Benevolent Opposition:
Detrimental Effects of Early Methodism on the Church of England

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My theory in this presentation is a potentially controversial one. The theory has grown out of my own research into the effects of Wesley's Methodism on the Church of England. Initially, I set out to better understand the benefits of Methodism on the Church, yet as I continued to explore the topic it became apparent to me that perhaps Methodism was not always beneficial. In fact, I've come to the working conclusion that early Methodism was, perhaps, a hindrance to the institutional Church of England.

My hope in exploring this potentiality, even if it's not a comfortable approach for a Methodist who studies Methodism, is to better understand the complexities of early Methodism, warts and all. I'm convinced that scholars have enabled us to see Wesley warts and all, but I'm not convinced that the guild has approached Methodism with the same incisive and critical lens.[1]

David Hempton has noted that "in truth, [John] Wesley's support of the Church of England was always more impressive in thought than in deed, and was neither static nor entirely unconditional."[2] Perhaps Wesley's passion lay in a revival of English Christianity rather than the institutional Church of England. I can't claim that this is an entirely new thought. **John Kent wrote that early Methodism "did not strengthen existing religious institutions – it tended to weaken them – but formed new ones out of men and women who had no deep sense of having belonged to a religious community**

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[1] One potential benefit of such an approach is another avenue by which we might understand Charles Wesley's view of Methodism, in this case as a movement that had become not just detached but detrimental to the institution he so loved. See Charles Wesley's *Epistle to the Reverend Mr John Wesley, by Charles Wesley, a Presbyter of the Church of England* (London, 1755) later published in 1784 in the aftermath of the 1784 ordinations. Also, seeing his letters to his brother in 1784 and 1785 in this light might prove beneficial to Charles Wesley studies.

[2] David Hempton, "Wesley in Context," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, Randy L. Maddox and Jason Vickers, eds., (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 63.

before, even though they might have attended parish churches or dissenting chapels."[3] My hope, however, is to dig further into the causes and repercussions of this particular approach to early Methodism.

For clarity, I offer my argument in short form: When the Act of Toleration was passed by Parliament in 1689, its passage sent shockwaves through an already precarious religious establishment. Amongst dissenters, the Act created legal status and privileges. Amongst Anglicans, the Act undermined Church discipline and created detachment from the institutional Church. This detachment would create an **elemental Anglicanism** amongst a portion of the population removed from the rhythms of parish life and liturgy. While culturally Anglican, it is from this segment of the population that early Methodism would take root. However, in taking root amongst the Church's periphery, early Methodism would take energy from the institutional Church. Early Methodism then did not revive the institutional Church. Rather, it became a form of benevolent opposition by organizing a portion of elemental Anglicanism. It would also hinder other reform efforts – such as those by the evangelical Anglicans – by bringing the loyalty of reform efforts into question and by creating a second eighteenth-century schism.

Wesley's Intentions

When Wesley stood in the rain on April 21, 1777 to preach at the laying of the foundation stone of his New Chapel on City Road, London located just north of St. Paul's Cathedral, he took the opportunity to present his vision of Methodism, a vision that had changed in the 1750s, but one that persistently claimed a desire for the revival of the Church in some form or another.[4] In the sermon he proclaimed that Methodism "is the

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[3] John Kent, *Holding the Fort: Studies in Victorian Revivalism* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1978), 16.

[4] Hempton notes that, "Until the early 1750s [Wesley's] declared aim was to 'reform the nation, more particularly the Church; to spread scriptural holiness over the land'. To achieve this he allied himself with a clutch of country Tories and Jacobites who hoped to propel themselves into positions of national influence through the reversionary politics of the Prince of Wales at Leicester House." Hempton sees the shift not in his Wesley's desire

old religion, the religion of the Bible, the religion of the primitive church, the religion of the Church of England."[5] In order to promote a truly national revival, Wesley argued that the Methodists chose to stay within the Church of England, unlike the Presbyterians, Quakers, and others. He argued that the "Methodists (so termed) know their calling," and that is to remain within the Church of England in order to revive it.[6] With hindsight, however, we can see that the incremental separation of Methodism from the Church of England was already taking place when Wesley spoke these words.

