



THE RADICAL WESLEY

THE PATTERNS AND PRACTICES
OF A **MOVEMENT MAKER**

HOWARD A. SNYDER

I'm impressed with Snyder's knowledge of Wesley's story; thought and methods, but even more so with his ability to apply all of it to the present reality of the church. In an era when church structure is often questioned by those who sincerely seek renewal, it is refreshing to be reminded of a revival leader who sought to develop radical Christianity and radical discipleship within the established church. Snyder demonstrates that John Wesley believed the institutional and charismatic dimensions of the church need not be mutually exclusive. In fact, these two dimensions are complementary. Snyder knows what he is talking about. If you have been called to be a leader among God's people, I recommend that you take time to read this book. It will surely bless your ministry.

Bishop João Carlos Lopes

Methodist Church of Brazil
President of the Council of Bishops of
Latin America and the Caribbean

Howard Snyder's *The Radical Wesley* provided a touchstone for many of us when it was first published in 1980 and is needed today, perhaps, more than ever. While the author's indebtedness to Yoder and to the larger Anabaptist tradition is clear throughout the book, what really captures one's attention is the "radical" nature of Wesley's vision. In John Wesley was combined that rare genius of a "warmed heart" and brilliant organizational mind that would contribute mightily to the emerging Great Awakening. In the pages of this book, one will discover a pattern for discipleship that unites every aspect of life and penetrates to the core of the Christian faith. One will emerge from the book not only challenged to ask how Wesley changed England but also pondering what implications there are for a more thoroughgoing reformist vision for a twenty-first-century ecclesiology.

Brian T. Hartley

Dean of Arts and Sciences
Professor of Religion
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A classic book is one whose time has come—*again*. Howard Snyder's book, *The Radical Wesley*, returns just when we are floundering in our search for a Christian church with relevance in the cyber age. To date, we have been flung from pole to pole in the paradoxes of Biblical truth—old or new, faith or works, belief or experience, institution or charisma, personal or social, individual or community, etc. Snyder finds hope in John Wesley's genius for going beyond polarity to the higher synthesis of Spirit and Word for the church as a community of faith and discipleship. As I reread the book, I too saw beyond Wesleyan history and Arminian theology to a Spirit-guided process for the creative synthesis that the current generation needs and the rising generation wants. Snyder's scriptural model for the institutional church as a community of disciples living out the meaning of "faith working through love" is a timeless answer to the continuing need for institutional reform, spiritual renewal, and social relevance. Let the reading begin.

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OF A MOVEMENT MAKER

HOWARD A. SNYDER

**The Radical Wesley:
The Patterns and Practices of a Movement Maker**
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Foreword

A couple of years ago, my dad loaned me his tattered, well-worn copy of *The Radical Wesley*. He will never get it back.

Working through dog-eared pages, syncing with underlined passages, holding together broken binding, it felt a little like unearthing a family heirloom—an inheritance to care for, a legacy to embrace.

But this goes beyond the intimacy of father and son. For me it became a journey of rediscovering and reclaiming my own radical Wesleyan heritage. And my hope and prayer is that the reissue of this potent book will have the same awakening effect on a new generation of radicals in waiting.

Movement Maker

“Movement” is a buzzword in today’s church, tired from overexposure and misuse. A glossy tool trotted out for marketing events and products; a tag line to sell institutional initiatives. We’ve somehow polished down the sharp edges of the word and domesticated a once dangerous idea. In reaction, I’ve backed away from the word as of late. Out of respect for it. Out of love for it. Out of hope that I might be a part of one someday.

In these pages, Howard Snyder shows us what the real thing looks like. And our hearts burn with a longing to see it again. What if we could reclaim the marks of our movement? What if we could recapture, in our day, the spirit of renewal that swept through England more than two centuries ago? This book examines the man at the epicenter of that awakening and outlines the patterns and practices that gave shape to it. And perhaps we will find here the scattered seeds of a new Wesleyan revival.

As Snyder points out, the true genius of John Wesley is not in his *analysis* of theology, but in his *application* of it. He explored the depths of theology in the place where it matters most—the real lives of real people.

That Wesley was not a systematic theologian is a familiar refrain. But Howard Snyder reminds us that he was a systematic disciple maker. Using innovative and creative means, he organized Methodism around the ancient call of the church: making disciples of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Under his strategic vision, the Methodists gathered in classes, bands, and societies. They carried good news to the poor through field preaching, education and empowerment, health care, and soul winning, and utilizing sacred spaces as hubs for mercy and justice. Wesley's message of holiness of heart and life made its way to the masses through a creative flood of new songs for the new day. And he unleashed his circuit riders throughout the countryside, fanning the flame first kindled at Aldersgate. His passion to spark renewal in the church resulted in renewal throughout society.

Through compelling biography, history, theology, and practice, Snyder reveals more than a figure from our past. He points to a new way forward. Here we meet a John Wesley we should study as the patron saint of today's missional church.

Where We Find Ourselves

It's been said that there's nothing so powerful as an idea whose time has come. Recently my friend J. D. Walt added, "except an idea whose time has come *again*."

