

## **In the Current Discussions On Separation and Division, Do United Methodists Care What John Wesley Thinks?**

Among the plethora of current discussions about what constitutes the authenticity of “the people called Methodists” in North America and elsewhere, there have been discussions of the writings of John Wesley, who with his brother was a founder of the Methodist movement within the Church of England in the eighteenth century. Indeed, there have been discussions of Wesley’s treatise “Reasons Against a Separation from the Church of England.” However, it seems as though turning specific ideas into legislation takes precedence over the meaning and nature of the Church, as the Wesleys understood and expressed them. There are those who seem to think they will make the church purer and holier by limiting it to a specific set of legislated opinions.

I commend to anyone and everyone who may be struggling with issues relating to the division of United Methodism to continue a discussion of John Wesley’s treatise “Reasons Against a Separation from the Church of England” (1758).<sup>1</sup> However, it should not be read in isolation. It should be read against the background of the very difficult times of the 1740s when “the people called Methodists” in England suffered tremendous opposition from laity and clergy of the official, nationally established Church of England, as well as general public opposition. John Wesley was dragged by his hair through the streets of Walsal. While preaching, Charles Wesley had a military officer draw his sword and attack him. Houses in which Methodist groups were meeting at times were razed by opposing mobs. Charles writes of such opposition in a stanza of “Ye Servants of God” that is generally not included<sup>2</sup> in hymnbooks:

Men, devils engage, the billows arise,  
And furiously rage and threaten the skies;

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<sup>1</sup> I commend also John Wesley’s sermon “A Catholic Spirit.”

<sup>2</sup> Omitted in *UMH* 181.

Their fury shall never our steadfastness shock;  
The weakest believer is built on a rock.

On one occasion John Wesley was refused Holy Communion at a parish church, and he was not allowed to preach in the church at Epworth that his father had served for so many years.

Given such treatment by laity and clergy, would not “the people called Methodists” have wanted to go their own way and separate from the Church of England? Absolutely not, says John Wesley in his treatise “Reasons Against a Separation from the Church of England.”

Before taking a look at some of Wesley’s perspectives, let us pause briefly for a moment of contemporary historical reflection. Clearly the Methodist movement in the American colonies went a different direction from the movement in England. From the Wesleys’ perspective, the founding of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the colonies in 1784, before their deaths (Charles died in 1788, John died in 1791), was motivated by many factors other than a strong theological argument for separation.

Though this was not the only reason, the Archbishop of Canterbury had not supplied a bishop or bishops for North America, therefore, ordination required a return to England, and countless Methodist groups served at times by circuit riders had little or no opportunity to receive the sacraments of the church. Furthermore, just because John Wesley appointed ordained<sup>3</sup> clergy to superintend the North American Methodists did not mean that he supported separation. Yes, in 1784 twenty-six years had passed since John wrote his “Reasons Against a Separation from the Church of England,” but the circumstances of the time did not dictate a change in his perspectives eloquently expressed in 1758. Those perspectives have strong implications for current discussions regarding divisions among United Methodists.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Coke was an ordained priest of the Church of England when Wesley designated him as one of the two to be general superintendents in America. But the other superintendent, Francis Asbury, was not ordained at the time Wesley designated him for superintendency. Asbury’s ordination happened at the Christmas Conference held in Baltimore in 1784.

Another part of historical perspective is the movement toward union among “the people called Methodists” in North America in the twentieth century. After the divisive struggles resulting from the Civil War, three Methodist groups decided to end their separation and to come together as one church in 1939. At that time the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Protestant Methodist Church joined to form The Methodist Church. Of course, even then they united by dividing into racially segregated jurisdictions, and the African American Methodist denominations (AME, AMEZ, and CME) were not part of the “reunion.” In 1968 there was another movement toward a larger union that involved the joining of The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren Church to form The United Methodist Church. This added churches of German Wesleyan heritage into yet a larger union of “the people called Methodists” and included an end to the racial segregation of the jurisdictions.

Ironically there are those who now wish to undo these unifying movements among “the people called Methodists” in North America and elsewhere, as though the unions of 1939 and 1968 were a sham. The fact that the symbolism of “union” in Methodism is to be shattered beyond measure confuses the rest of the ecumenical church. While United Methodists produced numerous documents in the twentieth century on church unity and have a Commission on Church Unity now supervised by the Council of Bishops, UMC divisions and institutional instabilities threaten our commitment to being one in Christ. Our progress toward full communion with the Episcopal Church has been put on hold, and some are pleased to let such ecumenicity fade away.