Hempton highlighted Wesley's actions as indicative of his fluctuating attachment to the Church, yet Wesley's words also undermined his claims to institutional loyalty. For example, the institutional Church of England is not mentioned in Wesley's most thorough definition of a Methodist, *The Character of a Methodist* (1742). Wesley uses scriptural quotations from the Church's prayer book psalter (the Coverdale) but does not claim a Methodist is one who's vocation is to revive the Church. The use of the prayer book psalter speaks to a cultural Anglicanism, but not to an institutional one. The only allusion to an institutional church in *The Character of a Methodist* is when Wesley wrote that, "from real Christians, of whatsoever denomination they be, we earnestly desire not to be distinguished at all."[7]

Wesley's system of societies, classes, and bands was distinct from the ecclesiastical structure of Anglicanism from the beginning. Unlike the Fetter Lane Society, the group from which John and Charles Wesley broke from over a de-emphasis on sacraments in 1739, **Wesley's London Foundry** never required members to be constituent members of the Church of England. Attempts to unite Wesleyan structures to trusted evangelical incumbents within the Church always failed. Wesley had rejected oversight by Cornwall

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to reform the Church but in his shift to a bottom up approach rather than a top down. See Hempton, *The Church in the Long Eighteenth Century* (New York: I. B. Tauris & Co., 2011), 163.

[5] *Sermons, Works* 3:585

[6] *Sermons, Works* 3:589.

[7] *The Methodist Societies, Works*, 9:42.

evangelicals.[8] The experiment at Huddersfield in 1761 where he did entrust a Wesleyan society to an evangelical Anglican parish priest had ended quickly and with disastrous ramifications for Wesley's relationship to the Venn family of evangelical clergy.[9] Detachment, or some sort of quasi-independence, from the institution of the Church of England seemed to be part and parcel of what it meant to be a Methodist in Wesley's Connexion.

So how do we analyze the apparent discrepancies between Wesley's stated aims, his actions, some of his words, and the creation of an ecclesiastical subculture with objectivity? I want to be very clear, I do not believe that Wesley was intentionally trying to hurt or hinder the Church of England. Nor do I believe that he was disingenuous in his claims. One of the great ironies of Methodist history is that a high church Tory created a schismatic and pragmatically low church movement. That tension must be held together.

Anglicanism at the Beginning of the Long Eighteenth Century

The key might be to look at the state of Anglicanism in the aftermath of the 1689 Act of Toleration. The work of scholars over the past few decades has not only freed the eighteenth-century from the shackles of nineteenth-century Whig interpretation – the general idea that humanity is always progressing and therefore the past must be somehow deficient – but has shed light onto the fabric of Anglicanism in a period that seems to linger between seventeenth-century revolutions and nineteenth-century expansionism.[10] In some of my own work, I have described the desire of the eighteenth-century Church for a "Pax Anglicana," a repercussion of the turmoil of the English Civil Wars, the beheading of

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[8] Samuel Walker was particularly struck by Wesley's refusal to place local Methodist societies under the care of Evangelical clergyman, James Vowler. See Edwin Sidney, *The Life and Ministry of the Rev. Samuel Walker, B.A. formerly of Truro, Cornwall* (London: 1838), 436 (letter to Thomas Adam dated June 7, 1758).

[9] Ryan Nicholas Danker, *Wesley and the Anglicans: Political Division in Early Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016), 129-133.

[10] See in particular the work of Norman Sykes, J. C. D. Clark, William Gibson, John Walsh, and G. V. Bennett.

the King, and the Commonwealth. Gibson notes that "eirenicism, the doctrine of peace and unity within the Church, was a powerful presence in much of the eighteenth century."[11] The mistake is to interpret this lack of major ecclesiastical unrest as somehow problematic.

I reject the notion that the church was decrepit in the eighteenth century, and that it resisted reform until the Reform Acts of the 1820s and 1830s. This can be read into J. C. D. Clark's assessment in his book, *English Society*,[12] but Gibson provided a needed corrective when he wrote that, **"ecclesiastical reforms of the 1830s were the culmination of a longer period of reform, and of an accommodation of change established in the second half of the eighteenth century, rather than a stark contrast with the 1820s."**[13] The work of reforming bishops like John Potter, Edmund Gibson, and Thomas Secker are testament to reforming work within the eighteenth-century Church, as is the efforts of evangelicals in parish ministry and in particular for the Evangelicals the founding of the Elland Society – a society that worked to educate and place evangelical clergy in the parishes.

