaching though mainly in fields, barns, and private meeting rooms rather than in the churches. He dutifully recorded many such incidents and, without embarrassment, took them as "signs" of God's work in sinful hearts. Yet Wesley was quick to confront any persons claiming extraordinary visions and examine them carefully.³⁷ Charles Wesley was by nature much more skeptical of any public outburst. "He kept a bucket of water in plain view and put the noisier ladies at the back, preferably out of sight, with evident results."³⁸ What is especially ironic is that George Whitefield, the most flamboyant speaker of the three, did not witness the mass conversions or the attendant mysterious agitations and outbursts. In fact, he critically addressed Wesley on the subject:

Were I to give so much encouragement to those convulsions as you have given, how many would cry out every night? I think it is tempting God to require such signs.³⁹

Generally, there were fewer and fewer "stricken cases" which followed Wesley's preaching. Periodic outbursts renewed themselves occasionally throughout the Methodist revival as was cited above. Wesley dispassionately sought to critically evaluate each excessive outbreak as is evidenced by a 1786 journal entry. He described a thriving

36 John Wesley, Journal, May 20, 1759, as quoted in Luke Tyreman, Life of John Wesley (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1890), 2:312.

37 J. Wesley, Journal, February 29, 1739, Works, 1:173.

38 Rupp, Religion in England, 369.

39 George Whitefield, Letter to John Wesley, June 25, 1739, Letters of George Whitefield, 2d ed. (Chatham: W.J. Mackay Limited, 1796), 497.

congregation in Macclesfield but laments that "Satan strives to push many of them to extravagance." He illustrated by describing how several persons would "pray aloud together" or "scream all together as loud as they possibly can." Some used "indecent expressions in prayer" and others "drop down as dead; and are as stiff as a corpse; but in a while they start up, and cry 'Glory! glory!'" He credited such antics with bringing "the real work into contempt. Yet whenever we reprove them, it should be in the most mild and gentle manner possible."⁴⁰

In the main, Wesley was a stickler for order and propriety. In "The Large Minutes," a rule book first formulated in 1744 for the 'Methodist Connexion,' he gives specific advice on preaching with the following sampling of rules:

- Begin and end precisely at the time appointed.
- Let your whole deportment before the congregation be serious, weighty, and solemn.
- Take care of anything awkward or affected, either in your gesture, phrase, or pronunciation.
- Always kneel during public prayer.
- Avoid quaint words, however in fashion, as 'object, originate, very, high,' &c.
- Beware of clownishness, either in speech or dress. Wear no slouched hat.⁴¹

There is no evidence that rabid emotionalism and disorder were ever officially promoted as evidence of super-spirituality in public worship. On the contrary, Wesley proudly commends the "unspeakable advantage" of the Methodists in their Sunday worship in a 1757 letter. Methodists are not a "gay, giddy crowd, who come chiefly to see and be seen" spending their time in "bowing and curtsying, or in staring about them; but in looking upward and looking inward, in hearkening to the voice of God, and pouring out their hearts before Him." He emphasizes the seriousness of the preacher's role as:

...one who performs that solemn part of Divine service, not in a careless, hurrying, slovenly manner; but seriously and

40 J. Wesley, Journal, April 3, 1786, Works, 4:329.

41 J. Wesley, "Minutes of Several Conversations," 1744-1789, Works, 8:317-8.

slowly, as becomes him who is transacting so high an affair between God and man.

Nor are their solemn addresses to God interrupted either by the formal drawl of a parish clerk, the screaming of boys, who bawl out what they neither feel nor understand, or the unseasonable and unmeaning impertinence of a voluntary on the organ. ...Add to that, the whole service is performed in a decent and solemn manner, is enlivened by hymns suitable to the occasion, and is concluded with prayer that comes not out of feigned lips.⁴²

Thus, John Wesley turns the table on his Anglican detractors by claiming they are the ones who conduct services filled with senseless distractions and shallow pronouncements. Complaints of Anglican reformers in the nineteenth century tend to confirm Wesley's judgement of Anglican services as being prone to irreverence and discordance. One such critic recalled "with a shudder the village singing in the good old times" when "the premonitory scrape on the fiddle used to warn us of the coming storm." Then "the discordant notes of viol, trombone, clarionet, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of music, the nasal twangs of the untrained rustics would make still more hideous a tune hideous at best."⁴³

The contrast in music between Methodism and Anglicanism was especially keen and polarizing. The Methodists were a singing people zestfully giving voice to hymns of their own composing often using lively and well known tunes. The Cornish Methodists were nicknamed 'the Canorum', from a Cornish word 'canor', which means 'a singer'.⁴⁴ Through use of their music, they were able to tap into a well-spring of emotion and feeling common to the people of that age. Music was "the most accessible, the most public, the most democratic, of the creative arts." The England of that day was essentially an oral culture and each

42 J. Wesley, "A Letter to a Friend," September 20, 1757, Works, 13:216-8.

43 Louth and North Lincolnshire Advertiser, April 18, 1863, as quoted in James Obelkevitch, Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey 1825-1875 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 147.

44 Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver Beckerlegge, eds., The Works of John Wesley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 7:62.

person, no matter what their station, could "understand the fundamental emotions of hope and fear, of love and aggression, the sense of jubilation or of sorrow, to which music gave expression."⁴⁵

The Methodists exploited this with seemingly total abandon. George Whitefield and John Wesley both contributed their original compositions, but Charles Wesley is estimated to have written 7,300 hymns of which 3,000 remained in manuscript.⁴⁶ The music of Isaac Watts was also utilized. Not only were the tunes in stark contrast to the metric regularity of traditional Anglican music, but the manner and fervency of their singing held great appeal. A skeptical Mr. Joseph Williams of Kidderminster, being a dissenter and Calvinist, attended a service led by Charles Wesley and afterwards reported:

...their singing was not only the most harmonious and delightful I ever heard, but, as Mr. Whitefield writes in his Journals, they 'sang lustily, and with a good courage.' I never so well understood the meaning of that expression before. Indeed they seemed to sing with melody in their hearts. ...such evident marks of a lively, genuine devotion, in any part of religious worship, I never was witness to in any place, or on any occasion. If there be such a thing as heavenly music upon earth, I heard it there.⁴⁷

The appeal and power of this new form of musical expression was magnetic both in attracting new converts but also in binding the new believers together. Vulliamy writes, "Nothing tends more to unite a simple people in loyalty and affection than the common knowledge of a chorus." He emphasizes the importance of this music stating, "You can measure the fervour of a revolution, or a religious movement, by the fervour of its popular music."⁴⁸

45 Robert W. Malcomson, Life and Labour in England: 1700-1780 (London: Hutchinson, 1981), 99.

46 Rupp, Religion in England, 410.

47 Joseph Williams, Letter for submission to Gentleman's Magazine found among Charles Wesley's papers, as quoted by Thomas Jackson, The Life of the Rev. Charles Wesley (London: John Mason, 1841), 1:197.

48 C. E. Vulliamy, John Wesley (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), 153.

Edmund Gibson, Bishop of London, would no doubt have agreed as he expressed his alarm at the fact that certain Methodist 'Tunes' were 'creeping into the Churches'. He admitted that certain congregations, 'being mostly of that cast,' will:

...pay the Clerk and Organist to stay away, that Two of their own People may supply their Places; by which Means they have every Thing performed in their own Way: It is true they have not yet ventured to sing Ballad-Tunes, as at the Tabernacle, Foundery, and elsewhere; because by such a Procedure they would doubtless be forbid the Use of the Church, but the Tunes they commonly use are generally too light and airy for Church-Music; and consequently have nothing in their Composure that may excite a true Spirit of Devotion.⁴⁹

He took severe exception to the Methodist hymn book containing tunes he identified as in actuality being 'The Dying Swan,' 'My bliss too long my Bride denies,' and 'Sure Jocky was the bonnies Swain.'⁵⁰ To Gibson, "Church-Music ought to be grave, serious, noble and divine; to raise the Affections of the Soul, with the proper Passions of Devotion ... and not the rapturous Strains of unhallowed Love, which pollute the Soul, and fire it with a wanton Passion."⁵¹

John Wesley was equally repulsed by some Anglican singing, however, as when he was invited to a church in Neath in 1768.

I...was greatly disgusted at the manner of singing.
1. Twelve of Fourteen persons kept it to themselves and quite shut out the congregation: 2. These repeated the same words, contrary to all sense and reason, six or eight or ten times over: 3. According to the shocking custom of modern music, different persons sung different words at one and the same moment; an intolerable insult on common sense, and utterly incompatible with any devotion.⁵²

Bishop Gibson's "Parochial Music Corrected" was intended to recommend solutions for such problems as well as warn against the mistakes of Methodism. He readily admitted, "It is a great Scandal to

49 Edmund Gibson, Parochial Music Corrected (London: 1762), 3.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid., 6.

52 J.Wesley, Journal, August 9, 1768, Works, 3:339.

the Established Church to have so essential a Part of our Public Devotions so wretchedly performed, when other Congregations (the Dissenters in particular) so very much excel us."⁵³

John Wesley was equally concerned about Methodist hymn singing and frequently offered his critical suggestions among these being:

4. Sing 'lustily' and with a good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sung the songs of Satan.
5. Sing 'modestly.' Do not bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony; but strive to unite your voices together, so as to make one clear melodious sound.
6. Sing 'in time': whatever time is sung, be sure to keep with it....
7. Above all sing 'spiritually.' Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing 'him' more than yourself, or any other creature....⁵⁴

The lyrics of Methodist hymns served to inculcate Methodist doctrine in a form easily retained by their common adherents. Charles Wesley educated his readers as well as providing a release for religious adoration. Henry Rack comments:

In their journey from conviction of sin through conversion to perfection, the early Methodists were taught and led as much through hymns as through sermons and Wesley's pamphlets. From them, too, they absorbed a measure of theology and even of culture.⁵⁵

Simon writes that the hymns of Charles Wesley "entered into the memory; they were conned and repeated in private until every phrase was familiar."⁵⁶

The phraseology of Methodist hymns were found to be objectionable by their opponents as well. There was a certain 'cheekiness' apparent in

53 Gibson, Parochial Music Corrected, 23.

54 J. Wesley, "Directions for Singing," Select Hymns, Hildebrandt and Beckerlegge, The Works of John Wesley, 7:765.

55 Henry D. Rack, Reasonable Enthusiast (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), 257.

56 Simon, The Revival of Religion in England, 302.

many Methodist lyrics which shocked their more staid contemporaries.

The caustic poem, "The Love Feast," attacks at this very point:

Sawcy enough in humble, vulgar Prose,
In Hymns they take th' Almighty by the Nose;⁵⁷

One obvious example of Methodist audacity presents itself in the hymn,

"Wrestling Jacob." Verse 3 proclaims:

In vain Thou strugglest to get free,
I never will unloose my hold;
Art thou the Man that died for me?
The secret of Thy love unfold;
Wrestling I will not let Thee go
Till I Thy name, Thy nature know.⁵⁸

Numerous examples can be found of truths overstated or simply badly composed in Methodist hymnology, but this is hardly surprising considering the sheer volume of music churned out by Charles and his associates. Far more significant are the numerous hymns that have been preserved in current collections to this present day. What is unmistakable is the determination and freedom with which music was harnessed to communicate the message of the revival in a rich variety of style. No tempo was considered too lively or tune too secular to be adapted for their purposes. One Wesley hymn declares plainly:

Who on the Part of God will rise,
Innocent Sound recover,
Fly on the Prey, and take the Prize,
Plunder the Carnal Lover,
Strip him of every moving Strain,
Every melting Measure,
Musick in Virtue's Cause retain,
Rescue the Holy Pleasure?⁵⁹

This they accomplished and gave liberty to the new song in the hearts of the new believers. Each individual, no matter how common or uneducated, was afforded a powerful means of expression that put profound words

57 Anonymous, "The Love Feast," a poem (London: Printed for J. Bew, in Pater Noster Row, 1778), 22.

58 Charles Wesley, "Wrestling Jacob," verse 3, John R. Tyson, ed., Charles Wesley - a Reader (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 198.

59 C. Wesley, "On the True Use of Musick," Tyson, C. Wesley: a Reader, 221.

within easy reach and in attractive form. Religious music was released from the narrow confines of the professional musician to become a fully, participatory activity independent of intricate instrumentation or ordained leadership. Methodist hymns were singable and they were often used as acapella preludes to street and field preaching. Thus, the common people had received their musical enfranchisement. Simon affirms, "The hymns were their organ of expression; they enabled them to explain what they felt of the power and the love of God."⁶⁰ And in so doing, they "out-sang their enemies, whether they were ill-mannered humans or principalities and powers."⁶¹

Such enthusiastic singing, or preaching for that matter, seems by today's standards quite acceptable and even desirous in many religious circles. To the eighteenth century church of England, however, enthusiasm was a dreaded word which was reserved for those practices clearly out-of-bounds to acceptable religious practice and expression. In matters of music, Bishop Gibson hoped that "the Established Church will never follow the Example of these frantic Enthusiasts, in 'stripping the carnal Lover of his Moving Strains and Melting Measures.'"⁶² The good Bishop saw similarities between Methodist singing and preaching observing that "this frothy Way of Singing seems to be of a piece with the flighty Method of Preaching adopted by their Teachers."⁶³ Indeed, there were many peculiarities which brought about the accusation of "enthusiast." The emotional and extemporaneous preaching, the convulsive outbursts of their audiences, the ribald singing of religious music to popular tunes, the immature and brash statements published in various journals, the close adherence to rules

60 Simon, The Revival of Religion in England, 303.

61 Leslie F. Church, More About the Early Methodist People (London: Epworth Press, 1949), 234.

62 Gibson, Parochial Music Corrected, 10.

63 Ibid., 8.

and fastings, and certainly the claim to inspiration by the Holy Spirit were all justification for the appellation of "enthusiast."

