

## THOUGHTS UPON METHODISM.

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

In the recent book, *The Next Methodism*, this may have been the most quoted paragraph. This paragraph and the “Thoughts” as a whole are worth our consideration today.

The first thing to notice is how Wesley talks about Methodists. He speaks of the “people called Methodists,” not the “Methodist church.” It’s essential to remember that in Wesley’s day Methodism was not a church in England – and only became a church in America in his last years (1784). Original Methodism was what we would call a *parachurch* movement or organization. Many of our longstanding difficulties are rooted in our history and our transition from *parachurch* to *church*. The logic of the one type of institution is not the same as the logic of the other.

Continuing in a sociological vein, it’s worth noting that the logics of *church as congregation* and *church as denomination* also differ.

When Wesley refuses to contemplate the non-existence of “the people called Methodist” he’s not referring to any particular local manifestation of Methodism (a society or a congregation) or even a particular denomination. He’s considering Methodism as a *movement*, instantiated in a people who are seeking holiness, the fullness of life with God, while they “escape the wrath to come.”

It is possible on Wesley’s reckoning that the *name* of the people can stay the same while the essence of what the people stand for and seek to achieve changes. We could become a “dead sect, cut off from the life and power of the Spirit.

Questions to consider:

- What are signs of a group that have the “form of religion *and* the power?”  
What are signs of groups that have the form without the power?
- What goods are associated with the power of which Wesley speaks? Which of these goods are not accessible by any other means?
- Have we ever settled for the “form of religion without the power?” If so, why?

Wesley has the conviction that “holding fast to the doctrine, spirit, and discipline” of the movement is what will determine whether it is alive. Other words we can use for these three are Orthodoxy, Orthopathy, and Orthopraxy. Orthodoxy is the one we hear the most about, the one we can find in Wesley’s writings. Its focus is on believing the right things, the things in line with who God is and what God’s done, and with reality. As we read Wesley, we see that Wesley thought it very important to teach and believe the right things. When it came to the *word* “orthodoxy,” however,

Wesley was usually critical. Too many times churches and people settled for just believing and teaching the right thing – as if Christianity were only a head game. For Wesley, orthodoxy alone was a clear path to “the form of religion without the power.”

The *spirit* of Methodism, what I’m calling *orthopathy*, is about having our loves, desires, and passions rightly directed and ordered. Are we loving the right things the right ways? Jesus summarized God’s commands by saying, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.” When Wesley preached and taught on holiness and Christian perfection, he often summed it up as “being made perfect in love.” The holier we are, the more we love. Without love, without our loves rightly directed and ordered, there is no Christianity. Orthodoxy and orthopraxy are major elements of what makes our loves and desires rightly directed and ordered. By aligning our minds (through the formation of our convictions and understanding) and our actions (we’ll get to this with orthopraxy) with God and God’s reality, we are in a place to love well. This path would keep us away from what Wesley and his age called “enthusiasm” – we’d use the word “fanaticism” today. Wesley and the Methodists we’re often accused of “enthusiasm.” This was because the passions played such a prominent role in the movement. Their convictions and passions led them to believe that they could have living and ongoing relationships with God, not just with beliefs, practices, and offices of the institutional church. When we give up orthopathy, perhaps out of fear of enthusiasm, we will be sure to end up with the powerless “form of religion.” Orthopraxy, another useful word of recent vintage, points to the *practices* we engage in, the actions we do as Christians. The actions Wesley describes in the third of the General Rules are elements of Christian orthopraxy. It is possible that we major on doing the right things, perhaps the right things we do in meeting the practical needs of people, perhaps the right things when it comes to being busy church people and still miss God. As a professional Christian I can be so involved in church work that I forget the “why” of the faith (which is theorized with orthodoxy and felt with orthopathy). The practices form us as Christians and give the Spirit entry to our lives to transform us into the image of Jesus. The classes and bands of original Methodism were the main engines of life transformation.

