Wesley and the People Called Methodists

Second Edition

Richard P. Heitzenrater

WESLEY AND THE PEOPLE CALLED METHODISTS, SECOND EDITION

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Contents

CHAPTER 1

Methodism and the Christian Heritage in England

John Wesley, the Oxford don, frequently walked the eight miles from the University to the hamlet of Stanton Harcourt to preach for the local vicar, his friend John Gambold. He could not have foreseen the way in which his preaching in that quiet pastoral setting might later be seen as a manifest confluence of forces that converge upon and express themselves in Wesley himself and in the Methodist movement he began during the second quarter of the eighteenth century. One of those occasions does, however, provide for us a striking historical vignette that captures much of the nature and dynamic of the origins of the Wesleyan revival.

On a late spring day in 1738, when Wesley preached "Salvation by Faith" in this little rural church, the past, present, and future of English religion met in an intriguing conjunction of forces. The long course of English ecclesiastical history met the force of a new concern for renewal, both individual and institutional. A long tradition of propositional certainty of faith met the power of a personal experience of faith. An institution built by and for the establishment met a concern for the souls and bodies of the disenfranchised. Although the preacher and his host were both already known as Methodists at the time, none of the small congregation on that Sunday morning in Stanton Harcourt could have known that Gambold, the host vicar, would eventually become a Moravian bishop and that Wesley, the guest preacher, would shortly become the leader of an evangelical revival that would, during his lifetime, spread across the lands and become a transatlantic movement.

Relatively unspoiled in the rural preserve of Oxfordshire, the eleventh-century church of St. Michael in Stanton Harcourt contains in its very stone and mortar the traditions of its Roman Catholic founders. Seclusion was, however, not able to protect or preserve the faith of the members or the fabric of the building from the iconoclastic zeal of the Anglican and Puritan reformers—

the carvings in wood, stone, and brass managed to survive more intact than either the stained glass or the Roman faith of the medieval patrons. The wooden rood-screen, still in place today, as it was in Wesley's day, is the oldest extant in England, a relic of medieval Catholicism dating from the thirteenth century. But the stone carvings preserve in their chips and missing appendages the marks of destructive zeal typical of the Henrician reformers. Most of the monumental brasses remain intact, but occasional indentions in the stone with orphaned brass rivets are vivid reminders of the Cromwellian zealots who thought the brass more appropriate for bullets than burials. The medieval stained glass is gone, the unrecapturable victim of several generations of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century reformers who exemplified the typical Protestant shift in spiritual and aesthetic sensitivity away from things representative or mystical.

When Wesley climbed the steps of the pulpit of St. Michael's on June 11, 1738, those visual reminders of his Church's history were spread before his eyes, signs of the power and glory, the storm and stress, the triumphs and failures that the Church in England had experienced in the previous centuries and in which Wesley himself had participated in his own pilgrimage of faith. A firm rootage in the early Christian tradition, a meditative spirituality typical of the medieval Pietists, an unembarrassed adherence to the Church of England, a moral conviction drawn from the Puritan ethos—these had left their mark on the mind and heart of Wesley, as they had also on the fabric of St. Michael's.

The ideas and forces that gave shape and direction to early Methodism are by and large manifest in the various upheavals of Reformation England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. To understand the Wesleyan movement, we must first sift the soil that gave it life, look for the seeds from which it sprang, and notice the resources that sustained and nourished it.

The English Reformation: The Church in *England to the Church* of *England*

England was introduced to Christianity in the sixth century by St. Augustine of Canterbury, whose strategy was to convert the Saxon king Ethelbert, whose queen, Bertha, was a Christian. The English monarchs have since then played an important role

in the religious affairs of the British Isles. The interface between religion and politics was certainly not without friction. Thomas à Becket's confrontations with Henry II, Anselm's compromise in the investiture controversy, John Ball's sermon against Richard II, and a host of other incidents testify to the continuing tension between church and crown. But the essential relationship of the two seemed to both somehow necessary and natural, if not divinely ordained, throughout most of England's history.