The term seems to have been used for any departure from the standard norms of practice in church life. "Any increase in zeal, or in fervour of devotion, any marked carefulness in living, was derided as enthusiasm, and enthusiasm was little less than a crime."⁶⁴ Dr. Joseph Trapp, in his circular entitled "The Nature, Folly, Sin, and Danger of being Righteous Over-Much; With a Particular View to the Doctrines and Practices of certain Modern Enthusthiasts," states "to be righteous over-much is to place much Religion (where there is really none, but the Contrary) in Extraordinaries, in new Inventions, and striking out into Bye-paths."⁶⁵

The specter of enthusiasm was most easily raised by any allusion to 'hearing from God' or of claiming to be 'led of the Spirit' such as the so-called French prophets, a number of young women of that time who claimed to prophesy in the name of the Lord. John Wesley records a "genuine instance of enthusiasm" at Tanfield-Leigh where a Mr. J___ B___ "who had received a sense of the love of God a few days before, came riding through the town, hallooing and shouting, and driving all the people before him; telling them, God had told him he should be a king, and should tread all his enemies under his feet."⁶⁶

Wesley spent a good deal of effort, however, in trying to deflect the same accusation from being applied to his own person and the Methodist movement. In a sermon entitled "The Nature of Enthusiasm," Wesley first of all complained that it was a term which was frequently used and yet "exceeding rarely understood, even by those who use it

64 Richard Greene, Anti-Methodist Publications, 2ed, (New York: Burt Franklin, 1973), vi.

65 Joseph Trapp, The Nature, Folly, Sin, and Danger of Being Righteous Over-Much (London: S. Austen, 1739), 9.

66 J. Wesley, Journal, December 4, 1742, Works, 1:404.

most." The modern Oxford English Dictionary defines the old usage of 'enthusiasm' as connoting a prophetic frenzy owing to possession by a god, a vain confidence of divine favour or communication.⁶⁷ Wesley, trained in classical languages, examined the supposed Greek derivation of 'enthusiasm,' found it forced and unspecific, and ended up calling it "a word of a loose, uncertain sense, to which no determinate meaning was affixed."⁶⁸ But as popularly conceived, he granted that enthusiasm was generally viewed as "A religious madness arising from some falsely imagined influence or inspiration of God."⁶⁹ Wesley went on to provide a highly articulated and balanced message that allowed both for the existence of several kinds of fanatical enthusiasm and for the proper and genuine leading of God's Spirit in the life of a believer. He also turned the argument against his critics by cautioning strongly against the "common herd" of enthusiasts who believed themselves to be forgiven Christians when, in fact, they were not. And he allowed for the ability of God to speak through visions or dreams infrequently as that may be.

But how frequently do men mistake herein! How are they misled by pride, and a warm imagination, to ascribe such impulses or impressions, dreams or visions, to God, as are utterly unworthy of him! Now this is all pure enthusiasm; all as wide of religion, as it is of truth and soberness.⁷⁰

As reasonable and appealing as Wesley's sermon may have been, it was also true that both George Whitefield and John Wesley were guilty of some perplexing behavior. Lecky relates:

Wesley frequently mounted the pulpit without even knowing from what text he would preach, believing that when he opened his Bible at random the Divine Spirit would guide him infallibly in his choice. The oratory of Whitefield was so impassioned that the preacher was sometimes scarcely able to

⁶⁷ J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner, eds. 2nd ed., The Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 5:296.

⁶⁸ J. Wesley, Works, 5:468.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 470.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 473.

proceed for his tears, while half the audience were convulsed with sobs.⁷¹

Whitefield was also criticized by Isaac Watts, the distinguished Dissenter, who said:

I wish Mr. Whitefield would not have risen above any pretences to the ordinary influences of the Holy Spirit, unless he could have given some better evidences of it.⁷²

Another leading Dissenter, Dr. Doddridge, described him as "rash," "bold," and coming "but little short of an assumption of inspiration or infallibility."⁷³ It must be remembered, however, that George Whitefield at the time was only 24 years old.

John Wesley continued to maintain a certain fascination with witches and supernatural events over the years. Lecky cites a litany of miraculous interventions from Wesley's Journal that strain the limits of credulity.⁷⁴ The most extensive record is a ten-page interview with Elizabeth Hobson describing her regular and frequent vision of and communion with ghosts. Wesley calmly prefaces:

The well-known character of the person excludes all suspicion of fraud; and the nature of the circumstances themselves excludes the possibility of a delusion.⁷⁵

The revulsion of educated men to such 'enthusiasm' was understandable, and it limited the appeal of Methodism within those circles. Yet it strengthened the Methodists' appeal to the general masses of the poor and uneducated whose vision of life was still influenced by the existence of 'magic.' Lecky writes of the Methodist preacher's influence:

71 Lecky, History of England, 2:610.

72 Isaac Watts, Letter, August 15, 1739, quoted in Tyreman, History of George Whitefield, 1:220.

73 Doddridge, Letter, May 24, 1739, quoted in Tyreman, History of George Whitefield, 1:220.

74 Lecky, History of England, 2:642-7.

75 J. Wesley, Works, 3:324.

His impassioned prayers and exhortations stirred the hearts of multitudes whom a more decorous teaching had left absolutely callous. The supernatural atmosphere of miracles, judgments, and inspirations, in which he moved, invested the most prosaic life with a halo of romance.⁷⁶

Both Wesley and Whitefield challenged the old limits of 'religious enthusiasm' and thereby greatly enlarged the playing field of Christian belief and practice for their followers. What had formerly been 'out-of-bounds' behaviour in terms of zestful preaching and singing, testifying, and 'methodical' living was now practiced openly and powerfully by some compelling orators in full, Anglican garb. The writings of John Wesley, especially, created an articulate defense for these new practices and defined both the basis for these freedoms and their limits. It became possible to tread out some new ground without feeling vulnerable to theological attack or spiritual suicide.

Thus, we have seen how Methodism pushed back the old limits and restrictions of the Anglican Church in the areas of preaching styles, parish licensing restrictions, emotional expression, music, and the exposure to the criticism of 'enthusiasm.' Through their fearless setting of public precedent, creative composition of a musical heritage, and the articulate way in which they responded to withering criticism, the Methodists carved out a new set of boundaries for religious life and practice within their societies. These liberating innovations were in part responsible for the appeal of their message and their survival and growth as a movement as well as engendering hostility from the established order.

76 Lecky, History of England, 2:653.

Chapter 3

Methodism as Leveller

"For who is greater, the one who reclines at table, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves."

-Jesus (Luke 22:27)

Even up to the point of the Last Supper, the disciples argued about who would be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. So it has been that Christians have struggled with notions of hierarchy and status for generations. Jesus confounded the culture of his day with his pronouncements of "the first shall be last and the last shall be first" and his teachings continue to challenge our ideas of inferior and superior today.¹ The Christian Church, in its imperfect way, has wrestled with these concepts at the same time it has sought to teach deference to civil authority and a rendering unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's.

The Anglican Church of 18th century England subscribed in theory to the Protestant tradition of the importance of the individual, the priesthood of the believer, and the equality of all men before God. But

¹ Matthew 19:30.

because of political and social developments dating back to the 17th century, the Anglican Church had entered into a dependent relationship with local political and social elites. This was a mutually advantageous relationship that enabled the local clergy to virtually dictate the religious norms of a community.

When a resident clergyman in a manageable parish enjoyed the wholehearted support of the local landowners and the magistracy, he could guarantee high rates of religious practice and make religious Dissent virtually untenable.²

Subsequent studies of the growth of Methodism have in fact shown that "the greatest sustained Wesleyan growth occurred in precisely the areas where the Church of England was weakest."³ The author of this statement, Robert Currie, goes on to suggest, "Industrial towns and villages were safe from the sanctions of a Church-minded squire or a zealous parson."⁴

The Church, in turn, could buttress the social structure of a fixed society with its concept of assigned place and social status. Warner writes, "Theology was therefore called upon gratefully to salve the conscience of the possessing and to reconcile the poorer groups to the injustice of their lot."⁵ As a result of this mutually dependent relationship which developed over the years, the Church allowed certain practices and attitudes to develop which socialized the subordinate members of society to respect their economic and social superiors "on the grounds of status."⁶

2 A.D. Gilbert, Religion and Society in Industrial England (New York: Longman, 1976), 12.

3 Robert Currie, "A Micro-Theory of Methodist Growth," Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society, 36(October 1967):68.

4 Ibid., 69.

5 Wellman J. Warner, The Wesleyan Movement in the Industrial Revolution, 2d. ed. (New York: Russell and Russell, 1967), 10.

6 Gilbert, Religion and Society in Industrial England, 13.

Methodism disrupted this delicate arrangement first of all with renewed emphasis upon the sinfulness of all men and the need of all men for a 'new birth' experience. While many of polite society were given assurance by the Church that in the rites of baptism (including infant baptism) they were afforded salvation, John Wesley discomfited them with another point of view. In response to the vital question, "How can ye escape the damnation of hell?", Wesley responded:

How, indeed, except ye be born again! For ye are now dead in trespasses and sins. To say, then, that ye cannot be born again, that there is no new birth but in baptism, is to seal you all under damnation, to consign you to hell, without help, without hope.⁷

This strong message was representative of Methodist preaching. So much so that Thomas Hanson recalled that in his earliest days when he went to hear the Methodist preachers (circa 1746), "the most common name for them was, 'the damnation preachers'."⁸ The doctrine of original sin, indeed, became a focal point of Methodist theology. One exposition alone on this doctrine occupies 273 pages in the works of John Wesley.⁹ Wesley's conviction that "...to be 'born flesh' is to be born corrupt and sinful"¹⁰ had serious social implications. Warner writes:

Incidentally, this very dogma [original sin] was probably the source of more genuine democratic social feeling than any other conception of wide currency, for it placed rich and poor, high and low, on a level in their equality of need and worth.¹¹

This, of course, did not go unnoticed by the higher social groups who found its implications repulsive. This is best illustrated by the letter written to the Countess of Huntingdon, one of the few

⁷ John Wesley, sermon, "The Marks of the New Birth," n.d., The Works of John Wesley (England: Wesleyan Conference Edition, 1872), 5:222.

⁸ Thomas Hanson, "The Life of Thomas Hanson," Thomas Jackson, ed., 3ed., The Lives of Early Methodist Preachers (London: Haymon Brothers and Lilly Hatton House, 1878), 6:202.

⁹ J. Wesley, Works, 9:192-465.

¹⁰ Ibid., 9:406.

¹¹ Warner, Wesleyan Movement in Industrial Revolution, 64.

aristocratic converts to Methodism, by the Duchess of Buckingham, the illegitimate daughter of James II. She writes:

I thank your Ladyship for the information concerning the Methodist preaching; these doctrines are most repulsive and strongly tinged with impertinence and disrespect towards their superiors in perpetually endeavoring to level all ranks and do away with all distinction, as it is monstrous to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth. This is highly offensive and insulting, and I cannot but wonder that your Ladyship

should relish any sentiments so much at variance with high rank and good breeding.¹²

It is not surprising, then, that the greatest response to the Methodist message was among the poor and common folk of England. Wesley addresses the Methodist people in 1745 as being those who:

...subsist, without power (for you are a low, insignificant people), without riches (for you are poor almost to a man, having no more than the plain necessities of life), and without either any extraordinary gifts of nature, or the advantages of education; most even of your Teachers being quite unlearned, and (in other things) ignorant men.¹³

Through a study of 'the meticulous reporting' in Wesley's journal, Gilbert offers a sketch of Methodist growth:

Societies sprang up particularly among the artisan and labouring classes of manufacturing districts in the north-east, among workers in the textile industries of north Midlands and the West Riding, in the Potteries, among the Cornish tin miners and the domestic craftsmen of the West Country woolen trade, in seaports and fishing villages, and in agricultural areas characterized by extensive freeholding.. Tradesmen, soldiers, and small manufacturers were potential Methodist recruits.¹⁴

Like any wise manager of limited resources, the Methodists directed their efforts to where the response and 'harvest' was greatest. The result was a strong outreach and response among the lower strata of an hierarchial society. A study of occupations from the 'Non-Parochial

12 Duchess of Buckingham, "Letter to Lady Huntingdon," as quoted in John S. Simon, The revival of Religion in 18th Century England (New York, Eaton and Mains, n.d.), 275-6.

13 J. Wesley, "Advice to the People Called Methodists," Works, 8:354.

14 Gilbert, Religion and Society in Industrial England, 60.

Registers' for the years 1800-1837 reveals that little had changed some 55 years after Wesley's address to the people called Methodists in respect to their constituency. Some 85% of the occupations recorded by Methodists were those of either farmers, artisans, labourers, colliers, or miners.¹⁵

George Whitefield had more numerous contacts with aristocratic followers primarily through the Earl and Countess of Huntingdon. John Wesley demonstrated, on the other hand, an attitude towards the rich which bordered on contempt. A 1758 journal entry records:

I dined at Lady _____'s. We need great grace to converse with great people! From which, therefore (unless in some rare instances), I am glad to be excused. ...Of these two hours I can give no good account.¹⁶

A 1785 entry relates:

I spent two or three hours in the House of Lords. I had frequently heard that this was the most venerable assembly in England. But how was I disappointed! What is a Lord, but a sinner, born to die!¹⁷

But Wesley was not consumed by a prejudicial hatred across the board for any and all of the upper class. He had his friends among that group and even took pains upon several occasions to reach the rich and powerful with the message of the revival. Neither was he blindly enthralled with some idealized image of the lower class working man. This seen in the distaste that Wesley felt and expressed concerning agricultural laborers.

Many of the Southern agricultural counties were rarely visited and were referred to as "the Methodist Wilderness."¹⁸ Response to the Methodist message was generally minimal, and Wesley simply moved on to more fertile fields but not without some residue of contempt. In a 1766

¹⁵ Ibid., 63.

¹⁶ J. Wesley, Journal, April 21, 1758, Works, 2:439.

¹⁷ J. Wesley, Journal, February 25, 1785, Works, 4:296.

