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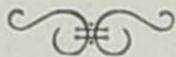
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Meet the Methodists

It is impossible to write the biography of a man without knowing something of his ancestry and childhood; it is equally difficult to write of the work of a church or denomination without knowing the environment in which it sprang up and developed.

Methodism began with the birth of John Wesley on June 17, 1703, in the rectory at Epworth, in Lincolnshire, England. His male ancestors on both sides were clergymen, many of them Non-conformists. Taught in his early years by his mother and sent to the Charterhouse School in London when he was ten, John Wesley entered Oxford University at seventeen. Here he became a member of the "Holy Club," a group of students, devoted to intensive religious practices, which had formed around his younger brother, Charles, the famous hymn writer. The name of the club seems to have been applied, in derision, by their fellow students, who also referred to the members as bigots and "Bible moths," as well as "Methodists."

"By rule they eat, by rule they drink,
Do all things else by rule, but think —
Accuse their priests of loose behavior,
To get more in the laymen's favor;
Method alone must guide 'em all,
Whence Methodists themselves they call."

John Wesley was ordained as a deacon in the Church of England in 1725. For a time he preached for his father at Epworth, and in 1728 he took priestly orders. The England of his day was a challenge, but Wesley was in no mood to meet it. The government was corrupt; the common people found solace from their hunger and misery in drink. Crime, though cruelly punished, was rampant, and disease stalked the path of the ill-fed, unwashed, badly clothed workers. The Church had fallen into a political slough: many of the clergy spent their days in hunting and their evenings in unclerical amusements.

The unrest of the time reflected itself in John Wesley's indecision. Though a priest, he was dissatisfied with his own spiritual condition. The answer to his religious perplexities came from his association with the Moravians both in England and in Georgia, where he served as a missionary to the Indians from 1735 to 1737. While on the stormy voyage to America, Wesley had observed that the Moravians alone of all his fellow passengers seemed unafraid of the terrors of the Atlantic and inwardly at peace; but it was difficult for an Oxford don to accept their simple faith.

Back in England, Charles Wesley was the first of the brothers to experience conversion, but three days later John passed the crisis in his spiritual life "about a quarter before nine" in the evening, Wednesday, May 24, 1738. While attending a Moravian prayer meeting in Aldersgate Street, London, Wesley felt his heart "strangely warmed," and "the peace of complete fellowship with God fell upon him."

From that time until his death, John Wesley never faltered. He went out to tell the story of his experience: his faith that God would receive all men who came humbly to seek forgiveness, his confidence that all could be saved from sin. Excluded from many of the churches, he began preaching in the open air, often to large crowds. Gradually he built up a great following — a few clergymen, some of the nobility and landowners, and many of the poor. Wesley and his leaders visited the prisons. No man or woman, he proclaimed, was too poor or too sinful to be accepted as a child of God, but once accepted he must turn away from drink, crime, and immorality, even from worldly amusements and pride.

Thus began an organization under John Wesley, as field marshal, which was religious but not a church. To supervise the work he traveled some 250,000 miles, most of the time on horseback. To assist him, Wesley used the few ordained clergymen who joined him in his work and numerous lay

leaders to shepherd the societies he formed. After some hesitation he decided to permit carefully selected laymen to preach. Among Wesley's associates was George Whitefield, the famous revivalist of the Great Awakening in the colonies.

The Methodist societies formed by Wesley and his followers were, at first, supplemented by bands made up of those whose sins had been forgiven. These devout members met for mutual counsel, confession, and testimony. Later, classes were organized under class leaders. Gradually the classes took over the spiritual nurture of the members, and the bands disappeared. Another practice of the Methodists was the "love feast," with bread and water in place of the bread and wine of the sacrament. These meetings were accompanied by prayer, testimonies, songs, and other manifestations of religious fervor. After a time the love feast came to be associated with class meetings and prayer meetings. Most meetings were for members only; transgressors were expelled.

The Methodist movement was a yeast which tended to leaven British society. Wesley's followers were often poor, but they ceased to be depraved. They were often ignorant, but they could sing hymns and learn to read the Bible. They were humble, but they could give certain testimony of their salvation. They took pride in their fellowship with God and with one another, and they went out to convert others by the thousands.

On June 25, 1744, John Wesley held the first conference of the Methodist societies in the Foundry, London, with six clergymen of the Church of England and four lay preachers present. Two years later the area covered by the Methodist work was divided into seven circuits. In spite of this organization, Wesley insisted that the Methodists must return to their regular churches for the sacraments.

By the time of John Wesley's death on March 2, 1791, there were 240 Methodist societies in Great Britain alone, with 134,549 members in good standing, under the supervision of 541 itinerant preachers, many of them laymen.

