

JOHN WESLEY AND THE BIRTH OF THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

By Frank Baker

In times of great stress our thinking is often influenced more by symbols than by logic. We have an immediate mental picture of an operating cause at work, focusing on one person, one incident, which seems to symbolize a whole train of events. Just as the caricature artist grossly exaggerates one or two features of his chosen subject, such as Hitler's forelock and moustache, or King George III's bloated face, so through the magnifying lens of deep emotion we exaggerate the faults of our villains of the moment, the virtues of our heroes. Only through the cold logic of critical history are we enabled to revise our views, and even then the symbolic caricatures die hard.

Two hundred years later the time is probably ripe for a reassessment of John Wesley's share in the birth of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Was he in fact the domineering Tory who wished to bring all the American rebels to heel, who had little genuine sympathy for those who sought independence, and who was so proud of the instrument of evangelism which he had forged through almost half a century that any variations from it must be squeezed from him by brute force?

We must make no attempt, of course, to whitewash John Wesley: he was indeed conservative in his politics; he did believe in and exemplify a benevolent autocracy rather than government by popular vote; he was impatient with self-righteous dodderers and blunderers; he did criticize the more radical propounders of revolution; he was sometimes over-hasty in his judgments, tactless in his remarks. Yet through it all he deeply loved the American people as a whole, and the Methodists in particular; he conscientiously sought their best spiritual interests in a new and developing republican status, and sincerely tried to empathize with their point of view. All this, and some of the detail in his admittedly complex relations with the American Methodists, we may be able to visualize as a twentieth-century British citizen presents "A Calm Address to our American ex-Colonies."

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It is impossible to understand John Wesley without pairing together his almost fanatical love of the Church of England and his equally intense but counteracting belief in the free conscience of the Christian man--both of which he owed in large measure to his parental upbringing. Thus he continued to proclaim to his dying day that he was a loyal member and minister of the Church of England, yet also to his dying day he continued to chip away at some of her customs and traditions and spiritual deficiencies. This, he claimed, was at the behest of the Holy Spirit. He saw his task as to reform and renew the Church of England from within, preferably in England but--in his later years--possibly in America. He carefully distinguished between the essential Church of Christ and the accretions added by man. Writing to his brother-in-law

Westley Hall in 1745 he used a striking simile: "We no more look upon those filthy abuses which adhere to our Church as part of the building, than we look upon any filth which may adhere to the walls of Westminster Abbey as part of that structure."¹ Thus he believed himself perfectly justified in constant modifications of normal church procedure, especially as he claimed that his own followers constituted a private but independent society of loyal members of the Church of England, which was neither a rival to that Church nor subject to its jurisdiction.

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Most of Wesley's variations from the Church of England were improvisations intended to fill some special spiritual need, and it was their cumulative effect which brought upon him charges of separating from the Church. We list eight.

(1) First was the need for spiritual fellowship. When in 1781 he sought to outline the history of the people called Methodists, he claimed that they had three "rises," or experimental beginnings: in Oxford, in Georgia, and in London. The common factor was that these were meetings for Christian fellowship quite distinct from regular public worship, "a free conversation, begun and ended with singing and prayer."² This Wesley supplied by band-meetings, first organized in Savannah³--a simplified development of the elaborate Moravian sub-division of their communities into many small groups called "choirs"--and class-meetings, a gradual extension of a debt-reducing penny-a-week scheme begun in Bristol in 1742.⁴

(2) Open air evangelism--which Wesley termed "field preaching" was forced upon him, much against his own prejudices and predilections, by the need to proclaim the gospel to people who could not or would not attend their parish church. Although Wesley had perforce preached under the sky on board ship an in Georgia, the epochal test of his daring in this matter took place in Bristol on April 2, 1739. Urged by his former pupil George Whiefield, he "submitted to be more vile, and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining to the city, to about three thousand people."⁵ This was the first of thousands of such occasions for Wesley and his followers on both sides of the Atlantic.

(3) Lay preachers, again, seemed to be the God-given answer to the crying need for auxiliary pastors and teachers to arouse and guide the increasing thousands who ventured within the orbit of Methodism. Although

¹John Wesley, Letters (Oxford edn.), 26:174.

²John Wesley, A Concise Ecclesiastical History, IV.175; cf. Frank Baker, From Wesley to Asbury, Durham, N. C., Duke Univ. Press, 1976, 19-20, 194-97.

³See John Wesley, Journal (henceforth "JWJ"), April 17, 1726 (cf. his diary, Apr. 25, 1736, "writ names").