The Church of England in the eighteenth century can be seen as a strong national church positioning itself for a new political reality in which Whig, Tory, Monarchy, and Church were all somewhat redefined. The Church successfully transitioned away from its role as defender of absolute right monarchy (even despite the efforts of Susanna Wesley and the Huntingdons), and engaged both the trans-Atlantic evangelical revival while fending off successive revolts by Catholic monarchical pretenders. However, it's naïve to imagine that the seventeenth century left the tri-part *ancien regime* unchanged, even if the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 had re-installed its parts.

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[11] William Gibson, *The Church of England 1688-1832: Unity and Accord* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 3.

[12] I want to be careful here. I'm not convinced that Clark argued for a stark and unbending line in the sand. Rather, he saw the Reform Acts as introducing the acceptance of valid competing claims and destroying the "hegemonic status" of the "old world." The argument of his book is that this "old world" lasted much longer than previously thought. See in particular his descriptions early in *English Society 1660-1832, Second Edition* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000), 16.

[13] Gibson, *The Church of England*, 18.

Certainly, the Restoration of the Monarchy and episcopal Anglicanism was itself a miracle in the aftermath of the Commonwealth. Cromwell and his colleagues had wanted to strip England of its monarchical and episcopal past just as thoroughly as they had decapitated the remaining figures of Ely's Lady Chapel. **Cromwell had underestimated the power of tradition and the conservatism of English life.** The cult of the martyred king swiftly arose in sharp defiance of Cromwell's innovation. Yet the battle wounds of Cromwell's efforts, just like the scars on church walls and roods, did not go away. So while the *ancien regime* was returned, and conservative political and social views dominated the century as Clark has shown, the outcome for the Church was not entirely positive.

The schisms of the 1660s and 1680s hurt the institutional Church. Much has been written about the Bartholomeans, those dissenting ministers of the Church who were ejected from their livings from 1660 to 1662 for a number of reasons, primarily related to a refusal to accept the Book of Common Prayer and the 39 Articles of Religion. Amongst that number were both of John Wesley's grandfathers. The loss of this group of nearly 2000 clergy shouldn't be underestimated. John Walsh and Stephen Taylor have written that, "No shift in the balance of forces within the Church was as spectacular as that which occurred with the ejection of the Puritan ministers at the Restoration."[14] During the period, the number of clergy was anywhere between 10,000 and 15,000. What was lost with their departure was the heart-warmed emphasis of the Puritan tradition, a tradition that would inspire later evangelicals.[15] It's often forgotten that the Puritan tradition was as much a part of Anglicanism as any other "party." Their departure was not a cleansing of the Church, but a severing of it. John Spurr wrote that:

> **Prominent in the ranks of Dissent were the ejected clergy of 1662 and their followers. These ministers were significant because of their eminence and their numbers, and because their ejection was a betrayal of the apparent promise made**

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[14] John Walsh and Stephen Taylor, "The Church and Anglicanism in the 'Long' Eighteenth Century," in *The Church of England c. 1689-1833: From Toleration to Tractarianism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 43.

[15] D. Bruce Hindmarsh's *Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) argues for a striking continuity between the Puritan conversion narratives and later evangelical ones.

> **in 1660 of a broad and godly national church. Although the Presbyterians had brought Charles II back to his throne, they found themselves excluded from the eventual religious settlement.**[16]

Until the Act of Toleration, these heirs of the Puritan tradition were left in legal limbo, outlaws against the established Church.

The departure of the Non-jurors or Jacobites, although much smaller in number, shook the establishment in a different way as it involved the departure of top ranking leaders and some of the most creative theological minds of the time, including Thomas Ken. Bennett put it best when he wrote:

> **Archbishop Sancroft refused by word or action to acknowledge the new regime; five of his episcopal brethren followed him into the wilderness of deprivation and poverty, and just over four hundred of the lower clergy. These Nonjurors were few in number, but their effect on the great body of conforming Anglicans was profound: they were like a ghost of the past, confessors who stood in the ancient ways, devout, logical and insistent. For the Nonjurors the conforming Church of England was no Church at all; it had apostatized from its distinctive doctrines by adhesion to a usurper."**[17]

It is into this context that the Act of Toleration is passed by Parliament in 1689 as an attempt to begin to heal the Church after destructive schism. The Act had no intention of bringing back the Non-jurors and their attachment to a Catholic monarch, as seen in the Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745, but it was an effort to create a more comprehensive church to include many of the so-called "moderate" dissenters.