¹⁸ Anthony Armstrong, The Church of England, the Methodists and Society, 1700-1850 (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973), 90.

journal entry, Wesley questions the assumption of the idyllic life of the country farmer and concludes:

...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. ¹⁹

A discourse on original sin contains this slight:

The generality of English peasants are not only grossly, stupidly, I had almost said, brutishly ignorant as to all the arts of this life, but eminently so with regard to religion and the life to come. ...Neither...do they rise one jot above the pitch of a Turk or a Heathen. ²⁰

It was among the urban and industrialized poor that Wesley found the greatest response and to whom he became most attached. In ministering to these individuals, he affirmed their worth by attacking the dominant values of a hierarchial society. Wesley constantly reiterated that a poor but pious Christian was better than a heathen with an estate, a Christian tradesman than a lord or gentleman "with the devil in his heart." ²¹ He decries, "A worldly Clergyman is a fool above all fools, a madman above all madmen!" ²² He warns of the dangers of gratification of any of the outward senses afforded by means of wealth citing those who "live in a genteel, regular sensuality; in an elegant epicurism, which does not hurt the body, but only destroys the soul; keeping it at a distance from all true religion." ²³ To all the trappings of social status and wealth, Wesley had but one prescription as far as a value system is concerned: "count all things dung" in order to win Christ. ²⁴ This was a direct slap at the prevailing social values

19 J. Wesley, Journal, November 5, 1766, Works, 3:269.

20 J. Wesley, "Doctrine of Original Sin," Works, 9:225.

21 J. Wesley, Sermon, "On a Single Eye," Works, 7:304.

22 Ibid., 7:303.

23 J. Wesley, Sermon, "The Danger of Riches," Works, 7:6.

24 Ibid., 7:15.

of his day, values with which the traditional church had by necessity and convenience become complicit. These utterances of Wesley were not occasional teachings but prominent themes throughout his sermons. The inevitable result was a significant national contribution to "the erosion of the feelings of deference and dependence among the 'lower orders' which had been essential to the maintenance of the old system."²⁵ Hagen calls it the "withdrawal of status respect"²⁶ acting as a "powerful solvent of the cement which binds the society together."²⁷ Methodism was inherently democratic with respect to social status, and it spread these notions wherever it made its way.

The corrosive effects of these teachings upon tradition were soon to trouble the Methodists as well. Thomas Maxfield, a lay member of the London society connected with the Foundery, began to preach one day in the absence of the Wesleys in the year 1742. Tyreman describes this likely former servant of Charles Wesley as having been "insensibly led from praying to preaching."²⁸ Jackson pictures a man who "began to preach, probably urged by others beyond his own first intention."²⁹ John Wesley, upon hearing this news, abruptly hastened to London to stop what he regarded as a "sinful irregularity."³⁰ Wesley "had been educated in the belief that no man is authorized to preach the Gospel but under the direct sanction of a diocesan prelate, the imposition of whose hands is essential to a valid ordination."³¹ Arriving in London,

25 Gilbert, Religion and Society in Industrial England, 84.

26 Everett E. Hagan, On the Theory of Social Change (Homewood, Illinois: The Dorsey Press, Inc., 1962), 185.

27 Ibid., 191.

28 Tyreman, Life of John Wesley, 1:369.

29 Thomas Jackson, 4th. ed., The Lives of Early Methodist Preachers (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1871), 1:X.

30 Ibid., 1:XI.

31 Ibid., 1:X.

Wesley was greeted by his mother who lived in his house adjoining the Foundery. She revealed her own prejudicial background on the matter but had a deep influence with her words of caution:

You cannot suspect me of favouring readily anything of this kind. But take care what you do with respect to that young man; for he is as surely called of God to preach as you are. Examine what have been the fruits of his preaching, and hear him yourself.³²

Following his mother's advice, Wesley listened to Maxfield preach and then affirmed the layman's calling.

It is generally assumed that Maxfield was Methodism's first lay preacher. Tyreman disputes this with a slightly earlier account of John Cennick, a converted land surveyor. Cennick's first occasion to preach was at a meeting of four or five hundred colliers at Kingswood who had gathered to hear someone read a sermon. When the reader did not appear, Cennick was urged to take his place which he reluctantly did. Afterwards he said, "The Lord bore witness with my words, insomuch that many believed in that hour."³³ Cennick relayed also how John Wesley soon arrived on the scene and encouraged him despite the pleas of many people to forbid him to preach. This seems to contradict the spirit of crisis which Wesley sensed at the report of Maxfield's preaching. Perhaps outdoor preaching to Kingswood colliers was of little offense to Wesley while the thought of a lay preacher standing before the converted in a Methodist chapel was a bit more "irregular."

Nevertheless, once Wesley was convinced that lay preaching was permissible, he became a formidable apologist for the practice in typical Wesley form. In a long and rambling discourse entitled "An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion" written in 1745, Wesley takes up an extensive defense of lay preaching:

³² Susannah Wesley, as quoted in Jackson, Early Methodist Preachers, 1:XI.

³³ John Cennick, Cennick's Autobiography, as quoted in Luke Tyreman, The Life and Times of John Wesley (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1870), 1:275.

...I am bold to affirm, that these unlettered men have help from God for the great work, --the saving (of) souls from death; seeing he hath enabled, and doth enable them still, to "turn many to righteousness." ³⁴

Wesley drew the line for lay involvement at administering sacraments. This, he said, was "an honour peculiar to the Priests of God." ³⁵ But in re-examining his other cherished traditions, Wesley found precedents for lay preaching dating back to the scribes of Bible times.

Lady Huntingdon seems to have had an equally rapid turnabout in her attitudes towards the ability of a commoner to speak on spiritual things. She writes:

The first time I made him expound, expecting little from him, I sat over against him, and thought, what a power of God must be with him, to make me give any attention to him. ³⁶

She explains her "astonishment" at how God's power is "shown in weakness" from one who was "raised from the stones." ³⁷ The Biblical metaphor of "stones" is also used by both Charles and John Wesley at various times in defense of lay preachers. It refers to Jesus' rebuke to the pride of the Jews in their 'aristocratic' religious tradition when they claimed, "We have Abraham to our father." Jesus reminded them that "God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham." ³⁸

John Wesley's views were not formed through some metaphysical reasoning nor even by theological ruminations. They were influenced mainly by experience. The democratic process of rubbing shoulders with the poor and uneducated changed John Wesley and had a profound effect upon the whole movement. Hence, the levelling tendencies were in large

³⁴ J. Wesley, "An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion," Works, 8:220.

³⁵ Ibid., 224.

³⁶ Lady Huntingdon, Letter to John Wesley, as quoted in John Whitehead, 2ed., The Life of the Rev. John Wesley (Boston: McLeish, 1844), 2:87.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Luke 3:8.

part a natural outgrowth of experience in working with the unchurched and uneducated underclass. While always examining experience against the authority of Scripture, Wesley nevertheless was quick to elevate the "living arguments" of the changed lives of Methodist working people to a level equal with any great metaphysical reasoning. In defending the immediate assurance of salvation experience to his brother, Samuel Jr., Wesley cites case after case in which he had both seen and heard assurance given and rests his case by saying, "These are my *living arguments* for what I assert."³⁹ Forty seven years later, John Wesley's fascination with the manifestations of God's grace through lay people was still evident:

February 6 --We had a love-feast. I could not but observe the manner wherein several of them spoke one after another. Not only the matter, but the language, the accent, the tone of voice, wherewith illiterate persons, men and women, young and old, spoke, were such as a scholar need not be ashamed of. Who teacheth like Him?⁴⁰

Wesley's fascination was not shared, needless to say, by the social and clerical elite of his day. Numerous examples of condemnation of lay preaching abound, a few of which should suffice. The Anglican clergyman, Dr. Joseph Trapp, fumed:

Do not ignorant, illiterate People presume to expound the Scriptures? which can never be done as it should be, by Persons skill'd in Languages, History, and Antiquity, and such as have made Learning their Study, and Profession. ...what is This but an Outrage, upon common Decency, and common Sense; the Height of Presumption, Confidence, and Self-Sufficiency; so ridiculous as to create the greatest Laughter, were it not so deplorable and detestable, as to create the greatest Grief and Abhorrence?⁴¹

The mocking poem, The Love Feast, made reference to a lay preacher:

The Weaver next explains the Christian-Scheme
Of weaving Souls anew, without a Seam.
His art's quaint Tropes give Rhet'ric ample Room

³⁹ J. Wesley, Letter to Samuel Wesley Jr., April 4, 1738, Works, 12:31.

⁴⁰ J. Wesley, Journal, February 6, 1785, Works, 4:296.

⁴¹ Joseph Trapp, 3ed., The Nature, Folly, Sin, and Danger of Being Righteous Over-Much (London: S. Austen, 1789), 12-13.

The Word's his Shuttle, and his Head's the Loom.⁴²
 In "The Spiritual Quixote," an itinerant Methodist, 'Nathaniel Snip,' says of a convert of his, a poor man named 'Brockally' whose living was crying vegetables:

Who knows but the Lord has marked this little Nicodemus out as one who shall stand before the Princes and Rulers of the Land, and instead of crying Oysters, &c., shall cry aloud the mighty and wonderful Doings of the Lord....⁴³

As was noted earlier, Wesley's fascination with lay witnessing was without distinction regarding either age or sex. Accordingly, women also came to share in the public ministry of the Methodist movement though not without some serious soul-searching and some open opposition. Wesley's defense of lay preaching by men made it difficult for him to forbid that practice by women also. In a series of sermons published in 1771, Wesley had clearly staked out the position, "Shall not God work by whom he will work?"⁴⁴ Testifying and exhorting by women was always encouraged in the societies and the band meetings but for a while, preaching was plainly off limits. Wesley directly instructed a Mrs. Crosby in 1761 to inform her encouragers, "The Methodists do not allow of women Preachers."⁴⁵ By 1769, Wesley wrote to her again but plainly waffled on the matter of preaching:

I advise you, as I did Grace Walton formerly, 1. Pray in private or public, as much as you can. 2. Even in public, you may properly enough intermix short exhortations with prayer; but keep as far from what is called preaching as you can: Therefore never take a text; never speak in a continued discourse, without some break, above four or five minutes.⁴⁶

⁴² Anonymous, The Love Feast, a poem (London: printed for J.BEW in Pater Noster Row, 1778), 19.

⁴³ Richard Graves, The Spiritual Quixote or The Summers's Ramble of Mr. Geoffrey Wildgoose (London, 1926), as quoted in Albert Lyles, Methodism Mocked (London: Epworth Press, 1960), 80.

⁴⁴ J. Wesley, Sermon, "A Caution Against Bigotry," Works, 4:488.

⁴⁵ J. Wesley, Letter to Mrs. Crosby, February 14, 1761, Works, 12:353.

⁴⁶ J. Wesley, Letter to Mrs. Crosby, March 18, 1769, Works, 12:355.

Wesley sensed that the whole movement called 'Methodism' was a bit irregular, a 'special dispensation,' and as such, the rules were not quite clear.⁴⁷ Of particular concern to him was Paul's injunction against women speaking in the congregation.⁴⁸ Wesley thought he saw an exception even to that, but by 1780, he sent a message to forbid any more 'preaching.'

I desire Mr. Peacock to put a final stop to the preaching of women in his circuit. If it were suffered it would grow, and we know not where it would end.⁴⁹

This position was changed again in 1786 after making the acquaintance of Sarah Mallet, a 22 year old woman who was "much devoted to God" and impressed that she "ought to call sinners to repentance" despite her feelings of inadequacy."⁵⁰ She received authority to preach in October of the following year "by order of Mr. Wesley and the Conference."⁵¹ Two years later, Wesley wrote to Mallet expressing his pleasure that "prejudice dies away and our preachers behave in a friendly manner."⁵² Though neither the Anglican Church or the Methodist Societies ever officially approved of women in ministry, a good number of them went about carrying on a considerable work. Mary Bosanquet ministered at Cross Hall for 13 years before becoming Mrs. John Fletcher of Madeley. This couple went on to share a unique ministry at Madeley where Mary had

47 J. Wesley, Letter to Mrs. Crosby, June 13, 1771, Works, 12:356.

48 Paul the Apostle, 1 Corinthians 14:34, 1 Timothy 2:11-12.

49 J. Wesley, Letter to George Robinson, March 25, 1780, John Telford, ed., Letters of John Wesley (London, Epworth Press, 1931) as quoted in Leslie Church, More About Early Methodist People (London: The Epworth Press, 1949), 140.

50 J. Wesley, Journal, December 4, 1786, Works, 4:356.

51 Church, More About Early Methodist People, 140.

52 J. Wesley, Letter to Sarah Mallet, December 15, 1789, as quoted in Church, More About Early Methodist People, 140.

her own preaching-room.⁵³ Her own feelings regarding her role reflect a humble sense of her own uniqueness as opposed to any grasping or competition. She writes in her sixty fifth year:

I do look on the call of women as an extra--not an ordinary call; therefore I strove, and do strive now so to act, not out of custom but only when I have a clear leading thereto, and this leading may and will differ at different parts of our lives, but to follow the cloud is the thing I aim at, and the soul feels a peace and comfort in so doing, for 'where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.'⁵⁴

Her words also betray a belief that what she was doing was an exception and not the rule.

Sarah Crosby was perhaps the most prominent woman preacher of Wesley's age, and she too expresses in her letters an acute discomfort with what she was doing. Teaching a class in 1761, she quickly realized she had a problem when it grew to some two hundred persons. Writing to Wesley for advice, she worried that she was offending by what appeared to be 'preaching.' Wesley's many letters in return apparently soothed her fears but raised those of Mrs. Wesley who was prone to unreasonable jealousy. Sarah Crosby went on to preach and minister for forty years and at a pace few others would care to match, male or female.

In one year she walked and rode nine hundred and sixty miles, spoke at two hundred and twenty public meetings, led six hundred classes and bands, wrote many long letters, and gave constant interviews to 'enquirers', visited the sick wherever she went, and brought joy and peace to scores of homes.⁵⁵

The role of these Methodist women was not just that of marginal positions of leadership in that they were allowed to take on as much of a load as they felt they could carry. Ann Cutler, Elizabeth Collett (wife and mother of eleven children), Elizabeth Evans (the disguised heroine in George Eliot's Adam Bede), and Mary Barritt (hardest riding

⁵³ Church, More About Early Methodist People, 145.

⁵⁴ Mary Bosanquet Fletcher to Mary Taft, Letter, November 28, 1803, as reproduced in Zechariah Taft, Biographical Sketches of the Lives and Public Ministry of various Holy Women (London: Kershaw, 1825-8), 1:20.

⁵⁵ Church, More About Early Methodist People, 153.

and most enduring of all women preachers) all cut huge trails among the English people.

