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John Wesley: A Methodist Foundation for the Restoration

Stephen J. Fleming

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In August 1877 the signers of the Declaration of Independence visited President Wilford Woodruff, asking for their temple work to be done. Woodruff quickly began this task; in addition, he performed the temple ordinances for a number of other prominent historical figures. In what is often considered an addendum to the story, Woodruff set apart three of the individuals—Christopher Columbus, Benjamin Franklin, and John Wesley—as high priests without explaining why in his journals. Woodruff recalled that the signers said, “We laid the foundation of the government you now enjoy,”¹ implying that their work played an important role in the Restoration of the gospel; the special distinction granted to Columbus, Franklin, and Wesley suggests that they perhaps played a particularly important role.

Church members frequently cite the contributions of the Founding Fathers and Columbus to the Restoration, but much less has been said of Wesley. If we designate Columbus’s, Franklin’s, and Wesley’s contributions to the Restoration according to their major achievements, then Columbus’s achievement would be geographical (finding the New World), Franklin’s would be political (helping to found the United States), and Wesley’s would be religious (founding Methodism). Members of the Church tend to credit the leaders of the Protestant Reformation, particularly Martin Luther, for playing the primary religious role in setting the stage for the Restoration. Nevertheless, it was Wesley whom Woodruff ordained with Columbus and Franklin.

Indeed, Wesley laid a major part of the groundwork for the Restoration by promoting essentially correct doctrine, encouraging religious zeal at a time when it was waning, and suggesting that the divine could play an active role in the lives of individuals in the midst of Protestant formalism and Enlightenment skepticism. Thus Wesley infused Anglo-American culture with a religiosity that was receptive to the Restoration. Methodism's influence in the Restored Church is extensive; the following is an attempt to give a summary of Wesley's achievements.

Beginnings

Born June 17, 1703, to Anglican rector Samuel Wesley and his wife, Susanna, John Wesley grew up in Epworth, Lincolnshire, England. He was raised by a devout mother whose discipline and devotion provided the seedbed for these important characteristics of Methodism.² Because of his mother's example and encouragement, Wesley began training to become an Anglican clergyman at Oxford. Through this study, Wesley discovered a number of Catholic and Anglican writers who were a part of what is called the holy living tradition. These writers rigorously focused on devoting every minute of their lives to God through stringent scheduling and personal devotion. This program was best laid out by the medieval mystic Thomas à Kempis in his classic work *The Imitation of Christ*, but the works of Anglicans Jeremy Taylor and particularly William Law further ingrained such notions in Wesley. Law, a contemporary of Wesley's, argued that one should strive for perfection in obedience to God's law and set aside all frivolity as a diversion from this important task. Wesley found some suggestions of these writers to be overly gloomy and austere, but he nevertheless became convinced that obedience to God's law, "inward and outward" as Wesley put it, was essential to being a "real Christian."³

The idea of being a real Christian rather than a nominal Christian became the essence of Wesley's movement. This factor is demonstrated in Methodism's beginnings, which took place when John Wesley's younger brother, Charles, began attending Oxford. Concerned about the religious state of the college, Charles and a small group of like-minded individuals started what became known as the Oxford Holy Club. Although most of the students at Oxford were technically Christians, the Wesleys did not believe many of them behaved as real Christians. However, the Wesleys did not seek to create a separate church but hoped to create a society within the Church of England that would promote true Christianity.

Soon John joined the Oxford Holy Club in their pious living, which included regular fasting, partaking of the Lord's Supper, scripture study, prayer, and holy conversation. Furthermore, the group engaged in simple living, giving what they could to the poor, and ministering to prisoners. Because of their methodical regimen, they were soon labeled "Methodists," though some detractors went as far as to call them "Bible moths" or "Bible bigots." Some critics even claimed that the untimely death of William Morgan, a member of the club, was caused by the frequent fasts of the Holy Club members.⁴ Morgan's brother complained to his father that the Methodists "imagine they cannot be saved if they do not spend every hour, nay minute, of their lives in the service of God."⁵

Further Influences

Despite these criticisms, John and Charles Wesley pressed forward in their determination to live holy lives. In 1736 the Church of England called John and Charles on a mission to the American colony of Georgia. John hoped this call would allow him to preach to the Native Americans and generally increase his holiness. After eighteen months, John headed home, frustrated that he had not accomplished either of his goals. Nevertheless, his Georgia mission was a turning point for Wesley in several ways, not the least of which was his encounter with a German pietist sect known as the Moravians. Wesley was particularly impressed with the conduct of the Moravians: on the voyage to America, while the ship was in peril and the rest of the passengers were screaming in terror, the Moravians—down to the last man, woman, and child—quietly sang hymns.⁶

When Wesley returned to England, he met several Moravian missionaries, who taught him the importance of faith in salvation. As Wesley had been frustrated by his inability to live the holy law perfectly, the Moravians taught Wesley that he lacked an absolute faith in Christ. Wesley soon attended a meeting at Aldersgate Street where the preacher read from one of Martin Luther's treatises on the importance of faith. Upon hearing the remarks, Wesley obtained the faith he sought, recounting, "I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death."⁷ Thus the experience of salvation through faith became central to Methodism, but this did not take away from the necessity of obedience to Christ. In fact, Wesley taught that it was through saving faith in Christ that one would be able to cease sinning entirely. In Wesley's words, saving faith

brought “a sense of pardon for all past, and freedom from all present sins.”⁸

The Moravians influenced the way Wesley organized the Methodists. For example, the Moravians met in small groups called classes, where their adherents would inquire after each other’s spiritual progress. This division into classes, in addition to field preaching, became the hallmark of the Methodist organization.

