

The History and Beliefs of Methodism

Introduction

Understanding the history and core tenets of Methodism provides valuable insight into one of the major Protestant Christian traditions, which has had a significant impact on the religious, social, and even political landscape globally. With an estimated 75 million followers worldwide, Methodism isn't just a denomination; it is a diverse and vibrant faith community.

What to Expect

In this lesson, we will break down the key elements of Methodism into five sections:

- **The Early Beginnings in England:** Explore how Methodism originated as a movement within the Anglican Church.
- **The Role of Evangelism and Influential Figures:** Delve into the lives of the key figures, like John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield, who were instrumental in shaping Methodism.
- **The Evolution into a Separate Denomination:** Understand how and why Methodism eventually became a denomination separate from the Anglican Church.
- **Methodism in America:** Examine the expansion, divisions, and unifications that have characterized Methodism in the United States.
- **Core Beliefs and Organization:** Learn about the theological and organizational principles that guide Methodism.

The Early Beginnings in England: A Historical Perspective

A Century in Turmoil

To fully understand the roots of Methodism, it is crucial to situate its emergence within the broader historical landscape of 18th-century England. This was a century rife with complex socio-political and religious changes. The Enlightenment, with its emphasis on rational thought, was challenging established religious dogmas. Meanwhile, the Industrial Revolution was beginning to alter the fabric of society, and class tensions were on the rise.

The Enlightenment and Religious Questioning

The Enlightenment was a cultural and intellectual movement that prioritized reason, scientific inquiry, and skepticism of traditional authority. Though its influence spread across Europe, it had a distinct impact on England, especially in religious circles. The period encouraged rigorous examination of religious beliefs and doctrines, leading to a more personalized approach to spirituality. However, this intellectual scrutiny often left people yearning for a faith that was experiential and emotionally fulfilling. This climate was fertile ground for Methodism, which sought to blend intellectual and emotional elements of faith.

The Anglican Church: A Backdrop to Methodism

During this era, the Anglican Church was the established religious institution in England. While deeply intertwined with the state, it had become largely disconnected from the everyday spiritual lives of many people. Clergymen were often more concerned with political influence and less focused on pastoral care, leading to a spiritual vacuum among the masses. Methodism arose as a movement aimed at addressing this void by fostering a more personal spirituality and a strong sense of community within the existing Anglican framework.

The Wesley Family: Foundations of Faith

The Wesleys played a foundational role in Methodism's early years. Born into a devout Anglican home, John and Charles Wesley were raised in an environment that emphasized rigorous religious instruction and spiritual discipline. Their parents, Samuel and Susanna Wesley, instilled in them a balanced approach to faith that combined intellectual rigor with emotional depth, an approach that later became a hallmark of Methodism.

The Oxford Movement: Seeds of Methodism

While studying at Oxford University, John and Charles Wesley and a few like-minded students formed a religious study group focused on systematic prayer, Bible study, and charitable works. Known for their disciplined, methodical approach to practicing their faith, the group was mockingly called the "Methodists" by their peers. Rather than taking offense, they embraced the term. This group became the nucleus for what would later evolve into the Methodist movement.

Setting the Stage for Methodism

Methodism was not born in a vacuum; it emerged as a response to the socio-religious complexities of 18th-century England. The movement sought to bridge the gap between the Enlightenment's intellectual skepticism and the people's spiritual hunger. It started as a reformist wave within the Anglican Church but quickly became a force of its own, powered by compelling figures like the Wesley brothers. Understanding this historical context allows us to appreciate the unique confluence of factors that gave rise to Methodism, setting the stage for its subsequent growth and global impact.

The Role of Evangelism and Influential Figures

Turning Point: John Wesley's Spiritual Crisis and Revival

After completing his studies at Oxford and undertaking a less-than-successful mission trip to America, John Wesley returned to England in a state of spiritual disillusionment. During this difficult period, he encountered Peter Bohler, a Moravian Christian, who deeply influenced both him and his brother Charles. Bohler's emphasis on the need for personal conversion and holiness ignited a spark that would soon turn into the flame of Methodism as a popular revival movement.