The influence of the Church of Rome, Augustine's legacy to medieval England, faced many tests in the lands north of the Channel. In the feudal period, the monarchy challenged the pope's prerogative to invest English bishops (who were in fact the monarch's vassals). In the early days of parliament, protectionist (if not xenophobic) tendencies resulted in several acts restraining the powers of, or appeals to, foreign powers such as the pope; a rising national self-consciousness, congenitally anti-French, led John Wycliffe to claim the Bible as an alternate authority to the pope, who was (during much of the fourteenth century) under French influence. An insular mindset pervaded the consciousness of the developing English nation. It is not surprising that Sir Thomas More would portray the ideal community, in Utopia, as an island kingdom. It is also no surprise that the English, the natural boundaries of their consciousness defined in part by the ever-present shoreline (never more than seventy-five miles away) and their developing national identity centered in large part in their monarchy, would eventually develop a religious establishment that was unabashedly nationalistic, legally centered in the monarchy, and strongly antipapal.

The monarchy is the central feature of English history through at least the eighteenth century. This is perhaps most evident during the period of the English Reformation, the time of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary I, and Elizabeth I. Although religious reformers gained some renown for their ideas and programs, especially on the continent, the implementation of their reforms depended in large part upon the wishes and whims of the political power structure—in many areas, such as Germany, France, and England, the fate of reform movements hinged upon the positive or negative inclinations of individual monarchs or princes. The Reformation in England goes through a series of stages, determined in large part by the attitudes of the monarchs, shaped to some degree by the advice of courtiers, and put in place in every case by acts of Parliament.

The vernacular translation of the Bible became an important feature of the English Reformation. Henry VIII supported the publication of the "Great Bible" in 1539 and is portrayed on its title page distributing the Word of God through Thomas Cranmer and Thomas Cromwell.

Henry VIII took the first major step—separating the English church from the Church of Rome and establishing it under the monarch. A series of personal and political problems moved Henry from a position of "Defender of the Faith," supporting the papacy against the writings of Luther (in the *Assertion of the Seven Sacraments*, 1521), to a stance a decade later of declaring himself the head of the Church of England. The **Erastian** form of government established by the Reformation Parliament (1532–35) declared Henry VIII to be head of both church and state in England (**Act of Supremacy**) and made the Church of England the official religion of the state and an integral part of the political structure. These actions set the boundaries of power for the future—all matters of church doctrine, structure, and policy would have to pass through Parliament. In addition to these steps that asserted English ecclesiastical independence, Parliament (with the encouragement and guidance of Henry's counselor, Thomas Cromwell) also vented its antipapalism by reiterating the prohibitions of earlier parliaments against interference in English affairs by foreign powers, including most obviously the See of Rome.

Theologically, the Henrician church was not typically Protestant in the Lutheran or Calvinist sense. The first official statement of the English faith, the **Ten Articles** of Religion (1536), was a fairly brief statement of traditional beliefs, omitting the (by this time) typical Protestant bias against transubstantiation, celibacy of the clergy, and so on. The two most notable changes in the transition from Church *in* England to Church *of* England were in polity and liturgy—the monarch rather than the pope was now the head of the church, and the service was to be in English rather than Latin. A revision of the doctrinal statement in 1539, the **Six Articles**, reflects an even more conservative trend in the Henrician church, reaffirming the doctrine of transubstantiation and reasserting the need for a celibate clergy. The soteriological doctrines, such as justification, good works, grace, and so on, as published in *The King's Book* (1543), are typical of the more irenic compromises arrived at by the Protestant and Roman Catholic negotiators at the colloquies of 1539–1541 on the continent (for example, the *Regensburg Book*).