Questions to consider:

- What are some ways you’ve experienced orthodoxy, orthopathy, and orthopraxy in the church and in your life as a Christian?
- Which of the three, doctrine/orthodoxy, spirit/orthopathy, or discipline/orthopraxy, is your church currently strongest at? Where is it weakest? In what ways are the three out of balance?
- What are the essential beliefs of the Christian faith? How do you identify what is essential and what is not? How do you, your church, and your denomination differ when it comes to identifying what is essential and what

is of less importance? (Note: The greater the percentage of our beliefs we consider to be essential, the smaller our group is likely to be.)

- When you consider our denomination as you experience it, how are we doing at these three? Again, where are we strongest, weakest, out of balance?
- How can we keep all three healthy in our church (taken in terms of local church and as a denomination)?

2. What was their fundamental doctrine? That the Bible is the whole and sole rule both of Christian faith and practice. Hence they learned, (1.) That religion is an inward principle; that it is no other than the mind that was in Christ; or, in other words, the renewal of the soul after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness. (2.) That this can never be wrought in us, but by the power of the Holy Ghost. (3.) That we receive this, and every other blessing, merely for the sake of Christ: And, (4.) That whosoever hath the mind that was in Christ, the same is our brother, and sister, and mother.

Wesley centers his theology on the Bible. You cannot read Wesley (or sing brother Charles' hymns) without seeing their deep immersion in the language of scripture. Experiencing the "form of religion" *with* the power requires a similar immersion in scripture for us today. Because the Bible *is* a text, we read it like other texts. We can get better at reading it as a text. The Bible is also the Word of God and not just a text. If we only read it like we read other texts, we'll miss the point. We read the Bible together filled with and in submission to the Holy Spirit. Because it is God's word and not ours, we know we can read wrongly, requiring us to be open to correction. Because it is God's word, we know God wants us to understand it so we can live it appropriately in our own setting. We wish there was a method to read the Bible to get guaranteed right answers, but we find ourselves always in a place where we have to trust God, not a method. Because God is, through the Spirit, joining us together as one body in Christ, reading together in love despite our differences is essential.

Questions to consider:

- How are you and your church doing when it comes to your life with the Bible? Are you engaging with it not only so you can know more, but so you can give the Spirit room to transform your lives and your life together?
- Are you practicing not just reading and study, but also memorization and meditation? These latter practices are especially powerful tools we can give the Spirit to work in our lives.
- How can your church take more joy in its engagement with the Bible?

3. In the year 1729 four young students in Oxford agreed to spend their evenings together. They were all zealous members of the Church of England, and had no peculiar opinions, but were distinguished only by their constant attendance on the church and sacrament. In 1735 they were increased to fifteen; when the chief of them embarked for America, intending to

preach to the heathen Indians. Methodism then seemed to die away; but it revived again in the year 1738; especially after Mr. Wesley (not being allowed to preach in the churches) began to preach in the fields. One and another then coming to inquire what they must do to be saved, he desired them to meet him all together; which they did, and increased continually in number. In November, a large building, the Foundery, being offered him, he began preaching therein, morning and evening; at five in the morning, and seven in the evening, that the people's labour might not be hindered.

Wesley continually returns to the story of the movement and his experience of God.

Questions to consider:

- Are you aware of the story of God's work in your life? Telling that story in a small group of people who also tell their stories is a good way to learn to do this. The testimony of God's work in your life and in your life together is a powerful force in the church.
- What is the role of testimony in your church? Do people regularly share stories of God's work, not just in the past but now?
- Does your congregation have a sense of its own story? How could you learn to tell that story with an eye to what God has been doing through the years/decades/centuries?
- Do you have a sense of your place and your church's place in the history of the Methodist movement? Knowing and feeling our story as Methodists is a key part of our identity (just as knowing and feeling our story as members of a particular family, state, or nation is in other dimensions).

4. From the beginning the men and women sat apart, as they always did in the primitive church; and none were suffered to call any place their own, but the first comers sat down first. They had no pews; and all the benches for rich and poor were of the same construction. Mr. Wesley began the service with a short prayer; then sung a hymn and preached, (usually about half an hour,) then sang a few verses of another hymn, and concluded with prayer. His constant doctrine was, salvation by faith, preceded by repentance, and followed by holiness.

