

Origins of the Methodist Episcopal Church

WBC Sunday School

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Overview at a Glance

John Wesley charters first Methodist Church in U.S.

On February 28, 1784, John Wesley charts the first Methodist Church in the United States. Despite the fact that he was an Anglican, Wesley saw the need to provide church structure for his followers after the Anglican Church abandoned its American believers during the American Revolution.

Wesley first brought his evangelical brand of methodical Anglicanism to colonial Georgia from 1735 to 1737 in the company of his brother Charles, with whom he had founded the ascetic Holy Club at Oxford University. This first venture onto American soil was not a great success. Wesley became embittered from a failed love affair and was unable to win adherents to his studious practices. However, while in Georgia, he became acquainted with the German Moravians, who hoped to establish a settlement in the colony. The meeting proved momentous, as it was at a Moravian meeting upon his return to London that Wesley felt he had a true experience of God's grace.

While closely allied to the Moravians, Wesley began taking the advice of fellow Oxford graduate George Whitfield and preaching in the open air when banned from Anglican churches for his unorthodox evangelical methods. By 1739, Wesley had separated himself from the Moravians and attracted his own group of adherents, known as Methodists, who were held in disdain by the orthodox Anglican clerical and civic hierarchy. By 1744, the Methodists had become a large enough group to require

their own conference of ministers, which expanded to create an internal hierarchy, replicating some of the Anglican Church's ecclesiastical order.

Wesley, however, remained within the Anglican fold and insisted that only ministers who had received the apostolic succession—the laying on of hands by an Anglican bishop to consecrate a new priest—could administer the sacraments. The refusal of the Anglican church to ordain Dr. Thomas Coke (pronounced Cook) to preach to Americans newly independent from the British State Church, finally forced Wesley to ordain within his own Methodist conference in the absence of a proper Anglican bishop. He performed the laying on of hands and not only ordained Coke as the superintendent of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America but also commissioned him to ordain Francis Asbury as his co-superintendent.

Legacy of Thomas Coke by Jordan Satterfield

Despite broad recognition of Thomas Coke's influential role in early Methodist missions, Coke remains somewhat obscure. His life and ministry were overshadowed by Wesley and Asbury in Methodism and by other luminaries such as Carey and Judson in foreign missions. His noble life and service should not be overlooked.

Jonathan Crowther's 1815 biography notes that Dr. Thomas Coke served Methodism with "pre-eminent distinction" and that he had an "active and principal hand in every notable transaction among them for thirty and forty years." Among his many activities, Dr. Coke served as a prime mover of the early Methodist missionary enterprise.

Dr. Coke is worthy of an elevated place in Methodist history because of his legacy of intense missionary labors that ushered the Methodist church into the great global harvest.

Joining the Methodists

On August 13, 1776, John Wesley recorded that he had met the young minister in Kingston, “Here I found a clergy man, Dr. Coke, late gentleman-commoner of Jesus College, in Oxford, who came twenty miles on Purpose: I had much conversation with him, and an union then began which I trust shall never end.” In just a year’s time, Wesley’s desire was fulfilled. On August 19, 1777, Wesley writes, “I went forward to Taunton, with Dr. Coke, who, being dismissed from his curacy, has bid adieu to his honourable name, and is determined to cast in his lot with us.” Dr. Coke would invest all his energy, fortune, and life with the Methodists.

In short order, Dr. Coke was filling a role as Wesley’s chief lieutenant, and Coke’s union to Wesley’s leadership team was greatly appreciated as providential. Wesley had hoped that the saintly Fletcher would succeed him, but Fletcher was failing in health and would pass on to glory before Wesley. Coke became Wesley’s adjutor until Wesley’s passing in 1791. He would fulfill many administrative positions over the years. In one of the first of these, Coke was sent to Dublin in 1782 and was chosen to preside over the Irish conference, a position he would hold for much of his life and which would require many trips there for oversight.

There can be no question though that early Methodism was defined by fiery evangelism. Methodists actively sought to evangelize nominal Christians and Roman Catholics. It was not uncommon to refer to the unconverted from their own nation and

communities as heathen. Wesley's societies and band of itinerant lay preachers were zealous and energetic in this great spiritual harvest at home. In America, there was a similar missionary zeal led by Asbury and his band of zealous circuit-riding preachers. It all was blessed extraordinarily of God. In Wesley's words:

In what age has such a work been wrought, considering the swiftness as well as the extent of it? When have such numbers of sinners, in so short a time, been recovered from the error of their ways? When hath religion, I will not say since the Reformation, but since the time of Constantine the Great, made so large a progress in any nation, within so small a space? I believe hardly can either ancient or modern history supply us with a parallel instance.

