

EARLY METHODISM

**—what was it all about?
and what is that to us today?**

Address given by Rev. Rod James
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We are here to celebrate 150 years of Methodism in this area, but what would we think of early Methodism if we saw it in the flesh, and what would it think of us?

The early Methodists were considered offensively provocative, overly religious, and in danger of going mad. In fact they were none of these things, but that is how they were seen by respectable, well-connected people, and church people at that. It was a matter of concern if one of your family members became a Methodist, or even began associating with the them.

A. The setting for the birth of Methodism:

i. Profligate living

A great Methodist Minister by the name of William Henry Fitchett wrote an account of *Wesley and his Century* in 1912. In it he described England at the time when the Wesleyan revival broke out.

Its ideals were gross; its sports were brutal; its public life was corrupt; its vice was unashamed...Cruelty fermented in the pleasures of the crowd, foulness stained the general speech. Judges swore at the bench; the chaplain cursed the sailors to make them attentive to his sermons; the king swore incessantly, and at the top of his voice...

Ferocious laws still lingered on the Statute-Book. Justice itself was cruel...It was the age of the pillory and of the whipping-post; of gin-hells, and debtors

prisons...Drunkenness was the familiar and unrebuked habit even of Ministers of the State. Adultery was a sport.

Someone jokingly, but wistfully, suggested at the time that the 'not' should be taken out of the commandments and put into the creed.

ii. Watered down religion

While Christianity was the state religion and widely held, it was in a very sad state. Fitchett observes that

...taken as a class, the clergy of the eighteenth century were gross and unspiritual because they represented a faith exhausted of all spiritual force.

The religion preached from English pulpits at the time could be called 'Deism'.

...Deism, a theory which exhausts all the great words of Christianity of their meaning, and all the great offices of Christ of their reality. It ignores—it treats as non-existent or as insignificant—that dread and measureless interval, a moral gulf, which no wit or toil of man can bridge, between sin and righteousness. Sin, on this reading is merely a stage in human development. It has no enduring element of guilt, and is pursued by no eternal penalties. Forgiveness, if any forgiveness indeed is necessary, comes through no awful mystery of suffering running up to the very person and throne of God. It is a cheap and easy thing, the mere gift of God's good nature. Conversion is a phrase. Christ's priesthood is, if not an impertinence, at least an irrelevance; for man needs no priest. A divine redemption accomplished through sacrifice is unintelligible. Christ has no redeeming offices. He is simply a teacher...Religion is a little scheme of moral reform, accomplished easily by the unaided energy of the human will.

This...is a creed which inspires no martyrs, creates no saints sends out no missionaries, writes no hymns, and has little use for prayer. Jesus Christ, in its scale of values, is merely a Jewish Confucius.

...this was the version of Christianity which, at the moment when the great revival began, had captured all the pulpits, and nearly all the mind, of England.

See W.H. Fitchett *Wesley and his century*, p.275

B. The start of Methodism

How, then, did Methodism begin?

- a. It began when a group of serious young Christians decided to do Christianity properly. Because of their earnest religious

devotion and their methodical Christian living in obedience to God they were informally nick-named 'methodists'.

- b. At first this project ended in failure. Methodism, plan A, was a rigorous legalism which left the fervent 'methodists' exhausted, discouraged, and uncertain of their salvation. They proved that 'by works of the law shall no man be justified'.
- c. However, God had mercy on their endeavours and their earnestness, and revealed his abounding grace in the midst of their failure.
- d. This grace, received with great joy, gave them vital good news for all sinners:

"Men are in utmost and instant peril; they need, not some new and heavier chain of duty, but a divine deliverance accomplished through redeeming grace. And this salvation is possible. A Saviour walks amongst men, touching them with hands of tenderness. Hope is born! All men may be saved here and now."

Fitchett continues,

No other preachers painted sin with colours so dark, and yet so true to human consciousness, as did these men. None depicted God's love in Christ in such radiant sunshine, or proclaimed Christ as a Saviour in tones so confident. These doctrines, too, were preached by men who had verified them. They had brought them to that ultimate test of all religious theories, the forum of conscious experience, They were not advocates they were witnesses. Fitchett, p.277

These preachers, themselves personally renewed, fearlessly preached this gospel to all—high and low, rich and poor, amenable and hostile. At the same time they boldly condemned the evils that had been become rife and socially accepted across their land.

e. The spread of Methodism

The early Methodists stuck out in the crowd because they lived what they preached.

- i. For them behaviour mattered! The *Rules of the Society for the People called Methodists* show how deliberately and

earnestly they went about their Christian lives. These rules were based entirely on Scripture, and those who refused to repent of ungodly ways were deemed to 'have no more place among us'.

- ii. They opposed social ills such as slavery, the liquor trade, abuse in the prison system, oppression of the poor, and unemployment. Indeed, there was nothing in human society they did not subject to the scrutiny of Christ and claim for his righteous and merciful Lordship.
- iii. However, unlike the mainline churches today, they never ever sought to improve people's physical circumstances without earnestly offering grace to their lost souls. They were committed to 'doing good to all men' in part by 'instructing, reproving, or exhorting all we have any conversation with'. As the *Rules of the Society* show, they were prepared to 'bear the reproach of Christ, to be regarded as the filth and offscouring of the world; and being willing that men should say all manner of evil of them falsely, for the Lord's sake'.

Celebrating Methodism today

Here we are in a comfortable situation, having enjoyed a lovely dinner, and now listening to a (hopefully) interesting address on the history of Methodism. All very pleasant. But what relevance has what we are hearing of the early Methodists and the amazing revival in their time, have for us, our world, our nation, our times, and the people of today—ourselves and our neighbours?