There are three important things to note here. First, original Methodism was egalitarian, not counting what we call class or socio-economic status as important in who we reached out to or how we sought to connect with them. All people were reckoned to be people God loved, people for whom Jesus died, people that God wanted to transform and energize through the power of the Spirit.

Second, singing was important in original Methodism. Charles Wesley probably would have written thousands of poems no matter what direction his life took. What we have from him, however, is a massive body of hymnody, much of it written for the church. Some are rephrasings of scripture. Some are prayers for the work of God. Some are testimonial in nature. Some teach the basic doctrines. Singing the faith was not a mere ornamentation to accompany the preaching. Singing the faith opened windows of the soul that enabled God to get in and work. The singing was as transformative as the preaching.

Third, in this context Wesley's preaching centered on an order, a way, of salvation. You see the order there in the last sentence: repentance, salvation by faith, holiness. When you read further in Wesley's works you'll see each of these developed in much greater detail. Take his sermon, *The Scripture Way of Salvation*, for example. Salvation in original Methodism was not just the moment in which we changed status with God, the moment of forgiveness and acceptance. Salvation, for Wesley, was the whole process of entering and enjoying life with God. His preaching – and the Methodist meetings in which they occurred (as well as the class and band meetings) aimed to help people identify and take their next step in this process. Questions to consider:

- How is your church doing at being “no respecter of persons,” of not catering to a single socio-economic group as if they were special in the sight of God, to the exclusion of others? How does your church do at bringing different kinds of people together? Note: The church growth movement made much of the “homogeneous unit principle,” the idea that people are most inclined to get together with people who are like them, so churches are most likely to grow along lines of similarity. There is some truth to this and it's worth remembering. We also need to remember, however, that while this is a truth of *marketing*, God delights in bringing people together in ways that confound the world. The world understands perfectly why churches would be separately organized on lines of socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, and political ideology. How is your church functioning as a display of the truth that God doesn't think like the world? What steps can you take to allow God to work more in this area?
- Is your church a singing church? Do you pay attention to what the songs you sing say? Is there content biblical? Is it good theology? Is your singing forming people as disciples of Christ?
- How aware are you and your fellow members of the order of salvation? In your setting how are you helping people discern where they are with God and how they can take their next step with him?

5. But when a large number of people was joined, the great difficulty was, to keep them together. For they were continually scattering hither and thither, and we knew no way to help it. But God provided for this also, when we thought not of it. A year or two after, Mr. Wesley met the chief of the society in Bristol, and inquired, "How shall we pay the debt upon the preaching-house?" Captain Foy stood up and said, "Let every one in the society give a penny a week, and it will easily be done." "But many of them," said one, "have not a penny to give." "True," said the Captain; "then put ten or twelve of them to me. Let each of these give what they can weekly, and I will supply what is wanting." Many others made the same offer. So Mr. Wesley divided the societies among them; assigning a class of about twelve persons to each of these, who were termed Leaders.

Questions to consider:

- How is leadership in discipleship taking shape in your setting?
- How is God calling you to step up and take responsibility for the ministry of the church and meeting its needs?
- How has God blessed you so you can contribute to the mission of the church?

6. Not long after, one of these informed Mr. Wesley that, calling on such a one in his house, he found him quarrelling with his wife. Another was found in drink. It immediately struck into Mr. Wesley's mind, "This is the very thing we wanted. The Leaders are the persons who may not only receive the contributions, but also watch over the souls of their brethren." The society in London, being informed of this, willingly followed the example of that in Bristol; as did every society from that time, whether in Europe or America. By this means, it was easily found if any grew weary or faint, and help was speedily administered. And if any walked disorderly, they were quickly discovered, and either amended or dismissed.