Not only were a relatively small number of women able to achieve a rather high profile as examples and leaders, there was also a significant precedent taking place in countless unheard of cottage meetings. When the home became the center for religious practice in Methodist circles, women became much more central to the practice of religion. Deborah Valenze points out, "Common women stimulated by the egalitarian spirit of cottage religion assumed powerful roles in domestic services. As keepers of the household, they often initiated and promoted meetings. Their sense of familial responsibility translated easily into pastoral concern" as they became an important factor in the institution of the cottage meeting. "By giving a legitimate voice to women hitherto silent, obedient, or otherwise noisome, cottage religion hinted at a different domestic and social order." ⁵⁶

The extent to which women were permitted to assume positions of leadership was a good indication of the levelling sentiment that accompanied Methodism under the guidance of John Wesley. After Wesley's death, however, those opportunities became more restricted. Methodist Conference minutes of 1803 declared that the preaching of women "does not at all seem necessary; there being a sufficiency of Preachers, whom God has accredited." While they still admitted to an "extraordinary call" for a woman, "we are of opinion she should in general address her own sex, and those only." ⁵⁷ Warner marks this as another example of "...the stultification of the liberal impulse after the

⁵⁶ Deborah M. Valenze, Prophetic Sons and Daughters; Female Preaching and Popular Religion in Industrial England (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 51-52.

⁵⁷ Phillip Garrett, A Digest of the Minutes of the Methodist Conferences from the First...in the Year 1744, to the Year 1826 (Halifax: Thomas Walker, 1827), 97.

vitalistic period of the movement which coincided with the leadership of John Wesley." ⁵⁸

Perhaps the most radical teaching of Methodism with regard to levelling the inequities in society was John Wesley's directives concerning wealth. English society was marked by extreme differences between the very rich and the very poor. Even with the development of the fledgling middle class through the industrial revolution, the only real model for the "haves" was that of the wealthy aristocracy who made oppulent display of their wealth. Wesley vigorously attacked the value system of the rich and the ruling class but without attacking the system which produced their wealth as later radicals would do. Wesley spoke on the topic many times throughout his lifetime in clear and unmistakable terms. Several sermons are devoted exclusively to the subject, and Wesley staked a great deal of his personal credibility upon his own compliance with these messages.

He preached repeatedly against the hoarding of riches or the "laying up of treasures upon earth." The success of a "gentleman" was, after all, often judged in English society by the size of the fortune he left behind him. Hence, Wesley wrote in 1743, "If I leave behind me £10 ... you and all mankind bear witness against me that I lived and died a thief and a robber." ⁵⁹ This noble sentiment brought criticism, however, as it struck at the core of English social values. Dr. Joseph Trapp, in his famous pamphlet "The Danger of Being Righteous Over-Much," caricatured Wesley's statements as meaning "'tis a Sin to be rich; a Christian ought not to leave an Estate behind him, when he dies; but is obliged to sell all he has, and give it to the Poor." ⁶⁰ Trapp denounced

58 Warner, The Wesleyan Movement, 266.

59 Tyreman, Life of J. Wesley, 1:436.

60 Trapp, "Righteous Over-Much," 15 (referencing to Luke 18:22).

these notions as being "so far from being the Perfection of Christianity; that they are repugnant to it, as well as to Reason." ⁶¹

To leave behind less than £10 was no small task for Wesley. Through the sale of "cheaper, shorter, and plainer books" and "many small tracts," he freely admitted that he had "unawares became rich." ⁶² His definition of 'rich' was, indeed, quite broad to encompass all those who had sufficient food to eat, clothes to wear, a place to sleep, and 'something over.' ⁶³ Yet, there is sufficient evidence to acknowledge that Wesley was wealthy by many men's standards of his day. James Lackington, a follower and bookseller, estimated Wesley's income as some £2,000 per year. The historian Henry Abelove estimates that if Wesley's income was even half of that amount at the height of his career, "it was still at a rough comparison as big as or bigger than, the revenues of eight of the bishoprics of the Church of England." ⁶⁴ Wesley spoke as one who was personally acquainted with the options that wealth entails and not simply as an uninvolved critic. He freely admitted his complicity and invited the world to hold him accountable to his own teachings.

Wesley's sensitivity to the snares of wealth was not based upon some monastic asceticism that equated money with evil. He rejected as "empty rant" any blaming of gold and silver for the world's corruption. "The fault does not lie in the money, but in them that use it. It may be used ill: And what may not?" ⁶⁵ Money has tremendous usefulness, he pointed out, both in business, among civilized nations, and in the

⁶¹ Ibid., 14.

⁶² J. Wesley, Sermon, "The Danger of Riches," Works, 7:9.

⁶³ Ibid., 7:3.

⁶⁴ Henry Abelove, The Evangelist of Desire (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990), 9.

⁶⁵ J. Wesley, Sermon, "The Use of Money," Works, 6:126.

common affairs of life. But in the hands of God's children it takes on noble proportions.

In the hands of his children, it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked: It gives to the traveller and the stranger where to lay his head. By it we may supply the place of an husband to the widow, and of a father to the fatherless. We may be a defence for the oppressed, a means of health to the sick, of ease to them that are in pain; it may be as eyes to the blind, as feet to the lame; yea, a lifter up from the gates of death! ⁶⁶

It is no wonder then that Wesley openly embraced the idea of productive gain and gave his whole hearted blessing to the capitalistic process for each individual. This was represented by the maxim, "Gain all you can." ⁶⁷ It was not only a right but "our bounden duty to do this." ⁶⁸ Wesley was quick to qualify this imperative, however, in that no one should seek gain that would harm one's health, life, mind, or neighbor. It is in this context that he condemns the English distillers who push the sale of "spiritous liquors" for common consumption. He calls them "poisoners general" and warns against envying their "large estates and sumptuous palaces."

A curse is in the midst of them: The curse of God cleaves to the stones, the timber, the furniture of them! The curse of God is in their gardens, their walks, their groves; a fire that burns to the nethermost hell! Blood, blood is there: The foundation, the floor, the walls the roof, are stained with blood! ⁶⁹

Thus is seen the basis for a strong social conscience based upon the mandate to love thy neighbor as thyself.

In addition to stressing honest gain and a strong work ethic, Wesley taught his followers to "Save all you can." ⁷⁰ Simplicity was his aim in all of life as he despised waste and what is now referred to as

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., 6:127.

69 Ibid., 6:129.

70 Ibid., 6:131.

conspicuous consumption. This was in direct contrast to English society that equated ostentation with rank and privilege. In matters of diet, Wesley hardly bothered with the sins of gluttony or drunkenness. "An honest Heathen would condemn these," he explained. His target was something much more broad, much more common, and much more excused. "...there is a regular, reputable kind of sensuality, an elegant epicurism, which does not immediately disorder the stomach, nor ... impair the understanding; and yet ... it cannot be maintained without considerable expense. Cut off all this expense! Despise delicacy and variety, and be content with what plain nature requires."⁷¹ To despise delicacy and variety, however, put a Methodist at plain odds with prevailing upper class societal values.

Superfluous or expensive apparel, furniture, books, paintings, or gardens all come in for equal condemnation. Wesley's injunction was to "Lay out nothing to gratify the pride of life, to gain the admiration or praise of men."⁷² When it came time to build preaching houses for Methodist services, Wesley's advice was predictable.

Let all preaching-houses be built plain and decent; but not more expensive than is absolutely unavoidable: Otherwise the necessity of raising money will make rich men necessary to us. But if so, we must be dependent upon them, yea, and governed by them. And then farewell to the Methodist discipline, if not doctrine too.⁷³

Simplicity in construction did not necessarily mean that a building must be ugly. This is seen in the construction of John Wesley's Chapel in Bristol. Built in 1739, rebuilt in 1748, and restored to its 1748 condition in 1930, the chapel is the oldest Methodist building still in use. The clean lines and simple materials combine to supply a beautiful structure even though seating is supplied by means of plain wooden benches.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 J. Wesley, Minutes of Several Conversations, Works, 8:332.



Illustration 3.1

The wooden dividing rail down the middle represents another Methodist distinctive. Wesley fiercely insisted that the sexes be strictly segregated during services and that no seats should be reserved on a rental basis. In 1788, a chapel committee dared propose mixed seating and reserved pews. Wesley's reaction was that it would overthrow "at one blow, the discipline which I have been establishing for fifty years!"⁷⁴ Three days later, after a "calm and loving consultation," the committee "judged it best" that Wesley's tradition be continued.⁷⁵

The exclusion of pew rents from Methodist chapels "was in as sharp

⁷⁴ J. Wesley, *Journal*, March 21, 1788, *Works*, 4:406-7.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 4:407.

a contrast as could be imagined to the hierarchically ordered congregation at the parish church, surrounded as it was with hatchments, memorials, and decorated pews." ⁷⁶ Dissenters also had allowed for private pews some of which tended to sharp ostentation. "In many chapels they were virtually closed-off rooms, resembling parlors, lined with baize and covered by curtains." ⁷⁷ Wesley would brook no such inequality and so precluded the problems which Hugh McLeod identified as creeping into churches of the 19th century.

...problems arose when there were sharp gradation in rents, with associated differentials in the quality of seating, or when no free seats were provided for those unable to pay. In the early nineteenth century, some churches were deliberately attracting the rich by excluding the poor, and others were achieving the same result without necessarily intending it. ⁷⁸

Such hierarchial distinctions were anathema to Wesley as were any superfluities of style in architecture or dress.

Wesley's preference for unadorned and plain personal appearance was quite clear, yet he was not a total iconoclast or a believer in monkish attire. Tyreman records that he appeared ordinarily in a gown, cassock, and bands, the canonically correct dress of a clergyman of the Church of England. ⁷⁹ He wore silk stockings and gloves and, when the weather was cold, a floor-length brocaded cloak. On his breast was noted a gold stickpin and on his shoes, large silver buckles. ⁸⁰ Abelow notes that he kept himself neat and fastidiously clean, and he took pains with his hair. "It was his own, not a wig, and he wore it long, parted in the

⁷⁶ Armstrong, The Church of England, Methodists and Society, 113.

⁷⁷ Abelow, Evangelist of Desire, 54.

⁷⁸ Hugh McLeod, Religion and the Working Class in 19th Century England (London: Macmillan, 1984), 59.

⁷⁹ Tyreman, Life of Wesley, 2:409.

⁸⁰ Abelow, Evangelist of Desire, 7.

middle, combed straight back, and curling slightly at the bottom."⁸¹

Abelove also portrays Wesley as "genteel" in his living and travelling arrangements. As evidence, he cites the lodgings which Wesley kept in London, first a suite of rooms and later a three-story town house, though he was usually there only four months out of the year. He also cites a staff of servants kept on hand to wait on him there and upon any helpers who also might accompany him.⁸² It would be difficult, however, to separate assistants from servants. In 1748, a thirty two year old widow named Grace Murray was a housekeeper at the Methodist society room in Newcastle. When Wesley became sick while on tour in the area, Murray nursed him back to health. He had known her for ten years time but became strongly attached to her, so strongly that when recovered he sought to propose marriage.⁸³ Nothing came of the relationship for various reasons, but this illustrates the difficulty of establishing the relationship of those people who most certainly swirled around him. Was Grace Murray a hired servant? Her occupation was that of housekeeper. But Wesley obviously saw her as something much more.

Abelove also describes Wesley as travelling "genteely."⁸⁴ Through a bequest by an admirer, Wesley received a carriage, a big chaise custom-fitted with a bookcase inside, in which he usually travelled after 1766. But before this time, he usually travelled by horseback. Considering the hundreds of miles Wesley travelled yearly in this fashion, one could be wondering at Abelove's definition of "genteel." Abelove has much invested in this portrayal of Wesley as a "gentleman," for he places the basis of Wesley's influence upon his ability to defer or shed his "gentleman's" status to gain the trust of the lower classes

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid., 8.

83 Abelove, Evangelist of Desire, 19.

84 Ibid.

of society. Abelove seeks to explain the dynamic of the revival in terms of poor people who are overwhelmed by the actions of a clergyman, obviously from a higher caste, who deigns to eat with them, to sleep in their homes, and to work to ease their afflictions. Such a view ignores the power of the spoken word that drew thousands to listen under the most adverse situations where personality is minimized and also the great bulk of the Methodist movement that was carried along by hundreds of poor and virtually unknown preachers.

Abelove does not at any point try to prove that Wesley was indeed guilty of a double standard. Rather, he attempts to dramatize the extent of Wesley's largesse to the poor in time, attention, and wealth and the impact that it registered. That this was the secret of John Wesley's success is debatable and that it should be the reason for the success of a whole movement is very doubtful. What is not in question is the extent of Wesley's modest lifestyle considering his annual income. His enemies looked for opportunities to catch him in a contradiction such as when the Commissioners of Excise questioned him in 1776 saying they "cannot doubt but you have 'plate' for which you have hitherto neglected to make an entry." His response was, "I have two silver spoons at London and two at Bristol. This is all the plate I have at present, and I shall not buy any more while so many round me want bread."⁸⁵

This was a man who was not opposed to a few, nice functional things and open about having them. But he was also fully convinced of the inherent dangers of indulging the desires above the level of need.

In using riches where they have no real use, nor we any real want, we only use them to our great hurt, in creating unreasonable desires, in nourishing ill tempers, in indulging foolish passions, and supporting a vain turn of mind. For high eating and drinking, fine clothes, and fine houses, state and equipage, gay pleasures and diversions, do

⁸⁵ J. Wesley, Letter, September 9, 1776, as quoted in J.W. Bready, England: Before and After Wesley, 2nd. ed. (New York: Russell and Russell, 1971), 238.

all of them naturally hurt and disorder our heart. They are the food and nourishment of all the folly and weakness of our nature. They are all of them the support of something that ought not to be supported. They are contrary to that sobriety and piety of heart which relishes divine things. They are so many weights upon our mind, that make us less able and less inclined to raise our thoughts and affections to things above.⁸⁶

Riches also led to feelings of inequality among men. How hard it was for the rich, exclaimed Wesley, "not to think themselves better than the poor, base, uneducated herd of men!"⁸⁷ Riches produced pride and those who "rose in the world" also "rose in their opinion of themselves."⁸⁸

Wesley also emphasized the more traditional stewardship angle with regard to wealth, but he did so with a vengeance. In his sermon, "The Danger of Riches," Wesley did not ask his followers to be good Jews and give up a tenth of all they possessed. He did not ask them to be good Pharisees and give up a fifth. He confessed instead, "I dare not advise you to give half of what you have; no, nor three quarter; but all!"⁸⁹ He was not advocating total surrender of their funds and assets but rather to recognize the Lordship of God over all they possessed and to handle it accordingly as faithful and wise stewards. "Do not you know that God entrusted you with that money (all above what buys necessities for your families) to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to help the stranger, the widow, the fatherless; and, indeed, as far as it will go, to relieve the wants of all mankind? How can you, how dare you, defraud your Lord, by applying it to any other purpose?"⁹⁰

The radical nature of this position dictated that excess wealth belonged not to the individual that created it but to the community.

