



LUTHERAN

looks at...

METHODISTS
& HOLINESS CHURCHES

Geoffrey A. Kieta

Northwestern Publishing House
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Art Director: Karen Knutson
Designer: Pamela Dunn

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide.

All rights reserved. This publication may not be copied, photocopied, reproduced, translated, or converted to any electronic or machine-readable form in whole or in part, except for brief quotations, without prior written approval from the publisher.

Northwestern Publishing House
1250 N. 113th St., Milwaukee, WI 53226-3284
www.nph.net

© 2011 by Northwestern Publishing House
Published 2011

Printed in the United States of America
ISBN 978-0-8100-2246-1

CONTENTS

Introduction	iv
PART ONE: The Methodist Church	
1 Methodist Beginnings	1
2 Methodism Comes to America	7
3 American Methodism Grows	14
4 What Are Methodist Churches Like?	22
5 Where Did Methodist Doctrine Originate?	26
6 What Do Methodists Believe?	40
7 Where Do Methodists Stand on Contemporary Issues?	56
PART TWO: The Holiness Churches	
8 The Beginnings of the Holiness Churches	66
9 Holiness Teachings	76
10 Holiness Churches on Doctrine and Contemporary Issues.	96
Conclusion	104
Appendix: Methodist and Wesleyan Bodies in America	111
Endnotes	118
Bibliography	124

INTRODUCTION

Methodism has been in America since before the Revolutionary War. Five US presidents were Methodists, including George W. Bush (but not his father). Dick Cheney attends a Methodist church, although he is not a member. Hillary Clinton is a member. Geronimo, Walter Mondale, Hubert Humphrey, Frederick Douglass, and Sojourner Truth were all Methodists.

Methodism is well represented in the media. George Lucas, Tim Curry, and Stephen King were all raised Methodist. Rush Limbaugh is a Methodist. The list could go on, but you get the point. Methodists are all around us. They are influential in our society.

I have a friend named Gil Boersma. He is a Methodist pastor. He served as the chaplain at Hackley Hospital in Muskegon, Michigan, during the almost nine years that I served a congregation in nearby Fruitport Township. Over the years, we had conversations about the ministry.

At times, he gave me good, practical advice. Once I was ministering in a very difficult situation, and I felt somewhat at a loss as to what to say. Gil said, "Sometimes, I think in terms of pastoral presence. You don't always have to say something. Just being there reminds them of Jesus." I thought that was pretty good advice, and I still try to make it a hallmark of my ministry.

Another time, though, we were discussing medical ethics. I drew a line between withholding extreme measures and taking steps to speed up the dying process, like withholding food and water. Gil's answer surprised me. He pointed to patients with Parkinson's disease who could not swallow without choking. He wanted me to consider whether the

situation wasn't as black and white as it was (and still is) in my mind. As a forthright and compassionate individual, he was trying to make it easier for me to accept realities in the medical world. And I think he truly believes that speeding the end of a person who has no "quality of life" is an act of mercy.

As I was writing this book, I asked Gil if he would read an early (and much longer) draft. I said to him, "It's written from a Lutheran point of view. That means that there are going to be a lot of times when I'm critical of Methodist thinking and practice because, as a confessional Lutheran, I don't agree with the all the teachings of the Methodist church. But I want to be fair. I want to accurately represent the way Methodists think, even when I disagree."

Up to that point, I hope that any Christian would agree this is the way to go. But then I said, "Gil, I consider us to be friends."

He quickly chimed in, "Because we are."

I went on, "I want us to still be friends when this is done. So if reading this is going to change that, please tell me now and I'll find somebody else."

Ever the gentleman, Gil said, "I'd be honored to read it." The funny part is, over the next couple of weeks, several times, I heard him recount that conversation to other people. He always laughed—in a warm and friendly way—about my concern. He remains my friend to this day.

But that being said, he did not like everything that he read in this book. In fact, when we met to talk about it over coffee, he commented that when he read some parts "the juices really started flowing."

If I could summarize Gil's description of Methodism, it came down to this statement: "Methodism is about grace and freedom." That pairing is everywhere, especially in the United Methodist Church. It is a refrain that Methodists hear and repeat—kind of like the way Lutherans say, "By faith alone."

