

- What is a Methodist?
- To answer this we must understand England of the 1700's.
- We must understand the Church of England of the 1700's.
- We must understand some things about John Wesley, born into a parsonage family of the Church of England.

The population of England increased from nearly 5 million souls at Wesley's birth, to roughly 8 million near the time of his death. Due to the changes especially in transportation, commerce and industry, and population, many within the increasing population were moving towards centers of industry and perceived opportunity.

From what I have learned about John Wesley through the years, it seems clear to me that there were certain *holes* in his faith experience which haunted him for many years, the chief being the lack of “assurance.”

- Following in his father's foot steps: Off to Oxford to study for the priesthood of the Church of England.
- While there he was very torn about his faith, and the Church of England.
- He organized a group of students, where he and his brother Charles Wesley were leaders.
- They were nicknamed the "Holy Club" and "Methodists" because they followed a strict weekly program. One night was study, another was prison ministry, another was caring for children, another was teaching the poor children to read, etc.

- Wesley decided to keep the name that had been used against him by other students.
- Yes, there was a “method” to how they lived and how they tried to serve and know God. This was intended as a put-down, but JW decided to wear it as a badge of honor.
- So the name stuck, and continues to this day.

- After graduation from Oxford, Wesley chose to go to the “new world” (which actually wasn’t so new!). He decided to be a missionary in the Georgia colony, controlled by England and the Church of England. JW was an official Church of England priest in the new world.
- While he was there, he suffered with his faith, suffered with the Indians whom he thought he would evangelize. Many things went wrong.

- While on the way to Georgia, and while there, JW encounters some Germans and ends up very attracted to their ways and their faith. They were at peace, even in big Atlantic storms where it looked like all would die.
- Wesley becomes quite influenced by these Germans. They seem to have a peace and assurance that he lacks.

- Georgia ends up being a disaster for John Wesley.
- His faith is torn up, his personal relationships get him into trouble (Sophie Hopkey), and he literally has to run for his life, through swamps into South Carolina to get a ship back to England.
- He heads home as a very broken man.



As John Wesley returned to London, it might be safe to suggest that his soul was as wounded as it had ever been. He mentions the tragic irony of having gone to Georgia to convert Indians, and ends up realizing that he himself might have been the one most in need of conversion. But after returning to London, it seems that a balm was sent for both John and Charles in the person of Peter Böhler.

- Wesley comes home to England, and while in London is invited to a religious gathering at Aldersgate Street.
- Other types of Christian groups had begun meeting together, outside of the normal church service. Wesley always had done everything **BY THE BOOK**. But there was something that attracted him to this new phenomenon.
- It was at Aldersgate Street that Wesley tells that his “heart was strangely warmed,” and that he finally knew that he was loved by God and that he was forgiven. This is a key moment in his life.

- Some of his friends from Oxford begin to feel a new calling and a new emphasis on preaching to the lost and lonely, and especially to those who are outside the normal church.
- Who are the usual people at the church in the normal Church of England Anglican Church? They are wealthy, nicely dressed, aristocrats. They also believe that they need no grace, as they are already just right.
- John Wesley goes throughout London and other parts of England preaching as a guest priest in different parishes. He ends up basically banned from all of the Church of England pulpits.

- **Why would he be banned?**
- Because he preached that every single person is in need of God's grace. We are all broken and we need to repent and surrender before God. This was seen as highly abnormal in the Church of England, and each time after he would preach there would be an almost instant meeting in which he would be 1) never invited to preach there again, and 2) banned from that particular church.
- John Wesley, choir boy, Boy Scout, Tory-conservative non-trouble maker, was quickly becoming one without desiring that at all.

- Some time after his Aldersgate Experience, Wesley is forced to change his tactics. He can no longer go to preach in Anglican Churches in England. But he now has the passion and drive to reach people who have been forgotten by the Church.
- With his friend George Whitefield ( a great preacher! ) he begins to break the rules by preaching outdoors with Whitefield to coal miners who were coming up from the ground to go home from work. They would preach from stumps to crowds of tired workers.
- Wesley hated it, but did it anyway. Why did he hate it? Because it was not traditional.