86 J. Wesley, Sermon, "Sermon on the Mount-8," Works, 5:374.

87 Ibid., 5:368.

88 J. Wesley, Sermon, "Some Account of the Late Work of God in North America," Works, 7:412.

89 J. Wesley, Sermon, "The Danger of Riches," Works, 7:10.

90 J. Wesley, Sermon, "Danger of Increasing Riches," Works, 7:360.

But where other radicals advocated some scheme of confiscation, Wesley dealt with it as an issue of the individual heart, not as a matter of politics or force. The traditional church had blessed the personal accumulation of wealth as a sign of God's blessing and asked for a tenth in return. Wesley, however, attacked any right to ownership of wealth above the meeting of very elementary levels of need.

Wesley also spoke out against the fashionable practice so valued in upper class English society of leaving large inheritances to children. This became more of an issue as the Methodists themselves became more prosperous in Wesley's later years. He tolerated leaving children enough money to keep them "above want" but anything more than that was foolishness. "What! cannot you leave them enough of arrows, firebrands, and death? not enough of foolish and hurtful desires? not enough of pride, lust, ambition, vanity? not enough of everlasting burnings?"⁹¹ Again, Wesley treats the abundance of wealth as being a very dangerous substance which must be handled with the utmost care. Just as the industrial revolution was about to create here-to-fore unheard of wealth for a considerable minority and the promise of prosperity to multitudes, John Wesley was labeling this delicious taste of rising above bare subsistence as a dangerous and poisonous brew.

To this end, he gave his third directive as an antidote to the poison of wealth: give all you can. To follow the first two directives of gaining and saving all that is possible and not acting on the third is to have done nothing at all. "You may as well throw your money into the sea, as bury it in the earth. And you may as well bury it in the earth, as in your chest, or in the bank of England. Not to use, is effectually to throw it away."⁹² It was not merely a matter of stewardship, however. It was a matter of self-protection and

91 J. Wesley, Sermon, "The Use of Money," Works, 6:132.

92 Ibid., 133.

self-preservation. As an old man, "having served...between sixty and seventy years; with dim eyes, shaking hands, and tottering feet" Wesley rose up with all his powers of persuasion and said of giving, "I defy all the men upon earth, yea, all the angels in heaven, to find any other way of extracting the poison from riches."⁹³ This was a direct reversal from the societal idolization of wealth as the great balm and panacea to all personal problems. Wealth was a powerful pharmaceutical capable of much good and much harm.

The pattern of giving which Wesley taught was also one which could perplex an outsider of the Methodist circle. Excess wealth was not their own and belonged to the community, believer and unbeliever alike. Giving was to be directed first of all to "them that are of the household of faith." If there was still a surplus, "as you have opportunity, do good unto all men."⁹⁴ Wesley warned specifically, "Let not your love or beneficence be confined to Methodists, so called, only."⁹⁵ Tyreman records an interesting story in which John Wesley once gave a guinea to a starving actor at the mercy of a landlord threatening eviction. To the actor he said, "You serve the stage, young man; would I could teach you to serve your God; you would find Him a better Master." The landlord received three crowns from Wesley and these words: "How terrible will be your condition on your death bed, calling for that mercy, which you refuse to a fellow creature! I shudder whilst under your roof, and leave it, as I would the pestilence." The irony was not lost on the landlord who afterward marvelled, "Why it was only yesterday, he was preaching everybody to the devil that encouraged the

⁹³ J. Wesley, Sermon, "The Danger of Increasing Riches," Works, 7:361.

⁹⁴ J. Wesley, Sermon, "The Use of Money, Works, 6:134.

⁹⁵ J. Wesley, "Plain Account of Christian Perfection," Works, 11:431.

players, and to-day he is the first to do it himself." ⁹⁶ Such reaction demonstrates the complexity of Wesley's position and the confusion it could engender. Such giving manifested a maturity that blended compassion and judgement. Yet it could easily confuse and bewilder the spectator who neither understood charity but was loathe to judge behaviour or who was quick to pass judgement but could not understand Godly compassion that transecnded judgement.

There is much more evidence to show that Wesley was consistent in his teaching regarding philanthropy and true to its practice throughout his lifetime. But what of his followers? There seems to be plenty of evidence that the early Methodists were quite receptive to the first and even the second aspects of Wesley's teaching. James Hall, a Methodist of humble position, testified:

I determined that the business of my station should be done as well as it was in my power, and with all possible dispatch. I found by this method I could do far more work in a day than I had done before, and have plenty of time for all the means of grace.... Idleness and religion can never be reconciled together." ⁹⁷

So, too, did many refrain from the waste involved with drunkenness and other idle amusements that drained their income. A private letter in 1743 describes how "many families that used to be sotting and quarrelling at alehouses in the evenings, so as often to make themselves unfit for work in the mornings, whereby they lived miserable: Now after work instead of spending part of their day's earnings at the Ale-house, do hear the preaching, and hereby their hearts are made so glad that they can rise at five to hear the Word, and go chearfully [sic] to work at six, and are better husbands on all accounts." ⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Reilly, "Memoir of an Actor," as quoted in Tyreman, Life of John Wesley, 2:446.

⁹⁷ James Hall, "Experience of James Hall, by Himself," Arminian Magazine, vol. 16, 1793, as quoted in Warner, The Wesleyan Movement, 169.

⁹⁸ T.B., "A Letter From a Private Person to his Pastor, concerning the People called Methodists" (London: W. Strahan, 1743), reprinted in Wesley Historical Society Proceedings, 6:38.

Yet the Father of the Methodists, John Wesley, was woefully disappointed with the ability of his followers to adhere to his third injunction, to give all you can. In 1789, Wesley wrote a rather despondent sermon entitled "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity." In it he decried that one may find many who follow the first rule: 'gain all you can.' "You may find a few that observe the Second, 'Save all you can:' But how many have you found that observe the Third rule, 'Give all you can?' Have you reason to believe, that five hundred of these are to be found among fifty thousand Methodists?" Wesley went on to grouse, "And yet nothing can be more plain, than that all who observe the two first rules without the third, will be twofold more the children of hell than ever they were before."⁹⁹ This only served to reinforce what he felt about the danger of riches. "It is an observation which admits of few exceptions, that nine in ten of these decreased in grace, in the same proportion as they increased in wealth."¹⁰⁰ This was a tension that ran throughout Wesley's ministry and life. Wealth, he maintained, was not inherently evil. But those who obtained it were led astray nine times out of ten. It was only after Wesley's death that the tension within Methodism was relieved with a more permissive view of the accumulation of wealth. The tension within society, however, continued to build because of great inequities that became even more pronounced; inequities that were sanctioned by the church, including Methodism.

Yet, was Wesley justified in such a morose view of Methodist charity during his tenure? They may not have measured up to his expectations, but did that mean that his teaching was a total failure? Numerous journal entries reveal offerings of hundreds of pounds taken up for relief of the poor (i.e. April 22, 1744, Jan 4, 1785). Some members left legacies to the societies upon their deaths as a Miss Leven who

⁹⁹ J. Wesley, Sermon, "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity," Works, 7:285-6.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 289.

left £1000 which was distributed to the poor within a year.¹⁰¹ Wesley even went so far as to pay tribute to an aristocrat, Sir Thomas Stepney, the seventh baronet of the Stepney family. In 1774, he travelled to Llanelly on the Thames and grieved the 'change' that was there. "Sir Thomas Stepney, the father of the poor, was dead: cut down in the strength of his years."¹⁰²

An exact record of Methodist charity is difficult to compile for their philanthropic impulses were intensely personal. Biographical entries rather than society or church records are the best sources to evaluate their efforts. John Valton, an early Methodist preacher who stopped in the village of Hanging Heaton to do some fund raising for a preaching-house, wrote, "I was astonished at the amazing liberality of this poor people," which was so great that he "was even obliged to stay the hand of some," lest they suffer for their generosity.¹⁰³ Warner cites two sources from 1825 and 1875 in saying that "Everywhere Methodists gained community-wide reputation for their benefactions."¹⁰⁴ There seems ample evidence that the teachings of Wesley did indeed take hold and make a lasting mark.

Yet, following Wesley's death, Warner notes a subtle shift in practice and teaching that rejected the practical concepts and discipline that Wesley espoused. "the moral emphasis in the revival's economic teaching was neutralized" and Wesleyanism "surrendered its capacity for creative leadership" in the political and economic

101 Robert F. Wearmouth, Methodism and the Common People (London: Epworth Press, 1945), 209.

102 R. Butterworth, "The Father of the Poor," Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society, 4:70.

103 John Valton, MS. Journal, January 19, 1783, reprinted in "Excerpts from John Valton's MS. Journal," Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society, 8:34.

104 Warner, The Wesleyan Movement, 216.

struggles of the succeeding century.¹⁰⁵ At issue was not the idea of charitable giving or even the amount of charitable giving. These had long been a part of English religion and society. What was different, radically different, was the renunciation of the right of ownership of excess wealth. Once that moral high ground was deserted, Methodism became as any other religion or church which espoused charity as a desirable practice. And if one contributed his tenth, the rest was his to do with as he saw fit. Great inequities could thus exist comfortably side by side. Warner rightly observes that this neutralized the levelling aspects of Wesley's Methodism. He detected that this, in fact, did happen from the increased tendency of Methodists to allow for difference in dress according to one's "station" in life and the reverting to pew rentals. Gone, too, were the strident calls to "Give all you can."

Though his followers were less than fully faithful to that dictum, it appears that John Wesley did follow through to the end. James Lackington, a convert of John Wesley and subsequent businessman and publisher, vouches that Wesley left behind at his death £4 10s.¹⁰⁶

Wesley also left behind a significant legacy in the form of a movement that demonstrated strong egalitarian tendencies. The equal status of all men was strongly grounded in the Biblical doctrine of original sin and need of a new birth experience. Methodists held that the manifestation of God's call to preach the Word was based upon supernatural gifts and callings and not on education or status thereby opening up the ministry to lay participation. This belief eventually broke down barriers to women ministering as co-equals among the Methodists themselves. Wealth, the greatest factor in creating inequities among people, was decisively and intelligently dealt with as

105 Ibid., 206.

106 James Lackington, The Confessions of James Lackington (London: Richard Edwards, 1804), 152.

an ethical issue in a way that significantly narrowed the gulf between rich and poor. In so doing, the Methodists created a strong base of appeal to the laboring people of England but also left the door open to people of all social and economic levels who would so choose to humble themselves.

Chapter 4

Methodism as the Tie That Binds

"Didst thou not make us one, that we might one remain,
Together travel on, and bear each other's pain;"¹

While George Whitefield was to earn a reputation as the premier orator of the Methodist revival years, it was John Wesley who established a much longer lasting presence by means of his genius for organization. His efforts produced the societies, classes, and bands that united the Methodists into an enduring force that eventually gave birth to the separate but worldwide Methodist Church, an outcome which would have evoked a bittersweet reaction from John Wesley. He earnestly desired to build a structure that would minister to the spiritual needs of his followers in a uniquely personal manner, but also desired that this structure should forever remain a loyal adjunct to the Anglican Church. While his efforts ultimately failed in maintaining perfect union with the mother church, he was very successful in building tremendous unity among numerous followers over a considerable geographic

¹ Charles Wesley, Hymn #416, A Collection of Hymns for the use of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Principally from the Collection of Rev. John Wesley, M.A. Late Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford (New York: B. Waugh and T. Mason, 1832), 361.

area that accomplished two things: it met a basic human need for belonging and created a lasting network that took on a life of its own. Just what was this structure, and how did it come to be? How did it build unity in the lives of its participants, and how was that unity perceived by outsiders? To what extent was Methodism inclusive and to what extent was it exclusive? What was the role and means of discipline, and why would individuals submit voluntarily to its requirements? Did Methodist unity pose a political threat? How enduring were the bonds of unity in the class meetings? Was Methodist unity an ever triumphing force? These questions will constitute the focus and form of this remaining chapter.

Para-church societies were nothing new to the Anglican Church of the eighteenth century. A fair number of them had flourished and waned prior to John Wesley's Methodist Societies which begun in 1739. The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and also the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts were two such groups that functioned with the full knowledge and blessing of the Anglican hierarchy.² A society was "a very innocent name, and very common in London for any number of people associating themselves together."³

John Wesley attributed the origin of the first Methodist society to a natural outgrowth of the intense zeal on the part of many to know "the truth as it is in Jesus" and in response to the opposition that rose up accusing that "much religion [will] make thee mad." If this is so, we may assume that the beginnings of Methodist organization was a response to pressure from below. John and Charles Wesley related how numerous individuals came to them in London asking "what they should do, being distressed on every side." They advised them to "Talk together as

² J.W. Bready, England: Before and After Wesley (New York: Russell and Russell, 1971), 2nd. ed., 183.

³ John Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists," 1748, The Works of John Wesley (England: Wesleyan Conference Edition, 1872), 8:250.

often as you can. And pray earnestly with and for one another, that you may 'endure to the end, and be saved.'"⁴ The followers responded by asking them to "talk with us often, to direct and quicken us in our way, to give us the advices which you well know we need, and to pray with us, as well as for us." John Wesley asked for their names and addresses but quickly realized the task was well beyond his ability to respond individually to each request. He asked them to come together each Thursday evening, and he would "gladly spend some time" with them. "Thus arose, without any previous design on either side, what was afterwards called 'a Society'." Thus, much of what is called John Wesley's genius for organization was actually a capacity to creatively adapt to demand and his ability to realize the possibilities of spontaneously generated forms.