Comprehension and Toleration

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[16] John Spurr, "Later Stuart Puritanism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim, eds., (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 91.
[17] G. V. Bennett, *The Tory Crisis in Church and State 1688-1730: The Career of Francis Atterbury, Bishop of Rochester* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 10.

The Act of Toleration was originally meant to apply only to the most strident of dissenters. An Act of Comprehension had been introduced with it in the Spring of 1689 that would have expanded the Church's tent and brought into the establishment many of those with minor theological and ecclesiastical qualms to the existing order. There is disagreement amongst scholars as to why both Acts were not passed. Bennett places the blame squarely on King William, while Gibson places it on the Commons.

[For Bennett, William made the same errors as the monarch he had just replaced by appearing to undermine the Church with a call to end the Test and Corporation Acts, laws that required sacramental participation for office holders and ensured that only communicants held substantive power. Bennett notes that "Anglican alarm and anger were difficult to keep within bounds. Not only was the King's proposal overwhelmingly defeated, but the Comprehension Bill itself was lost, and the Toleration Bill alone went on to become law."[18] Gibson argues that moves on the part of the Tories in the Commons to call a Convocation of the Church put them at odds with the King and that this debate ensured the failure of Comprehension. Even efforts by the King through a called commission for the Convocation failed to produce the comprehensive church that he had envisioned.[19] Steve Pincus argues that the High Church episcopal bench eventually put an end to comprehension and that the defeat of comprehension efforts revealed the deep fissures between High and Low church wings of the Church.[20]]

What the Toleration Act produced, however, was varied. High Church interests feared that Dissent was now going to be able to meet legally, even with restrictions and the full force of the Test and Corporation Acts still in place. Although in the end, the fears that the Act of Toleration would create a wave of Dissent did not prove accurate.

A multiplicity of causes re-invigorated Dissent later in the century, among them the fact that the Dissenting interest had never entirely been defeated. The Evangelical Revival ignited its embers. The comprehensive nature of English Protestantism never allowed for a

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[18] Ibid., 11.
[19] Gibson, *The Church of England 1688-1832*, 35-36.
[20] Steve Pincus, *1688: The First Modern Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 426-429.

narrow ecclesiology to last long. The fundamentalist approach couldn't hold up to historical scrutiny.[21] However, the claim that the Church of England had actually left the "old divinity" was, while not entirely accurate, an excellent marketing ploy for later Dissenters. They were the truly reformed church of England, or so they claimed.

Spurr added necessary insight when he wrote that "Dissent is a historical conundrum. It was an artificial category imposed from outside the Puritan tradition on a diversity of religious groups who were mutually suspicious or even antagonistic."[22] This alone would explain something of the decline of Dissent in the first decades after Toleration. Additionally, the idea of toleration itself was only thought secure with the accession of the Hanoverians, beginning with George I, in 1714.

Amongst Anglicans, however, the Act produced declining discipline. This can be seen in the decline of the church courts, a move that Walsh and Taylor argue was not uniform, but a decline that took place nonetheless.[23] The decline of church courts produced a context in which one could choose to go wherever one wanted on Sunday mornings, the parish, the meeting-house, or the pub with little or no repercussion. Obligatory attendance at clergy-led worship services was ended in practice, even if not in law. The Toleration Act did more than simply begin the process whereby the Church of England would become one ecclesiastical option among others, but changed the nature of the Church itself. William Cole wrote in the 1760s that **"As the discipline of our church, through the practices of dissenters, is now so relaxed as to come to nothing, there is no parleying with one's parishioners on any point of doctrine or discipline."**[24] This lack of discipline, together with shifting populations, the lack of church building, and rising anti-clericalism produced what I have termed an elemental Anglicanism. It was a shift from the

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[21] Although persons like Augustus Toplady would use a fundamentalist lens to interpret the Articles of Religion (a move that was neither true to their original intent nor to their inherent linguistic ambiguity) and challenge the Church. See Augustus Toplady, *The Church of England Vindicated from the Charge of Arminianism* (Holborn, UK: Joseph Gurney, 1769).

[22] Spurr, "Later Stuart Puritanism," 90.

[23] Walsh and Taylor, "The Church and Anglicanism," 6.

[24] William Cole, *The Blecheley Diary of Willilam Cole, 1765-67*, ed. F. G. Stokes (London, 1931), 8.

