

The Rise of the Methodist Societies

An Introduction

by

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Introduction

The history of the rise of the Methodist Societies lies in the origins of Religious Societies of a more general character in the English Church. There have probably always been religious societies. From the ten men Minian of the Judaism model and the twelve disciple extension by Jesus to groups of various types throughout the Christian era.

I outline some of the evidence for the rise of the Methodist Societies by tracing some specific manifestations in English Church life since the reformation. I do this in simple introduction form, and then reflect and ask some questions.

The origin of Religious Societies in England

Perhaps the best works on this subject are those of John S. Simon "John Wesley and the Religious Societies," 1921 and "John Wesley and the Methodist Societies" 1923.

John S. Simon in his "The Revival of Religion in England in the eighteenth century", Chapter 5 "The Religious Societies" suggests that while England suffered a "paralysis of faith" in the reign of Charles II some young men formed Religious Societies and that these helped to provide a basic network into which the evangelists of the eighteenth century were able to move. He quotes DR. Woodward who in his "Account of the rise and progress of the Religious Societies", gives a description of the experiences of these young men. He says that they belonged to the Church of England, in the Cities of London and Westminster; and that, about the same time, they were touched with a very affecting sense of their sins, and began to apply themselves, in a very serious manner, to religious thoughts and purposes. He describes how these societies were set up from about 1678 and were usually in close association with the Church of England. They practised frequent communion, Bible Study and supported the Parish Churches.

The Moravian Societies

The Moravians had 'societies' in London from at least 1699. Daniels in his "A Short History of the People called Methodist", page 56, recalls how Susanna Wesley modelled her society. Writing in 1923, he says, "It will be remembered that Mrs Wesley named her assembly at the Epworth rectory a "Society": a name that has held a prominent place in Methodist history, and which is still in use by British Wesleyans to designate an organized congregation, which they modestly refrain from calling a "Church". Indeed the move from being called 'Societies' to a church was significant. In more recent times, post second world war, the concept of being a church has grown and developed.

This Epworth experience with the Wesley family would count all the more when John Wesley met the Moravians, not only in America, but at Herrhut, Germany.

"Those little confidential companies of Moravians at Herrhut, who used to meet every week, and turn their hearts inside out, .in order to receive counsel from, or give encouragement to, their brethren, greatly interested him, and for some time after his return from Germany he appears as a leader in the "Societies" at Fetter Lane, Bear Yard, Gutter Lane and at the Society in Aldersgate Street, so memorable as the place of his conversion. One such 'Society' was organised by the Wesley brothers (Daniels page 57) even before the visit to Germany. It was so successful that they were able to erect a Chapel in Fetter Lane, London, which was called the Fetter Lane Society. It was the headquarters of the Methodist movement until Wesley left it for the Foundery in 1729.

It was this network of such societies which provided the opportunities for evangelical preaching when so many Parish Churches were closed to Wesley.

The Aldersgate Street Society

This was obviously a Society to which Wesley warmed. Not only did he feel at home in it, but was able to advance his theological ideas with its members. Rupert Davies in "Methodism", page 68, recalls John Wesley's association with the Aldersgate Street Society.

"On his return to England, Wesley accepted and fulfilled all possible invitations to preach with great eagerness, and spent much time with a "Society" in Fetter Lane in the City of London. This was not a Moravian Society, as has sometimes been thought, but a Religious Society of members of the Church of England which was speedily impregnated with Wesley's ideas especially his new ones on the

power of saving faith as the gateway to holiness. It was this Society which really marked the transition from the established Religious Societies of the period to the new type of Society which arose from Wesley's own experience and preaching".

Wesley made such an impression on this Society that some left it. His influence was clearly strong and had authority.

The Importance of the Societies in the Rise of Methodism

The contribution of the Religious Societies to the Rise of Methodism in this period is important. It demonstrates that the backcloth provided for the movement was not so much the Architecture of Parish Churches, but the simple unadorned meeting rooms of the Societies in houses and similar buildings. But as the Societies grew, it became necessary to house them, and so Chapels were built. A new kind of Basilica, for a new kind of Ecclesia. Nehemiah Curnock, Sen. records the facts clearly.