⁴JWJ, Feb. 15, 1742.

⁵JWJ for that date.

there were earlier examples such as Joseph Humphreys and John Cennick, the first lay preacher deliberately accepted by Wesley on a full-time basis was Thomas Maxfield, and Wesley's strong prejudice against any such practice was overcome by his mother's challenge: "He is as surely called of God to preach as you are," to which Wesley replied, "It is the Lord: let him do what seemeth him good." This was probably early in 1741.⁶

(4) Spiritual discipline was made necessary because even among Methodists there were backsliders, those whose early emotional enthusiasm faltered in the face of popular prejudice and persecution, or of more sophisticated temptations. They must be given clear standards to live up to, and these must be enforced. In 1743, therefore, Wesley devised his General Rules, claiming that to join the Methodist societies there was only one condition, "a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins." He went on, however, that those who wished to continue in the societies must give proof of their sincerity and resolution by avoiding evil, by doing good, and by holy living; he gave examples of all three categories of conduct. Henceforth Methodists have been men and women under discipline.

(5) An organized structure was necessitated by the proliferation of Methodist members, societies, and preachers. The society was the original nucleus, and this, if small, might comprise one class only; larger societies would be divided into several classes, some of the members of which might meet also in a band of their own sex and marital status. Societies in an area which might be encompassed by an itinerant lay preacher during four or six weeks' travel would form a circuit, for which from 1749 onwards a Circuit Quarterly Meeting was instituted. Immediately after Wesley's death there was a further grouping of these circuits into large Districts under the oversight of a senior preacher. From 1744 many of the itinerant preachers were invited by Wesley to a Conference with him, where they would discuss Methodist doctrine, discipline, and administration. In 1784 he executed a legal deed incorporating a hundred named preachers as the legal Conference, which was thereby empowered to govern the Methodist societies after his death. Periodically from 1749 onwards the polity of Methodism, as amended at the annual conferences, was consolidated in the so-called "Large" Minutes of the Conference, of which the official record from 1784 was its manuscript Journal.

(6) The doctrinal standards of Methodism were formulated during very lengthy discussions at the early conferences, and published as a separate entity in the "Doctrinal" Minutes of 1748--a parallel to the "Disciplinary" Minutes of that year. The "Doctrinal" Minutes proclaimed nothing contrary to the teaching of the Church of England, and maintained loyalty to the historic creeds--they simply laid a special emphasis upon the different stages of the way of salvation. The doctrines thus emphasized comprised: the fact of original sin and the possibility for all people of salvation by faith, Christian assurance of such salvation, and Christian perfection, defined as perfect love.

⁶Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society (henceforth "WHS"), XXVII.7-15.

These became known as "our doctrines," and all Methodist preaching was expected to remain true to them as they were defined and exemplified in Wesley's first four volumes of Sermons (1746-60), and his Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament (1755).

(7) Eventually services of warmhearted worship were organized upon Methodist premises, for the benefit both of dedicated members and of the inquiring public. Again the emphasis was upon the personal experience of religion, most notably in the rousing but strongly theological hymns of Charles Wesley, which found their most popular expression in the volume edited by his brother John in 1780, A Collection of Hymns for the use of the People called Methodists, recently issued in a definitive edition by the Oxford University Press. Other services characteristic of Methodism were the love-feast, modelled on the ancient agape and the Moravian love-feast, but with the added element of Christian testimony as a major feature; the watch-nights (regarded by Wesley as reminiscent of the vigils of the primitive Christian Church); and the covenant service, an occasion of solemn rededication using readings from the Puritan author Richard Alleine, as abridged by Wesley in his Christian Library, volume 30 (1753).

(8) An ordained ministry was something which Wesley had sought from the beginning for the support of his movement, but few suitable clergymen were prepared to leave their parish labours or their colleges in order to itinerate with the Wesleys. The lay preachers themselves agitated for improved status, especially from 1755 onwards. John Wesley was already convinced that in extraordinary situations and at the invitation of needy worshippers it was valid for presbyters to ordain, even to ordain bishops, and was tempted to set aside his ecclesiastical scruples. The strong opposition of Charles Wesley, however, together with that of their co-worker the Revd. William Grimshaw of Haworth, caused him to defer the contemplated ordination of his preachers, which Lord Chief Justice Mansfield told Charles Wesley in 1784 would certainly constitute separation from the Church of England. Even with all the precedents and with all the demonstrated need, Wesley would only take such a step if the situation became absolutely desperate, and there seemed no other way.⁷

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Eventually the situation in America did become desperate. The Revolutionary War had thinned the ranks of the Church of England clergy, so that only a small proportion of Methodists were able to receive the Lord's Supper from their hands. The evidence from at least one state, however, North Carolina, implies that Methodists as a whole did indeed seek to remain loyal to their mother church, and became the chief inheritors of her orphaned buildings.⁸

⁷Frank Baker, John Wesley and the Church of England, London, Epworth Press, 1970, 273.