Stirring Methodism's Missionary Vision

Despite the continuing expansion and general missionary spirit of Methodism, Dr. Coke would find Wesley and British Methodism reticent about foreign missions opportunities. His historical review of the West Indies missions notes that many years before even the first stirring of Methodism in the American colonies under Strawbridge and Embury, a Methodist layman named Nathaniel Gilbert lived on the island of Antigua in the Caribbean. He laid aside an honorable position as the Speaker of the House of Antigua to establish a Methodist society among the slaves. After Gilbert's death, the work was continued by two native women until a Methodist dockworker arrived and began serving as a local preacher. According to Vickers, the Methodist conference was aware of this work but made no attempts to fill the need for a minister.

Despite Wesley's world-parish aphorism and seemingly boundless zeal, in practical reality, the frenzied development of Methodism in the home territory was more than enough for one man to oversee. Wesley's perspective on expansion was that the Holy Spirit would direct Methodism to the places where it would bring forth the most abundant harvest, and it was hard to imagine that being possible to the same degree in other places. Resources of men and finance were best applied where it would be most fruitful. While this stratagem undoubtedly helped consolidate the work and produced very healthy societies, Dr. Coke would find his enthusiasm for foreign missions often rebuffed and his plans unfunded.

At the 1778 conference, Coke's first with the Methodists, the need for missionaries for Calabar in West Africa was considered. Some years previous, two African princes who had been enslaved and freed appealed to the Methodists for missionaries. Two Germans from the Bristol conference quickly responded but almost immediately lost their lives due to the unhealthy climate that claimed so many missionaries. Coke had evidently been tasked with penning an appeal for replacement missionaries. Two ministers responded to his appeal offering themselves for service, and a large sum was raised to finance the mission.

The 1778 conference, however, decided against the mission with the statement that "the time had not yet arrived for sending missionaries to Africa." This was likely quite disheartening to young Coke, but a passion for world missions had now been kindled in Thomas Coke that would never be extinguished.

In 1783, that missionary passion was revealed again when Coke published his "Plan for the Establishment of a Mission among the Heathen," a piece rather mechanical in

its style but distinctly missionary in its substance. Perhaps attempting to circumvent the conference which he feared would squelch the effort, Coke proposed that a new missionary society be formed of members by subscription. These donations could be used to fund the cause of foreign missions by supporting missionaries and printing literature.

This “Plan” was published a full eight years prior to William Carey’s *Inquiry*, but this first attempt would not succeed. Whether directly rejected or quietly tabled, Coke’s first plan would not have Wesley’s support.

Birth of American Methodism

Wesley, though not supporting this initial missionary effort of Dr. Coke, did have a special assignment that suited his skills and energy in America. Thomas Coke had joined the Methodists at a time of transition. For all of Wesley’s concern about the coldness and formality of the Church of England, he still considered it the greatest national church.

The Methodist societies were to be a revival movement; members of Methodist societies were still to attend public services and receive the sacraments from the Anglican church. The gaps between the Methodists and the Church of England widened. The situation was untenable. The Napoleonic Wars, the Revolutionary Wars, and the expansion of Methodism to other lands and regions further complicated the organizational structure. Dr. Coke’s delicate legal labors for the “Deed of Declaration” in his early years with the Methodists were a start with giving the Methodists properties and organization formal legal standing.

Even as late as the forty-third 1786 conference in Bristol, no societies were allowed to completely separate from the Church of England unless the minister was notoriously wicked or preached heresy, the Anglican churches in a locality were insufficient for half of the community, or there were no churches within two or three miles. While Wesley was still not ready to ordain his itinerant band of preachers in England or form a separate church, the issue was forced across the Atlantic. With the American War for Independence, as many as three-quarters of the Anglican clergy had returned to England. Wesley shared his perspective,

I have still refused [to ordain ministers]: not only for peace' sake, but because I was determined, as little as possible to violate the established order of the national Church to which I belonged. But the case is widely different between England and North-America. Here there are Bishops who have a legal jurisdiction. In America there are none, neither any parish Ministers. So that for some hundred miles together there is none either to baptize or to administer the Lord's Supper. Here therefore my scruples are at an end: and I conceive myself at full liberty, as I violate no order, and invade no man's right, by appointing and sending labourers into the harvest.