When he returned from Georgia with new doctrine, Anglican bishops began to exclude Wesley from local pulpits.⁹ With the encouragement of George Whitefield (1714–70), a fellow member of the Oxford Holy Club, Wesley began to preach throughout England, often in open fields. This practice, so common to the American religious experience, was seen as subversive by the Anglican establishment. The Church of England worked on a parish system in which ministers were assigned certain geographical areas. Thus itinerant preachers encroached on another minister’s territory. On the other hand, field preaching was essential for Wesley and his followers to reach the people.

Wesley took his message of scriptural holiness to the people, and he and George Whitefield sparked a revival of religion in Great Britain. Wesley’s purpose was to cause his listeners to feel the same conversion he had experienced. Wesley felt it was important for Christians to *experience* salvation; he called this “experimental” or “heart” religion. Such experiences were central to the Methodist revival: sinners experienced salvation and dedicated their lives to Christ. Once a person had this experience, Wesley would encourage them to join the local Methodist class so the Methodists could help the new converts stay on the path. Thus the dual forms of the field meeting, where sinners repented and came to Christ, and the class meeting, where converts helped each other to remain steadfast, were Wesley’s way of spreading Christianity in England.

Break from Other Faiths

Methodism grew rapidly. As it did, Wesley began to part with many of his associates. Though he owed much of his theology and practice to the Moravians, Wesley disagreed with certain ideas they had about faith. The Moravians taught there were not degrees in faith: one either had absolute faith or none at all. Until one had absolute faith, one should not engage in any religious activity at all except waiting for the faith to come. Wesley, however, believed that one should continually be engaged in good works, which build one’s faith. Also, when

Wesley visited a Moravian settlement at Herrnhut, Germany, he felt the Moravians engaged too much in levity and too little in rigorous devotion.¹⁰

Wesley soon split with his Calvinist associates, chief of whom was George Whitefield. While most Calvinists clung to double predestination, Wesley promoted instead an Arminian view of salvation. Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609) was a Dutch theologian who sought to modify Calvinist thought by rejecting double predestination, arguing instead that all people who accepted the Lord could be saved. Likewise Arminius rejected the Calvinist doctrine of irresistible grace, that humans were powerless to resist God's saving influence if He chose to save them. Instead Arminius argued that humans possessed free will that they could use to affect their salvation. He wrote that humans could fall from grace if they turned from the Lord.¹¹ Arminianism began more than a century before Wesley's time, but most evangelicals prior to Wesley had preferred five-point Calvinism. As a result of Wesley's Arminianism, the Calvinist Methodists formed in opposition to Wesley and followed George Whitefield.¹²

Wesley's most difficult religious relationship was with the Church of England because of his field preaching. Other religions existed in England at the time—marginalized in English society—but an Anglican minister considering all England as his parish, as Wesley did, violated the laws of the Church. Furthermore, Wesley allowed those who were not ordained Anglican ministers to preach Methodism. Wesley's use of lay preachers, his field preaching, his insistence on holiness, and his long hair led others to consider him a radical bent on separation from the state church.¹³

Yet Wesley saw Methodism as a reform movement within its mother church and was determined to remain with it. With this goal in mind, Wesley encouraged his followers to take the Lord's Supper at Anglican churches, allowed only ordained Anglican clergymen within his movement to administer the Lord's Supper, and generally defended the Church of England as a legitimate, though flawed, body. Wesley dissented from Anglican rules only when he felt he absolutely had to: Wesley continued to field preach because he felt that between obeying the Church and preaching the gospel, preaching was a higher obligation.¹⁴ The relationship between Methodism and the Church of England was always strained, and Wesley felt fettered.