The early attempts at doctrinal formulation were revised and extended by Henry's closest religious advisor, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, at the close of the monarch's reign. His first important step was to publish a collection of sermons or homilies

that would present models of correct theological exposition for the clergy. The first **Book of Homilies** (1546) contained twenty-one sermons that could be read from the pulpits to assure that the people would on occasion hear solid interpretation of orthodox doctrines, regardless of the homiletical or doctrinal inadequacy of the local parish priest or curate.

During the reign of Edward VI, the influence of the continental reformers became more noticeable, both at the royal court and in the countryside. Cranmer himself was not untouched by this development. In 1532, he had secretly married Margaret Osiander, the niece of Andreas Osiander the Lutheran reformer, and brought to England some of the continental theologians, mostly Calvinist and noticeably irenic, such as Martin Bucer and Peter Martyr. The Archbishop's next major production was the official prayer book for the church—the **Book of Common Prayer** (1549, rev. 1552). By an act of Parliament, the BCP became the official liturgy of the established church. Cranmer also helped develop a revised doctrinal statement, the **Forty-Two Articles**, which was much more Protestant than any previous English standard of orthodoxy. The Calvinistic bent of these Articles can be seen in their assertion of supralapsarian predestination (decreed by God before the Fall) and their clear opposition to good works apart from a proper faith in Christ. These Articles received royal acceptance in June 1553, less than a month before Edward VI died and his sister Mary acceded to the throne.

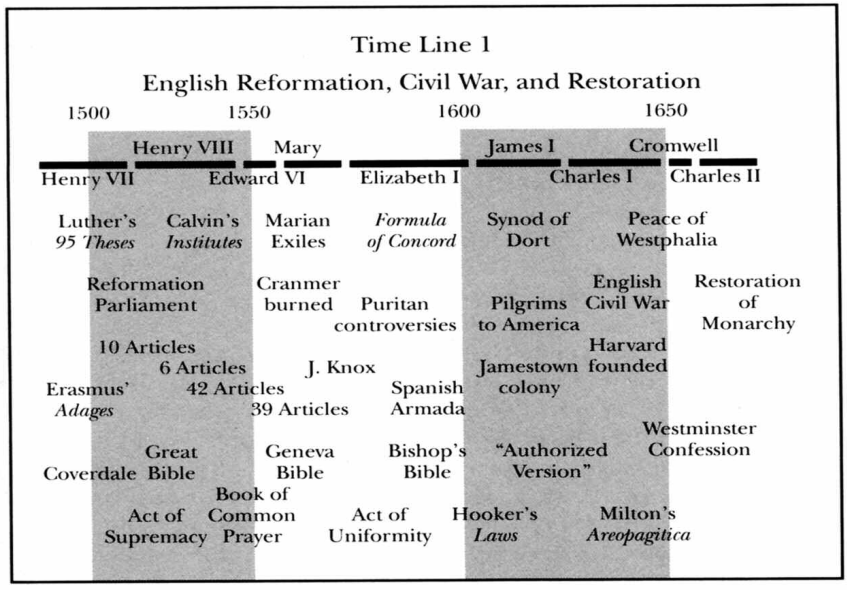
As a result of its history and nature, the Church of England would continue to assume a position somewhere between the more radical views of continental Protestantism and the more traditional views of Roman Catholicism. The reign of Mary was really too short to effect a permanent return to Roman Catholicism in England. The incipient Protestantism of Edward's reign, culminating twenty years of slow shifts in the religious winds of England, seems to have pervaded the country sufficiently to present a broad challenge to Mary's program of religious reformation, effected as usual by acts of Parliament. Even her firm-handed disposal of the opposition through the traditional methods used earlier by her father and later by her sister, in the end worked against her. The persons she forced into exile because of their Protestant inclinations came back to England at her death with a reforming zeal that saw even the Henrician church as having need of further reform. And the execution of those who stayed in England served not only to solidify the opposition to Mary in her own day, but

also to provide her most unfortunate legacy—the nickname "bloody" Mary. In particular, the burning of the three bishops, Cranmer, Latimer, and Ridley, ignited a lasting spark for the continuing spirit of anti-Roman reform in England, a spark fanned by the writings of John Foxe, Thomas Cartwright, and others.

