

Scripture: Romans 4:14-17,22-25; Luke 24:13-16,28-32

We now return to the 1700s. The Methodist tradition comes out of the Anglican church and so we are also back in England. John Wesley¹, the founder of the Methodist tradition, was an Anglican priest trained at Oxford and was ordained in 1728. At Oxford, John started a club with his brother, Charles, called the *Holy Club*, the members of which sought to lead more devout Christian lives. Even with this foundation, John Wesley's ministry in the Anglican church was fraught with personal concern about the assurance of his faith.

In 1736, John decided to go to America. He felt called to Savannah, Georgia and on the journey over, the ship he was on ran into a huge storm. Everyone on-board panicked – everyone except for the Moravian missionaries who were also headed to America.

While everyone else was coming apart, the Moravians sang hymns, prayed, and showed no outward signs of worry or fear. Once they got to land, Wesley asked the leader of the Moravian group why they were so calm and the leader answered with a question “*Do you have faith in Christ?*” Wesley said yes, but then was assailed with doubt. He became very aware of the distance between his faith and Moravians.

Moravians are sort of pre-Reformation reformers who were also known as Hussites, after John Hus attempted to challenge the Catholic Church in the very early 1500s. After the Reformation, the Hussites – now Moravians - aligned with the Lutheran Church, as they do today.

Things did not go well for Wesley in America. He tried to bring high church to rural and rugged people in America and they didn't like it. Wesley ran into trouble over a woman who denied his affections, and upon denying her communion, was brought up on charges. He fled and returned to England.

On May 24, 1738, it was a very depressed John Wesley that wandered into a Moravian church in England on Aldersgate Street. There, the minister was reading Luther's preface to the Romans. The words struck John Wesley and, as he said, they warmed his heart in the same way the disciples felt their hearts warmed in the Walk to Emmaus story.

Luther says in his preface to Romans:

Faith is not what some people think it is. Their human dream is a delusion. Because they observe that faith is not followed by good works or a better life, they fall into error, even though they speak and hear much about faith. “Faith is not enough,” they say, “You must do good works, you must be pious to be saved.” They think that, when you hear the gospel, you start working, creating by your own strength a thankful heart which says, “I believe.” That is what they think true faith is. But, because this is a human idea, a dream, the heart never learns anything from it, so it does nothing and reform doesn't come from this `faith,' either.

¹ Information about Wesley and Methodism came from several sources beyond personal knowledge.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Wesley; <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/denominationalfounders/john-wesley.html>; <http://www.patheos.com/library/methodist>.

Instead, faith is God's work in us, that changes us and gives new birth from God. (John 1:13). ... Faith cannot help doing good works constantly. It doesn't stop to ask if good works ought to be done, but before anyone asks, it already has done them and continues to do them without ceasing. ...

Faith is a living, bold trust in God's grace, so certain of God's favor that it would risk death a thousand times trusting in it. Such confidence and knowledge of God's grace makes you happy, joyful and bold in your relationship to God and all creatures. The Holy Spirit makes this happen through faith. Because of it, you freely, willingly and joyfully do good to everyone, serve everyone, suffer all kinds of things, love and praise the God who has shown you such grace. Thus, it is just as impossible to separate faith and works as it is to separate heat and light from fire! ... Ask God to work faith in you, or you will remain forever without faith, no matter what you wish, say or can do.²

This galvanized Wesley and set him on fire. He began to draw crowds to his preaching.

During 1740s, Wesley caught the attention of George Whitefield, an Anglican preacher who asked Wesley to join him in preaching tours of England in fields and on the docks. Wesley joined hesitantly but ended up preaching on the docks as well.

Wesley changed his style of preaching and became an organizing force behind Whitefield's preaching tour. Whitefield's concern was conversion, but Wesley's concern was the transformation of the person. Wesley saw the opportunity provided by these massive crowds to continue preaching to them and helping them, so Wesley would go down to the docks, into factories, into farm fields, and lead mini-revivals. He witnessed people turn their lives around in amazing ways.

Through this, Wesley came to believe that one could become wholly sanctified in this life. In other words, you could have a complete transformation of body, soul, and mind by the power of the Holy Spirit in this life in such a way that you would be essentially a walking saint (for lack of a better way of saying it), which is a pretty radical idea. It is also an idea that is completely counter to Calvinism and Lutheranism.

Here is the thing you need to know about John Wesley: the guy was an organizational giant. He was obsessed with organization and record keeping to the point that when Wesley died he knew exactly how many Methodists there were in England AND America, how many churches there were related to the movement, how many people had been baptized, on and on.

That organizational sensibility empowered Wesley to expand the Methodist movement very quickly throughout England and America. Wesley's preaching and passion inspired people to meet together in homes to hold one another accountable in devotion to the faith, so small groups, study groups, self-study groups met in houses. Members helped one another follow the Holy Spirit. These house groups formed chapels and started to apply the Method that Wesley suggested (hence the Methodists).

