

# Revival Leader *and* Church Founder

What might it mean  
for United Methodists today to live

Although John Wesley was for a hundred years portrayed as “The Founder of Methodism” or even “The Founder of the Methodist Church” by pious Methodists, it became well known in the twentieth century that John Wesley remained an Anglican priest through his life. He was never a member of a Methodist Church, and he consistently discouraged Methodist people from seeking separation from the Church of England. How, then, can we speak of John Wesley as a church founder?

Frank Baker’s ecumenically sensitive study of John Wesley and the Church of England (1970), written in the midst of serious negotiations between British Methodists and the Church of England, portrayed the complex steps by which the Methodist people under John Wesley’s leadership became a *de facto* church (Baker’s term) despite Wesley’s warnings and protestations to the contrary. By the end of John Wesley’s life, Baker points out, Methodist chapels were registered according to the Act of Toleration, the Methodist people had their own Prayer Book and their own ordained clergy (in the British isles as well as America), and Methodist congregations celebrated eucharist in their chapels at the same time as Anglicans celebrated eucharist in their nearby parish churches. British Methodists in 1791 were an independent church in every sense except that John Wesley had not admitted the fact of their separation. In the case of Methodists in North America, John

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Wesley had actually admitted their separation from 1784.

Nevertheless, John Wesley’s dogged refusal to admit British Methodists’ separation from the Church of England gives us an important clue to Methodist identity. Having originated

as a religious movement that centered on fellowship in the love feast, Methodists became a church almost accidentally. Heirs of Wesley’s own ambiguous relationship to his national church, Methodists have almost always held what we might call a “bipolar ecclesiology”: one side of our being says that we are a religious revival movement, the other side says we are part of the *unam sanctam*, the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.” Geoffrey Wainwright has argued that we should see this as a clue to Methodism’s “ecumenical vocation.” We should relinquish any claim to catholicity and join wholeheartedly in efforts for visible Christian unity, but maintain the distinct identity of Methodism as a religious movement to bring renewal, vitality and holiness to the churches.

Our doctrinal and liturgical texts reflect this “bipolar ecclesiology.” Our Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith, for example, speak of the faith we share in common with other Christians, whereas the General Rules describe the distinct ethos of the Methodist movement. Methodist hymnals since the middle of the 1800s begin with the praise of the divine Trinity, echoing the faith

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and worship of the universal church, and then have a long section on "The Christian Life" in which we sing sinners and believers through the "way of salvation," from prevenient grace through justifying grace to sanctifying and perfecting grace, all of this reflecting the distinct spirituality of the Wesleyan movement.

What might it mean for United Methodists today to live faithfully in the tension between being a religious movement and being a part of the historic and ecumenical Christian community? In the first place, United Methodists have to be clear that our primary identity is our identity as Christians. It is in this basic sense that what we share in common with other Christians is far more important than what is distinctly Methodist. Our first loyalty, as John Wesley's first loyalty, is to our Savior and our first identity as a church is that we are indeed a part of the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church." Sometimes it concerns me that United Methodist congregations have classes for new members in "United Methodism" and not in "Christianity." I wish that our *Book of Discipline* were more consistently clear about this. Although our constitution and doctrinal standards make clear our ecumenical commitments from the outset, other parts of the *Discipline* proceed as if United Methodists can simply invent for ourselves what ordination means, for example, and the *Discipline* sometimes fails to show, for another example, in what ways our polity reflects the reality of the larger Christian community to which we profess our loyalty.

In the second place, United Methodists today need to think creatively about what it would mean to pursue a distinctly Wesleyan vision in our times. The most distinctly Methodist or Wesleyan aspects of our church life have been slowly and smoothly polished over through the years so that, for example, we speak of "itinerant ministry" but it scarcely means what it did for Methodists in earlier generations. Itinerant ministry once meant that Methodist leaders had the responsibility to find new constituencies and offer

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the Gospel to them. Although we retain the word "itinerancy," our church leaders now feel that they are largely "owned" by the local congregation that pays their salary. They cannot function as true itinerants, that is, as persons who seek new congregations or new constituencies. What if we recognized a distinct order of "itinerant elders" who had an explicit mandate to seek new constituencies for the Gospel? This, I think would be truer to the Wesleyan model of "itinerancy."

John Wesley's relationship to his own church bequeathed to his followers both the sense of belonging to the broader Christian community and the sense of belonging to a religious movement with a very distinct purpose. One of the earlier charters of the Methodist movement, the Large Minutes, asks and answers the following question as the first substantive item in the document:

Q. 3. What may we reasonably believe to be God's design in raising up the Preachers called Methodists?

A. Not to form any new sect; but to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land [in the Jackson edition of John Wesley's *Works*, 8:299].

Methodists have not as often quoted the first phrase, "Not to form any new sect," but it was clearly part of Wesley's understanding of the most basic meaning of the Methodist movement. To be faithful to the Wesleyan vision today, we must be faithful to Christ, faithful to the broader, ecumenical church, and then faithful to the distinct calling of the Methodist people. May God help us to rediscover and to live out our Christian and Methodist calling. □



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