Authority Anxiety

Wesley's desire to remain with the Church of England was based largely on a number of pragmatic reasons: separation would cause infighting among the Methodists and marginalization in English society, and running a separate church would be overly taxing. All these consequences, Wesley reasoned, would limit Methodism's effectiveness in spreading true religion.¹⁵ On the other hand, Wesley was also bothered by the concept of religious authority. Wesley ascribed to the state-church idea of authority that the Church of England promoted; this concept rejected the Catholic idea of papal supremacy and apostolic succession, arguing instead that each nation's church had authority insofar as it adhered to scripture and Christian tradition. To Anglicans, the Church of England followed this tradition and therefore had its own apostolic authority, while dissenting sects did not.¹⁶

Additionally, in his explanation for why the Methodists should not part with the Church of England, Wesley threw in his own doubts about members of his society having the authority to perform ordinances. Wesley explained that in the Bible, "It is true *extraordinary prophets* were frequently raised up, who had not been educated in the 'schools of the prophets,' neither had the outward, ordinary call. But we read of no *extraordinary priests*. As none took it to himself, so none exercised this office but he that was outwardly 'called of God, as was Aaron.'"¹⁷ Without Methodism's connection to the Church of England, Wesley felt that his followers would not have the authority to perform ordinances. Though Wesley was willing to defy the state church on a few points, particularly field preaching, Wesley did not want to undertake practices that would force separation with the Church of England. Nevertheless, Methodism continued to spread throughout Great Britain, with over twenty-five thousand members on the eve of the religion's spread to the American colonies.¹⁸

Methodism's growth in the American colonies caused even greater tension between Wesley and the Church of England when Wesley sought the ordination of some of his followers whom he wished to send to the colonies. The bishop of London refused, saying that Wesley's candidates did not have sufficient learning. Frustrated, Wesley decided that expediency demanded that he break with protocol and ordain the men himself. "The Case is widely different between England and North America," Wesley explained, "Here, therefore, my scruples are at an end." Wesley's brother Charles was furious that Wesley had performed these ordinations without authority from the Church of

England, saying that such an act was tantamount to breaking with the Church. After months of debate, Wesley wrote to Charles, “You say I separate from the Church; I say I do not. Then let it stand.”¹⁹ Despite this declaration, the American Methodists split with the Anglicans in 1784, and the British Methodists split soon after Wesley’s death in 1791.

Though he opposed the American Revolution, Wesley could not help notice the freedom the American Methodists gained when the Church of England was disestablished in the United States of America. Wesley remarked to his American followers: “As our American brethren are now totally disentangled both from the State and from the English hierarchy, we dare not entangle them again either with the one or the other. They are now at full liberty simply to follow the Scriptures and the Primitive Church.”²⁰ Thus the American Revolution wove together the contributions of Columbus, Franklin, and Wesley to create the full opportunity to do as Wesley suggested.

Methodism in America

Though Oxford Holy Club member George Whitefield was a major part of the American First Great Awakening of the 1740s, preachers of Wesleyan Methodism did not officially arrive in the American colonies until 1769. Methodism gained a good foothold in many of the northern cities before the Revolutionary War; however, with their connection to the Church of England, the Methodists were seen as Loyalists and faced many threats of violence at the hands of the Patriots. The fact that Wesley vehemently denounced the Revolution did not help Methodism’s reputation in the colonies.²¹

Yet Methodism in America weathered the storm, and with the American Church of England in disarray after the Revolution, the Methodists were able to scoop up much of their membership.²² The American Methodist church, called the Methodist Episcopal Church, was soon taken over by Francis Asbury (1745–1816). Using the word *episcopal* because the church was run by bishops, the Methodist Episcopal Church made Asbury its first bishop. However, though Asbury remained devoted to Wesley’s teachings, Asbury rejected Wesley’s authority and ran Methodism in the United States without taking orders from Wesley.²³ Asbury proved to be a masterful organizer and leader, and he soon enlisted an army of itinerants who covered every corner of the new nation.

Methodism took off like wildfire in America to the point that it became the nation’s largest religion by 1830.²⁴ Historian John Wigger

explains, “Much of the movement’s astonishing success could be traced to the way in which American Methodists took advantage of the revolutionary religious freedoms of the early republic to release, and in a sense institutionalize, elements of popular religious enthusiasm long latent in American and European Protestantism,” including belief in miracles and visions.²⁵ Methodist itinerants battled Calvinism and infused the English-speaking culture with an intense belief in religious experience. Methodist success led to the effectual triumph of Arminianism over five-point Calvinism in America.²⁶ As a successful Methodist preacher from New Jersey exclaimed, “The doctrine [of double predestination] must die, and I would like to stand upon its grave and preach its funeral sermon.”²⁷

The nature of early American Methodism is perhaps best represented by the lives of Benjamin Abbott (1732–96) and Lorenzo Dow (1777–1834). Abbott, born in 1732, saw dramatic visions of heaven and hell that motivated him to seek salvation. When he was forty years old, he first heard a Methodist preacher in New Jersey. Abbott attended Methodist meetings and even ventured into the woods to pray vocally for the first time. Such attempts made Abbott feel a little better, but he did not feel fully relieved until one night when he had an unusual dream about crossing a river. When Abbott awoke, he “saw, by faith, the Lord Jesus Christ standing by me, with his arms extended wide saying to me, ‘I died for you.’ I then looked up and by faith saw the Ancient of Days, and he said to me, ‘I freely forgive you for what Christ has done.’” Overcome in the joy of his redemption, Abbott nevertheless had one more question, “At the time of my conviction I used to consider what church or society I should join, whether the baptists, presbyterians, or methodists; but at this time the Lord said unto me, ‘You must join the methodists for they are my people.’”²⁸

Abbott’s Presbyterian wife became concerned when Abbott told her about his experiences, and she encouraged him to see her minister. When they met, the minister “told me he understood that God had done great things for me; whereupon I related my conviction and my conversion; he paid a strict attention until I had done, and then told me that I was under strong delusions of the devil.”²⁹ Such a claim dismayed Abbott, yet confident in the validity and holiness of his vision, he soon set about preaching repentance to sinners across southern New Jersey.