That is where we find ourselves. We share Wesley's conviction that no time is more ripe for renewal than the moment at hand.

In the spirit of his subject, Snyder calls us back to the roots of the primitive church, to live as a compelling community of disciples. After all, he reminds us, the term "radical" grows from the Latin word for "root." In true Wesley fashion, we find our best beginning by returning to it.

Howard Snyder is one of our treasured voices. I am grateful to him for lighting a fire in me through this book. And I am hopeful that you will experience that too. This classic work deserves a new life, and just might provoke the same new life in our movement.

Matt LeRoy

Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Preface

Perhaps Western culture is nearing a point where the Christian faith can be successfully reintroduced. Maybe the collapse of the present order will lead to a new outbreak of revolutionary Christianity. Way back in 1979, the publisher of *Rolling Stone* wrote, “Since politics, economics, and war have failed to make us feel any better—as individuals or as a nation—and we look back at long years of disrepair, then maybe the time for religion has come again.”¹

Today we see that “religion” certainly has not faded. But radical Christian faith and discipleship? That’s another matter.

Two centuries ago in England, John Wesley saw God’s providence at work in the way Deism had undermined traditional Christianity in his day. “This was the most direct way,” he wrote, “whereby *nominal* Christians could be prepared, first, for tolerating, and, afterwards, for receiving, *real* Christianity” by “causing a total disregard for all religion to pave the way for the revival of the only religion which was worthy of God!”²

This, in part, is what this book is about. Readers of other books of mine—such as *The Problem of Wineskins*, *Community of the King*, or *Decoding the Church*—will recognize that this volume deals with similar questions, but in a different way. In *Wineskins*, I briefly explored the Wesleyan witness in eighteenth-century England as

one example of church renewal. This book continues that exploration in greater depth.

Who am I writing for? I write for those sidetracked “mainline” Christians by whom, as Albert Outler said, John Wesley “has been revered but not carefully studied.”³ I write for some immobilized heirs of the Holiness Movement who still see Wesley through the lens of his nineteenth-century interpreters, and for non-Wesleyan evangelicals who like Wesley’s results but not his theology. I write for charismatic sisters and brothers who (often unknowingly) stand in one branch of the Wesleyan tradition and to whom Wesley would speak both encouragement and caution. I write for radical biblical Christians who can find in Wesley both a hero and a helper toward a more inclusive view of the church, and for church-growth enthusiasts, who in their pragmatism sometimes neglect to ask what the church really is. I also write for “Orthodox evangelicals,” those calling for a reaffirmation of historic Christianity, but with a strongly evangelical thrust. The book may have special interest for such folks, since Wesley specialized in this very thing.

I write also for “emerging church” folks, cell-church folks, and “no-church” Christians who will find surprises in this book.

Finally, I write to help answer my own questions as I continue my quest to understand God’s plan through the church (Eph. 3:9–10).

I am grateful to those who have provided the impulse and motivation to pursue this study. A special word of thanks goes to Joe Culumber, a brother with whom years ago I studied Wesley’s sermons week by week and whose dialogue with me on Wesley has been most helpful.

When I first published this book in 1980, I was completing my doctorate at the University of Notre Dame under John Howard Yoder. In a course with Yoder titled *Radical Reformation*, I first began exploring Wesley’s radical roots and his links to the

Pietist and Moravian movements. *The Radical Wesley* grew out of the research paper I wrote for that class. My 1983 dissertation comparing early Methodism, Pietism, and Moravianism was later published in more popular form as *Signs of the Spirit: How God Reshapes the Church* (Zondervan, 1989; Wipf & Stock, 1997) and incorporated some of the material in *Radical Wesley*.

The dissertation topic, and thus indirectly the book, grew out of a conversation with John Howard Yoder. He advised me to focus on Wesley. Yoder, champion and embodiment of the Anabaptist tradition, had doubts about Methodism and its founder.

“The question about Wesley is: Was he inconsistent, or does he represent a higher synthesis?” Yoder pondered. In other words: If Wesley really believed the radical gospel he taught, shouldn’t he have left the fatally compromised Church of England and become, in effect, an Anabaptist?

Here Yoder and I diverged. I feel Wesley does indeed represent a “higher synthesis” that bridges the stark state church–free church divide. Wesley wanted radical Christianity and radical discipleship within the established church and knew it was possible. Ever since, interpreters have debated whether he succeeded or failed.

I show in this book that Wesley succeeded to a remarkable degree. We need, therefore, to learn from him both in theology and by example. Yoder’s own remark about a “higher synthesis” in fact opened the door a crack to that interpretation.

Hence this book.

I am very thankful to Seedbed Publishing for producing this updated edition of *The Radical Wesley*. I have long wanted to update the book. It is the same book (no new chapters), but I have updated quotations and references and made some additions and revisions in light of new research. In particular I have, where possible, updated Wesley quotes to the new *Bicentennial Edition of the*

Works of John Wesley (begun in 1984 and ongoing) and taken note of *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley* (2010), edited by Randy Maddox and Jason Vickers.