One condition only was laid down as a requirement for admission to these new societies: all must exhibit "a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins."⁵ The basis for membership was therefore an extremely broad but simple principle that continued as the foundation of societal fellowship throughout John Wesley's lifetime. There was no doctrinal test or required adherence to a creed that would narrowly discriminate against dissenters or any other religious group or background. The all-inclusive nature of this rule resulted in a mature and appealing call to fellowship that cut across all creeds and community boundaries.

There were some expectations, however, which John and Charles Wesley had of those who truly "desired to flee from the wrath to come." They felt that "wherever this is really fixed in the soul, it will be shown by its fruits. It is therefore expected of all who continue therein, that they should continue to evidence their desire of

4 Ibid, 249.

5 Ibid, 250.

salvation." Here it was that numerous conditions were put forth whereupon membership in the societies could be seriously regulated. A member could be disciplined or expelled for such infractions as profaning the sabbath "either by buying or selling," drunkenness, usury, brawling, quarreling, laying up treasures upon earth, uncharitable or unprofitable conversation "particularly speaking evil of Magistrates or of Ministers," or for mere "softness, and needless self-indulgence."⁶

Not only were there negatives to avoid, there were also strong Christian imperatives which must be in evidence in order to maintain one's good standing in the society. Each member "should continue to evidence their desire of salvation" by "doing good of every possible sort, and as far as is possible, to all men," by "giving food to the hungry, by clothing the naked, by visiting or helping them that are sick, or in prison," by "instructing reproofing, or exhorting all they have any intercourse with," and by "denying themselves, and taking up their cross daily."⁷ Attendance at all public worship services, the Lord's supper, and personal Bible study and prayer were, of course, also requirements of a good society member. Thus, while the invitation to membership was extremely broad and inclusive, the gate to retaining one's membership and good standing was extremely narrow. This was a Christianity that focused on personal piety rather than on intellectual assent to church or doctrine and which amounted to a left-handed slap at respectable churchmen.

These criteria for membership were more than idle threats or virtuous platitudes. To Wesley, the jealous guarding of a pure and unified body of believers was a matter of order. True Christian discipline to him existed where "all the living members of Christ are knit together in one, and all that are putrid and dead immediately cut

⁶ John and Charles Wesley, "The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies," 1743, Works, 8:270.

⁷ Ibid, 270-271.

off from the body: this order I reverence, for it is of God."⁸ This was a basic criticism which he held of the Anglican Church whose parishioners he called "a rope of sand." Because so few, if any, in his opinion, were "alive to God; so they have no connexion with each other, unless such as might be among Turks or Heathens."⁹ Wesley rightly recognized that a sincerely held set of core Christian values was the first essential ingredient of unity in the body of Christ. In this context, it is understandable that Bready would say (with Warner and others) that "the very foundations of the Movement were ethical, practical and experimental rather than doctrinal, theoretical or metaphysical."¹⁰ Rupert Davies also points out that this marked a key difference for Methodism in the religious life of England.

Obedience to God was no longer one necessary and legitimate interest among many in the life of the rational man. It became the over-mastering motive in every sphere of activity.¹¹

While this appealed to the Methodist purist, it created discomfort and reaction among those who did not share that zeal and gave rise to the epithet of "being righteous over-much." But Methodism must be seen as a reform movement that sought to restore the ideal of a disciplined life at a time when, as Baker says, "Anglican discipline was very lax, Convocation no longer met, and Bishops were unlikely to move unless pushed very hard."¹²

⁸ J. Wesley, "A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion," part 3, 1745, Works, 8:225.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Bready, England: Before and After Wesley, 201.

¹¹ Rupert Davies, "The People Called Methodists - 1. Our Doctrines," Rupert Davies and Gordon Rupp, eds., A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain (London: Epworth Press, 1965), 186.

¹² Frank Baker, John Wesley and the Church of England (New York: Abingdon, 1970), 58.

Wesley framed the themes of total obedience around the scriptural imperative to be of a single eye.¹³ In a sermon by that title, he identifies those vital values and characteristics of the true believer:

If his eye be single, his one design is to save his own soul, and them that hear him; ...If, on the other hand, his eye be not single, if he aim at ease, honour, money, or preferment; the world may account him a wise man, but God says unto him, "Thou fool!"¹⁴

Those who do not have 'a single eye' "can know nothing of scriptural religion" or of "what Christian holiness means." The beginning place for all of this, Wesley maintains, is "'the new birth,' with all the circumstances attending it."¹⁵ This was the bedrock basis for Methodist unity: a common value system and the common experience of the 'new birth.' It was again a sharp provocation to the status-quo and raised the issue of valid and invalid Christianity.

Wesley was not unconscious, however, that bringing together a narrowly focused group of people has pitfalls all of its own. He therefore resolved "to use every possible method of preventing...a narrowness of spirit, a party zeal, ...that miserable bigotry which makes many so unready to believe that there is any work of God but among themselves." To do this, he allotted one evening in every month to read the accounts he received "of the work which God is carrying on in the earth, both in our own and other countries, not among us alone, but among those of various opinions and denominations." His goal was to encourage "every child of God to say, (O when shall it one be!) 'Whoever doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.'"¹⁶ Wesley had a great longing to build unity among Christians across denominational and cultural lines as well as

13 Matthew 6:22,23.

14 J. Wesley, Sermon, "On a Single Eye," 1789, Works, 7:303.

15 Ibid., 7:300.

16 J. Wesley, "The People Called Methodists," Works, 8:257.

within his little societies. It was an admirable effort to remain more inclusive and no doubt greatly enhanced the appeal of Methodism.

Unity was an important priority to John Wesley both within these societies and with the Anglican Church itself. It was not long, Wesley records, that objections were raised to the forming of these societies to which he was particularly sensitive: "Is not this making a schism? Is not the joining these people together, gathering Churches out of Churches?" In a particularly pointed and testy reply, Wesley answered by admitting he was gathering people from out of buildings called churches. But he denied that he was dividing Christians from Christians or destroying Christian fellowship for "These were not Christians before they were thus joined. Most of them were barefaced Heathens." He also was highly skeptical of any "Christian fellowship" as he envisioned it ever existing within the Anglican Church. He answered thus, "That which never existed, cannot be destroyed."¹⁷ But this was basically an evasive response. Wesley was, consciously or unconsciously, creating a separate stratum under his exclusive control.

The fellowship Wesley had in mind for his societies was that which was close, intimate, confrontive, and intensely personal. The societies filled that description to a certain degree, but the band meetings were an outgrowth of a desire on the part of society members for a "closer union" where they could "pour out their hearts without reserve." Wesley divided them up into groups of four and five according to sex, age, and marital status for, in dealing with temptation, "they knew not how to speak" in a larger group setting where "every sort, young and old, men and women, met together."¹⁸ The rules of the band-societies were drawn up in December of 1738, and were designed to fulfill the scriptural

17 Ibid., 8:251.

18 Ibid, 8:258.

injunction to "confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed."

It was this penchant for confession which attracted criticism. Any one of the following questions could be considered fair game in the bands:

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations have you met with?
3. How were you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not?¹⁹

Tyreman cites these as "an indication of the still unhealthy tone of Wesley's piety." He notes as well that "the thing looked like a prurient prying into secrets which properly belong alone to a man and his Maker" and "savour far too much of the popish confessional to be admired."²⁰ English protestantism was, above all, strongly united in its opposition to anything that smacked of Catholicism, and Tyreman represents the mainstream of that tradition. The idea of confession of sins to others as being necessary or effectual for salvation was naturally repulsive. Wesley, on the other hand, had a natural bent towards introspection and analysis that dated back to the days of the "Holy Club" at Oxford. His was a conviction that grace should result in righteousness and that being a measurable and observable quantity. He was also repulsed by the lack of change or effect that the gospel seemed to have upon those Anglicans who professed a saving faith. Yet he had to work through years of tortuous self-examination to arrive at an assurance of salvation before entering the productive phase of his ministry, an experience he would later say was entirely unnecessary.

Wesley took some criticism of his confessional practice in the 1740's for he responds to the charge of "Popery" in 1748 as being,

19 J. Wesley, "Rules of the Band-Societies," 1738, Works, 8:273.

20 Luke Tyreman, The Life and Times of John Wesley (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1870), 1:210.

related to this matter, "a stale objection." The fact that the band confession was several people confessing to one another and not a single individual speaking to a priest was for Wesley a distinction of major proportions.²¹ Evidently, Wesley thought that the communal nature made it a matter of common edification which sufficiently distanced it from any sacrament of confession. Yet Wesley dismissed this objection in such a cursory manner so as to be curiously unlike his normal thoroughness and thus evoke suspicion.

Though the rules and intensity of the band meetings seem severe and inquisitorial to a later generation, there does not seem to be any reaction of the sort by those of the early Methodists. Leslie Church notes that there is no record of any objection being raised when the "Rules" were read in Conference.²² In fact, he cites a 1799 journal entry from Mary Titherington, a Liverpool Methodist, who wrote:

Mr. Barber read the Band rules in the Band [meeting]. I felt much humbled that I had not paid stricter attention to them; and much gratitude to God and his people for bearing so long with me, and promoting me to honour among them, notwithstanding all my inconsistencies. I felt also a desire that wherein I came short in times past, I might bear with others as I had been borne with.²³

In this confession, we might also see how the strict standards were perhaps tempered with mercy and longsuffering in their translation into actual practice. This fact will not easily show up in Methodist writings outlining their standards and purposes for the bands. Yet it was an obvious point of concern for married couples, families, and employers when one of them should be required to pledge such openness and honesty. Samuel Wesley, John's older brother and conventional cleric, complained to their mother, Susanna:

21 J. Wesley, "The People Called Methodists," Works, 8:259.

22 Leslie Church, The Early Methodist People (London: Epworth Press, 1949), 152.

23 Mary Titherington, Journal, 1799, as quoted in Church, Early Methodist People, 152-3.

Will any man of common sense or spirit suffer any domestic to be in a band engaged to relate to five or ten people everything without reserve that concerns the person's conscience how much soever it may concern the family? Ought any married persons to be there unless husband and wife be there together?²⁴

In this context, it is understandable that the Wednesbury riots could indeed have begun with the man who searched for his missing wife convinced that she was in the presence of "those preachers."

But Wesley put a high priority upon propagation of these 'bands' and formed yet another level of close relationships known as the Select Societies. Church identifies a hierarchy of spirituality with these different groups. The societies were for 'awakened persons,' the bands for those who had received assurance of 'remission of sins,' while the select societies were for those 'who seemed to walk in the light of God.' He also speculates that these were in part formed to provide a close support group for the leader of Methodism itself who was a very public but lonely figure.²⁵

While the band and select societies continued to play a part in Methodism for some time, it was not until the class meeting was born in 1742 that the great majority of Methodists found a "family hearth round which all could gather."²⁶ It is another example of spontaneous generation from below. A member referred to as Captain Foy responded for a need to raise funds for a society building in Bristol by suggesting that each society member give a penny a week until the debt was paid. When it was pointed out that many were poor and could ill afford the sum, he responded, "then put ten or twelve of them to me. Let each of these give what they can weekly, and I will supply what is

24 Samuel Wesley, Letter to Susanna Wesley, 1739, as quoted in W.E.H. Lecky, A History of England in the Eighteenth Century (New York: D. Appleton and Co.), 2:609.

25 Church, Early Methodist People, 151.

26 Ibid., 153.

wanting."²⁷ It appears that not even Wesley suspected the implications that would flow from that simple idea, but the model matured and grew. As Captain Foy and others went about to collect the weekly penny, they became intimately acquainted with their people and their needs both physical and spiritual. These men (and women) became sub-pastors who ministered guidance and comfort to each and every society member.

In March of 1742, Wesley brought the Bristol experiment to London. He records in his journal:

I appointed several earnest and sensible men to meet me, to whom I showed the great difficulty I had long found of knowing the people who desired to be under my care. After much discourse, they all agreed, there could be no better way to come to a sure, thorough knowledge of each person, than to divide them into classes, like those at Bristol, under the inspection of those in whom I could most confide. This was the origin of our classes at London, for which I can never sufficiently praise God; the unspeakable usefulness of the institution having ever since been more and more manifest.²⁸

The impractical nature of house-to-house visitation soon gave way to weekly meetings under the guidance of the group leader. While many awkward beginnings were no doubt made by inexperienced leaders, there was a definite drift away from the inquisitorial techniques of the bands. "Instead of resembling courts of inquiry, they were family circles, where problems might be solved and experience shared, and where every member felt that there was One in the midst to guide and to bless."²⁹ Wesley records:

Many now happily experienced that Christian fellowship of which they had not so much as an idea before, They began to 'bear one another's burdens,' and naturally to 'care for each other.' As they had daily a more intimate acquaintance with, so they had a more endeared affection for, each other.³⁰

27 Captain Foy, as quoted in Church, Early Methodist People, 154.

28 J. Wesley, Journal, March 25, 1742, Works, 1:364.

29 Church, Early Methodist People, 156.

30 J. Wesley, "The People Called Methodists," Works, 8:254.

Not all members shared Wesley's enthusiasm for such intimacy as he himself noted: "many were at first extremely averse to meeting thus." Some viewed class membership "not as a privilege...but rather a restraint...because they did not like to be restrained in anything. Some were ashamed to speak before company. Others honestly said, "I do not know why; but I do not like it."³¹

But many did, and numerous testimonies exist that show a deep-seated loyalty to the class meeting that endured the physical hardships of distance and the test of time. "In 1744, John Maden ... joined with nine others in a class at Walsden ... and for twelve months tramped every week a distance of five miles each way to the meeting."³² These relationships proved to be very enduring in many cases. Ann Darvell died at Farlington at the age of 94 having been a class-member for 73 years.³³ For upwards of seventy years, Hugh Fauls of Clones was never once absent from class except when ill or absent from home.³⁴ John Brunskill, member of the Society at City Road Chapel in London, was Surveyor-General and Examiner in the Excise and so travelled constantly. "When away from home, he made it a rule in every town to find out a Methodist class-meeting once in the week, and in this way he met in class in nearly every county in England."³⁵ Brunskill thus demonstrated that membership in one Methodist class was to gain admittance to any other class meeting in the country.