Methodism’s cultural influence throughout the United States is illustrated by the career of the charismatic Methodist preacher Lorenzo Dow. Beginning around the turn of the nineteenth century, Dow tire-

lessly tramped over North America, visiting backwoods hamlets and dazzling locals with his animated preaching style. Dow also denounced five-point Calvinism, which he summarized in the following ditty: “You can and you can’t—You shall and you shan’t—You will and you won’t—And you will be damned if you do—And you will be damned if you don’t.”³⁰ Called “crazy Dow” by his detractors, Dow nevertheless won over multitudes of Americans; it is estimated that in the early 1800s only George Washington “had more children named after him than Lorenzo Dow.”³¹

Transition

Not long after John Wesley’s death, Methodism in both Great Britain and the United States began to undergo fundamental changes. These changes are perhaps best described by Job Smith, who was raised a Methodist but later joined the Church:

John Wesley, being inspired to do good among the English people, and to show the difference between empty formalities and real, religious activity, left off his surplice . . . and set out with earnest, honest desire and faith to preach the gospel as far as he understood it, for the reformation and salvation of those who would listen to him. . . .

Later on, and as wealth and popularity filled fashionable chapels and places of worship, formality and fashion deadened the preaching of his successors, and he being now gone, left nothing but his printed sermons to keep his fervor alive.³²

Scholars note numerous changes in Methodism beginning around 1810.³³ For instance, Jon Butler notes, “Methodists revivals of the 1830s paled in comparison to those that [Benjamin] Abbott led in the 1790s.”³⁴ The best indication of what had changed within Methodism comes with Joseph Smith’s experience with the Methodists. Around 1820 Joseph “was called up to serious reflection” on the matter of religion, and “in process of time my mind became somewhat partial to the Methodist sect, and I felt some desire to be united with them” (Joseph Smith—History 1:8). In fact, Joseph’s brother William said that it was a “Rev. Mr. Lane of the Methodists” who “preached a sermon on ‘What church shall I join?’ And the burden of his discourse was to ask God, using as a text, ‘If any man lack wisdom let him ask of God who giveth to all men liberally.’ And of course when Joseph went home and was looking over the text he was impressed to do just what the preacher had said.”³⁵ Yet the response Joseph received from the local preacher indicates that a change had occurred within the society: “I was greatly surprised by his behavior, he treated my communication

not only lightly but with great contempt, saying it was all of the devil, that there were no such things as visions or revelations in these days; that all such had ceased with the apostles, and there would never be any more of them.”³⁶ Clearly American Methodism *had* changed from the visionary time of Benjamin Abbott.

In Britain this shift occurred even earlier. As a result of the changes described by Job Smith above, the Primitive Methodists formed in 1808, hoping to restore Wesley’s original vigor. In an *Ensign* article, Christopher Bigelow claimed that the “spiritual integrity and involvement in England’s religious revival” of the Primitive Methodists’ leader Hugh Bourne “likely helped prepare many to receive the message of the Restoration.”³⁷ In 1834, Thomas Kingston broke with the Primitive Methodists on the same grounds that the Primitive Methodists broke with the main body to form the United Brethren. The United Brethren are a particularly interesting group because of the great success Wilford Woodruff had among them in 1840. Woodruff was enjoying great success in Staffordshire when the Spirit told him to “go south.” To the south, Woodruff met the United Brethren and eventually baptized the entire group (six hundred) save one.³⁸ Similar schisms had formed in the United States. Reformed Methodists, in which Brigham Young’s family was involved, was another such splinter group.³⁹

A Methodist visitor to Nauvoo recorded the Saints’ view that “the Methodists were right as far as they had gone, and next to the Latter-day Saints, . . . were the best people in the land, but they had stopped short of their grand and glorious mission; that they were afraid of persecution, and had shrunk from their duty; that if they had followed the light they would have taken the world.”⁴⁰ John Wesley himself was worried whether the Methodists would remain true to the principles that he strived so earnestly to practice. Toward the end of his life, Wesley warned the Methodists that if they were not careful, God might “remove the candlestick from this people and raise up another people who will be more faithful to his grace.”⁴¹ In fact, in the account of the First Vision recorded by the Prophet’s Hebrew tutor, Alexander Neibaur, Joseph prayed, “Must I join the Methodist Church?” to which the response was, “No, they are not my People, have gone astray.”⁴²