What was he getting at? If we can come to understand what a Methodist means by "grace and freedom," we will begin to understand Methodist churches. Most of this book will deal

with Methodist history, doctrines, and views on various issues. It will also deal with members of Methodism's extended family, the holiness churches.

Why are you interested in Methodism? Maybe you have a relative or a prospective spouse who's a Methodist, and you want to better understand where that person is coming from. Maybe you've read something in the news about a Methodist church or pastor and you want to learn more. Maybe your child has asked you what the difference is. So you picked up this book and you're hoping for answers. I will try to give you some.

But you won't get an unbiased view. In most situations in life, there is no such thing. I don't even try to stop being a confessional Lutheran when I look at Methodism. Yet I have tried to be fair. I have evaluated Methodism and the Wesleyan Holiness bodies in the light of God's Word.

PART ONE:
The Methodist Church



1 METHODIST *Beginnings*

Methodism began with John Wesley, a priest of the Church of England, who lived from 1703 to 1791. He is to Methodism what Luther is to Lutheranism—the founder, the original thinker, and the framer of Methodist ideas. Just as we Lutherans sometimes wrestle with who Martin Luther was, what he thought, and what he would think of us today, in the same way Methodists wrestle with the legacy of John Wesley.

Wesley's early years

Wesley was the son, grandson, and great-grandson of English preachers. His father, Samuel, was the Anglican pastor of the church in Epworth, a little town about 170 miles north of London. From him, John Wesley inherited a commitment to the Church of England and its doctrines.

Wesley's mother, Susanna, was the dominant influence during his childhood. Her father, Dr. Samuel Annesley, had been the leading nonconformist minister of his day. This means that he refused to allow the government-run Church of England to tell him how to conduct his ministry. Yet Susanna had concluded that the nonconformists' ideas were wrong, and she considered herself to be a faithful member of the Anglican Church.

But Susanna was also a committed pietist. Pietists believed that churches had become too formal in their worship, were too caught up in doctrine—especially in doctrinal controversy—and didn't pay enough attention to the spiritual condition of the common believer. They questioned whether many of the church members of their day were believers at all.

So John Wesley grew up in an environment that was loaded theologically with Pietist sentiments, nonconformist thought, and at the same time, a commitment to Anglican teaching and worship.

John was the 15th of 19 children and the second of four sons. Eight of his thirteen older sisters died before he was born. One of his younger brothers also died.

John himself had an early brush with death. His father was so unpopular with his parish that some members set the parsonage on fire in the middle of the night—with the family sleeping inside! John was five years old. He was spotted from the ground standing at an upstairs window in a room that was already in flames. A neighbor climbed up and pulled him out just as the roof fell in. After that, Susanna called her son “a brand plucked from the burning” (quoting Amos 4:11 from the King James Version). She and John both drew the conclusion that he had been delivered by God for some future purpose.

In 1720, when he was 17, John enrolled at Oxford University. He received a bachelor’s degree in 1724 and in 1725 was ordained as a deacon in the Anglican Church. In 1726 he was appointed to a fellowship at Oxford. For the next nine years, he lectured in Greek, logic, and philosophy on and off while he continued to study. He earned a masters degree in 1727 and was ordained a priest in 1728. For most of those two years, he was on leave, assisting his father with his parish duties.

While he was at home, his younger brother Charles enrolled at Oxford. Charles became involved with a group of spiritually minded students who held many of the classic concerns of Pietism. One was George Whitefield (1714–1770), who would become a famous Methodist preacher.

John returned to Oxford in 1729 and became involved with this group also. Their fellow classmates had rude names for the group—the Bible Moths, the Holy Club, and the Sacramentarians. (In the English translation of Luther’s works, this

term is often used for Reformed preachers where it implies a *devaluation* of the sacraments. When it was used at Oxford, it referred to the fact that the members of the Holy Club went to the sacrament every week.) The name that stuck was *Methodists*. The name reflects the strict “method” that Wesley’s group employed in the pursuit of piety: communion every week, visiting the sick, regular Bible study, and other spiritual exercises. When Wesley became famous, his followers revived and embraced the name.