"About this time the Methodist Societies were formed. You shall have Mr Wesley's account of their beginning. He says: "The first rise of Methodism was in November 1729, when four of us met in Oxford. The second was at Savannah, in North America, in April 1736, when twenty or thirty persons met at my house. The third was at London, on this day, (May the 1st, 1738) when forty or fifty of us agreed to meet together every Wednesday evening". The fourth was in Bristol, in the summer of 1739. Now were formed what Mr Wesley called the "United Societies", first in London, either in November or December 1739, and very soon afterwards in many other places. All who joined them professed a desire to save their souls, and serve and please God.

It would seem that Wesley found life in some of the religious societies agreeable to his spiritual pilgrimage even before his enlightenment experience at Aldersgate May 24th 1738. Clearly the work of these Societies played an important part at a most formative period in Wesley's life. Their influence links the Oxford, Savannah and London experiences to Aldersgate and the formation of the United Societies at the Foundery in 1739. Now as these Societies were formed, they needed places in which to meet, where they could worship God, and hear His Holy Word preached. This led to the building of Methodist Chapels.

In Bristol, on Saturday May 12th 1739, the first stone of the first Methodist chapel was laid by Mr Wesley, he says: "With the voice of praise and thanksgiving. This was a piece of ground near to St James's Churchyard, in the Horse-fair". This chapel was called for many years, "The New Room"; and after that "The Old Room", Bristol. It was to pay off the debt on this chapel that the members of the society first began to pay a penny a week.

The City Road Chapel marks a further advance from the Preaching House, as in Bristol to the Chapel for Word and Sacrament, and to take the place of the Foundery, and in fact constituted a recognition of a move from being the United Societies to being a church.

Did this work constitute the founding for a new denomination, or church ?

It would seem that nothing was further from John Wesley's mind. He saw his work simply as attempting to recreate within the established church the conditions of primitive Christianity; how things were done in the beginning. The over-riding work for the Societies was to provide the venue for confession of sins; the assurance that came from faith in the saving work of Christ; the nurturing of souls within the fellowship of converted sinners, the pursuit of 'holiness' and 'satisfaction' and fellowship of the Lord's people. Robert Wearmouth, "Methodism and the Common People of the Eighteenth Century", page 117, shows Wesley's mind on this subject.

'The doctrines we preach,' he said, 'are the doctrines of the Church of England; indeed the fundamental doctrines of the Church, clearly laid down both in her prayers, articles and homilies'. When requested to say in what things they differed from other clergymen, he answered, 'In none from that part of the clergy who adhere to the doctrines of the Church'. Although he organised religious Societies in different parts of the country, and arranged for them to meet weekly under the direction of leaders appointed by himself, he did not believe he was forming any new sect. There had been similar societies before his time; they continued to exist after he began his ministry.

The Methodist Societies as they became, began to grow. Partly because of the increasing number of people converted under Mr Wesley's ministry and his clear direction that all such people should be gathered into a class, a number of which formed a society. But also because they created their own momentum. It was a new, exciting and rewarding thing for a new convert to find a place in a warm and friendly group of fellow converts, so different from the cold institutional Parish Church.

For Reflection

Perhaps the rise of the Methodist Societies in the eighteenth-century is indicative of one of the signs of authentic Christian discipleship which has been characteristic of the Christian movement since apostolic time. (See Rupert Davies "Methodism", Ch. 1).

Perhaps it should be seen in contrast to the institutional developments which have often followed recurrent outbursts of the work of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps neither should be condemned or singled out for applause, but seen as a pattern of Church growth and decline, advance and withdrawal.

How should the Methodist societies react to modern ecclesiology now ?
As a denominational Church, or as Societies within the Anglican Church ?
Should they, with others, pioneer new avenues of ecclesiastical interpretation?
Is the coming 'great church' to be 'Catholic' in the spirit which embraced
'the religious societies', but owing a central and loyal obedience to the
institutional focus of authority either in the person of the Bishop, or
for Methodists in the authority of the 'Conference.'

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