Early Methodist Converts to Mormonism

The Prophet’s Methodist leanings were quite common among early Latter-day Saint converts. For example, when missionaries for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints arrived in southern

New Jersey, Methodism was the area's leading religion, and Benjamin Abbott's efforts were a major reason why.⁴³ The Church's first convert in the area was a Methodist preacher, Josiah Ells, and the *Trenton Daily State Gazette* reported that "the [Mormon] excitement carried off quite a number from the Methodist Church."⁴⁴ Often Methodists who converted to the Church in New Jersey saw continuity between their new and old faiths. Alfred Wilson, whom William Appleby described as a "devoted and humble member of the Methodist Church, prior to his conversion to Mormonism," described his experience to Appleby: "I enjoyed myself somewhat and received a certain portion of the Spirit of the Lord while in the Methodist Church." But, said he, "I never new what true religion or the spirit of the Lord was until I became a member of the Church to which I belong."⁴⁵

Samuel Harrison, a Latter-day Saint missionary to New Jersey in the 1850s, described a conversation he had with "a man of great influence with the Methodists" in the area, who was thinking of converting:

He asked me if I thought that the Methodists and other religious people enjoyed any thing like religion, or what it was that caused them to feel happy. I told him that every person that lived up to the light that they had, always felt justified, "but," said I, "if light is made known to them more than what they already have, and they reject that light, they never will feel like as they did before they knew it. Now I appeal to you as a man—can you, with the light that you have received from the Latter-day Saints, enjoy the Methodist religion?" He said, "No, I can not." "Now," said I, "wherein you have rejoiced in Methodism, embrace the fullness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and you shall rejoice ten fold."⁴⁶

Apparently, more early converts came out of Methodism than any other religion. Two studies of early American converts found that Methodism was on par with the Baptists as principal prior denominations of the early converts.⁴⁷ Methodist converts were even more common in Great Britain; Malcolm Thorpe's study of early British converts' journals shows more Methodists joining The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints than members of any other church.⁴⁸ The number grows even larger when we include members of Methodist splinter groups like the Primitive Methodists and the United Brethren.

Even more striking is the number of American converts whose parents belonged to Methodism. In fact, the converts' parents were more than twenty times as likely to have been Methodists as were the

parents of the general American populace at the time; indeed, children of Methodists were more likely to have joined the Church than were the children of people with any other affiliation. The following chart compares religious affiliations of the converts' parents with the affiliations of the American populace a generation before the establishment of the Church:

Denominational affiliation of early converts' parents and of the 1800 American populace⁴⁹

Affiliation	Converts' parents	American populace in 1800	How many times greater than general population
Methodist	28%	1.2%	23
Presbyterian	12%	0.9%	13
Episcopalian	4%	0.5%	8
Baptist	17%	2.4%	7
Congregationalist	11%	1.6%	7

Because so many early Saints' parents were Methodist, several of their children were named after Lorenzo Dow. Thus far I have found nineteen early Saints named after Lorenzo Dow; their last names were Barlow, Barnes, Barton, Booth, Brown, Budd, Clark, Hatch, Hickey, Johnson, Merritt, Omstead, Perry, Pettit, Snow, Wasson, Webb, Wells, and Young. This is more evidence that early Saints had a strong tendency to come from a Methodist background.

Of course, those early Latter-day Saint converts had felt that Methodism was missing something. For instance, Thomas B. Marsh and John Taylor both left Methodism to begin quests to find a church more closely in line with the New Testament pattern.⁵⁰ Brigham Young, whose brother was named after Lorenzo Dow, felt that Dow taught "nothing but morals. . . . When he came to teaching the things of God he was as dark as midnight."⁵¹ Interestingly, Dow himself expressed similar feelings: "I frequently wished I lived in the days of the prophets or apostles, that I could have had sure guides."⁵²

While some converts had rejected their parents' faith before they heard of Joseph Smith, many other converts remained Methodists up to the time they joined the Church. "The best and holiest . . . among the Mormons had been members of the Methodist Church," some Saints once told a Methodist visitor to Nauvoo.⁵³ This statement has some validity considering that the first three Presidents of the

Church—Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and John Taylor—had been involved with Methodism, and that the fifth President of the Church and Brigham Young’s brother were both named Lorenzo.⁵⁴

Similarities with Latter-day Saint Doctrine

That so many Methodists joined the Church is understandable due to so many fundamental doctrinal similarities. Wesley taught that man has fallen and that the “natural man” is totally against God and under the bondage of sin. Nevertheless, Christ’s grace is given to all people that they might choose to follow Him and be redeemed. This redemption comes through the individual’s faith in Christ and is an act of grace; however, the individual must choose to receive Christ’s grace through obedience. Through faith the individual receives an assurance that Christ had redeemed her or him. Wesley called this experience of being redeemed passing through “the gate.” Once the individual has entered through the gate, he or she gains an ascendancy over sin but has not entirely overcome it. At this point the individual must continually strive to eradicate sin in the hope of achieving entire sanctification. At entire sanctification, the individual is filled with perfect love and has no more desire to sin. Wesley called this state holiness, or perfection. Yet the individual can still fall from holiness and therefore needs to be ever vigilant.⁵⁵