Anglican establishment's hegemony after the Restoration. And it was a shift that would affect the Church, and thus Anglicanism, particularly for the first half of the century.

Anglican Establishment and Anglican Culture

Norman Sykes has argued for the use of the term "laicization" to describe one of the defining movements within the eighteenth-century Church, and a movement that I believe was, to some extent, a repercussion of the Act of Toleration. He wrote:

> **The eighteenth century witnessed a steady and progressive laicisation of religion, which is the keynote of its ecclesiastical development. Hostile critics have preferred to describe the process as the secularisation of the Church; but it may be contended that the laicisation of religion is a more accurate phrase; for albeit the clerical order generally was characterised by a markedly unprofessional temper, the laity not only deemed themselves a proper and necessary part of the organisation of the Christian Church, but acted upon that persuasion with vigour and conviction.**[25]

This can be seen in numerous ways. During the century, devotional literature flew off of the shelves and yet attendance at the Eucharist was at a distinct low. The communion returns for Oxford from this period show that about 5% of the population took the Sacrament.[26] The reasons for these numbers are many. Juxtaposed with the sales of devotional materials, this shows a distinctively active lay-centered piety. The popularity of *The Whole Duty of Man* and Nelson's *Festivals and Fasts* is indicative of this lay piety. However, much of the literature was connected to the Book of Common Prayer, and thus a distinctly Anglican spirituality.[27]

This is indicative of the development of an elemental Anglicanism alongside the establishment. Although, this was not the first time that this had taken place. During the

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[25] Norman Sykes, *Church and State in England in the Eighteenth Century*, The Birbeck Lectures in Ecclesiastical History delivered at Trinity College, Cambridge, 1931-3 (Hamden: Archon Books, 1962), 379.
[26] Walsh and Taylor, 'The Church and Anglicanism," 23.
[27] Ibid., 25.

Commonwealth, what we would later call Anglicanism was retained by a culture at odds with what had become the established church. In the eighteenth century, this cultural Anglicanism was not at odds with the establishment, but rather augmented it until such time when the establishment could better address its needs. Both the culture and the establishment – if such clean lines are even allowable – were Anglican. The parish church continued to serve as the central meeting place of village life – for Anglican and dissenter alike – the connection to establishment or clerical Anglicanism, however, was at a low ebb and would only pick up as reforms were engaged such as organized efforts to build new churches, to better educate the clergy, and to end the practice of pluralism, the granting of multiple churches to one clergyman that often left local churches with little pastoral coverage.

The portion of the population within this elemental Anglicanism was the "world" of Wesley's parish. Wesley once claimed that "the world is my parish." This is what he meant. **I do not believe that Methodism weakened Anglicanism as a form of Christianity, but perhaps Methodism participated in the weakening of institutional Anglicanism by organizing this elemental Anglicanism on its social, theological, and geographic fringe.** This organization on the part of the Methodists would ultimately clash with the Church of England in the nineteenth century, a church that would embrace, at an institutional level, the necessary reforms begun in the eighteenth. Yet this earlier organization presented a challenge to the Church as it attempted to come to grips with the full impact of its new status under the Act of Toleration.

The eighteenth-century church was not bereft of vitality. That ship has thankfully sailed amongst historians. Yet institutional Anglicanism was hindered by the departure of Methodism in a similar way as it was with the departure of the Puritans and the Jacobites.[28] In fact, it may serve Methodist Studies to begin to see the similarities between these departures. Seen in this way, Methodism did not rejuvenate the Old Ship, but rather participated, even if unintentionally, in that which held it back from reform.

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[28] Sykes links the non-jurors and the Methodists as "the two secessions of the epoch," whose later historians would impugn the Church in the eighteenth century. *Church and State in England in the Eighteenth Century*, 3.

One can argue that perhaps laicization was the key to reform, but that would have been a radical approach and not the trajectory that the Church of England took. Nor would it have been given the choice. A conservative political trajectory ran through the long-eighteenth century. Sykes summarized it as "the conservative character of English political development."[29] Radicals such as Bishop Hoadley rejected this broad consensus and the repercussion of his actions brought an end to the Convocation of Clergy for nearly a century. The Church reacted to his liberalizing efforts by attempting to censure a bishop in good graces with the monarch and the end of the Convocation was the result.