The Method of Evangelism: "The World is My Parish"

One of the striking features of early Methodism was its commitment to evangelism. Unlike the established Church of England, which often restricted the locales where its clergy could preach, John Wesley famously declared, "The world is my parish." This bold statement encapsulated his belief that the message of salvation should be taken to people wherever they are, without regard to traditional ecclesiastical boundaries. With doors of Anglican churches often closed to them due to their unconventional methods, the Wesley brothers and their associates turned to alternative venues—homes, barns, open fields—to preach the gospel.

George Whitefield: A Pioneering Spirit

Around this time, another significant figure entered the Methodist narrative—George Whitefield. An Anglican minister like the Wesleys, Whitefield was a key leader in both the Methodist movement and the Great Awakening in America. Notably, he popularized the practice of open-air preaching. However, he and the Wesley brothers ultimately diverged in their theological views, particularly on the issue of predestination, leading to a parting of ways.

Tensions and Synergies: Evangelism Versus Established Church Norms

The evangelistic zeal of these early Methodists was both a blessing and a point of contention. While it enabled them to reach a broader audience, it also led to strained relationships with the Anglican Church, which was more conservative in its approach to ministry. The result was a mixed legacy: they opened up new horizons for how Christianity could be practiced and spread, but they also faced criticism and marginalization from their religious peers.

Figures like John Wesley, Charles Wesley, and George Whitefield were not content to follow the established norms of their time but felt a strong calling to take the message of Christ to a broader audience. This evangelistic drive was crucial in shaping Methodism and distinguishing it as a movement focused on personal conversion, community holiness, and social action.

The Evolution into a Separate Denomination

Reluctant Separation from the Anglican Church

Although John Wesley never set out to create a separate church, the rise in popularity of Methodism and its distinct approach to spirituality led to its divergence from the Anglican Church. The United Societies, as Wesley called them, were initially small groups aimed at restoring and deepening faith within the Anglican context. However, the unique focus on experiential religion, personal conversion, and social ministry started to coalesce into something larger and more independent.

The First Conference: A Milestone in Methodism

A significant turning point came in 1744 when Methodism organized its first conference. It provided a structured platform for Methodists to discuss theological issues, formulate doctrine, and coordinate their evangelistic efforts. While still identifying as Anglican, these conferences revealed the Methodists' increasing self-awareness as a distinct religious community.

Wesley's Dilemma: Loyalty to Anglicanism and a New American Opportunity

John Wesley faced a complex decision when Methodism started spreading to the American colonies. With the newly independent United States lacking sufficient Anglican ministers, Wesley took the unprecedented step of ordaining two lay preachers to serve across the Atlantic. He also appointed Thomas Coke as the first Methodist bishop in the U.S., actions that stretched the boundaries of his Anglican identity and commitments.

Registration of Preachers: The Final Break

By 1787, Methodism's growth and divergence from Anglicanism had reached a point where Wesley felt compelled to register his preachers as non-Anglicans. Despite this, Wesley himself remained an Anglican until his death. The separation was not a split in the traditional sense but rather a reluctant and incremental divergence born out of necessity and practical concerns.

The evolution of Methodism into a separate denomination was a gradual process marked by significant milestones, such as the formation of the United Societies, the first Methodist conference, and Wesley's ordination of preachers for America. Each step was characterized by a tension between the desire to remain within the Anglican Church and the need to meet the distinct spiritual and organizational demands of the Methodist community.

Methodism in America

Early American Roots: A New Frontier for Methodism

As the 18th century drew to a close, Methodism found fertile ground for expansion in the newly independent United States. Lacking an established church and imbued with a spirit of religious freedom, America provided a unique context where Methodism could flourish. The early American Methodists took to heart John Wesley's ethos of "the world is my parish," adapting it to the expansive landscapes and diverse communities of the United States.

Circuit Riders: Spreading the Word in Remote Areas

One of the iconic features of American Methodism was the role of "circuit riders"—itinerant preachers who traversed large geographic areas to reach remote communities. Often facing harsh conditions and riding on horseback, these preachers were instrumental in spreading Methodism across the American frontier. Their journeys contributed to the faith's growth, particularly in rural and remote areas.