The view that what Wesley said in the eighteenth century has no bearing on the state of United Methodism in the twenty-first century has little viability. Wesley is speaking of the nature of the church that transcends all periods of time. He is not addressing legislating support of specific opinions about behavior. As a matter of serious concern, there is an amazing breadth

acknowledged in his treatise in the practices of Christians, even the sacraments.

### **Key Propositions in Wesley's Treatise<sup>4</sup>**

Given the length of his treatise, here only some of his perspectives will be addressed. Wesley's concerns and arguments emphasize that "it is by no means expedient for us to separate from the Established Church," i.e., the Church of England. Generally, his arguments will be summarized rather than quoted word for word.

1. Separation would contradict what the Methodists have affirmed in preaching, publications, and conversation.
2. Separation would provide a huge occasion of offence to those who seek to oppose God and God's truth.
3. Separation would initiate prejudice against the Methodists and reduce the benefit of their preaching.
4. Separation would hinder multitudes who neither love nor fear God, from hearing us at all.
5. Separation would occasion hundreds, if not thousands, who are united with us to separate from us.
6. Separation would throw balls of wildfire on those who are now quiet in the land. "We are now sweetly united together in love. We mostly think and speak the same thing. But this would occasion inconceivable strife and contention, between those who left, and those who remained in the church, as well as between those who left us, and those who remained with us."
7. . . . Separation "would utterly banish peace from among us, and that without hope of its return."
8. "To form the plan of a new church would require infinite time and care, (which might

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<sup>4</sup> At times I have summarized and paraphrased Wesley's comments. At others direct quotations are within quotation marks.

be more profitably bestowed) with much more wisdom and greater depth and extensiveness of thought, than any of us are masters of.”

9. Because of the idea of separation, “evil fruits have already followed, such as prejudice against the clergy in general; and aptness to believe ill of them; contempt (not without a degree of bitterness) of clergymen as such, and a sharpness of language toward the whole order, utterly unbecoming . . . Christians.”

10. Separation as an “experiment has been so frequently tried already, and the success [has] never answered the expectation.”

11. Separation will do less, not more service to God. Wesley asks, “have any separated themselves and prospered? Have they been either more holy, or more useful than they were before?”

### **A Summary of Wesley’s Treatise**

In the second section of his treatise Wesley addresses the idea that unless we separate, “we cannot be a compact, united body.” There are arguments such as, “It is mere cowardice and fear of persecution which makes you desire to remain united with them.” Wesley says succinctly, “This cannot be proved.” He finds it of much more value to “Let every one examine his own heart, and not judge” [others].<sup>5</sup>

In the third section Wesley asks about how we see ourselves. “Do we not all now see ourselves, the Methodists (so called) in general, *the Church* and *the Clergy* in a clear light? We look upon ourselves, not as authors, or ringleaders of a particular sect or party; (it is the farthest thing from our thoughts:) but as messengers of God, to those who are Christians in name, but heathens in heart and in life, to call them back to that from which they are fallen, to real, genuine Christianity.”

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<sup>5</sup> Original wording “his brother.”

Wesley expresses his affection for England and its citizens and the desire to bring them out of “*darkness and the shadow of death.*” The clergy are part of these people and are “called to be watchmen.” “If [they] then neglect their important charge, if they do not watch over them with all their power, they will be of all men most miserable, and so are entitled to our deepest compassion. So that to feel, and much more to express either contempt or bitterness towards them, betrays an utter ignorance of ourselves and of the Spirit which we especially should be of.”

It is certainly a fair question today: What does it mean for clergy to be watchmen? Watchmen of what? Who claims the divine knowledge to know precisely what constitutes life in the Spirit? Further, Wesley says, “We should employ all our care, labor, prudence, joined with fervent prayer, to overcome evil with good, to melt . . . hardness into love.” He adds, “We need of all gentleness and meekness of wisdom. Contempt, sharpness, bitterness can do no good. . . . Harsh methods have been tried again and again. . . . And how did they succeed? They always occasioned numberless evils; often wholly stopped the course of the gospel.”

Wesley’s next comments some would find absolutely ridiculous, if not frivolous. “Might it not be another (at least prudential) rule, for every *Methodist* preacher, ‘Not to frequent any Dissenting Meeting?’ (Though we blame none who have been accustomed to it). But if *we* do this, certainly our people will. Now this is actually separating from the church. If therefore it is (at least) not expedient to separate, neither is this expedient.”

Wesley discusses the importance of the prayers, sacraments, and sermons for the gatherings of the people called Methodists. He further elaborates that too many diminish the importance of these by becoming proponents of ideas that overturn the gospel. He mentions specifically predestination and final perseverance. He sees support of specific opinions that take precedence over the value of the gospel itself as “deadly poison.”

But some argue today that he had no idea whatsoever about leftwing proponents of the

twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They are the culprits of division. Wesley could not have known that, they argue.