Over the years, this book has perhaps done as much good as any book I've written. I am happy to commend it to the rising generation.

**THE RADICAL
WESLEY**

Every one who knows the Law and becomes a disciple
of the kingdom of Heaven is like a householder who
can produce from his store both the new and the old.

—Matthew 13:52 (PHILLIPS)

Introduction: New-But-Old Truths

It's early Sunday morning, May 30, 1742. The northern port city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne is hardly awake. Two strangers from London, one a slight man in his late thirties, walk quietly down Sandgate Street in “the poorest and most contemptible part of the town.”¹

The two men stop at the end of the street and begin singing the Hundredth Psalm. A few curious people gather, and the shorter man starts preaching from Isaiah 53:5—“But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed” (KJV).

The knot of listeners grows to a crowd of several hundred, then more than a thousand. When the small man stops, the crowd gapes in astonishment. Soon the preacher announces: “If you desire to know who I am, my name is John Wesley. At five in the evening, with God’s help, I design to preach here again.”²

That night Wesley finds a crowd of some twenty thousand waiting. After he preaches many urge him to stay longer, at least for a few days. But Wesley has to leave at three o’clock the next morning to keep an appointment elsewhere.³

So begins Wesley’s work in Newcastle, henceforth to be the northern point in his annual triangular tour of England. For nearly

fifty years he would make a yearly circuit from London to Bristol to Newcastle and back to London, preaching and teaching daily, with many side trips along the way.

Organized to Beat the Devil

It is hard to grasp all that is happening in this one small incident. Perhaps a more contemporary comparison will help. Suppose someone like Billy Graham were to show up, alone and unannounced, with no advertising or sophisticated preparations, in Chicago's worst neighborhood and begin preaching from the sidewalk. Wesley's first appearance in Newcastle was something like that. Wesley followed this basic pattern for decades, all over England.

Wesley, the master organizer, never built a great evangelistic organization. He simply went everywhere preaching, and he sent out other preachers in similar pattern. Wesley's gift for organization was bent toward the one objective of forming a genuine people of God within the institutional church. He concentrated not on the efforts *leading up to* decision but on the time *after* decision. His system had little to do with publicity or public image but everything to do with building the community of God's people. From the beginning of Wesley's great ministry in 1738, the secret of his radicalism lay in his forming little bands of God-seekers who joined together in an earnest quest to be Jesus' disciples. He "organized to beat the devil"⁴—not to make converts but to turn converts into saints. Wesley would have nothing of "solitary religion," secret Christians, or faith without works.

Many years later Wesley wrote, "In religion I am for as few innovations as possible. I love the old wine best."⁵ Yet Wesley was one of the great innovators of church history. Although eighty-six when he made this remark, he could have said the same thing fifty years earlier.

The remark is in fact typical of Wesley's whole ecclesiology, his view of the church. The key words are "as possible." Hold to the old. But if the old hinders the gospel, then changes and innovations must be made. Wesley's ecclesiology was a working synthesis of old and new, tradition and innovation.

Perhaps the church today can learn new things from John Wesley. People, even the born-again kind, are notoriously weak at holding together paradoxes which belong together—the Spirit and the Word, the private and the social, or "things old and new" (Matt. 13:52). Yet true renewal in the church always weds new insights, ideas, and methods with the best elements from history. And true renewal is always a return, at the most basic level, to the image of the church as presented in Scripture and as lived out in a varying mosaic of faithfulness and unfaithfulness down through history. John Wesley represents an intriguing synthesis of old and new, conservative and radical, tradition and innovation that can spark greater clarity in today's new quest to be radically Christian.

By any standards, John Wesley was a remarkable man. His life (1703–91) nearly spanned the eighteenth century. From the time he began "field preaching" in 1739 until his death fifty-two years later, he traveled some 225,000 miles and preached more than 40,000 times, sometimes to crowds of more than 20,000.⁶ At his death he left behind 72,000 Methodists in Great Britain and Ireland and a fledgling Methodist denomination in America of some 57,000 members.⁷ C. E. Vulliamy described Wesley as the "ascendant personality" of his age, more widely known in Britain than any other Englishman of the time.⁸

But the reasons for studying Wesley today go beyond mere historical curiosity. Wesley's role in bringing spiritual renewal to a rapidly industrializing society and his understanding and practice of Christian discipleship suggest two aspects of his

continuing worldwide relevance.⁹ David Hempton, by placing Wesley and Methodism in a larger global context in his book *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*, also underscores Wesley's continuing importance.¹⁰

If anything, Wesley is more significant today than for any period since the eighteenth century. He is important—and often cited—as an example of warm-hearted evangelism tied to active social reform. His historical and theological significance keeps getting rediscovered and reassessed—witness Bernard Semmel's 1973 book, *The Methodist Revolution*; the theme of the Sixth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies (1977), "Sanctification and Liberation;" and a continuing stream of new books right up to the present. And now, two centuries later, a critical and comprehensive edition of Wesley's works is finally being published.