Mary's untimely death, without heirs, left the throne to her sister, Elizabeth, whose political savvy and religious inclinations (or lack thereof) led to the **Elizabethan Settlement**—a series of parliamentary acts (1559) that defined once again the nature of and relationship between the English crown and church. Elizabeth's desire was to turn the clock back to the time of her father, Henry VIII. The march of time and events would not permit that. The intervening years had seen the rise of Calvin in Geneva and the redefinition of Roman Catholicism at Trent. She found it necessary to confront both realities in her own country—the reinstituted Roman faith of her sister's reign and the revitalized Calvinism of the returning **Marian exiles**. The latter brought with them two books that would influence the English-speaking world for generations—John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* and the Geneva Bible.

The first of these was a detailed description, in the tradition of the "lives of the saints," of the martyrdom of those persecuted under Mary's reign. The blatant anti-Catholic tone of the book is exemplified in the conclusion of the account of a pregnant woman who was burned at the stake and whose unborn child burst unexpectedly into the fire, first to be retrieved but then to be cast back into the flames, as Foxe says, "to make up the number of those countless innocents who by their tragic death display to the whole world the Herodian cruelty of this graceless generation of Catholic tormentors." The widespread popularity of Foxe's work is largely responsible for implanting in the English consciousness a vibrant anti-Catholic sentiment.

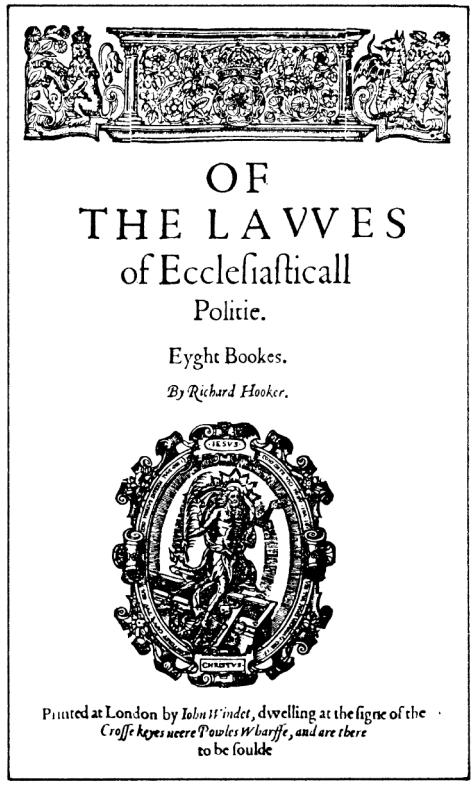
The Marian exiles also came carrying their Calvinist bibles as the handbook for church reform. The Geneva (or "Breeches") Bible—small in size compared with the editions of the official Bishops' Bible; printed in clear Roman type rather than the heavy black-lettering of previous English bibles; verses numbered for convenience—was considered not only a source of devotional study and Protestant (anti-Catholic) theological interpretation, but also in good Calvinist terms a practical guidebook for church reform. The returning Marian exiles had already determined from their place of exile that the Church of England, even in its



Henrician or Edwardian form, needed further reform of its Roman tendencies. Hence some English Calvinists became known popularly as **Puritans** and worked to effect reforms that would purify the church of its nonscriptural corruptions. They saw no scriptural support for such things as vestments in worship services, or archbishops (much less monarchs) in ecclesiastical leadership.

The task of the religious settlement under Elizabeth was to establish a balanced approach that would protect the national church, formed (if not fully "reformed") under Henry, from the traditional "catholic" claims of Rome on the one side and from the more radical "reform" tendencies of the Puritans on the other, a stance traditionally expressed as the *via media* ("middle way") between Rome and Geneva. Elizabeth's role in this process was not determined so much by strong personal religious sentiments, if indeed she had any, as by her political astuteness: she was, in this as in most matters, thoroughly *politique*. Her concern was to establish stability in her reign, following the turmoil of her siblings' reigns. A unified country would need a settled order in the church.