Methodism in America was already burgeoning before the War. Their first conference in 1773 was attended by ten ministers and reported over one thousand class members with many additional uncounted society members. In 1784, Wesley and the British Conference quietly commissioned Dr. Coke along with Revs. Whatchoat and Vasey, to organize American Methodism into the Methodist Episcopal Church. Dr. Coke was ordained as "Superintendent" or Bishop of the American Societies.

The formal organization of American Methodism was accomplished at the Christmas Conference of 1784 over which Dr. Coke presided. Francis Asbury, already the leader of American Methodism, was ordained as a co-superintendent in America with Dr. Coke, as directed by Wesley. Coke would also travel extensively through the eastern states on his nine visits to America and preside over the important 1787 and 1791 conferences which, among other things, settled the issue of American autonomy with authority resting in the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Another very important factor from the Christmas Convention of 1784 was the commissioning of three missionaries to two foreign fields, Nova Scotia and Antigua. These were the first Methodist missionaries commissioned in America. Francis Asbury's journal simply records their appointment as a matter of business, and one might infer the influence of Coke in finally securing missionaries. Unfortunately, Rev. Lambert, appointed to ministry in Antigua which had so captivated Coke's attention, would have a serious health crisis and pass away before he was able to reach his assignment.

Due to Coke's extended travel overseas and limited time in America, Bishop Asbury is rightly honored for doing the lion's share of the promotion, organization, and oversight of Methodism in America, but Barclay observes, "Asbury... was essentially missionary in spirit and purpose, but it was Thomas Coke, rather than John Wesley or Francis Asbury, who launched early American Methodism on its early missionary course. He was, in fact, the herald and apostle of both British and American Methodist missions."

The Methodist Advance

1786 was an epochal year for Methodist missions, due in large part to Dr. Coke's impetus. In this year, he published a new missionary appeal under the title, "Address to the pious and benevolent, proposing an annual subscription for the support of missionaries in the Highlands and adjacent islands of Scotland, the isles of Jersey, Guernsey, and Newfoundland, the West Indies, and the provinces of Nova Scotia and Quebec." This plan was more passionate, but also more pragmatic than his first, in its limited scope and more diplomatic appeal to the rather reluctant Methodists. Here Coke cordially admits, "the providence of God has opened to us so many doors nearer home, that Mr. Wesley thinks it imprudent to hazard at present the lives of any of our preachers...." This plan had Wesley's blessing and was an important start to a new era for Methodism.

Later that same year, Coke and three other missionaries embarked on a transatlantic journey to establish mission works in Nova Scotia and Antigua. Bitter storms threw them off course, and instead of arriving in Nova Scotia, the battered ship made the first landfall two thousand miles south in Antigua on Christmas Day. Walker notes that they perceived this to be the providential ordering of God and immediately embarked upon ministry there. Large crowds attended their services and there was much fruit as they built on the labors of the laymen and women who had pioneered the work.

Dr. Coke states that "being thus in a providential manner, and without any design, brought into the Archipelago," he "considered it as his duty to improve the opportunity, and to endeavor to introduce the gospel into other islands as well."

After ministering with the missionary band for several months, Dr. Coke continued on, leaving behind all three missionaries, including the two appointed to serve in Nova Scotia. God's blessing was on the work in the West Indies' islands. By the fifty-third conference in 1799, they would report the organization of 13 circuits served by 23 preachers with a total membership of 11,700. This was already more than one-tenth of the size of the English conference!

From the time Dr. Coke returned from the Christmas Conference in America, he would be the face of Methodist missions as he relentlessly recruited missionaries, raised financial support, provided oversight to the fledgling mission works, and served as the liaison between the missions and the conference. According to Stevens, in America Dr. Coke was so moved by the appeal for laborers for Nova Scotia by William Black that the conference not only set aside two laborers for service in that conference, but he also personally "begged and gave funds for their support, but returned to England to procure additional men and money for it."

This pattern he followed through the remainder of his career. The conference was notoriously slow to provide funding, and Coke would unashamedly "beg" for donations, even door to door if needed, or he would provide for the needs from his own resources. His determined recruitment of missionaries also was a concern for Wesley who wrote, "Ought we to suffer Dr. Coke to pick out one after another of the choicest of our young preachers?"