John’s involvement with this group while he was at Oxford was not due to a sudden shift of thought or the result of a dramatic awakening. Throughout the 1720s he had been reading pietistic and perfectionistic literature and developing ideas about “holiness.” The club fit right in with John’s temperament. The odd thing is, John would later characterize this entire period of his life as the time before he came to faith.

Crisis and conversion

John’s father died in 1735. In that same year John left Oxford to serve as a missionary and chaplain in the British colony of Georgia. He traveled with 26 German Moravian refugees. The Moravians were a pietistic sect led by Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700–1760). When a storm nearly destroyed their ship, the Moravians responded by singing psalms. John was deeply moved.

His experience in Georgia was a disaster. John wanted to serve as a missionary to the Indians, but much of his time was consumed by parish work among the settlers. The settlers disliked his services and felt he interfered in their personal lives.

John courted a young woman but vacillated between marriage and the ministry. When the girl married another man, John refused to commune her, accusing her of deceiving him about her feelings. Her new husband filed a lawsuit against him (the Church of England was a branch of the

government). A grand jury brought an indictment against him on ten charges. In 1737 Wesley left for England. After he arrived, the trustees of the colony cleared him of all charges. He then resigned, and they were glad to be rid of him.

Wesley had reached the low point of his life. He preached occasionally, but consistently the host congregations told him not to come back. He became involved with another group of Moravians, led by German-born Peter Böhler (1712–1775). Wesley admitted to Böhler that he did not have faith in Christ as the Savior for his sins. He prepared to resign from the ministry, since it made no sense to preach what he did not “have” himself. But Böhler insisted, “Preach faith *till* you have it, and then *because* you have it, you *will* preach faith.”

In May of 1738 Wesley attended a meeting of a religious society on Aldersgate Street in London. The group was studying Luther’s introduction to the book of Romans (found in Volume 35 of the American Edition of *Luther’s Works*). Wesley later recounted his experience:

About a quarter before nine, while he [Luther] was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt 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. (*Journal*, May 24, 1738)

This conversion experience was to have a profound impact on the way Wesley preached for the rest of his life. To this day, Methodists seek this kind of “assurance” of salvation.

Wesley’s life’s work

The more he preached his message of a personal conversion experience, the more pulpits were closed to him and the more he associated with pietistic societies. At the end of the year, his old Oxford friend George Whitefield undertook a revival effort around Bristol. He invited Wesley to join him there.

In February of 1739, Whitefield had started preaching to a few hundred coal miners. By March, 20,000 were coming to hear him. Wesley arrived that month and began to preach as well. They conducted their services in the open air, with little trappings of liturgy or “church.” For the rest of his life, Wesley engaged in this kind of open air preaching.

Late in 1739 eight or ten people came to Wesley for spiritual counsel. They were suffering from a crisis of sin and guilt and wanted him to pray that they would have a personal experience of conversion. Wesley did so, and the next day they came back with a few more people. The group decided to meet every Thursday. This was the beginning of the first “Methodist society.” Wesley later organized these societies and laid down rules for them. They spread everywhere he worked.

Wesley’s work sparked a renewal movement that swept through the English-speaking world. In 1740 he purchased the lease on an abandoned foundry and remodeled it into the first Methodist meeting house. But the crowds came to him in almost every imaginable setting. In 1773 Wesley estimated he had preached to 32,000 people in one service. He traveled endless miles preaching from place to place. He covered the entire British Isles every two years. During one week in 1747, he preached 13 sermons in 15 different places. He preached as many as 40,000 times in the course of his ministry.

Wesley’s work centered on the poor and the outcast. He combined charity work with gospel preaching. He had a tremendous understanding of the law, and he preached it with great power. Many people were convicted of sin. He also proclaimed God’s forgiveness.

Wesley did marry, but he was seldom at home, and he always put his ministry ahead of his wife. Their marriage was unhappy and his wife eventually left him. They never reconciled. Even Methodist writers find room for criticism of Wesley’s relationship with his wife.

Wesley lived an ascetic lifestyle. He slept only a few hours each night and drove himself at a pace that few people could have kept up with. He was busy right up to the last. He died in 1791.