⁸See Frank Baker, "The British Background of North Carolina Methodism," in Methodism Alive in North Carolina, ed. O.K. Ingram, Durham, N. C., The Divinity School of Duke University, 1976, 1-17, 141-46, espec. 16-17.

Only in a few scattered areas was a building for worship serviced by an ordained clergyman offering the sacraments. Joining the Presbyterians or the Baptists might have seemed a natural expedient, yet this the Methodists resisted. At their conferences in 1777 and 1778 the Methodist preachers raised the question, "What shall be done with respect to administering the ordinances?" In each case the matter was deferred until the following year. In 1779, however, at the Broken Back Church, Fluvanna County, Virginia, the preachers finally formed a presbytery of four and ordained each other.⁹ This precipitated a sharp rift, and there followed a year of "letter-writing and wringing of hands."¹⁰

In 1780 Asbury managed to bring both parties together by proposing yet another delay, while both groups wrote for Wesley's advice. This came just in time for the Conference of 1781, and Freeborn Garrettson reported thankfully: "We met and received Mr. Wesley's answer, which was that we should continue on the old plan until further direction. We unanimously agreed to follow his counsel, and went on harmoniously."¹¹ Wesley could hardly know how long it would be before he could give his "further direction," but even after the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown in October 1781 the formalities ending the war dragged on, and it was not until January 14, 1784, that the Treaty of Paris was ratified, and peace was finally secured.

In the meantime William Watters had assured Wesley that the ordination controversy had been laid to rest.¹² This Asbury confirmed, hinting that Methodist sacramental yearnings were being satisfied by clergy such as "Mr. Jarratt, in Virginia, . . . Mr. Pettigrew, North Carolina, Dr. Magaw, Philadelphia, and Mr. Ogden in East Jersey."¹³ Reassured or not, Wesley remained deeply concerned about the American situation, and was planning for action as soon as the time was ripe. He informed Edward Dromgoole on September 17, 1783: "When the Government in America is settled, I believe some of our brethren will be ready to come over. I cannot advise them to do it yet. And I am the less in haste because I am persuaded Bro. Asbury is raised up to preserve order among you, and to do just what I should do myself, if it pleased God to bring me to America."¹⁴ In October 1782 he tried to safeguard Asbury's position by pleading with the American preachers not to accept freelance

⁹William Warren Sweet, Virginia Methodism, Whittet & Shepperson, Richmond, Virginia, 1955, 79-83; Elizabeth Connor, Methodist Trail Blazer: Philip Gatch, Cincinnati, Ohio, Creative Publishers, 1970, 97-125.

¹⁰Frederick A. Norwood, The Story of American Methodism, Abingdon, Nashville, 1974, 92.

¹¹Freeborn Garrettson, Experience and Travels, Philadelphia, Hall, 1791, 207.

¹²Cf. Wesley's letter to Watters, Feb. 22, 1782: "It is a great blessing that there is an end of that unhappy dispute."

¹³Francis Asbury, Journal and Letters, ed. Manning Potts, Abingdon, Nashville, 1958, III.28, a letter to George Shadford in Bristol, England; Shadford would surely pass the word on to Wesley.

¹⁴William Warren Sweet, Religion on the American Frontier, 1783-1840, Vol. IV. The Methodists, Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1946, 13-16.

preachers from England, "who will not be subject to the American Conference, and cheerfully conform to the Minutes both of the American and English Conferences," working under the supervision of Asbury.¹⁵

At last the stage was set for John Wesley to resort to heroic measures to solve the problems of American Methodism, by setting up his loyal followers there as an independent Church, complete with a valid scriptural ministry and sacraments. For almost thirty years his reading had been preparing him for this day. In order to secure valid sacraments for America he needed an episcopally ordained ministry such as that of the Church of England, "the most scriptural national church in the world."¹⁶