Though the work in the West Indies would prove to be the most successful mission established under his leadership, it was by no means the only area that attracted his attention and missionary passion. He is credited with the founding of Welsh

Methodism for his initiative in sending missionaries to labor in northern Wales according to the plan laid out in his 1786 "Appeal." Additionally, the work in Nova Scotia by both British and American missionaries saw good success. Vickers observes that his desire to rectify the failure of Methodism to replace the missionaries to Africa probably led to a premature, though noble plan to establish a mission in what is now Sierra Leone. He dreamed that the converted Negroes from the West Indies would one day carry the Gospel back to Africa. Martin reminds us that he also energetically pursued mission outreach in France, trying to establish a foothold for Methodism there before the Calvinistic London Missionary Society did, while Thomas notes that "during the Napoleonic Wars [Coke] organized work among the 70,000 French prisoners of war held in England."

In 1814, he embarked on a new venture to serve personally as a missionary in India with a missionary band of nine as he had long desired since his first missionary publication in 1783. They weathered terrible storms amiably and were nearing their destination. As they passed through the Indian Ocean, Dr. Coke's health was failing, and he passed away peacefully in his sleep on May 3, 1814, at the age of 66.

A Missionary Legacy

Though Dr. Coke was actively engaged in administrative duties for British and American Methodism, he must be remembered chiefly for his missionary legacy. Drew's biography of Coke neatly gives this synopsis:

Under his influence, missions were established in almost every English Island in the West Indies. The flame of his missionary zeal burst forth on British America.

Methodist societies were also formed by him, or under his superintendence, in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and the islands on the eastern coast of the American continent, and subsequently in the Bahamas, and in Bermuda; and to the coast of Africa also he directed his zealous efforts.

As evidence of his zeal, one must mention his endless travels which exceeded both Whitefield and Wesley, including crossing the Atlantic an astounding eighteen times. Further, he is to be noted for his sacrificial giving which was more than any other Methodist and probably any Protestant of his day. He gave up his own inherited fortune and, marrying twice, also found his wives willing to bestow freely their fortunes for the cause of missions; he often personally covered the deficit needed to finance the Methodist mission efforts. He was not an arm-chair philosopher, but he served shoulder to shoulder with the men he recruited.

Dr. Coke was not without his foibles and shortcomings. Taggart documents various charges that Coke faced during his lifetime and by historians since then; he had too much ambition, he was too authoritative, he did not work well with the mission committee, he was too lax with the discipline of missionaries, he did not provide adequate financial oversight of the missions, he was a poor judge of the character of the men he recruited as missionaries, and he left no guidelines for the missionaries to Asia when he passed away. Some of these were legitimate charges. The first attempt at establishing the West African mission largely failed because of missionary ineptitude, for example. To the missionary recruits who failed, Coke was very gracious. He was personally aware of the enormous challenges of culture, climate, and adversity the new missionaries faced.

Grace can certainly be extended to Dr. Coke for multiple reasons. First, this was very early in the development of Protestant missions. The best practices and policies would be hammered out in real time. He would be among the first in the Protestant world to attempt long-distance oversight, grapple with issues of delayed communication, organizational structure, and mission financing.

Second, Dr. Coke was terribly overloaded with all of his varied administrative responsibilities, travels, prolific writing, fundraising and much more. Third, while the Methodist conference sometimes organized committees to oversee missions, they were more interested in curtailing spending than planning and strategizing for success. The conference appointed mission oversight committees met sporadically (some of them never met). Put simply, the Methodist conference did not even establish a regular conference-wide missionary society until 1818, four years after Coke's death.

Vickers refers to Dr. Coke as a "One-man Band," a characterization which seems perfectly legitimate. Wesley was resistant. The conference was distracted. Once Coke had the fire of missionary possibilities kindled in his soul, he was intensely focused on that goal no matter the obstacle or how many other responsibilities and obligations filled his time. This is not to disparage Wesley or British Methodism at all, but it was Coke who single-handedly and doggedly kept the cause of foreign missions alive in their circles. Walker would state, "It was Coke's work to develop in Methodism the Missionary spirit, already latent, but not yet manifest."

The influence of Dr. Coke on Methodism has not been uniformly appreciated. McLeister and Nicholson's *Conscience and Commitment: The History of the*

Wesleyan Methodist Church of America, a 700-page tome commissioned by the Wesleyan Church History Committee, does not so much as mention the name of Dr. Coke. In many other cases, Coke is referenced only in association with the establishment of the American Church.

This cursory review of the life and labors of Dr. Coke may surely confirm that he embodied the missionary zeal of Methodism, not only in spirit but in relentless activity. The fiery missionary life of Dr. Coke should be honored as his true and enduring legacy. Laboring in world contexts far removed from Coke's era, missionaries today should be inspired by eternal difference wrought by one obscure missionary ambassador with vital spirituality, singular focus, and relentless passion.

Sources:

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