Implicit in this paragraph is the assumption of a picture of the good life, a picture that excludes at least some actions, behaviors, and ways of living. There's a second assumption: life change is possible and desirable. There is a connection between the way we live and the state of our souls. When we Methodists ask, "How it is with your soul?" or "How does your soul prosper?" we're *not* just asking "Are you saved?" or "Have you received forgiveness of your sins? Original Methodists took life change seriously and was built around methods that helped make it happen. In this paragraph the classes are in view, the next, the bands. In Wesley's description you notice the degree to which they took responsibility for each other. They opened their lives to each other and pursued holiness together.

Questions to consider:

- What picture of the good life does your church teach? To what degree is this picture in line with scripture?
- How are the realities of human sinfulness and the power of the Spirit considered in your church's picture of the good life?
- Is your church good at both (a) offering hopeful grace to sinners, and (b) avoiding a lazy antinomianism (exemplified in phrases like, "Different strokes for different folks," "Nobody's perfect," or "God made me this way so it must be right.")? What are some steps you could take to be better this regard?
- To what degree is your church aware of and intentionally countering the cultural forces that deny the possibility of grace to sinners or deny the existence of sin?
- How are you letting other people speak into your life, to know you well enough so they can speak the truth in love so you might become more like Christ?
- To what degree are you taking responsibility for others, looking for opportunities to truly know people and to walk alongside them in their sin and brokenness, offering them hope in Christ?

7. For those who knew in whom they had believed, there was another help provided. Five or six, either married or single men, met together at such an hour as was convenient, according to the direction of St. James, "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, and ye shall be healed." And five or six of the married or single women met together for the same purpose. Innumerable blessings have attended this institution, especially in those who were going on to perfection. When any seemed to have attained this, they were allowed to meet with a select number, who appeared, so far as man could judge, to be partakers of the same "great salvation."

Questions to consider:

- Have you ever been part of a group like this (whether it's called "band" or not)?
- What is the connection between sin, confession, and healing?
- Do you and people in your church expect real and substantial healing from your "bent to sinning?"

8. From this short sketch of Methodism, (so called,) any [person] of understanding may easily discern, that it is only plain, scriptural religion, guarded by a few prudential regulations. The essence of it is holiness of heart and life; the circumstantial all point to this. And as long as they are joined together in the people called Methodists, no weapon formed against them shall prosper. But if even the circumstantial parts are despised, the essential will soon be lost. And if ever the essential parts should evaporate, what remains will be dung and dross.

Wesley didn't take himself or Methodism to be doing anything out of the ordinary.

When you read his *The Character of a Methodist*, you'll see him claim that Methodism is nothing more than basic Christianity. Though somewhat disingenuous, Wesley sincerely wished this to be reality. When Methodism was a parachurch movement and not a church/denomination it was easier to operate as if members of any church could be participants in the Methodist movement. When Methodism became a church, however, the boundaries between Methodists and non-Methodists changed. One could not be a Presbyterian/Anglican/Baptist *and* a Methodist; now one would be Presbyterian/Anglican/Baptist *or* Methodist. Some of our current difficulties today lie in insufficient acknowledgement of this transition. We take up Wesley's language regarding the relationship between Methodists and other Christians, written when Methodism was alongside – and potentially *within* various churches – and apply it to Methodism as it now exists as a *church*.

Questions to consider:

- In your church, what are considered the essential elements of your life as a church? How much agreement is there within the church on these? How does your congregation's view match up with the other Methodist churches you are in connection with? Do you see your differences as conflictual or complementary?

- How do new members in your church gain a sense of what is essential in your life together?

9. It nearly concerns us to understand how the case stands with us at present. I fear, wherever riches have increased, (exceeding few are the exceptions,) the essence of religion, the mind that was in Christ, has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore do I not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality; and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches.

Wesley turns to the economic effects of Methodism and the work of God in our lives. Put more generally, he is making the claim that as we submit to the ways of God, we will have better, more successful lives. As we experience success, we will gain confidence in ourselves and rest secure in our success, taking it increasingly as our own achievement. As we lean on our success, we will decreasingly rely on God, having engineered our lives so we don't need him (except to get us into heaven when we die or to help us when we have really big problems).