The Theological Wesley

For many years Wesleyans were somewhat apologetic about Wesley's *theological* work, saying that, after all, Wesley never attempted a systematic theology.¹¹ True. But the past fifty years have witnessed growing appreciation of John Wesley *precisely as a theologian*. It turns out theology was Wesley's strength, not his weakness! Theologians tend to admire other theologians who have neat, profound, learned systems. Calvin's theological reputation rests especially on his accomplishment as a logical systematizer. Therefore other theologians like to study him, and a huge literature on Calvinism exists.

In contrast, Wesley was long considered a second-rate theologian. It had sufficed to say, "As a theologian, Wesley was a great revivalist!" The literature on Wesley has primarily been historical and biographical, rather than theological. So hundreds of biographies or biographical studies on Wesley have come from the presses.¹²

Two new-but-old truths are increasingly stressed today, however. First, theology must be grounded in life. It must be tied to and spring from *praxis*, as Latin American theologians have been insisting since the 1960s. Second, theology is not just the work of “theologians.” It is the task of the whole body of Christ. All Christians are called to be theologians, if by this we mean all believers should be literate about the biblical faith and know how to apply that faith intelligently to all of life. Further, theology must grow out of the witness and community life of the church. Perhaps we will find deeper meaning to the priesthood of believers precisely at this point of theology.

For these and other reasons, Wesley’s theological star continues rising. As A. Skevington Wood observed in the 1970s:

For too long it has been assumed that the founder of Methodism was mainly a man of action and only minimally a man of constructive thought. Recent years, however, have witnessed a radical reappraisal of his theological role, which in turn has required that the nature of his distinctive doctrinal emphasis should be taken into serious consideration.¹³

This book looks at Wesley both as practitioner and as theologian. In Wesley, theology and practice *really were* one. From the beginning, his theological work grappled with practical issues. His theology was shaped by his experience, and he most earnestly cared that his actions be grounded in sound doctrine.

The Shape of Life Together

In the early years of my ministry, I came to a firm conviction that *ecclesiology*—the doctrine of the church—is basic for biblical faith. The growing stress on discipleship, spiritual formation, church health, and similar concerns further confirms this conviction.

Clearly, a *soteriology* (doctrine of salvation) stripped of a biblical ecclesiology cannot be fully biblical. The key question is: What is the shape of our life together as the people of God in the world?

Wesley helps us precisely at these points. This book examines John Wesley—not just Wesley the Anglican, but also Wesley the radical. My aim is to understand Wesley better by viewing him from an angle too often ignored and to search for insights needed in today’s church.

In the 1970s, many Christians seeking a new speaking-forth and living-out of the gospel rediscovered the Anabaptist or Radical Protestant tradition. Anabaptism, as Wes Michaelson wrote,

has provided a unique point of identification for many from an evangelical heritage who are taking the call to discipleship seriously in our time. This is because of the pivotal questions which, historically, Anabaptism has asked and attempted to answer:

What does it mean to give our lives according to all the demands of the gospel?

How can our lives be molded consistently by the pattern of Christ’s servanthood?

What are the concrete implications of loving our enemies?

How is the church to live out its life as a called community of God’s people?

The evangelical tradition has generally evaded these questions; only in the last few years have such concerns even entered evangelical discourse. Anabaptism has urgently asked those questions for centuries.¹⁴

This rediscovery of Anabaptism in turn produced a strong backlash from many Reformed churches and theologians who often still view Anabaptism through sixteenth-century lenses.

But Wesley is different. Though rooted in a quite different context from historic Anabaptism—and though appreciative of Reformed theology—John Wesley asked the same questions the early Anabaptists did. In comparing Wesley with the Radical Reformers of Luther’s and Zwingli’s day, in fact, I note a number of arresting parallels, as well as some important differences. John Wesley represents in his own right a form of radical Christianity, a rather unique blend of diverse elements that deserves closer scrutiny.

The relation between early Methodism and Anabaptism still remains largely unexplored. Since two hundred years and major cultural differences separate the two movements and there are almost no direct historical links, it is easy to assume that little or no relationship exists between the sixteenth-century “radicals” and the eighteenth-century English evangelical revivalists—the much celebrated Evangelical Revival. This book suggests that a significant relationship does in fact exist, and that it hinges more on ecclesiological questions than on historical continuity. The purpose of the book is, in part, to explore this relationship.

With the Radical Reformers, and especially the Anabaptists, the question of the meaning of the church was central, so much so that Franklin Littell titled his groundbreaking study of Anabaptism, *The Anabaptist View of the Church*.¹⁵ The Radical Reformers wanted to carry the Reformation clear through to a radical restructuring of the life and experience of the Christian community. So did John Wesley. In this sense, Wesley stands in the Radical Protestant tradition. Yet he lived and died an Anglican and hoped for a general reformation of the church. He was a radical reformer of a different stripe.