The Book of Mormon is in accordance with Arminianism’s essential elements of the fallen man who needs redemption (see Alma 34:9), free salvation for all who desire it (see 2 Nephi 26:33), man’s free will to follow Christ and be redeemed (see 2 Nephi 2:27; 10:23), and man’s free will to turn from Christ and lose salvation (see 2 Nephi 31:14; D&C 20:32). In the words of John Brooke, Mormonism “explicitly rejected Calvinism.”⁵⁶ Thus a local historian of the time recorded that a speech delivered by John Taylor, who had at one time been a Methodist, “seemed to differ but little from an old-fashioned Methodist sermon on the necessity of salvation.”⁵⁷ One New Yorker observed, “Setting aside the near approach of the Millennium and the Book of Mormon, [the Latter-day Saints] resemble in faith and discipline the Methodists.”⁵⁸

Besides their similar doctrines of salvation, early Mormonism’s ecclesiastical system resembled Methodism’s highly effective system. At its basic level, early Methodists were divided into small classes led by a class leader who encouraged the members’ continued quest for holy living. The classes were watched over by the itinerants, who administered to groups of classes in their circuits. Groups of classes met

together at quarterly conferences. Over larger regions was the general conference, where the itinerants met together annually to receive their appointments from the presiding elder (itinerants were appointed to new circuits every few years).⁵⁹ The Lord's instructions in the Doctrine and Covenants commanded the early members to meet quarterly (see D&C 20:61–67), and, of course, Latter-day Saints still meet in a semiannual general conference. Interestingly, early Saints outside of Kirtland, Far West, and Nauvoo used an ecclesiastical structure that very closely resembled the Methodist system. These outlying areas were governed by conferences, where traveling elders decided ecclesiastical matters and governed the branches.⁶⁰ For instance, the same New York observer noted that Latter-day Saint meetings in the state were “marked by the fervid simplicity that characterizes [the Methodist] body of Christians.”⁶¹

Naturally there were a number of points on which Latter-day Saints and Methodists differed. The New Yorker who commented on the similarities between Mormonism and Methodism noted, “It is in believing the Book of Mormon [is] *inspired* that the chief difference consists; but it must be admitted that this is an important difference.”⁶² Furthermore, baptism did not figure strongly into Wesleyan theology, and Wesley accepted infant baptism. Wesley assented to the idea that infant baptism passed the covenant from parent to child (like circumcision in the Old Testament), but ultimately the purpose of baptism in Wesley's theology is nebulous. First, Wesley rejected infant damnation; he wrote to a friend, “No infant ever was or ever will be ‘sent to hell for the guilt of Adam's sin,’ seeing it is cancelled by the righteousness of Christ as soon as they are sent into the world.” Second, Wesley expressed skepticism that baptism affected the new birth, exclaiming, “How many are the baptized gluttons and drunkards, the baptized liars and common swearers, the baptized railers and evil-speakers, the baptized whoremongers, thieves, extortioners!”⁶³ Wesley certainly never rejected baptism as a practice, but its exact purpose in his theology is unclear from a Latter-day Saint perspective.

Also Methodism did not include the elements that Joseph Smith added to standard Protestantism: degrees of heavenly glory, deification, the temple, and so forth. For example, Wesley never approached the Latter-day Saint doctrine of deification. Though Wesley taught the doctrine of perfection and even spoke of a “continual increase” in this perfection, he never took the position that humans could become like God.⁶⁴ He was also unsure about pentecostal spiritual gifts. Though Wesley believed God's active presence in the world and even lamented

Christianity's loss of what he called "the extraordinary gifts of the spirit,"⁶⁵ he felt uneasy about the New Testament spiritual gifts. He cautioned his flock to "beware of enthusiasm. Such is the imagining you have the gift of prophesying, or discerning spirits, which I do not believe one of you has; no, nor ever had yet."⁶⁶

Conclusion

Of course, Wesley was not called to restore the fullness of the gospel. In the words of Brigham Young, "Had the priesthood been conferred upon [John Wesley], he would have built up the kingdom of God in his day as it is now being built up. He would have introduced the ordinances, powers, grades, and quorums of the Priesthood: but, not holding the Priesthood, he could not do it."⁶⁷ Nevertheless, his contributions were essential in laying the foundation for the Restoration. Wesley's contributions to the Restoration are perhaps best illustrated by a conversation reported by Thomas Steed to have occurred between two members of the United Brethren on the eve of Wilford Woodruff's visit:

[The preachers] were walking a distance to fill an appointment for preaching when one said to the other: "What are you going to preach today?"

"I don't know, I have preached all I know. What are you going to preach?"

"I, also, have preached all I know. I hope the Lord will send us light. . . ."