Schisms and Unification: The Complex Path to a United Methodist Church

The story of American Methodism is also one of divisions and unifications. Methodism was initially spread in America by itinerant preachers who traveled vast distances to reach communities hungry for spiritual guidance. This early period saw the creation of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784 when it formally separated from the Church of England.

However, the first major schism occurred in 1830 with the formation of the Methodist Protestant Church, which rejected the Episcopal governance structure in favor of a more congregational model. Subsequently, the issue of slavery led to another significant division. In 1844, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South broke away from the Methodist Episcopal Church over the question of slaveholding among some bishops. The Methodist Episcopal Church, largely based in the North, was more likely to oppose slavery, while the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, generally supported it or was silent on the issue. After the American Civil War and the abolition of slavery, the denomination remained divided along regional and racial lines for many years. Various Methodist bodies have since acknowledged and apologized for their historical complicity in slavery and segregation, aiming to address social justice issues more actively today.

In 1939, three major branches—the Methodist Protestant Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South—merged to form the Methodist Church. Nearly three decades later, in 1968, another significant merger occurred. The Methodist Church combined with the Evangelical United Brethren Church leading to the formation of the United Methodist Church, now the second-largest Protestant denomination in America.

Social Reforms and Outreach: Beyond the Pulpit

American Methodism focused on spiritual growth and took an active role in social reforms. This involvement could be seen in movements like civil rights and prison reform. Organizations such

as the Salvation Army, founded by a Methodist minister, reflect the long-standing commitment of Methodism to mission work and social justice.

Modern-Day Methodism: A Diverse Tapestry

Today, American Methodism represents a tapestry of theological perspectives and cultural backgrounds. Beyond the United Methodist Church, other significant American Methodist denominations include the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME Church), the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME Church), and the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Zion (AME Zion). Collectively, these groups form part of the Pan-Methodist Commission on Union, emphasizing their shared origins and common theological beliefs.

Methodism in America has a rich and complex history. From the early days of circuit riders to the multiple unifications and divisions, it has continually adapted to meet the needs of its followers. Whether through spiritual revival or social activism, American Methodism has left an indelible impact on the religious landscape of the United States.

Core Beliefs and Organization

The Methodist Church's Orthodoxy

The Methodist Church stands as a testament to Christian orthodoxy, rigorously upholding historical Christian teachings endorsed by ecumenical councils over the centuries. It understands itself as a part of the holy catholic (or universal) church and recognizes the historic ecumenical creeds, the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. One of the key documents encapsulating the church's orthodox stance is the Articles of Religion, which echo many theological affirmations made during early Christian councils like Nicaea. For instance, the Methodist Articles of Religion strongly affirm the doctrine of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ, concepts that were solidified in the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. Just as the Nicene Creed clarified the co-equal and co-eternal nature of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Articles of Religion reaffirm these foundational beliefs, ensuring that Methodism remains anchored in historical orthodoxy.

The Doctrinal Standards

These Doctrinal Standards are constitutionally protected. The Constitution of The United Methodist Church, in its Restrictive Rules, protects these Doctrinal Standards and that "shall not be revoked, altered, or changed." Creating new "standards or rules of doctrine" is restricted, requiring either that they be declared "not contrary to" the present standards or go through the difficult constitutional amendment process.

The officially established Doctrinal Standards of United Methodism are:

- The Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church
- The Confessions of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church
- The General Rules of the Methodist Societies
- The Standard Sermons of John Wesley
- John Wesley's Explanatory Notes on the New Testament

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: A Fourfold Approach to Theology

While the Holy Scriptures are the primary source for theological guidance, Methodists subscribe to the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," which considers Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience as four interrelated sources for theological understanding. This approach allows for a nuanced and comprehensive interpretation of faith and doctrine.

In practical terms, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral is understood as follows:

- Scripture, as the primary source for Christian theology, is where we find God's revelation of God's self that includes God's work and relationship with the creation throughout history, culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Bible provides the foundation for understanding Christian faith and life.
- Tradition helps us to read and understand Scripture by connecting with the experiences, learnings, and reflections of those who have gone before. Tradition serves as a living

witness to the good news, bringing the witness of Scripture to life. The tradition of the church informs the liturgies, prayers, hymns, creeds, and affirmations of faith.