Wesley’s practice grew out of his view of the church, so we need to know what that view was. Although Wesley “did not attempt to formulate a new doctrine of the church but to remedy its decadence,” as Frank Baker notes,¹⁶ still his ministry of renewal continually

forced him to face ecclesiological questions. His concept of the church has been variously labeled Catholic, Anglican, Classical Protestant, Puritan, and free church; and, as F. Ernest Stoeffler commented, “passages can be found in John Wesley’s many writings which will support one or all of these interpretations.”¹⁷ Yet his ministry led to the birth of one of the largest free churches and Wesley has, therefore, frequently been seen as standing in the free church or Radical Protestant tradition.¹⁸

Part of Wesley’s problem—or rather, our problem with Wesley—is that he doesn’t fit the molds we place him in. We are not used to a popular mass evangelist who is also a university scholar, speaks several languages, knows classical and Christian authors by heart, and publishes his own English dictionary. Nor are we any better prepared to handle an evangelist who is also a social reformer and a theologian who preaches several times daily, develops his own discipling and nurturing system, sends out teams of traveling preachers, and publishes a home medical handbook that goes through twenty-some editions!

In these pages, I delve into Wesley’s view of the church and Christian discipleship to see not only what Wesley believed, but also how his views can help earnest Christians today. It will be useful to note what Wesley has in common with historic Radical Protestantism, that stream of Christianity flowing from sixteenth-century Anabaptism but represented also by a broad range of free church or believers’ church groups. I will not attempt to show direct historical links between Wesley and the Anabaptists nor to co-opt Wesley for an Anabaptistic understanding of radical Christianity. We want to examine Wesley on his own terms, for this is where his importance lies.

In this connection, note that I use “Radical Protestant” and “believers’ church” as fundamentally synonymous categories and ways of viewing the church. In this I follow Donald F. Durnbaugh in

his groundbreaking 1968 study, *The Believers' Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism*.¹⁹ Radical Protestantism consists of those church bodies that wanted to carry the Reformation through to a thorough restructuring of the church on a New Testament model. As representative Radical Protestant or believers' church groups, Durnbaugh discusses the Waldenses, the Unity of Brethren (*Unitas Fratrum*), and later Moravian Brethren, Anabaptist groups, and early Baptists, Quakers, and Methodists. He also includes more recent groups such as the Disciples of Christ, Plymouth Brethren, and the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany.

I highlight three things about this "radical" perspective in order to clarify the later discussion. First, this is a thematic and typological approach, not one based on linear history. Though significant historical links can be traced between many Radical Protestant groups, this is a secondary consideration. The important fact is the similar understanding of the church which distinguishes these groups, in spite of differing historical settings.

Second, a word about infant baptism. Since "Anabaptist" means "rebaptizer" and most believers' churches baptize adults and not infants, many interpreters stress the practice of believers' baptism historically but miss the more fundamental issue: *voluntarism*. Franklin Littell notes that even in early Anabaptism the "real issue" was "not the act of baptism, but rather a bitter and irreducible struggle between two mutually exclusive concepts of the church." Anabaptists were "out to restore apostolic Christianity. Baptism became important because it was the most obvious dividing line between the two systems."²⁰ Similarly Leonard Verduin notes that the Anabaptist rejection of infant baptism was based primarily "on an aversion to 'christening,' that is, to baptism with sacralist overtones," and thus "early Anabaptism was not so much a matter of anti-pedobaptism as a matter of anti-Constantinianism." In fact,

some of the early Anabaptists did not repudiate infant baptism at first, but only the christening ritual.²¹

We should keep this in mind when we examine early Methodism, where infant baptism was, of course, practiced. In this connection, we should remind ourselves that today virtually all Christian groups, Catholic and Protestant alike, are voluntary associations.

The third point is my use of the Moravian Brethren as representative of Radical Protestantism. I portray the Moravians as carriers of the Radical Protestant strain. This was crucial in their contacts with John Wesley. This might seem like stretching a point if the concern were direct historical links. I make clear, however, that this is not our focus here. With Durnbaugh, George H. Williams, and others, I see the Moravians (and the earlier *Unitas Fratrum*) as standing within the Radical Protestant tradition because of their fundamental idea of the church.²²

The general plan of this book is successively historical, theological, and analytical. The first section tells the story of Wesley's formative years from 1725 to about 1745. The second examines Wesley's understanding of the church and its role in history. The final section discusses the life and renewal of the church today in the light of Wesley's concepts.

PART I

The Making of a
Radical Christian

Wesley's Roots

1

John Wesley's spiritual rebirth and the rise of Methodism occurred during the years 1738 to 1740. These years also mark the period of Wesley's most intimate contact with the Moravian Brethren.

Four crises hit Wesley during this time: (1) his sense of failure on returning from America in February 1738, (2) his "heart-warming experience" on May 24, 1738, (3) his encounter with field preaching in April 1739, and (4) his break with the Fetter Lane Society on July 20, 1740. These crises set the direction of Wesley's life ministry, and they partly shaped his understanding of the church. This and the following three chapters of this book focus on these crises.

But first, in order to grasp these critical events, we must review Wesley's pilgrimage during the previous several years.

John Wesley's spiritual quest began in earnest in 1725. It started when, at his father's urging, John began to study for ordination. Samuel Wesley, John's father, was rector of the Epworth parish, about one hundred miles north of London, and devoutly

wanted to see his son in holy orders. Samuel, like John's mother, Susanna, had while young converted to Anglicanism from a Dissenting family.