It was not until after Wesley's death that a church grew out of the Methodist movement in England, but in America the Revolution hastened the transformation. By 1760 a few Methodists had arrived in the colonies. Philip Embury came to New York in that year, and six years later started a Methodist society, which, in 1768, built Wesley Chapel. Other societies were formed in Maryland and Virginia by Robert Strawbridge, and steadily the movement covered more and more territory. It was but natural that American Methodists should make their wants known to John Wesley — they required money and preachers. The British Methodists sent out ten preachers including the indomitable Francis Asbury, who came in 1771. In 1773, when the first Methodist

conference in the colonies was held at Philadelphia, ten preachers came in from their circuits. Thomas Rankin had been sent over by John Wesley to superintend the work in America which, however, was just getting under way when the colonists defied George III and the Parliament.

As for John Wesley, rebellion was not to his liking. In religious matters he was a Nonconformist like his ancestors, but politically he was a Tory. Not long after the trouble in the colonies began Wesley issued (1775) *A Calm Address to Our American Colonies*, urging loyalty to the crown. This pamphlet was bitterly resented in America, and Methodism might have been destroyed had it not been for the devotion of its workers. They bowed to the storm but did not lose faith.

When the war was over, John Wesley was fair minded enough to see that Methodism in the United States could not stand in the same relationship to English Methodism as before; the feeling still existing against England made this an impossibility. A demand that the Methodist preachers be authorized to baptize and to give communion had already threatened the work in 1779 and 1780. Wesley now realized that a break was inevitable and that a new church was the answer. He ordained two lay preachers — Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey — to act as presbyters or ministers in the United States. He also

appointed Dr. Thomas Coke as the superintendent of the new church and instructed him to ordain Francis Asbury as joint superintendent.

The three men sailed for the United States in 1784, bearing John Wesley's instructions for the American Methodists. On November 3 they arrived at New York where they were welcomed to Wesley Chapel. Asbury quickly assigned them to a wide circuit in order to acquaint them with frontier conditions.

The Christmas Conference, held in the Lovely Lane Chapel in Baltimore from December 24, 1784, to January 3, 1785, was attended by more than fifty Methodist preachers whom Freeborn Garrettson, an American-born Methodist preacher, had rounded up from their circuits. By the vote of this conference, the Methodist Episcopal Church was organized. Asbury was ordained as a deacon in the new church, on the following day as an elder, and on the next day, after his election by the conference, as a superintendent.

Thus, in 1784, the first national church organization in the new nation came into being with 18,000 members, 104 traveling preachers, 104 local preachers, 208 licensed exhorters, 60 chapels, and 800 preaching places. In 1789, a month after George Washington was inaugurated as President of the United States, he was visited by four leaders of the new church who gave their blessing to the new government. By 1810 the Methodist

Episcopal Church reported 175,000 members, and in 1830 the membership reached 476,000.

The Methodist Church in America followed many of the customs which Wesley had developed in England. There were societies (later, churches), classes and class leaders, lay preachers, and conferences. Only accepted members could attend some of these meetings. In 1777, for example, the conference ruled that funeral sermons would be preached only for those who died in the fear and favor of the Lord. In place of the great meetings in England, America developed camp meetings and revivals, usually lasting several days, since distances in the United States often made it difficult to collect a congregation for a single sermon.

The doctrines of the Methodist Episcopal Church were largely determined by the teachings of John Wesley, who selected twenty-four of the *Thirty-nine Articles* of the Church of England. These, together with an additional article pledging allegiance to the new republic, became the constitution of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States. The doctrines of the new church were based on John Wesley's sermons and his *Notes on the New Testament*. The church government was placed in the hands of the bishops or superintendents. In the early years, Francis Asbury was the dominant personality, but gradually the number of bishops was increased and the

important decisions of the church were made at the general conferences held every four years.

In a church so new, operating in an ever moving, ever widening field, differences of opinion were unavoidable, and several divisions occurred in the Methodist fold. In 1830 a dissenting group organized, without episcopal government, as the Methodist Protestant Church. In 1844, the antislavery sentiment caused the withdrawal of a large contingent and the organization, in 1845, of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. These branches of Methodism were not reunited until 1939 when, following the adoption of the Plan of Union, they were brought together at Kansas City, Missouri, to form "The Methodist Church."

For almost fifty years before the settlement of Iowa was begun, the Methodist Episcopal Church had vastly enlarged the circle of its ministry. With bishops in general charge of its work, with doctrine, organization, and administration in the hands of annual conferences, with an army of itinerant preachers pushing out to the most remote settlements, with hundreds of congregations singing and praying in the cabins and schoolhouses, the Methodist Episcopal Church was on the march across the continent.