Admittance to the class meetings, as with the bands and societies, was indeed closely regulated by means of tickets. In order to "separate the precious from the vile," Wesley determined to talk with every member

31 Ibid.

32 Church, Early Methodist People, 176.

33 Ibid., 177.

34 Ibid.

35 George Stevenson, City Road Chapel, London (London: Stevenson, 1872), 462, as quoted in Church, Early Methodist People, 179.

once a quarter "to inquire at their own mouths, as well as of their Leaders and neighbours, whether they grew in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." To those who met his approval, Wesley issued "a testimony under [his] own hand, by writing their name on a ticket prepared for that purpose."³⁶ Wesley congratulated himself on this system by exclaiming, "These also supplied us with a quiet and inoffensive method of removing any disorderly member."³⁷

Wesley was fearless in enforcing his powers of discipline as is illustrated by his examination of the classes in Gateshead in 1747. He addressed squarely the issue of purging unsatisfactory members evidently in the face of some opposition. He concludes his journal entry by saying:

The society, which the first year consisted of above eight hundred members, is now reduced to four hundred. But, according to the old proverb, the half is more than the whole. We shall not be ashamed of any of these, when we speak with our enemies in the gate.³⁸

He was equally adamant in his instructions to assistants that they "Give no ticket to any that wear calashes, high-heads, or enormous bonnets."³⁹ Wesley could only do this because of his complete and autocratic control.

Yet absolute power over membership in any club or society is of no value if there is not a substantial desire to belong to that society. The power of exclusion was of no value except that there were also strong attractions to keep and hold its membership. In fact, the exclusivity of an organization can be seen as an indication of the drawing power of that organization. Just what drew the thousands of members into these societies and fixed their allegiance? Gilbert answers, "Chapel communities were able to meet associational,

36 J. Wesley, "A People Called Methodists," Works, 8:256.

37 Ibid., 8:257.

38 J. Wesley, Journal, March 8. 1747, Works, 2:49.

39 J. Wesley, "Minutes of Several Conversations," Works, 8:307.

recreational and communal needs which in many cases would otherwise have gone unfulfilled; and they were able to provide a degree of economic protection and social security rarely available elsewhere."⁴⁰ In short, the Methodist family reached out and met to some degree the spiritual, social, and physical needs of its constituents.

The spiritual focus of the classes, bands, and societies is quite obvious, but social needs were also addressed. Primary among these was a feeling that someone cared about their personal trials and very existence. Good preaching was valued highly among Methodists, but yet Wesley found "that is not sufficient" for building a fellowship of believers. "By repeated experiments we learn, that though a man preach like an angel, he will neither collect, nor preserve a society which is collected, without visiting them from house to house."⁴¹ Class leaders were instructed to see each person once a week "to inquire how their souls prosper" and to "watch over that soul as they that must give an account."⁴² This close accountability could not help but foster a sense of belonging and value in each member as they discovered their importance in the eyes of another.

Though E.P. Thompson considers many accounts of Methodist fellowship "too euphoric," he admits that Methodism "did offer to the uprooted and abandoned people of the Industrial Revolution some kind of community to replace the older community-patterns which were being displaced." He also reports that the 'ticket' of admittance to Methodist meetings acquired a "fetishistic importance" for many and that the resultant fellowship contributed to the stability of families and

40 A.D. Gilbert, Religion and Society in Industrial England (New York: Longman, 1976), 90.

41 J. Wesley, Journal, January 29, 1759, Works, 2:466.

42 John and Charles Wesley, "General Rules of the United Societies," Works, 8:270-1.

homes as well as the church and the workplace.⁴³ Bready estimates that there were possibly 10,000 class leaders known to Wesley of which 8,000 were alive at the time of his death.⁴⁴ He characterizes these classes as the "spiritual school" of the underclass, "something wholly new to English life" that became a "civilizing, as well as spiritualising, force."⁴⁵ Bready also notes the modeling influence of the class meeting for future generations as when in the 19th century struggle for the Ten Hours Bill, the supporters "financed the organisation of factory operatives by borrowing bodily the scheme of the Methodist Class Meeting."⁴⁶

The rapid spread of these class meetings, however, coupled with their exclusive and private nature raised many questions and suspicions because of its being "something wholly new to English life." Dr. Hooker, editor of the Weekly Miscellany, concluded that the Methodists were "united together like a sect of *Religious Freemasons*," a direct comparison to a traditionally suspect secret society. He continued, "In general, they seem to be practising over the lesson set them by the *old Puritans* before the beginning of the *grand rebellion*."⁴⁷ Methodists were constantly under suspicion as a result of their closed meetings of being conspiratorial in nature. Green quotes a pamphlet printed in 1750 which contains the curious entry, "Suppose these Methodists should

43 E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 379-380.

44 Bready, England: Before and After Wesley, 216.

45 Ibid., 217.

46 Ibid., 215.

47 Dr. Hooker, Weekly Miscellany, February 10, 1739, as quoted in Luke Tyreman, Life of George Whitefield (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1890), 1:175.

gather so much strength as to make an Insurrection, as, God knows, is dreadfully suspected by many."⁴⁸

Another meeting which easily could have been misinterpreted was the "Love Feast," another social gathering which emphasized thanksgiving around a simple meal of "plain cake and water." Meeting three times a quarter, the sexes would meet first separately and then together "in order to increase in them a grateful sense of all his mercies."⁴⁹ John Walsh characterizes these services as "a domesticated, democratized folk sacrament," an informal substitute for the clergy dominated and sometimes infrequent or denied communion sacrament.⁵⁰ The exclusive nature of these meetings, again, and the unfortunate suggestiveness of their name gave rise to all manner of speculation and accusation by Methodism's more uncharitable critics. In mocking verse, The Love Feast viciously accuses:

There Saints, new-born, lascivious Orgies hold,
Meek Lambs by Day, at Night no Wolves so bold.
There the New Adam tries the old one's Fort,
And Children of the Light in Darkness sport.⁵¹

Mocked also were the Watch Night services which were held on a monthly basis on a Friday nearest the full moon to facilitate the travel of those attending. Beginning around eight or nine o'clock in the evening and lasting until after midnight, participants would spend the time singing, praying, and praising God.⁵² Wesley himself was not sure

48 Nathaniel Fletcher, A Vindication of the Methodist Dissected (Halifax: 1750), as quoted in Richard Green, Anti-Methodist Publications Issued During the Eighteenth Century (London: C.H. Kelly, 1902; reprinted New York: Lenox Hill Publishers, 1973), 57.

49 J. Wesley, "The People Called Methodists," Works, 8:258-9.

50 John Walsh, "Religious Societies, Methodist and Evangelical, 1738-1800," in Studies in Church History, Volume 23, 1986, as quoted in Henry Rack, Reasonable Enthusiast (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), 411

51 Anonymous, The Love Feast, a poem (London: Printed for J.Bew, in Pater Noster Row, 1778), 27.

52 J. Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists," Works, 8:256.

what attracted people to these meetings, whether it was the novelty or "the awful silence of the night."⁵³ No doubt it ministered to the social needs as well as the spiritual needs of many. Lyles, in fact, cites the origin of the Watch Night meetings as being among the Kingswood colliers who after their conversion met together for prayer during the time they had normally spent in drunkenness.⁵⁴ The Love Feast poem again was typical of Methodist detractors in suggesting the purpose to be sexual immorality:

But chiefly when their Midnight-Feast displays,
Like Aretino, Vice a thousand Ways; ...
Together wanton Pairs promiscuous run,
Brothers with Sisters, Mothers with a Son:
Fathers, perhaps, with yielding Daughters meet,
And Converts find their Pastor's Doctrines sweet;
Pure Souls are fir'd by Loves divinest Spark,
And Paradise is open'd in the Dark.⁵⁵

The Watch Night service was later held only on December 31.

One mutual aspect of all these fellowship gatherings was that the commoners felt socially welcome in these functions. Warner documents the fact that the class meetings were both founded and led by people of all backgrounds but most typically those of the lower economic class. "In a group of societies chosen at random, the founders included a carpenter, a schoolmaster-shepherd, a retired soldier, an upholsterer, a tailor, a tanner, a piece-maker, a handloom weaver, a cordwainer, a cooper, a grocer-breadbaker, and a brazier."⁵⁶ In contrast to this, an 1857 House of Lords Select Committee was told by Rev. Thomas Sooks, that a shopkeeper or an artisan was "an unheard of unit" in an Anglican congregation. The non-conformists, he continued, "have tea meetings and prayer meetings; they bring their people more together, and they are

53 Ibid.

54 Albert Lyles, Methodism Mocked (London: Epworth Press, 1960), 90.

55 Anonymous, The Love Feast, a poem, 28.

56 Wellman J. Warner, The Wesleyan Movement in the Industrial Revolution, 2nd. ed. (New York: Russell and Russell, 1967), 263.

able to carry out the spirit of union more fully in a dissenting chapel that we have yet the secret of doing in the church."⁵⁷ Gilbert appropriately observes, "If these associational factors were attracting people to Nonconformity in the 1850's, it is clear that they would have been even more significant a few decades earlier, when alternative associations were less frequently available."⁵⁸

Not only did the social restrictions of rank and economic class fall away in these fellowship gatherings, race also seemed to be no barrier. Wesley records of a visit to a select society at Whitehaven in 1780 and being "particularly pleased with a poor Negro. She seemed to be fuller of love than any of the rest. And not only her voice had an unusual sweetness, but her words were chosen and uttered with a peculiar propriety. I never heard, either in England or America, such a Negro speaker (man or woman) before."⁵⁹

So it was that the fellowship structure seemed fully accessible to people regardless of rank, sex, or race. But these groups not only ministered to the spiritual and social needs of their members, they ministered to the physical needs as well. First of all, the sick were to be visited three times a week in order to "inquire into their disorders, ...procure advice for them," and "to relieve them, if they are in want."⁶⁰ Wesley's first efforts were to direct the sick to hospitals and physicians, but he could not see much result at so great an expense. He wrote, "I saw the poor people pining away, and several families ruined, and that without remedy." To this situation he applied "a kind of desperate expedient" of giving "them physic myself." He drew upon his preparation for ministry among the American Indians and made

57 Thomas Sooks, testimony, "Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords," Parliamentary Sessions Papers, 1857-8, 9:59,62.

58 Gilbert, Religion and Society in England, 90.

59 J. Wesley, Journal, May 7, 1780, Works, 4:180.

60 J. Wesley, "The People Called Methodists," Works, 8:263.

"anatomy and physic the diversion" of his leisure hours. Taking the assistance of "an Apothecary, and an experienced Surgeon; resolving, at the same time, not to go out of my depth," Wesley gave notice to the societies that "all who were ill of chronical distempers (for I did not care to venture upon acute) might, if they pleased come to me ... and I would give them the best advice I could, and the best medicines I had." In five months time, he saw 500 persons, recorded considerable success, and dispensed nearly forty pounds worth of medicine. This ministry was made available to member and non-member alike. Wesley states he "did not regard whether they were of the society or not."⁶¹ Thus, these medical favors were not an exclusive privilege of society members, yet they undoubtedly helped cement the relationship of many to the Methodist infrastructure as well as draw new members into the fold.

Wesley did become fascinated with the use of electricity in treating common maladies as many were prone to do in that day. But he did seem to make a significant contribution to health care for the poor in the form of his health manual, Primitive Physic, first published in 1747. Twenty three subsequent editions followed before Wesley's death in 1791. In 1772, the Westminster Journal highly recommended some of the suggestions and remedies found in this manual.⁶² Wesley intended as far as possible to put the latest medical advice into plain language, list only the main and most proven cures, and to encourage the reader to a basic program of cleanliness, good diet, and exercise.⁶³

Besides ministering to the medical needs of the poor, Methodism also addressed through the societies the extremely prevalent problem of impoverishment. The heavy emphasis upon philanthropy has already been

61 Ibid., 8:264-5.

62 The Westminster Journal, February 8-15, 1772.

63 J. Wesley, Preface, Primitive Physic: Or an Easy and Natural Method of curing most Diseases, Works, 14:307-318.

addressed in a previous chapter. What remains is to describe some of the ways in which that aid was dispensed.