The direction of John's quest was clear from the beginning: "I began to aim at and pray for inward holiness."¹ Seeking holiness in every area of life, he began his lifelong custom of weekly communion. Wesley was ordained a deacon in the Church of England in September 1725 and priest in July 1728. In the intervening years he was elected a fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford (1726), and received his master of arts degree (1727).

Wesley read extensively during this period and was strongly attracted toward mysticism. He encountered William Law's *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* shortly after it was published in 1728. Vulliamy notes that "the *Serious Call* played its part in confirming the habits of personal discipline and of pious exclusion which marked the life of Wesley at Oxford from 1729 to 1735" and strengthened his mystical leanings "until the Moravian example gave to Wesley's religious life an essentially practical tendency."²

Wesley was at Oxford almost constantly from 1729 until 1735, teaching, tutoring, and studying. He quickly became the leader of the "Holy Club," which his brother Charles had organized there with two others. This religious cell flourished until the Wesley brothers left for Georgia in 1735. One of the members was George Whitefield.

The Holy Club was simply "a society of very young and very earnest High Churchmen, with evangelistic views and a true desire to lead the lives of exemplary Christians."³ Its primary aim was the spiritual development of its members. Wesley wrote to his father in 1734, "My one aim in life is to secure personal holiness, for without being holy myself I cannot promote real holiness in others."⁴ Good works were an expression of this desire for holiness. The Wesleys and their colleagues visited prisoners and poor families, helped them financially, and began school classes for poor children.

The Religious Societies

In founding the Holy Club, the Wesleys followed the religious society pattern which had grown up in the Church of England over the previous forty years. Anthony Horneck, an influential Anglican preacher who had come to England from the Continent around 1661, first organized such cells for earnest young Anglicans about 1678.⁵ This was about the time Philip Jacob Spener, whom Horneck had known in Germany, published his *Pia Desideria* (1675) and began forming small devotional cells in Germany called *collegia pietatis*, giving rise to German Pietism.

In England, the Anglican religious societies spread and became a mini-renewal movement. At least forty such societies were meeting in the London area by the early 1700s.⁶ Besides observing strict devotional rules, religious society members “visited the poor at their houses and relieved them, fixed some in a way of trade, set prisoners at liberty, furthered poor scholars at the University,”⁷ and established scores of charity schools for the poor. Richard Heitzenrater notes that by 1700 “this form of religious organization had established itself with[in] the structure of the Church as a viable expression of Christian piety and social concern.” Despite its institutional deadness, “the Church of England made a concerted effort to secure such reforming zeal within its own structure” by permitting and encouraging these societies.⁸ The special concern of the religious societies for the poor and disadvantaged is especially noteworthy in light of later Methodism.

The Wesley brothers were well acquainted with this movement. Their father had long been an ardent supporter of religious societies. Samuel Wesley, pastor at Epworth, had in fact organized a society for promoting Christian knowledge in his parish in 1702, following the pattern of the newly founded Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK).⁹ The purpose of the Epworth society,

wrote Samuel Wesley, was “First to pray to God; Secondly, to read the Holy Scriptures, and discourse upon Religious Matters for their mutual Edification; and Thirdly, to deliberate about the Edification of our neighbour, and the promoting of it.”¹⁰ The outward ministry to “our neighbour” was by no means neglected. The society’s rules included the following:

Their first care is to set Schools for the Poor, wherein Children (or if need be, Adult Persons) may be instructed in the Fundamentals of Christianity by men of known and approv’d Piety.

Their second design is to procure little Practical Treatises from Holland, England, and Germany, &c. to translate them into the Vulgar Tongue, print them, and so to give or lend them to those who are less solicitous of their own and others Edification.

The Third is to establish a Correspondence with such Societies in England, Germany, &c. that so they may mutually Edify one another.

The Fourth is to take Care of the Sick and other Poor, and to afford them Spiritual as well as Corporal Helps.¹¹

Samuel Wesley was quick to see not only the practical value of such societies but also something of their significance in church history. In a “Letter Concerning the Religious Societies” he wrote insightfully:

I know few good men but lament that after the destruction of monasteries, there were not some societies founded in their stead, but reformed from their errors and reduced to the primitive [i.e., early church] standard. None who has but looked into our own church history, can be ignorant how

highly instrumental such bodies of men as these were to the first planting and propagating Christianity amongst our forefathers. . . . A great part of the good effects of that way of life may be attained without many of the inconveniences of it, by such societies as we are now discoursing of.¹²

The benefits of monasticism without its “inconveniences”! This was the goal of the elder Wesley—and later of his most prominent son.