The parliamentary measures that settled the religious question under Elizabeth used the Henrician church as a model and set the basic framework for English religion for generations to come. A new **Act of Supremacy** (1559) established Elizabeth as head of state and


OF
THE LAVVES
of Eccleſiaſticall
Politie.

Eyght Bookes.

By Richard Hooker.

Printed at London by *Iohn Windet*, dwelling at the ſigne of the *Croſſe keyes neere Powles Wharffe, and are there* to be ſoulde

Title page of the first edition of Hooker's exposition of the polity and theology of the Elizabethan Settlement.

"Supreme Governor" of the church, carefully chosen words that indicated an appreciation for the problems Henry had encountered in proclaiming himself "head" of the church (in the light of Eph. 5:23 and Col. 1:18). **The Act of Uniformity** (1559) defined the standards for liturgy and doctrine—requiring that churches use the Book of Common Prayer, requiring clergy and other officials to subscribe to the doctrines in the **Thirty-Nine Articles** of Religion, and providing a standard exposition of accepted teachings in an enlarged **Book of Homilies** (to be read regularly from pulpits across the realm). These three basic sources of theological identity came primarily from the pen of Thomas Cranmer a decade earlier; the BCP and the Articles were only slightly revised from the Edwardean prayer book and Articles, and the homilies were doubled in number from the edition first produced in 1546.

Neither the Puritans nor the Roman Catholics took kindly to these developments. As the Puritans' numbers increased (returning from the continent and gaining converts), they protested the political and theological structures put in place by Elizabeth and her advisors, their tempers boiling over in the controversies of the 1570s and 1580s concerning liturgy, episcopacy, and doctrine (Thomas Cartwright, Walter Strickland, the "Marprelate Tracts," and so on). Pope Pius V excommunicated Elizabeth in 1570, calling upon her subjects to depose her. This forced the English Roman Catholics to choose between loyalty to the queen (thus denying papal authority) and obedience to the pope (thus inviting treason to England).

In the face of these tensions, Richard Hooker undertook to provide an exposition of church polity and doctrine in a work that became a definitive explication of the Elizabethan Settlement, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1595). In his work, Hooker first raises the crucial question as to what the authorities should be for answering basic questions of ecclesiastical structure and thought. His answer, self-consciously walking a line between the poles of thought in his day (to become a model of the mediating, *via media* tradition of the Church of England), was three-fold: (1) **Scripture** (but not as used by the Puritans) provides the main source of truth and the basic test of Christian veracity, but was not to be used in the manner of the Puritans' understanding of *sola scriptura*—scripture was not a handbook that provided specific answers to all questions, to be followed to the letter: doing all the things spelled out there, omitting all the things not found there. Hooker suggested that the Scriptures, the primary source of truth, should be seen whole and could provide guidelines for thought and action in many areas. (2) **Tradition** (but not as used by the Roman Catholics) provides a view of life and thought from the earliest centuries of Christianity, closest to the purity of the apostolic witness and most liable to be (in its consensus) an authentic reflection and explication of the biblical testimony—certainly not be venerated equally with scripture (as the Council of Trent had decreed), and by all means limited to the first few centuries of the church, excluding the "innovations" of the medieval church. Hooker saw the value of tradition as an early authoritative explanation of scriptural truths. (3) **Reason** (but not as used by the Platonists) furnishes the means by which scripture and tradition can be scrutinized and understood by thoughtful persons—revealed truth may at times be above reason, but can never be

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We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Richard Heitzenrater for this book. Its elegant prose and presentation, supported by years of primary research, offer a clear and compelling picture of John Wesley and the spiritual renewal with which he is forever associated. Reading this book will help you understand Methodism better and, perhaps, even be caught up in its movement toward holiness.
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