- If we can begin to use one label for John Wesley, it would be **pragmatic** or practical. If you could no longer do things the old way, you had to do them in new ways. Wesley hated it, but began to accept and allow it.
- He hated field preaching, but did it.
- He eventually allowed for **Lay Preaching**. If he had held against this, the Methodist Church would have never happened. Lay Preaching was a key new change.

Towards the end of the 17th century, after the struggles with Puritanism within England, leaders within the government and the Church felt an urgency to do something to stop the moral decline of their society. So, under the leadership of Anthony Horneck in particular (1678), the concept of **“religious societies”** was born. This was not to be a new church. It was to operate within the Church of England, in order to bring “real holiness of heart and life.” The plan was to change and improve one person at a time, with an emphasis on quality rather than quantity. The movement first targeted those who were most likely to improve upon an already moral foundation. This would be the first time within the Anglican Church that small subgroups existed for deeper moral and spiritual development.

- We must understand that the “Religious Societies” in England were probably the key to everything. They would meet at other times during the week.
- What JW did that was so special was to organize them better than they had been, and to use them to shape the lives of Christians.
- Religious Societies in time became **Methodist Societies.**



- Wesley and George Whitefield would preach in the fields to coal miners.
- After the message had ended, Wesley would talk with those who showed interest in living a new life. He would invite them to Methodist Society meetings in different areas, based upon where these workers lived. They would be invited to some place close to home on a night when they could attend.
- Many would only attend once, but others stayed and things began to change for them.

- What would happen at these meetings?
- People would gather, maybe 40 to 60 total.
- First they would sing. Methodists were big on singing. In fact, Charles Wesley would take common British drinking songs and re-write the words to something religious. People would be able to sing, because they sang these songs at the Pub!
- Then after singing, there might be a testimony, and then break up into smaller groups. Wesley called these “Class Meetings.” This is where serious business took place.

- Class Meetings were probably the heart of the Methodist Movement in England. It was in these **SMALL GROUPS** that peoples' lives would be changed, and where groups grew to trust one another, and be able to talk about more than the weather.
- These groups would consist of those who would commit to coming each week. Those who missed were not permitted to continue. And there were rules to the Societies and Class Meetings.

- They kept attendance records.
- They kept records on when you had taken communion at your local Anglican Church.
- Then they would discuss the **QUESTIONS**: And these were really something...

These basically focus upon one's sense of forgiveness, peace with God, and interconnections with other people. Beyond these important issues, it seems that there were 4 (or 5) questions addressed to each participant **each week**: 1) what sins have you committed? 2) what temptations have come? 3) how were you delivered? 4) have you done anything that might be a sin, but you don't know? And some add this fifth, 5) Do you have anything you feel you must keep secret?

- *Each week, under the guidance of a mature and trained group leader (picked by Wesley) the groups would make their way through these serious questions. People began to be a support to one another, but maybe more importantly, to be a friend of accountability for one another. They would ask the big question “How goes it with your soul?”*

- An amazing thing in this is that people were not taken away from their churches. They were strengthened to go back into their churches as stronger Christians. Even though the Church rejected Wesley, he never rejected it, to his dying day. He still considered himself a priest of the Church of England.

REVOLUTIONARY WAR  
TROUBLES...

Due to the fact that Wesley was banned everywhere, they had to do something new. His classes began to build their own meeting places. They would collect offering and began building “Wesley Chapels” as they could not be called churches. Only real Church of England churches were permitted to be called churches. But Wesley’s influence grew and grew until he needed to organize sets of Lay Preachers (even some women!) who would go around and care for the different Methodist Societies and the Wesley Chapels.



The first “Conference” was born, and Wesley eventually needed to have special helpers, who would be called Superintendents. They were to *confer* with Wesley on matters that affected the group. But really, it was all under John Wesley’s control. His Lay Preachers would actually go out and read sermons that John Wesley had written. It was very controlled. Circuit Riders in the US colonies and states did the same thing. Wesley wrote a commentary on the NT, and a big book of sermons, and all preachers would read from these as they traveled through their groups of people.

So what is at the heart of a true Methodist?

You must be pragmatic and practical in finding ways to get the job done for God. \*\*\* Please note that this means that sometimes you leave traditions behind in order to reach the people.

You must have a heart for people who are far from God, and do whatever it takes to reach them.

And as Wesley was not into all the Protestant theology fighting of the 1600's, there was room for some different ideas within his tent. That is why we do not have huge religious tests for joining our churches.