The nature of the Church's Establishment, without a demarcation between sacred and secular or between theology and politics, would never have allowed it to laicize, nor to reject its place within the structures and norms of English society. The Sachevell affair (a huge Jacobite scandal in the heart of Westminster), the rejection of efforts such as the Quaker Tithe Bill and the anti-Subscription movement in the 1760s (which would have lifted legal requirements connected to the 39 Articles of Religion) is indicative of the reality that the established Church of England was not simply one denomination amongst others, but was itself integral to the running of the nation. The Church's status as the church of the establishment has always called for a certain level of professionalization. This is precisely how even Whig bishops such as Gibson saw his work and the work of the clergy in the Diocese of London.[30] It was also the approach of those who promoted the Society for the Proclamation of the Gospel, the first of the great missionary societies. The Church was not a voluntary organization, but rather integral to government, and in some ways above it before the repeal of the Test Acts. Yet in all of this, the growth an elemental Anglican culture alongside, and in a certain sense detached from, the establishment should be seen as a hallmark of the eighteenth-century Church.

Methodism and Establishment Anglicanism

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[29] Sykes, *Church and State in England in the Eighteenth Century*, 43.
[30] Edmund Gibson, *The Charge of Edmund, Lord Bishop of London, to the Clergy of his Diocese, in his Visitation Begun in the Year 1741, and finish'd in the Year 1742.*

Was there something about Methodism's organizing efforts within laicization, or what I've called elemental Anglicanism, that became detrimental to the Church of England in a way that laicization itself may not have been? By its very nature, elemental Anglicanism spurred the need for reform and the rise of its lay-driven piety was meant to remain unorganized. Wesley's efforts to organize these effects, or a portion of elemental Anglicanism into societies through lay-driven organization may have hindered an otherwise fluid effect of the Restoration by organizing it into opposition to the structures of the Church.

The institutional Church was moving away from laicization, as reform efforts began to gain steam within the structure. Macaulay best describes this movement away from laicization, even if he does so as a way to impugn the eighteenth-century Church. His comments about how the Roman Catholic Church would have organized the Wesleyans and Huntingdonians into monastic orders speaks accurately to the way in which Roman Catholicism manages establishment and fluidity. But his negative assessment of the lack of fluidity within the eighteenth-century Church of England is misplaced after 1760, as the Church was ultimately able to embrace the Evangelicals.[31] Macaulay seems to misunderstand the nature of laicization. It was a fluid part of Anglicanism that the establishment allowed, as long as it wasn't in opposition to the establishment. Thus Maccaulay's insinuation of a lack of fluidity within the eighteenth-century Church is unfounded, even if he accurately identified the Church's initial reluctance to embrace the Wesleyans. His conclusions about Catholicism are accurate. John, Charles, George, and Selina would have been canonized by now.[32]

Methodism's approach, while perhaps necessary to reach shifting populations on the fringes of the establishment – mainly geographically –ran counter to the reformist approaches of leaders such as Gibson and Secker,[33] but also to the evangelical Anglicans

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[31] One example would be the first Evangelical bishop in 1815. He also happened to be Lord Dartmouth's son.

[32] Thomas Babbington Baron Macauley, *Selections from the Writings of Lord Macauley, Volume 2* (1876), 245-246.

[33] Robert G. Ingram's *Religion, Reform and Modernity in the Eighteenth Century: Thomas Secker and the Church of England*, Studies in Modern British Religious History 17 (Woodbridge,

who tried desperately to stay within the confines of the Church. Arguably, the organization of elemental Anglicanism by means of a lay-run organization was what **set apart John Wesley apart from his brother, Charles**, and even from figures dear to Wesley such as John Fletcher and William Grimshaw, both set to succeed Wesley had he not outlived them. Yet it should be noted that it was in areas that combined church court decline and large parishes averaging over 3000 acres – areas in which arguably laicization and elemental Anglicanism took most root – that Methodism grew. Laicization provided an arena in which Methodism was allowed to exist and the ecclesiastical and legal limbo that Wesley created for the Methodists could thrive.

Rack has argued that much of the Wesleyan revival was constituted of "types of persons who were plainly unhappy with the regime of conventional 'civil religion' in church or Dissent" and markedly impatient.[34] They were, however, for the most part connected to that civil religion, at least culturally. Certainly there were those who responded to the Wesleyan message who had no connection to the Christian faith, but most of those involved were nominal Christians who were "awakened" from a cultural Anglicanism or who had "turned toward seriousness" from some form of nominalism. The low numbers of Methodists in the southeast of England where parishes were geographically smaller and the Church stronger is indicative of this. Methodists seemed to appear where the Church organization was more spread out.