Firstly, we can see that, while some characteristics of England in the early 18th century are thankfully long gone, there are other characteristics which parallel our own times. The moral fabric of the Australian people today has 'pre-Methodist' characteristics:

- Gambling, and alcohol and substance abuse are rife in Australia today.
- Selfism is the prevailing creed as people pursue that which has to do with their own aspirations and material greed.

- To use the Biblical expression, ‘there is no fear of God before their eyes’, and so people today reject and resent any divine constraint, and laugh at the prospect of divine judgment.
- Corruption and domination abound in commerce.
- Politics is at a very low ebb, serving the interests of parties and politicians more than the interests of the people.
- The public lust for scandal is fed by a relentless media which happily crucifies the reputations of those unfortunate enough to fall under the public eye.
- Family breakdown has risen to alarming levels, imposing serious deficiencies on the upbringing of children.
- And Christians too often are little different to those around them, and churches too often are the guardians of injustice and keepers of the status quo rather than proclaimers of a new creation and liberators of the oppressed.

Becoming ‘methodist’ again

True repentance and conversion

In the western churches today, we need to ask ‘are people really converted?’ Do they really manifest true repentance and moral change, and so ‘shine as lights in the world’ as ‘blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation’ (Philippians 2:15)

A fundamental reason why early Methodism was so impressive and grew so massively was that those who became Christians were soundly and lastingly converted or changed. In a huge number of cases repentance, faith and new birth in the Holy Spirit meant radical and lasting changes in the character, speech and works of the converts. Foul-mouthed drunkards, relentless thieves, brazen adulterers, scurrilous swindlers, lazy lollabouts, violent husbands and fathers, uncaring wives and mothers, unscrupulous traders, corrupt officials, greedy landlords, and shameful clergy—every kind of citizen, high and low, young and old, heard the word of the holy and merciful God, and large numbers fell under deep conviction concerning the terrible, deceptive and captivating sin that they and

their nation had fallen under. And ‘the power of God was present to heal’, so that ‘by grace’ many were saved from their former sinful lives. Radical moral transformation was the evidence of conversion. Problematic antisocial citizens became model members of the community, and many among the worst were transformed to become among the best.

In the western church today the supreme attribute is friendly inclusivity. Nothing is asked of the newcomer, and everything is offered. By contrast, the early Methodists took people’s salvation seriously. Having laid out in the *Rules of the Society* what was required of a participating believer, the *Rules* concluded, ‘...if there be any among us who observe them not, who habitually break any of them’ such a one was to be ‘committed to the leader having oversight of their soul for reproof and instruction’. ‘We will admonish him of the error of his ways. We will bear with him for a season. But then, if he repent not, he hath no more place among us.’

Careful and disciplined living

The Australian psyche is well known as being ‘easy going’, ‘she’ll be right mate’, ‘take it as it comes’. This relaxed approach to life has flowed over into the way Australian Christians live their lives. But the moral climate is declining around us, and sinking standards are deceptive. Creeping changes are overtaking our nation little by little. Being ‘easy going’ and ‘she’ll be right’ is not really an adequate *modus operandi* for Christians in our time. This is a time to be alert, diligent, prayerful, disciplined, and distinct from the changing world around us. It is a time to be like the early Methodists and practise righteousness—carefully, methodically, earnestly, and collectively.

Basic to the life of the Methodist societies was the class meeting. This was a group of around 12 believers with one who was ‘class leader’. They met weekly for the purpose of carefully supporting one another in the Christian life. Membership of a class required ‘a willingness to be told about yourself’. Conversion was to be

evidenced by the fruits of the Spirit, and the believers shared their struggles, prayed for each other, and exhorted and encouraged right living in one another.

The covenant service

John Wesley recognised that people needed, not just to accept, but also to grow in relationship with God. He therefore emphasised that God's grace and love constantly prompts and energises to transform us. So we should continually seek and pray to grow in holiness and love.

In 1755 Wesley created a form of service adapted from the Puritan tradition. After a series of meetings about the Covenant of God involving sermons, explanations and exhortations, an invitation was issued for "those as will" to come to the Covenant Service. Following a day of retreat for people to prepare themselves in prayer, fasting, reflection and self-examination there would be the Covenant Service itself. This would be held in the context of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

The process did not end with the Covenant Service. People were encouraged to continue to work out the implications for their lives of the fact that their relationship with God had been renewed in and through Christ. It was accepted that people might find this difficult to do without help, and might "backslide". There would therefore be further pastoral guidance offered to both groups and individuals in the weeks that followed the service.

During the Covenant Service, after careful preparation, the believer deliberately and publicly yielded (or yielded afresh) to the covenant of God's grace. The covenant prayer at the centre of the service is as follows.

I am no longer my own, but yours.
Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed for you or laid aside for you,
exalted for you or brought low for you.
Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine, and I am yours.
So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

The Methodist covenant prayer provides a suitable antidote to modern (Christian) self-ism. I know of a present day Christian who prays this prayer each morning as part of his personal devotions. This would seem an appropriate practice for a contemporary Christian who wishes, like the early Methodists, to 'grow in holiness and love'.

A picture of the church

In closing, let us gaze upon the following description of the early church, which is also descriptive of the early Methodists as well. Pray God that it, once again, will become a description of the church in the near future.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. Acts 2:42-47

Other related resource:

The Rules of the Society for the People called Methodists

Rod James

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