Indeed, each group member was even instructed at one point to "bring, once a week, all he can spare toward a common stock."⁶⁴ Such resources were, in turn, donated to the neediest members. Wesley wrote to a Mr. Blackwell and gave an accounting for the £5 5s. he had donated. The record reveals a profile of typical disbursements:

To Eliz. Brooks, expecting daily to have her goods seized for rent...£1 1s; To Eliz. Room (a poor widow) for rent ...5s; Toward clothing Mary Middleton and another poor woman, almost naked ...10s; To John Edger, a poor weaver, out of work ...5s; To Lucy Jones, a poor orphan ...2s; To a poor family, for food and fuel ...5s; To Christopher Brown, out of business ...2s 6d; To an ancient woman in great distress ...2s 6d; Distributed among several sick families 10s.⁶⁵

The Leeds Intelligencer also credits Wesley with considerable charity in providing food to the hungry. The February 1, 1763, issue noted that on the previous Saturday "a great number of poor persons had pease, pottage and barley broth given them at the Foundery, Moorfields, at the expense of the Rev. Mr. Wesley" and also reported a collection on Sunday of £100 for the poor.⁶⁶

While this type of poor relief is not surprising or unusual, there were other means of relief which were not quite as conventional. The very first recorded disbursement item in Wesley's letter above to Mr. Blackwell was for £2 2s. "to the lending stock." Starting in 1746, Wesley initiated a loan fund to create "a present supply of money" to keep their entrepreneurs from the pawnbrokers. Starting with £50, two stewards "attended every Tuesday morning, in order to lend to those who wanted any small sum, not exceeding twenty shillings, to be repaid

64 J. Wesley, "The People Called Methodists," Works, 8:261.

65 J. Wesley, Letter to Ebenezer Blackwell, February 4, 1750-1, Works, 12:173.

66 Leeds Intelligencer, February 1, 1763, as quoted in Robert Wearmouth, Methodism and the Common People (London: Epworth Press, 1945), 209.

within three months(*We now [1772] lend any sum not exceeding five pounds.)"⁶⁷ One striking success from this program was that of James Lackington. Starting with a £5 loan, he began a book-shop and before long was netting over £4000 a year.⁶⁸

Another experiment in encouraging industriousness involved employing those temporarily out of work. Wesley's journal of November 25, 1740, declares:

Our aim was, with as little expense as possible, to keep them at once from want and from idleness; in order to which, we took twelve of the poorest, and a teacher, into the society-room, where they were employed for four months, till spring came on, in carding and spinning of cotton: And the design answered: They were employed and maintained with very little more than the produce of their own labour.⁶⁹

This experiment was met with suspicion and criticism by the skeptics who accused Wesley of exploiting the poor. The Weekly Miscellany wanted to know "what he means by setting up so many Spinning Wheels at the Foundry. Everybody allows that there are above twenty, and some say forty. The common complaint is that all this is done with an ill Design." It was further accused that young servants were neglecting their masters' businesses only to be received at the Foundry where Wesley was furthering a system for self-interest with a view to making money.⁷⁰

While the Methodists were not interested in making money, they were very interested in taking care of their own. It was seen as an integral factor in presenting a pleasing witness to the gospel. Citing his help to genuine widows, Wesley crowed, "I can now say to all the world, 'Come and see how these Christians love one another!'"⁷¹ Rack cites evidence

67 J. Wesley, "The People Called Methodists," Works, 8:267.

68 Wearmouth, Methodism and the Common People, 206.

69 J. Wesley, Journal, November 25, 1740, Works, 1:292.

70 The Weekly Miscellany, April 25, 1741, as quoted in Wearmouth, Methodism and the Common People, 203.

71 J. Wesley, "The People Called Methodists," Works, 8:265.

that old age pensions were dispensed in some societies.⁷² Members were also expected to favorably remember one another in business dealings. They were urged to do good "especially to them that are of the household of faith, ...employing them preferably to others, buying one of another; helping each other in business; and so much the more, because the world will love its own, and them only."⁷³ This system of brotherhood, whereby the weakest was afforded genuine care and concern by the strongest, created a significant social safety net which also undoubtedly magnified the appeal of Methodism to the common man of that time.

The semblance of a large group of commoners closely committed to a tightly disciplined society and to John Wesley did not go unnoticed on the political scene. Edmund Burke paid compliment to Methodist unity with his acknowledgement in 1780:

There is one Sect (if they may be so called) behind; pretty numerous; and still more under the discipline of their Teachers than any of the rest - that is the sect of the Methodists. I am not yet quite certain what part they will take, except the negative certainty, that they will not take it for me.⁷⁴

Wesley was little interested in political activism on the part of his societies but addressed the question of political involvement of his ministers in a formal address in 1782 entitled, "How far is it the Duty of a Christian Minister to Preach Politics?" His main concern centered around upholding the Biblical injunction, "Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people."⁷⁵ If a Christian minister defends the King or his ministers from "vile aspersions, in public as well as in

72 Henry Rack, Reasonable Enthusiast (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), 448.

73 John and Charles Wesley, "The United Societies," May 1, 1743, Works, 8:271.

74 Edmund Burke, Letter, September 3, 1780, as quoted in James Bradley, Religion, Revolution, and English Radicalism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 198.

75 Exodus 22:28, Acts 23:5.

private," then "it is the bounden duty of every Christian Minister to preach politics." Wesley was quick to caution, "Only remembering still, that this is rarely to be done, and only when fit occasion offers; it being our main business to preach 'repentance towards God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.'"⁷⁶ Though Wesley had already been motivated to speak out against the slave trade in 1772 and had meddled in the American Revolution with his "Calm Address to Our American Colonies" in 1775, he did not attempt to mobilize the Methodist societies to act or speak with one voice in the political realm. In this he was consistent with his dictum, "For it is our main and constant business to 'preach Jesus Christ, and him crucified.'"⁷⁷

But neither was he at all prone to divorce the secular from the sacred. "Christianity is essentially a social religion," he maintained vehemently, and "to turn it into a solitary religion, is indeed to destroy it."⁷⁸ Christians were to mingle and converse with other men, to be 'the salt of the earth' and "season whatever is round about." Wesley concluded, "By this means a check will, in some measure, be given to the corruption which is in the world; and a small part, at least, saved from the general infection, and rendered holy and pure before God."⁷⁹ Wesley saw his job to be that of sowing salt into the world and model that savoring influence as an individual. Wielding a unified body of believers as a political club was just not a meaningful or relevant idea.

It is not to be assumed, however, that Methodism was always a smooth running, well-oiled machine. It is true that members were

76 J. Wesley, "How Far is it the Duty of a Christian Minister to Preach Politics?," Works, 11:154-5.

77 Ibid.

78 J. Wesley, sermon, "Upon Our Lords's Sermon on the Mount," discourse #4, Works, 5:296.

79 Ibid., 5:299.

integrated into close fraternal circles on the local level and that these were tied into a hierarchial system leading to John Wesley. Yet that chain of submission was not always absolute or unchallenged.

John Wesley was the glue that did hold the Methodist societies together. His constant making of rounds, his preaching and writing on topics of practical interest, his beneficence, and his strength of personality all contributed to his personal popularity. And ultimately, it was his threat of cutting off visitation and personal friendship that held many in line. In his visitation to St. Ives, Wesley discovered the practice of buying and selling of smuggled goods was common among the members. Realizing this, he brought the society together and declared, "either they must put this abomination away, or they would see my face no more."⁸⁰ This threat was used often and with effect.

But Wesley was constantly facing challenges of one sort or another, some of which were beyond the power of even his immense resources of favor and goodwill. Laboring in Wednesbury in 1751, Wesley lamented the lack of greater growth due to "doubtful disputations" sown by "Predestinarians" who had "thrown back those who began to run well, partly into the world, partly to the Baptists, and partly into endless disputes concerning the secret counsels of God!" He continued:

While we carried our lives in our hands, none of these came near; the waves ran too high for them; but when all was calm, they poured in on every side, and bereaved us of our children. Out of these they formed one society here, one at Dudley, and another at Birmingham, Many indeed, though torn from us, would not stay with them, but broke out into the wildest enthusiasm. But still they were all called Methodists; and so all their drunkenness and blasphemies (not imputed to a believer) were imputed to us.⁸¹

The issue of predestination was the most divisive issue among Methodists during Wesley's lifetime even to the point of causing the ultimate separation of Whitefield and Wesley. Though they spoke

80 J. Wesley, Journal, July 25, 1753, Works, 2:298.

81 J. Wesley, Journal, April 1, 1751, Works, 2:225.

affectionately of each other until the end, these co-laborers were driven apart by the issue itself and especially by the caustic exchanges among their followers. Lecky writes of the quarrel between the Wesleyan and Calvinist Methodists: "Whatever calumny, whatever injustice, whatever violence of language was displayed by the enemies of Methodism, they never equalled the ferocity exhibited by the saints in their internal quarrels."⁸² In this he was referring to the attacks of the Calvinists John MacGowan, Rowland Hill, and Augustus Toplady (author of hymn, "Rock of Ages") who remained forever unreconciled to John Wesley.

Though the predestination issue was perhaps the greatest source of division among the Methodists, Wesley was quite consistently called upon to deal with a host of minor disputes. At Heptonstall, he dealt with a society "hurt by two Leaders getting into new opinions. One of them fell upon [him] directly, for 'denying the righteousness of Christ.'"⁸³ In 1863, Mr. Maxfield, the first lay preacher of Methodism, bolted from the fold in open defiance of Wesley's requests. Wesley recorded the effect upon some society members, "Enthusiasm, pride and great uncharitableness appeared in many who once had much grace."⁸⁴ In 1787, the controversy over separating from the mother church broke out from time to time. In Deptford, Wesley wrote, "I was got into a den of lions. Most of the leading men of the society were mad for separating from the Church. I endeavoured to reason with them, but in vain; they had neither sense nor even good manners left." Wesley threatened again that they should see his face no more to this effect: "This struck deep; and from that hour I have heard no more of separating from the Church."⁸⁵

⁸² Lecky, England in the Eighteenth Century, 3:97, as quoted in Lyles, Methodism Mocked, 18.

⁸³ J. Wesley, Journal, July 13, 1761, Works, 3:67.

⁸⁴ J. Wesley, Journal, April 28, 1763, Works, 3:132.

⁸⁵ J. Wesley, Journal, January 2, 1787, Works, 4:357,

Besides some painful failures at preserving Methodist harmony, Wesley's marriage to Molly Vazeille, a banker's widow, was disastrous as well. Much is written about her shallow jealousies and Wesley's insensitivities to the demands of marriage. Whatever the factors in this failure, Abelow describes Mrs. Wesley's course: "She grew fretful and jealous, opened his mail, spied on him, forbade him to meet his women followers in private, beat him, and eventually, after seven years of marriage, left him."⁸⁶

These failures, both personal and corporate, in building unity within his followers and family were certainly real and noteworthy. Yet, as significant as they may be, they pale before the unity which was developed among thousands of believers most of whom were commoners for whom no equivalent means of fraternal association was available in that century. The unity achieved was deep in that it resulted in the formation of caring relationships that affected significant areas of human need. The existence and contribution of each member was affirmed, social and practical needs were addressed, and opportunities for service and leadership development were created. Membership in the group was esteemed by its members and guarded by high standards and vigilant leadership. The opposition Methodism encountered was in great part overcome by the ability of the people to bond together in these fraternal relationships. This was seen in the Wednesbury riots where the persecuted drew together in prayer to support one another through their trials and to await relief support from Methodists outside the community. In this, the prayers of the early Methodists were answered as they sang out, "Help us to help each other, Lord, Each other's cross to bear; Let each his friendly aid afford, And feel his brother's care."⁸⁷

86 Henry Abelow, The Evangelist of Desire (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990), 37.

87 Hymn 415, A Collection of Hymns, 360.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

Regardless of one's view of Methodist doctrine or practice, what is undeniable is the acute and violent opposition which it evoked almost immediately upon its inception. Methodism was something which divided the people it touched into two camps: those for and those against. While Methodism vehemently asserted its allegiance to the doctrines and government of the Anglican Church, it seemed that these statements of allegiance were what infuriated their opponents the most. By remaining in the system, Methodists subverted the ideals and values at the core of the establishment. They challenged the very definitions of how Anglicans perceived themselves. Dissent was nothing new to English religion. It was officially and legally tolerated. Yet there was something in the very character and thread of Methodism that many among English society and Anglican clergy alike found deeply objectionable and repulsive. The fury of this response is what should drive us to examine the implications of Methodist doctrine and practice for both church and society.

In doing so, the first and most obvious threat to tradition was the liberating teachings and innovative practices promulgated by the Methodists. Restriction after restriction fell away as numerous heretofore sacrosanct barriers were ignored or violated. Preaching styles were notoriously irreverent in comparison to staid traditions.

Doctrines of salvation were clarified and pegged to acts of spiritual contrition as opposed to sacraments or works. Parish boundaries were rendered null and void by the fearless and reckless practice of field preaching. The demon of religious emotionalism was loosed to the horror of the enemies of "enthusiasm." Popular melodies and stirring hymns were shamefully embraced in sharp contrast to the polite metrical psalmody of the Anglican Church. Not only were these anomalies practiced in open defiance, but they also found an articulate scriptural defender in the person of John Wesley who effectively parried every verbal and written attack.

Not only did Methodism challenge the church, but it also challenged many current English societal values as well for Methodism implicitly challenged embedded notions of social hierarchy. The enemies of Methodism were not only those of offended churchmen but of many of the civil and economic establishment of that day, both churched and unchurched. This was only natural given the entwined nature and interests of the ruling class and the ruling church. Methodism, by contrast, had no stake in sanctioning the practices and prejudices of a hierarchial society. They freely ordered their own priorities of cultural status, leadership and sexual roles, and attitudes towards wealth. Lay preachers became a national scandal, and doctrines of original sin and the new birth became an insult to a self-important and self-righteous ruling class. Levelling tendencies brought ferment to the Methodist movement itself in regard to opportunities for female leadership. Great inequities in wealth were attacked as examples of greedy accumulation and wasteful misappropriation.

The third significant aspect of the Methodist movement was the forging of strong relationships among largely unempowered and laboring class people. They are significant from the standpoint of their uniqueness at a time when older community ties were being dissolved but newer laboring class associations were still virtually non-existent.

They are also significant in the depth and range of services they provided, from spiritual oversight to health care. The existence of these closed bands and societies did not go unnoticed but raised the specter of conspiracy, catholicism, and sexual immorality. This fueled the fears and enriched the accusations of those ranged against them.

What we see in the history of Methodism (1738-1791) is a wide ranging cultural conflict that far outshadows any attempt to confine it to merely a sectarian controversy. At stake were matters of tradition and control, social status and hierarchial standing, and a united power base. In short, these were issues of liberty, equality, and fraternity, and within this discussion framework, the major facets of Methodism can be examined. In each of these areas, clear suspicion and opposition are identifiable, and the offenses of Methodism become obvious. There was undeniable movement and activity on each of these fronts as Methodism confronted the values in which numerous people had rooted their identities. These values were challenged by new and antithetical values which resulted from an intense religious revival in which experience, doctrine, and personal leadership all played major roles. It was the general praxis of Methodism which gored the ox of the established order and provoked such a bellowing response. The wound was real and not imagined.

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VITA

Maynard W. Nordmoe is a native of Rockford, Illinois, where he was born March 28, 1944. Graduating from Belvidere High School, Belvidere, Illinois, in 1962, he then entered Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois, with an interest in chemistry. After wandering through the field of literature, he finally obtained a Bachelor's Degree in Art from Wheaton in 1966. After two years military service, he entered Seattle Pacific University, Seattle, Washington, and completed a two year program towards teacher's certification and a Master's Degree in Creative Education. He was awarded his Master's Degree from Seattle Pacific University in 1972. Cursed with the interests of a Renaissance man, Maynard has spent some years teaching art and English and, following a family relocation, has also pursued a career as a chemical laboratory analyst. He has authored an as yet unpublished work on aging entitled, "Growing Old is Not for Everybody" and is currently pursuing the status of Master Woodworker with the East Tennessee Woodworkers' Guild. He was awarded his Master's in History from the University of Tennessee in May of 1994.