Questions to consider:

- What evidence do you see, in your own life and in the lives of others, that Wesley is correct?
- How do you keep wealth and success from sapping your life with God?
- When you've experienced success, how do you get yourself back into the place where you have to trust God, even when failure is possible?
- In what ways is your church trusting in God more than in "what we've always done" or in the world's patterns of wise management?

10. How, then, is it possible that Methodism, that is, the religion of the heart, though it flourishes now as a green bay-tree, should continue in this state? For the Methodists in every place grow diligent and frugal; consequently, they increase in goods. Hence they proportionably increase in pride, in anger, in the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life. So, although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away.

Wesley continues in the same vein. Let's apply this to the history of American Methodism. The height of Methodist success in America can be considered more than one way. We might look at the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and the massive movement of planting churches. They bragged of planting "two a day" at that point. In terms of keeping up with population growth, Methodists were at the top of their game. By this time already, however, the movement had dropped the classes and bands. Methodists were more concerned about "conversions," bringing people to faith in Christ, than in leading toward the full salvation of original Methodism, which included going on in holiness to "perfection." Discipleship became more a matter of gaining information than of experiencing life transformation. As we moved into the 20<sup>th</sup> century we saw serious decline in the rate of growth in Methodism (no longer

keeping up with population growth), but continued to see increase in absolute numbers and influence in society. By the 1950s we were surely an “in” church, a church of the “mainline” of American society. Our colleges, universities, and seminaries achieved academic respectability. We were successful! Well, at least in the world’s terms. As Wesley observes, we were really good at the “form of religion,” but we’d mostly forgotten entirely about the power, the “spirit” of original Methodism.

Questions to consider:

- How does your congregation define success? To what degree, if any, is this definition rooted in the Bible and our Methodist theology? To what degree is it rooted in our cultural values? To what degree are the people in your church willing to see and acknowledge the truth about how things are going?
- From your experience of the denomination (not what you’ve heard from others, but from your own experience), how does it define success? Is its definition adequate?
- How can church (on either local or connectional levels) regain a proper understanding of success, what it is and how to achieve it? How can we find hope in the midst of decline and struggle?
- How can we shift from our confidence in the “way we’ve always done thing” (whether we think those ways are working or not) to discerning, trusting, and obeying God?

11. Is there no way to prevent this? this continual declension of pure religion? We ought not to forbid people to be diligent and frugal: We must exhort all Christians to gain all they can, and to save all they can; that is, in effect, to grow rich! What way, then, (I ask again,) can we take, that our money may not sink us to the nethermost hell? There is one way, and there is no other under heaven. If those who "gain all they can," and "save all they can," will likewise "give all they can;" then, the more they gain, the more they will grow in grace, and the more treasure they will lay up in heaven.

LONDON, August 4, 1786.

Seeing Wesley end on an economic note, warning against the corrupting influence of wealth and success, may be a challenge to us. When we consider the Christian movement around the world, it is almost always the poorer areas where growth is happening, the richer areas where secularization and apathy is growing. Our culture makes it seem only natural to remain attached to the comforts of wealth. We even often teach it as a blessing of God. If Wesley is correct, however, we’ll need to learn to let go of those blessings, of that wealth, so our security and identity can again be found in Christ, not in ourselves.

Questions to consider:

- To what degree can our current denominational struggles be attributed to our wealth?

- What factors is Wesley missing that might offer additional explanation for our day? Perhaps our quest for respectability in our culture? Our infatuation with political ideologies (whatever their labels: liberalism, conservatism, libertarianism, progressivism, etc.)? Our love of pleasure and entertainment?
- Recognizing the dangers that sap our vitality, what is your church doing to stay connected to Jesus and his mission? How are you standing against the spirit(s) of the age in a way that increases your connection with God *and* offers a winsome witness to those who are lost, desperate, lonely, broken, or wandering in hopelessness?

[Indented text, commentary and questions to consider, are by Richard Heyduck ([rheyduck@gmail.com](mailto:rheyduck@gmail.com)); the rest is John Wesley, with the text taken from the Jackson Edition of his works, now in the public domain.]