The structure of the movement spread rapidly in rural and industrial areas alike and very quickly, Methodism became the fastest growing Christian movement in Europe and America. Wesley saw what was happening as a movement within the Anglican church.

Wesley and his brother both died as Anglican priests. John lived within moments of being ejected from the Anglican church for many years, often with his brother, Charles, stepping in either to warn

² From <http://www.fwponline.cc/v18n1/v18n1luther.html>

John or defend him against British bishops. By the end of their lives, it became clear that the Methodists couldn't be contained by the Anglican system, so the Methodists separated from the Anglican church. Even so, John had 'General Rules for the Church' and systems and structures all mapped out, which provided the foundations for the separation and creation of the Methodist church soon after John's death at 87 years old in 1791.

In America, the Methodist church became associated with two things that made their expansion rapid and enormous: the "circuit" and abolition. The circuit were systems of house churches and chapels which lay-preachers and ministers visited. They were called circuit riders and each circuit was associated with a mother church, and the circuit and mother churches were overseen by supervisors. And so when America began moving west, it was very easy for the Methodists to follow in the wake.

WORSHIP - THEOLOGY

Methodists retain a lot of the liturgical style of the Anglican/Episcopalian church, since that is their foundation, but they also have a lot of freedom to worship as each church sees fit. Methodism is generally a liturgically focused denomination, though. The worship, like the Anglican/Episcopalian tradition, most often revolves around two poles: the Word and the Table.

Here's the big difference between the Anglican/Epis and the Methodist tradition: Theology always determines worship and worship style. The Methodist tradition is very focused on the work of the Holy Spirit, and so they're very spirit focused in worship. This leads into the theology as well: because of their focus on the Holy Spirit and their belief in Whole Sanctification in this lifetime, the Methodists can be very charismatic. By Whole, or Entire, Sanctification, the Methodist Church means: ...

*a state of perfect love, righteousness and true holiness which every regenerate believer may obtain by being delivered from the power of sin, by loving God with all the heart, soul, mind and strength, and by loving one's neighbor as one's self. Through faith in Jesus Christ this gracious gift may be received in this life both gradually and instantaneously, and should be sought earnestly by every child of God.*³ The Holiness tradition in the Methodist church takes this Article in the Confession of Faith very seriously. Worship in these churches is musical, exuberant, and active. People wear white to church to symbolize their baptism.

Theology in the Methodist tradition is an all-church exercise. John Wesley had a system for how people should consider theology, just as he had a system for everything. It is a very useful way of thinking about theological questions. It is called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral – Scripture, Reason, Tradition, Experience.

Scripture is primary, with Reason – the active application of the mind, Tradition – the whole history of the church in terms of thought, event, and world, and Experience – the personal and corporate experience of God in one's personal life all of equal consideration. When a theological issue arises, or there is a question about the nature of God, the Quadrilateral is a very helpful tool. I use it often.

³ <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/confession-of-faith>, Article XI, paragraph 2.

STRUCTURE

Because Wesley was so obsessively organized the Methodist church is a highly structured affair. Churches are organized in districts, which are overseen by a district superintendent, or presiding elder, who appoints priests/ministers to different churches. Following in the tradition of the circuit riders of western American history, Methodist ministers are not quite transient but they're pretty close. Up until recently, a Methodist minister could not expect to be in one place for more than 5 years.

The Methodists have a very strong lay leadership tradition, including lay preachers. It has to be that way because you never know when the superintendent is going to replace the minister in your Methodist church. So it may be fair to say the focus in the Methodist tradition is the organization supporting the gathered people holding the Holy Spirit.

OUTREACH

I hope you can see how, if you have a Method that can be applied (regardless of the location, government, language, or culture) how quickly you can bring Christ to other people. The Methodists were able to expand worldwide, particularly because they would go to places not to start a mission but to start a church. And when a Methodist starts a church, the Methodists does so with the intent of starting another church so you can have a circuit.

The Methodists are attracted to and attractive to places under oppression, people seeking freedom and so the Methodist church was and still is prolific on the African continent and throughout Asia, places where people are, or have been, enslaved and/or oppressed.

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

The Methodists have a very rich spiritual discipline tradition. A lot of those disciplines flow out of the Anglican tradition from which they came, and they also have their own very rich devotional life in writing and music.

The active, involved church matters to the Methodists and this becomes an important spiritual discipline of the Methodist tradition. The people of the church are empowered to *be* the church. The minister very particularly becomes the one who preaches the word and delivers the sacrament, but the people of the church are the church.

So Wesley was lit on fire by Martin Luther. Wesley was formed by the Moravians in their confidence of salvation through Christ. Even so, Wesley remained an Anglican priest all his life.

But Wesley was much more than all of this, and this is where the Methodists come from. John Wesley used to say, *"I lit myself on fire so people could watch me burn."*

Let each of us, in the example of John Wesley and the disciples at Emmaus, be strangely warmed by the fires of the Holy Spirit within our souls and within our community of faith so we might become an empowered church who transforms and frees other to also be warmed by the fires of our sanctified and loving spirits. Amen.