Whether left or right: “In a short time [this] destroys all their zeal for God. They grow fond of opinions and strife of words. They despise self-denial and the daily cross; and to the complete all, wholly separate from their brethren.”

Wesley’s third from the last paragraph of the treatise is absolutely essential to a Wesleyan understanding of the church.

“If we continue in the church not by chance, or for want of thought, but upon solid and well-weighed reasons, then we should never speak contemptuously of the church, or any thing pertaining to it. In some sense, it is the Mother of us all, who have been brought up therein. *We ought never to make her blemishes matter of diversion, but rather of solemn sorrow before God.*<sup>6</sup> We ought never to talk ludicrously of them; no, not at all, without clear necessity. Rather, we should conceal them, as far as ever we can, without bringing guilt upon our own conscience. And we should use every rational and scriptural means, to bring others to the same temper and behavior. I say, *All*; for if some of us are thus minded, and others of an opposite spirit and behavior, this will breed a real schism among ourselves. It will of course divide us into two parties; each of which will be liable to perpetual jealousies, suspicions, and animosities against the other. Therefore on this account likewise, it is expedient in the highest degree, that we should be tender of the church to which we belong.”

### **Reflections on Wesley’s Treatise**

It is important to note that Wesley does not say that those of differing opinions should use scriptural interpretation to divide the church, but rather to help the church to be repentant of its inability to represent the church’s full unity to the world. He longs for members of the church to be of a *tender* conscience toward one another and to reflect a repentant spirit for their inability to be what God would have them be, with the knowledge that separation and division give even a stronger signal that a vision of God’s church has been lost.

One thing I find most interesting is that the phrase, “theologically conservative,” that has become determinative for some groups advocating separation, is not used by John Wesley in this

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<sup>6</sup> Italics added for emphasis.

treatise. He does not see the church as a theologically conservative institution; rather, it is first and foremost God's church based on a resurrection faith. And while theologically he is very Christocentric in his perspectives, he is first and foremost Trinitarian. While many enthusiastically speak of him as an "evangelical," perhaps more accurate would be a "sacramental evangelical." The proclamation of the gospel and the humble reception of the sacrament of Holy Communion are at the heart of Wesleyan spirituality, knowing that it is the body and blood of Christ that send us forth to serve, reaching out to all, including the neediest, especially the poor. It is at the table of the Lord that we are beckoned to be perfected in one, the one body of Christ, the church.

So writes Charles Wesley:

Sure and real is the grace,<sup>7</sup>  
the manner be unknown;  
only meet us in thy ways  
*and perfect us in one.*<sup>8</sup>  
Let us taste the heavenly powers,  
Lord, we ask for nothing more.  
Thine to bless, 'tis only ours  
to wonder and adore.

Certainly, many believe that a voice from the eighteenth century has little to say to the kinds of left and right issues dominating church discussions today. No matter how one sees this, opinions on any subject, even sexuality and abortion, cannot and must not overshadow or take the place of Christ's sacrificial love that goes in search of humankind at all costs, even death upon a cross. His life, ministry, death, and resurrection model a cruciform pattern of life for all Christians today. This is the heartbeat of the life of the church. In his *Hymns and Sacred Poems* of 1740 Charles Wesley eloquently summarized this self-giving life of the Christian in the following words:

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<sup>7</sup> See *UMH* 627; *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* (1745), 41, stanza 4; hymn based on John 6:35–58.

<sup>8</sup> Italics added for emphasis.



Christ, from whom all blessings flow,<sup>9</sup>  
perfecting the saints below,  
hear us, who thy nature share,  
who thy mystic body are.

Join us, in one spirit join,  
let us still receive of thine;  
still for more on thee we call,  
thou who fillest all in all.

Move and actuate and guide,  
diverse gifts to each divide;  
placed according to thy will,  
let us all our work fulfill.

Never from thy service move,  
needful to each other prove;  
use the grace on each bestowed,  
tempered by the art of God.

Many are we now, and one,  
we who Jesus have put on;  
there is neither bond nor free,  
male nor female, Lord, in thee.

Love, like death, hath all destroyed,  
*rendered all distinctions void;*  
names and sects and parties fall;  
thou, O Christ, art all in all.

Charles Wesley begins with the plea that God will hear a prayer from those who share the divine nature, which is love, and who thereby claim to be God's mystic body, to be joined as one. What a challenge, if not a frightening one, to realize that we share in God's nature and thus we act as ones who claim to be God's mystic body. Thus we must constantly ask: Is this what others sense in our words and deeds—God's unified mystic body of love?

Furthermore, we need to ask the question Charles Wesley is ever asking.