The organization of persons on the fringe of Anglican culture into an increasingly separate structure is key in order to understand the effects of detachment on the long-term impact of the Evangelical Revival within the institutional Church. Hempton notes that "What gave Methodism its preponderance over many other evangelistic associations was its ability to bestow an element of organizational coherence and order on the disparate and

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UK: Boydell, 2007) is a wonderful source for understanding the reform undertaken by Secker as Archbishop of Canterbury.

[34] Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism, Third Edition* (London: Epworth Press, 2002), 179.

sometimes bizarre religiosity it encountered."[35] This organizational prowess would produce long-term detachment from the establishment. And as Methodism drifted even from cultural Anglicanism it increased the detachment of its members from their Anglican foundations. In the nineteenth century, this would mean that the Methodists who might have been part of an evangelical party within the Church of England were no longer candidates for a regular ministry.

Arguably Methodism made it more difficult for evangelical candidates to enter holy orders. Of the six evangelical students expelled from Oxford in 1768, only one became a member of the clergy. Additionally, **John Newton's ordination was delayed by** "methodistical connections" until Lord Dartmouth stepped in to help. If it hadn't been for Samuel Walker, William Romaine would have left the establishment for Dissent because of pressures on evangelicals in the Church, much brought upon them by irregular evangelical/Methodist action. It is not an unfounded claim to say that Methodism reduced the number of Evangelical clergy within the Church of England. And while the Evangelical party would be a major force within the Church in the next century, it could have been stronger.[36] And until the Catholic revival of the 1830s, the Evangelicals were the most likely to reach those who had been detached from the establishment through clergy-connected societies and occasional irregularity.

I do not have direct evidence for this claim, nor might it be possible to prove, yet the decline in the number of clergy coming from the lower orders by the end of the century does correspond with the rise of Methodism and other forms of Dissent. Heitzenrater has shown that Methodism contained both larger percentages of upper and working class persons and this raises the question of whether or not it contributed to this decline amongst the clergy amongst the lower orders.[37] It should be noted that there was not a

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[35] David Hempton, *The Church in the Long Eighteenth Century* (New York: I. B. Tauris & Co., 2011), 155.

36 Samuel Walker essentially made this argument as a prediction in a letter to Wesley in 1755. See *Letters, Works* 26:585.

[37] Richard P. Heitzenrater, "The Poor and the People Called Methodists," in Richard P. Heizenrater, ed., *The Poor and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2002), 15-38.

decline amongst the upper classes but rather an increase. Overall, however, the decline in the number of total clergy within the Church produced further pluralism, thus limiting the number of clergy available for pastoral care and the performance of liturgical rites. Wesley's structure, however brilliant as a means of organizing persons for the experience of the New Birth and Christian perfection, may have been destructive to the very purpose for which it was originally created; to be a reform agent *within* the Church.

Wesley and the Church

There's also the question of whether or not Wesley actually cared to revive institutional Anglicanism as I'm describing it. At a certain level, I'm more convinced that Wesley viewed the Church of England itself as a culture than as an institution or denomination. His assumption that the Methodists would remain within the Church despite their distinctive ethos is indicative of a culture more than an institution. Additionally, his debates with Samuel Walker about the nature of the Church in the 1750s, that the Church was constituted of those who believed her teachings rather than followed her canons or laws, is indicative of this approach.[38]

There were times when Wesley addressed the establishment and seemed concerned for its renewal. His *Address to the Clergy* (1756) fits within this category. He took shots at it, as a fellow, in his last University Sermon of 1741, even directly at the ecclesiastical structures that ran Oxford in a way that indicated his belief that it could be an agent of change.[39] But as his own ministry continued, he showed particular disdain for the effectiveness of establishment ministry. This can particularly be seen in his comments to two Evangelicals, Thomas Adam and John Fletcher.[40]

Wesley was adamant that if Fletcher began a "settled" ministry, his effectiveness would be greatly limited. Wesley's words to Thomas Adam, one of the most influential

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[38] See Letters, Works 25:583-584.
[39] "The Almost Christian," *Sermons, Works* 1:131-141.
[40] See Danker, *Wesley and the Anglicans*, 220-221. For the letter to Adam, see *Letters* (Telford) 5:97-99 (July 19, 1768); for Fletcher, 5:82-85 (March 20, 1768).