- God sheds light on God's Word through the exercise of reason. Through reason, we practice the freedom God has given us to question, think, and teach to grow in discernment and understanding of God. Reason illuminates and animates the Christian faith and life, opening our minds to the wisdom of God's Word and the experiences of tradition. By using reason, we can perceive and recognize God's majesty, mystery, and work.
- Experience speaks of our encounter with God in everyday life. These experiences help us develop and establish a personal relationship with God, supporting and informing our study of Scripture and tradition. The Holy Spirit works through our experiences, giving us life and strengthening our faith to become disciples and witnesses for Jesus Christ in the world.

Grace: A Continuous and Universal Gift

Another cornerstone of Methodist theology is its focus on grace, described as God's unmerited, transformative love. Unlike Calvinist views on predestination, where only a chosen "elect" receive grace, Methodists believe God's grace is available to all individuals. Moreover, grace isn't a one-off experience but a continuous interaction throughout a person's spiritual journey.

In Methodist theology, grace is understood as an active and pervasive presence in an individual's journey toward salvation and sanctification. This journey is marked by three primary forms of grace:

- **Prevenient Grace:** This is the grace that "goes before" or precedes human awareness. It is the divine love that surrounds all humanity and precedes any and all of our conscious impulses. This grace prompts our first wish to please God, our first glimmer of understanding God's will, and our "first slight transient conviction" of sinning against God.
- **Justifying Grace:** Sometimes called conversion, this is the moment or process where an individual recognizes and accepts God's forgiveness. Through justifying grace, we are reconciled to God and are transformed from a state of estrangement and condemnation to one of redemption and assurance.
- **Sanctifying Grace:** After justification, the journey continues in the experience of sanctification, which seeks the fullness of God's love in the believer's heart. Sanctifying grace draws us toward the goal of perfection in love, where we are enabled to love God and neighbor fully and grow in holiness.

Repentance, Faith, and Holiness: The Three Pillars

The Methodist faith can be summarized through its three central tenets—repentance, faith, and holiness. Repentance involves turning away from sin and seeking divine forgiveness. Faith pertains to a profound belief in the redemptive power of Jesus Christ. Holiness, a concept that encompasses both personal sanctification and societal transformation, has two dimensions—personal and social holiness.

Personal and Social Holiness: Dual Aspects of Spiritual Growth

While personal holiness involves individual spiritual growth, social holiness extends the principle of holiness to the realm of social justice and community well-being. Methodists believe that spiritual growth is incomplete without social activism, embodying the principle that faith must work through love.

A Connectional System: Strength in Unity

The Methodist Church's organizational structure is "connectional," meaning individual congregations are united in a larger network. This system is most evident during annual conferences where ministers are assigned to churches based on the community's needs and the minister's skills. The conferences serve as vital platforms for collective decision-making, theological discussions, and mutual support among Methodists.

Evangelism and Social Advocacy: Integral to Methodism

Evangelism is a core tenet of Methodist belief, originating from the movement's early days with John Wesley. But evangelism in Methodism isn't just about converting individuals; it is also about transforming communities through social advocacy. Methodists have been at the forefront of numerous social reforms and mission works, indicating a theology deeply invested in both individual and societal well-being. This character dates back to its founder, John Wesley, who spoke out against issues like slavery, poverty, and prison conditions.

Over the years, the church has been involved in various social causes, from the Civil Rights Movement in the United States to advocating for fair labor practices and healthcare access. Methodist congregations worldwide have established food banks, homeless shelters, and educational programs as a way to support their communities tangibly.

Global Reach and Ecumenical Relations

Today, Methodism is a global phenomenon with an estimated 75 million adherents. Although regional and cultural variations exist, the underlying theology and organizational structure remain remarkably consistent across national boundaries. Methodists also actively engage in ecumenical dialogues and partnerships, highlighting their commitment to Christian unity.

It is evident how the faith tradition's balanced approach to theology, emphasis on both universal grace and holiness, and its well-structured organizational system contribute to its rich spiritual heritage. From its beginnings to its current global presence, Methodism offers a multifaceted, inclusive, and socially responsible avenue for Christian spirituality.