This was the condition of nearly all the preachers.⁶⁸

The United Brethren, all but one of whom joined the Mormons, truly believed that Mormonism was the further light that they were looking for.

The Prophet Joseph Smith expressed his own attitude toward Methodism to a Methodist preacher named Peter Cartwright in Illinois. Cartwright recorded, "He believed that among all the Churches in the world the Methodists was the nearest right. But they had stopped short by not claiming the gift of tongues, of prophecy, and of miracles, and then quoted a batch of Scriptures to prove his position correct. . . . 'Indeed,' said Joe, 'if the Methodists would only advance a step or two further, they would take the world. We Latter-day Saints are Methodists, as far as they have gone, only have advanced further.'"⁶⁹

"I never passed John Wesley's church in London without stopping to look at it," declared Brigham Young. "Was he a good man? Yes; I suppose him to have been, by all accounts as good as ever walked on

this earth, according to his knowledge. . . . Did the Spirit of God rest upon him? Yes, and does, more or less, at times, upon all people.”⁷⁰ Wesley, in following the light that he received, prepared the world for even more. **RE**

Notes

1. Wilford Woodruff, *The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff*, ed. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990), 160.

2. Kenneth Collins, *John Wesley: A Theological Journey* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 14–19.

3. Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth, 1989), 72–75.

4. Collins, *Wesley*, 42–43; Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 83–88.

5. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 25:365.

6. Collins, *Wesley*, 56–58.

7. Cited in Collins, *Wesley*, 89; emphasis in original.

8. Cited in Collins, *Wesley*, 88.

9. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 183–86.

10. Collins, *Wesley*, 97–99.

11. “Arminianus, Jacobus,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 1:419–20.

12. The Calvinist Methodists looked to Whitefield as their leader, though he never attempted to organize his own movement. Wesley and Whitefield tried to get along despite their doctrinal disagreements; the major critiques of Wesley came from other Calvinist Methodists (Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 282).

13. Collins, *Wesley*, 123–26; Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 183.

14. John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 23.

15. John Wesley, “Reasons Against a Separations from the Church of England,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, 13:225–31.

16. Ted A. Campbell, “Christian Tradition, John Wesley, and Evangelicalism,” *Anglican Theological Review* 74, no. 1 (1992): 54–67.

17. John Wesley, “Ought We to Separate from the Church of England?” in Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (London: Epworth, 1970), 332–33; emphasis in original.

18. David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 214.

19. Collins, *Wesley*, 230–32.

20. Cited in Collins, *Wesley*, 232.

21. William H. Williams, *The Garden of American Methodism: The Delmarva Peninsula, 1769–1820* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1984), 39–41.

22. Williams, *Garden of American Methodism*, 89–90.

23. Collins, *Wesley*, 234.

24. Edwin Gaustad and Philip Barlow, *New Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 219–28, 374.

25. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 105–6.
26. Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1976), 11.
27. Caleb A. Malmesbury, *The Life of Charles Pitman* (Philadelphia: Methodist Episcopal Book Rooms, 1887), 86.
28. Benjamin Abbott, *The Experience and Gospel Labours of the Rev. Benjamin Abbott* (Philadelphia: D&S Hall, 1825), 6–15. Of course, nearly fifty years later, Joseph Smith received a different answer to the same question.
29. Abbott, *Experience of Abbott*, 17.
30. Quoted in John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 18.
31. Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 241.
32. Job Smith, “The United Brethren,” *Improvement Era*, July 1910, 818–19.
33. Russell Richey, *Early American Methodism* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1991), xii.
34. Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 241.
35. Cited in Larry C. Porter, “Reverend George Lane—Good ‘Gifts,’ Much ‘Grace,’ and Marked ‘Usefulness,’” *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (1969): 337–38.
36. Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 1:7.
37. Christopher K. Bigelow, “In Search of God’s Truth,” *Ensign*, June 1999, 49.
38. Smith, “United Brethren,” 818–23; Woodruff, *Discourses*, 60.
39. Rebecca Cornwall and Richard F. Palmer, “The Religious and Family Background of Brigham Young,” *BYU Studies* 18, no. 3 (1978): 289–99.
40. Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright: The Backwoods Preacher*, ed. W. P. Strickland (Cincinnati: Cranston and Curtis, 1856), 397–98.
41. John Wesley, “The Wisdom of God’s Counsels,” *The Works of John Wesley*, 4:563.
42. Milton Vaughn Backman, *Joseph Smith’s First Vision: Confirming Evidences and Contemporary Accounts*, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 177.
43. My focus on New Jersey stems from my articles “‘Sweeping Everything before It’: Early Mormonism in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey,” *BYU Studies* 40, no. 1 (2001): 74–106; “South Jersey Methodism and the Creation of Ocean Grove,” *New Jersey History* 122, nos. 1–2 (2004): 44–67.
44. Benjamin Winchester, Letter to Robinson and Smith, in *Times and Seasons*, November 1839, 11; *Daily State Gazette* (Trenton), May 7, 1870.
45. William Appleby, “Autobiography and Journal of William Appleby,” typescript, Church History Library, 31–32.
46. Samuel Harrison, in *Millennial Star*, December 9, 1854, 782.
47. Lawrence M. Yorganson, “Some Demographic Aspects of One Hundred Early Mormon Converts, 1830–1837” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1974), 42–43; Mark R. Grandstaff and Milton V. Backman Jr., “The Social Origins of the Kirtland Mormons,” *BYU Studies* 30, no. 2 (1990): 56.
48. Malcolm R. Thorpe, “The Religious Backgrounds of Mormon Converts in Britain, 1837–52,” *Journal of Mormon History* 4 (1977): 70.
49. The affiliation of the converts’ parents come from Yorganson, “Some Demographic Aspects” 42; Grandstaff and Backman Jr., “Social Origins,” 56. For