### **Where Shall My Wondering Soul Begin?<sup>10</sup>**

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<sup>9</sup> See *UMH* 550; *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1740), 194–95, based on 1 Cor. 12:4–31; Gal. 3:27–28.

<sup>10</sup> This is the first line of a hymn by Charles Wesley, eighteenth-century Anglican priest and poet. See *UMH* 342; *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), 101–102.

A wondering soul must always ask,  
What is my starting point today?  
Do I start only with one task,  
or do my thoughts show me the way?

Do I have faith that guides me forth?  
Is there a love that shows the way?  
Am I called east, west, south, or north?  
And where do I begin today?

For those who claim to follow Christ,  
who ask the question Wesley asked,  
look first at what Christ sacrificed:  
a life, self-giving love unmasked.

It's there the Christian must begin:  
to give of self in love for all.  
If there we start, we all are kin:  
Christ's selfless love will build no wall.  
S T Kimbrough, Jr.

### **Postscript**

Perhaps it is worth mentioning the prerequisite for becoming a member of a Methodist Society. The only condition for candidates' admission was that they have "a desire to flee from the wrath to come, [and] to be saved from [their] sins." Furthermore, in Wesley's *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1748), he contends: "Orthodoxy or right opinions, is, at best, but a very slender part of religion, if . . . allowed to be any part of it at all." To this view should be added his comments in his sermon on the "Ministerial Office" (Sermon 115)<sup>11</sup>:

We, by the grace of God, hold on our way; being ourselves still members of the Church of England, as we were from the beginning, but receiving all that love God in every Church, as our brother, and sister, and mother. And in order to their union with us, we require no unity in opinions, or in modes of worship, but barely that they 'fear God and work righteousness' as was observed. Now, this is utterly a new thing, unheard of in any other Christian

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<sup>11</sup> Cork, May 4, 1789; from the final paragraph; accessed 04/22/22 from website <https://media.sabda.org/aikitab-6/wh2-ref/jw-ser.pdf>.

community. In what Church or congregation beside, throughout the Christian world, can members be admitted on these terms, without any other conditions? Point any such out, whoever can; I know none in Europe, Asia, Africa, or America! This is the glory of the Methodists,<sup>12</sup> and of them alone! They are themselves no particular sect or party; but they receive those, of all parties, who endeavor “to do justly, and love mercy, and walk humbly with their God.”

John Wesley further avers that he knows of no other religious society with such a broad perspective. See the entry in his Journal for May 18, 1788: “I do not know of any other religious society in which such liberty of conscience is now allowed, or has been allowed, since the age of the apostles.” It is precisely the denial of *liberty of conscience* which energizes the posture to separate and divide.

Jesus, Lord, we look to thee;<sup>13</sup>  
let us in thy name agree;  
show thyself the Prince of Peace,  
bid our strife forever cease.

By thy reconciling love  
every stumbling block remove;  
each to each unite, endear;  
come, and spread thy banner here.

Make us of one heart and mind,  
gentle, courteous, and kind,  
lowly, meek, in thought and word,  
altogether like our Lord.

Let us for each other care,  
each the other’s burdens bear;

to thy church the pattern give,  
show how true believers live.

Free from anger and from pride,

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<sup>12</sup> The newly proposed name of the “Global Methodist Church” is indeed puzzling, given Wesley’s clearly expressed perspectives. Does the name imply that wherever Methodists are in the world, they are part of the “Global Methodist Church” or must one adhere to specific perspectives in order to be included, which would then hardly mean that such a church were global. At best it is a very presumptuous name. While seeking to be inclusive, it is clearly exclusive.

<sup>13</sup> See *UMH 562; Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1749), 1:248.

let us thus in God abide;  
all the depths of love express,  
all the heights of holiness.

Let us then with joy remove  
to the family above;  
on the wings of angels fly,  
show how true believers die.

Further, Charles writes on the theme of unity in Christ:

Blest be the dear uniting love<sup>14</sup>  
that will not let us part;  
our bodies may far off remove,  
we still are one in heart.

Joined in one spirit to our Head,  
where he appoints we go,  
and still in Jesus' footsteps tread,  
and do his work below.

O may we ever walk in him,  
and nothing know beside,  
nothing desire, nothing esteem,  
but Jesus crucified.

We all are one who him receive,  
and each with each agree,  
in him the One, the Truth, we live;  
blest point of unity!

Partakers of the Savior's grace,  
the same in mind and heart,  
nor joy, nor grief, nor time, nor place,  
nor life, nor death can part.

© April 28, 2022, S T Kimbrough, Jr.  
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<sup>14</sup> See *UMH 566; Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1742), 159–60, based on 1 Cor. 2:2.