What Samuel Wesley only dreamed and talked of doing, however, his remarkable wife, Susanna, carried out, at least in a measure. Samuel Wesley often traveled to London on church and political business, leaving Susanna and the large family alone at Epworth. In early 1712, with Samuel on a prolonged absence, Susanna began a small meeting in the parsonage. As she related in letters to her husband, the meeting grew out of the family devotional time Susanna held on Sunday evenings with her children. A few neighbors asked to attend, then others, so that the group soon grew from about thirty persons to more than two hundred. At these gatherings Mrs. Wesley would read a sermon, pray, and talk with the people who came.¹³

This new venture caused a stir in Epworth and some friction between Susanna and her husband. Samuel liked the theory but not the practice. He objected to these home meetings because they were led by a woman, might cause him some embarrassment, and would be seen by some as a “conventicle”—a private, separatist religious gathering.

Susanna defended herself in two masterful letters to her husband on February 6 and 25, 1712. She noted that attendance at the church services had jumped dramatically due to her meetings despite the opposition (and jealousy?) of Mr. Inman, Wesley's assistant. Mrs. Wesley wrote:

This one thing has brought more people to church than ever any thing did in so short a time. We used not to have above twenty or twenty-five at evening service, whereas now we have between two and three hundred; which are more than ever came to hear Inman in the morning.

Besides the constant attendance on the public worship of God, our meeting has wonderfully conciliated the minds of this people towards us, so that we now live in the greatest amity imaginable; and what is still better, they are very much reformed in their behavior on the Lord's day; and those who used to be playing in the streets, now come to hear a good sermon read, which is surely more acceptable to Almighty God.

Another reason for what I do, is, that I have no other way of conversing with this people, and therefore have no other way of doing them good; but by this I have an opportunity of exercising the greatest and noblest charity, that is, charity to their souls.

[And she warned:]

I need not tell you the consequences, if you determine to put an end to our meeting. . . . I can now keep [the people] to the church, but if it be laid aside, I doubt they will never go to hear him [Inman] more, at least those who came from the lower end of the town. . . .

If you do, after all, think fit to dissolve this assembly, do not tell me that you desire me to do it, for that will not satisfy my conscience: but send me your positive command, in such full and express terms, as may absolve me from all guilt and punishment for neglecting this opportunity of doing good, when you and I shall appear before the great and awful tribunal of our LORD JESUS CHRIST.¹⁴

The meetings seem to have continued until Samuel Wesley returned from London, but apparently not afterward. Samuel lacked the insight, skill, and openness to see what was really happening and the similarities between what Susanna was doing and his intention for religious societies. So he was kept from benefiting from these home meetings and making them part of his own pastoral work. Still, one already sees hints here of the dynamic which would be released two decades later under the leadership of Susanna's sons, John and Charles Wesley.

The Holy Club

During John Wesley's teaching days at Oxford University, the Holy Club observed a strict discipline which John himself devised, but which followed closely the pattern of other similar societies.

The members of the Club spent an hour, morning and evening, in private prayer. At nine, twelve, and three o'clock they recited a collect, and at all times they examined themselves closely, watching for signs of grace, and trying to preserve a high degree of religious fervour. They made use of pious ejaculations, they frequently consulted their Bibles, and they noted, in cipher [that is, coded] diaries, all the particulars of their daily employment. One hour each day was set apart for meditation. . . . They fasted twice a week, observed all the feasts of the Church, and received the Sacraments every Sunday. Before going into company they prepared their conversation, so that words might not be spoken without purpose. The Primitive Church, in so far as they had knowledge of it, was to be taken as their pattern.¹⁵

Small wonder that Wesley and his companions were mockingly called "Methodists," "Sacramentarians," "Enthusiasts," "Bible Moths,"

the “Reforming Club,” and “Supererogation Men.” The name “Holy Club” was apparently the most popular tag among Oxford students, but the term “Methodist” stuck permanently to the Wesleys.¹⁶

So began “the people called Methodists,” though the Methodist Revival was still a decade away. In labeling the Wesleys and their friends “Methodists,” their mockers drew on a common fund of derisive names. A century earlier traditionalists had derided the “Anabaptists and plain packstaff Methodists” and others who stood for plainness and carefulness in life.¹⁷

John Wesley led a spartan existence at Oxford. He lived on twenty-eight pounds a year, giving away all he did not need for clothing and sustenance. In one year he gave away sixty-two pounds; in another, ninety-two.¹⁸ During these days Wesley developed many traits and disciplines which he kept throughout his life.

Off to Georgia

On a trip to London in 1735 the Wesley brothers met James Oglethorpe, an adventurer and philanthropist who was organizing a group to help settle his new colony in Georgia. The Wesleys agreed to go along, John as a missionary to the Indians and Charles as Oglethorpe’s secretary. In October they set sail for the New World.