Evangelicals, and an ally on the question of predestination, a man who had dedicated his life to parish ministry, were particularly biting:

> **I cannot but say to you, as I did to Mr. Walker…"The Methodists do not want you; but you want them." You want the life, the spirit, the power which they have, not of themselves, but by the free grace of God; else how could it be (let me speak without reserve) that so good a man and so good a preacher should have so little fruit of his labour—his unwearied labour—for so many years. Have your parishioners the life of religion in their souls? Have they so much as the form of it? Are the people of Wintringham in general any better than those of Winterton or Horton? Alas! sir, what is it that hinders your reaping the fruit of so much pains and so many prayers?**[41]

Wesley's words were not his best, nor his most pastoral. They are indicative of the lack of patience he had for the establishment. They cast a shadow on the efficacy of a settled ministry, the backbone of the Church of England both culturally and as the establishment.

Wesley's 1784 revision of the 39 Articles of Religion into the 24 for the American Methodists, while not a direct shot at the Church of England, can be read as his response to the Subscription Controversies of the 1760s and 1770s and thus an alignment - albeit not theologically – with the Unitarians and other liberals who wanted to remove the Articles from their privileged place. The Articles stood as one of the central motifs of institutional Anglicanism, and a connection to the Reformers who created it.

Wesley's own words do not always indicate an interest in reviving institutional Anglicanism. In his 1788 sermon "The Wisdom of God's Counsels," Wesley describes the state of religion under Charles II, "one of the worst princes that ever sat on the English throne" and the "infidelity" that "overspread the land as a flood" with the "immorality that came with it" increasing until the end of the century. Even at the Restoration, Wesley shows his colors by describing the state of Christianity as "what religion was left in the land."[42] As a good Tory, he then highlighted efforts made under Anne, but essentially leaves all other efforts aside until he gets to William Law's publication of *A Practical Treatise*

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[41] *Letters* (Telford) 5:99.
[42] *Sermons, Works* 2:558.

on Christian Perfection (1726) and his *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1729), from which the "seed was sown" which would produce the Methodist revival.[43] The glaring omission in this short historical sketch is the Glorious Revolution and it's declaration of a Protestant monarchy, together with both the Religious Societies movement and a number of "church in crisis" movements that sought to revive the Church of England in the same timeframe. What is obvious from the description, however, is that Wesley believed that Law's writings set the groundwork for a company of preachers – a reference to the Methodist preachers – who's work was to revive *Christianity*. He never mentions reviving the Church. The omission is glaring.

Conclusion

I don't doubt the words of John Walsh who wrote that Wesley "aimed at bridging the gap between elite and popular religious sensibility" and that through voluntary associations and community that embraced religious experience Wesley "had in full view the interests of the historic, institutional Church."[44] However, I'm convinced that early Methodism, despite good intentions, created problems for the institutional Church of England in the cultural aftermath of the Restoration and the Act of Toleration. In the end, Wesley created a benevolent opposition to the Church made up primarily of those who would be the target of the Evangelical and Catholic revivals within the Church. Such a departure, like those of the Puritans and the Nonjurors, would weaken the Church. And in the next century this organization of a portion of elemental Anglicanism would compete with the establishment as a distinctive denomination.

The organization of a permanent separate structure, the one that I'm calling a benevolent opposition, can be seen in the words of Wesley. Returning to that wet Spring day in 1777 London, Albert Outler described Wesley's journal entry for the laying of the

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[43] Ibid.
[44] John Walsh, *John Wesley 1703-1791: A Bicentennial Tribute* (Inverness: Friend's of Dr. William's Library 1993), 13.

foundational stone at the New Chapel as a having a "ringing triumphalist tone."[45] The tone, however, shouldn't distract the reader from the expectation that Wesley had that the foundation stone itself – with his name on it – would last until the Eschaton. The City Road Chapel, situated in the Moorfields, then on a periphery of London and its establishment, can be seen as the physical manifestation of what I've been trying to convey in this presentation; it solidified a lasting and separate presence on the periphery of the established church it meant to revive, even as its opposition.

[45] *Sermons, Works* 3:578.