the American rates, see Hempstead, *Methodism*, 212; Gaustad and Barlow, *New Historical Atlas*, 79; Edwin Gaustad, *Historical Atlas of Religion in America*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 62, 72, 92.

50. G. St. John Stott, "John Taylor's Religious Preparation," *Dialogue* 19, no. 1 (1986): 123–24; A. Gary Anderson, "Thomas B. Marsh: The Preparation and Conversion of the Emerging Apostle," in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint History: New York*, ed. Larry C. Porter, Milton V. Backman, and Susan Easton Black (Provo, UT: Department of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University, 1992), 129–48.

51. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 14:197.

52. Lorenzo Dow, *History of a Cosmopolite* (Joshua Martin, 1848), 11.

53. Cartwright, *Autobiography*, 260.

54. Though many Methodists joined the Church, most did not, and some even became bitter opponents. Yet numerous opponents came from among the Church's own membership. Individuals such as Philastus Hurlbut, John C. Bennett, and William Law (all former Latter-day Saints) caused more problems for the Church than members of any other church. Certain Methodists' opposition to the Church should not be seen as John Wesley's doing any more than Mormon dissenters' opposition could rightly be called Joseph Smith's fault.

55. Collins, *Wesley*, 184–93.

56. John Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 13. Marvin Hill argues that the Book of Mormon actually has both Calvinist and Arminian elements in its theology; however, this is a fundamental misunderstanding of the two theologies (Marvin S. Hill, "The Shaping of the Mormon Mind in New England and New York," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 [1969]: 363–64). The elements in the Book of Mormon that have been called Calvinist—those which describe fallen man as carnal and devilish, who cannot merit anything of himself—are actually points of agreement between Arminianism and Calvinism. That is, these are Arminian doctrines as well as Calvinist doctrines. The differences between the two theologies are irresistible grace, free will, and limited salvation. These are what distinguish the two theologies, and the Book of Mormon ends up on the Arminian side. As Timothy L. Smith argued, one of the most common fallacies that scholars commit "is to label everyone who believed in man's sinfulness a 'Calvinist'" (Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 33). Clyde D. Ford rightly notes that the Book of Mormon goes beyond Arminianism by answering the question, what happens to those who die without hearing of Christianity? but notes that in matters of the personal salvation of people who have heard the gospel, the Book of Mormon is in line with Arminian theology ("Lehi on the Great Issues: Book of Mormon Theology in Early Nineteenth-Century Perspective," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 38, no. 4 [2005]: 75–96). Though one might claim that the Book of Mormon's Arminian stance on predestination demonstrates that the book is an outgrowth of theology of the time in which it was printed, this is a myopic claim. Elements of Arminianism can be found in such philosophies as the Pelagian heresy of the fourth century and the Thomist theology that the Roman Catholic Church embraced. All reject the Augustinian/Calvinist concept of double predestination by advocating the role of free will and good works in human salvation. All who advocate this point of view

(including Latter-day Saints) argue that theirs is the theology of the Bible, and if this is the case, then the Book of Mormon would teach the same theology.

57. Edwin Salter, *A History of Monmouth and Ocean Counties* (Bayonne, NJ: E. Gardiner and Sons, 1890), 253.

58. Josephine, "The Book of Mormon," *Times and Seasons*, February 1, 1841, 305–6.

59. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 23.

60. This statement is based on a study of the various conference minutes listed in *Times and Seasons*.

61. Josephine, "The Book of Mormon," 306.

62. Josephine, "The Book of Mormon," 305; emphasis in original.

63. Cited in Collins, *Wesley*, 140.

64. John Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," in *The Works of Rev. John Wesley* (New York: J. and J. Harper, 1827), 12.

65. Parley P. Pratt dubbed Wesley "A Latter-day Saint, in Regard to the Spiritual Gifts and the Apostasy of the Church," *Millennial Star*, June 1841, 23.

66. Wesley, *Christian Perfection*, 55.

67. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:5.

68. Smith, "United Brethren," 823.

69. Cartwright, *Autobiography*, 342.

70. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:5.