Without their leadership the Holy Club at Oxford began to disintegrate. The *Gentleman’s Magazine* for October 1735 reported:

Tuesday 14, This morning James Oglethorpe Esq. accompanied by the Rev. Mr. John Wesley Fellow of Lincoln College, the Rev. Mr. Charles Wesley, Student of Christ Church College, and the Rev. Mr. Ingham of Queens College, Oxford, set out from Westminster to Gravesend, in order to embark for the Colony of Georgia. Two of the aforesaid Clergymen

design, after a short stay in Savannah, to go amongst the Indian Nations bordering upon that Settlement, in order to bring them to the Knowledge of Christianity.¹⁹

John Wesley went to Georgia primarily, he said, to save his own soul and learn the true meaning of the gospel by preaching to the Indians. He was sponsored by the Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel at a salary of fifty pounds per year.²⁰ Characteristically, he didn't go alone. He joined with Charles and two friends, Benjamin Ingham and Charles Delamotte, to form what amounted to a Methodist Holy Club onboard ship. Three of the four (all except Delamotte) had been Oxford Methodists, so in effect the Holy Club continued in this small shipboard band. John at thirty-two was the oldest of the four; Ingham and Delamotte were in their early twenties. On leaving England the four companions made the following covenant:

We, whose names are underwritten, being fully convinced that it is impossible, either to promote the work of God among the heathen, without an entire union among ourselves, or that such a union should subsist, unless each one will give up his single judgment to that of the majority, do agree, by the help of God: —first, that none of us will undertake anything of importance without first proposing it to the other three; —secondly, that whenever our judgments differ, anyone shall give up his single judgment or inclination to the others; —thirdly, that in case of an equality [or tie], after begging God's direction, the matter shall be decided by lot.²¹

The little band followed a strict discipline including private prayer from four till five each morning, joint Bible study from five to seven, and public prayers from eight till nine. From nine till noon Wesley usually studied German (so he could converse

with the Moravians on board) while the other three were variously employed in study or teaching.

The four met at noon for prayer and discussion and again at eight. The afternoons were spent teaching the children and adults who would listen, while the hour from five to six was devoted to private prayer. The four went to bed between nine and ten in their two adjoining cabins.²²

The long weeks onboard ship to Georgia gave Wesley his first opportunity to observe the Moravian Brethren closely. A small band of Moravian missionaries under the leadership of David Nitschmann was among the passengers. Normally Wesley spent the evening hour from seven to eight with them. Wesley noted in his *Journal* for Sunday, January 25, 1736:

At seven I went to the Germans [Moravians]. I had long before observed the great seriousness of their behaviour. Of their humility they had given a continual proof, by performing those servile offices for the other passengers which none of the English would undertake; . . . If they were pushed, struck, or thrown down, they rose again and went away; but no complaint was found in their mouth.²³

What impressed Wesley was not only the Moravians' piety and good works, but their calm assurance of faith during storms at sea—something he lacked. During his two years in Georgia he stayed in close contact with the Moravians, including the missionary August Spangenberg.

In Georgia, Wesley's zeal for holiness became "a burning desire to revitalize the church" and build "a model Christian community in one Anglican parish," as Frank Baker put it.²⁴

Understandably, the rigor of his efforts in the lax frontier setting was not universally appreciated. Already, however, Wesley was introducing such innovations as hymn singing in public worship

and the use of “lay” men and women in parish work.²⁵ Because of his zeal and his innovations he was accused of “leaving the Church of England by two doors at the same time”—Roman Catholicism and Puritan Separatism. But at heart his experiments simply sprang from his desire to recover the spirit and form of early Christianity.²⁶

Wesley thought he saw in the Moravians some genuine elements, at least, of early Christianity, and he tried some of their methods. As Baker notes:

Wesley organized societies for religious fellowship quite apart from ordered public worship. In these gatherings the members spent about an hour in “prayer, singing and mutual exhortation,” naturally under the close supervision whenever possible of their spiritual director. . . . Wesley even divided these societies into the “more intimate union” of “bands” after the Moravian pattern. It was this which readily fostered the charge of his having instituted a Roman Catholic confessional, for mutual confession was indeed one of the purposes of these small homogeneous groups.²⁷

Here we see Wesley introducing a Moravian element into the religious society pattern he brought with him from England and being charged with Romanism!

Wesley’s behavior in Georgia, as well as on board the *Simmonds*, should be seen also in light of his sponsorship by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. The SPG prescribed detailed rules for its missionaries, and Wesley followed these to the letter. On board ship, missionaries were to “demean themselves . . . so as to become remarkable examples of piety and virtue to the ship’s company.” If possible they were to conduct daily morning and evening prayers with preaching and catechizing on Sundays and they should “instruct, exhort, admonish and reprove as they have occasion and opportunity, with such seriousness and prudence, as

may gain them reputation and authority.”²⁸ At their place of service the SPG missionaries were (among other things) to study the doctrines and homilies of the Church of England and to carefully examine all candidates for baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Richard Butterworth notes that much of what Wesley did in Georgia, including book distribution, starting schools, visiting outstations, and seeking to reach the Indians, was “in exact obedience to the Instructions of the Society.”²⁹

Wesley spent two frustrating years in Georgia, however. His strictness and zeal made enemies of some, though it helped others. Then there was the complication of a frustrated romance with young Sophy Hopkey.³⁰ He went back to England in early 1738, arriving in London on February 3. He returned amid controversy, considering his missionary efforts a failure. He had been unable to evangelize any Indians.³¹ He had stirred up opposition and controversy among the Anglican settlers. And he knew he lacked inward peace of soul.