Step by step the harsh legality of his early years had been tempered. He had come to acknowledge that mutual consent was necessary between a pastor and his flock.¹⁷ Stillingfleet's Irenicum (1659) had taught him that although episcopacy was scriptural, no specific form of church government was prescribed in Scripture.¹⁸ In 1746 the reading of Lord Peter King's Enquiry into the Constitution . . . of the Primitive Church (1691) had clinched his view that "bishops and presbyters are (essentially) one order,"¹⁹ and that the true function of "all ecclesiastical order" was "to bring souls from the power of Satan to God, and to build them up in his fear and love."²⁰ His earlier reading had convinced him also that Roman teaching on apostolic succession was "as muddy as the Tiber itself," and that the Holy Spirit validated such things as the extraordinary call of a lay preacher and an extraordinary ordination by presbyters, as in the Alexandrian Church.²¹

Hitherto Wesley's deep love for even a marred Church of England had prevented his bold action on any of these convictions, except by the formation of a lay itinerant ministry. This ministry, from its troubled American outpost, was now calling upon him to validate their status in whatever manner seemed good to him. They did not know how he might contrive it, but they believed that he would indeed find some way. The words of Thomas Ware, one of Asbury's recruits in 1782, apparently reflected the prevailing sentiment: "I can only wonder at the privations to which they submitted for so long a time, out of reverence for Mr. Wesley. He had said he would never forsake the Church in which he was brought up; and the Methodists felt for him a tie of affection stronger than the ties of blood. Hence they continued to suffer on, hoping for relief when the war should terminate. The struggle, however, continued so long that there is reason to believe, if it had not been for the influence of Mr. Asbury, the societies in America would have assumed the character of an

¹⁵Jesse Lee, A Short History of the Methodists, Baltimore, Magill and Cline, 1810, 85-86.

¹⁶Frank Baker, John Wesley and the Church of England, 138.

¹⁷Ibid., 143-45.

¹⁸Ibid., 146.

¹⁹Ibid., 146-49.

²⁰Ibid., 149.

²¹Ibid., 64-65, 151, 263-64.

independent church, and had the ordinances of God duly administered to them."²² As partners across the ocean Asbury and Wesley joined hands in tactical delay which eventually secured a greatly modified independent episcopal church in America.

Wesley acted boldly indeed. There were no bishops in America yet (though Samuel Seabury was even then in Britain, seeking ordination), and the English bishops would not ordain his preachers.²³ Therefore he must do it himself, and do it as speedily as was reasonably possible in one of the busiest and most significant years of his life. He discussed the question with Coke, who seems to have been surprised when Wesley finally proposed making him a bishop in order to transmit ordination to America, under the disguised terminology of "Superintendent" used by the Protestant Reformers in Europe.²⁴ At the cabinet of senior preachers which preceded the British Conference Wesley announced his plans for ordination. John Pawson reported: "The preachers were astonished when this was mentioned, and to a man opposed it. But I plainly saw that it would be done, as Mr. Wesley's mind appeared to be quite made up."²⁵ He consulted some clergy in Leeds during the Conference; they were equally opposed to his scheme, as inconsistent with his professions of loyalty to the Church of England, so that Wesley broke up the meeting.²⁶ Knowing that the response of his brother Charles would be the same, Wesley deliberately kept him in the dark. The spiritual needs of the American Methodists were more important than his love for his brother, and the outrage of some local members of the Church of England must be faced in order to ensure its essential continuance in America. Coke eventually confessed himself in full agreement with Wesley: "The more maturely I consider the subject, the more expedient it appears to me that the power of ordaining others should be received by me from you, by the imposition of your hands."²⁷

On September 1, 1784, Wesley noted in his Journal: "Being now clear in my own mind, I took a step which I had long weighed in my mind, and appointed Mr. Whatcoat and Mr. Vasey to go and serve the desolate sheep in America." (In their case and in Coke's, Wesley's private diary used the word "ordain.") He had grasped the nettle firmly, even though he did not publicly flaunt his action. In the letters of orders which he prepared he described his ambassadors as deacons, elders, and (in the case of Coke) superintendent. These documents make it clear that this was being done for those in America "who desire to continue under my care, and still adhere to the doctrines and discipline of the Church of England," and who "are greatly distressed for want of ministers to administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper,

²²Thomas Ware, Sketches of the Life and Travels of Rev. Thomas Ware, New York, Mason and Lane, 1839, 110-11.

²³Baker, John Wesley and the Church of England, 259-62.

²⁴Ibid., 263-64.

²⁵Luke Tyerman, The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M. A., London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1871, III.428; cf. Baker, op cit., 264.

²⁶Baker, John Wesley and the Church of England, 265.

²⁷Ibid.

according to the usage of the said Church." The reason for this extraordinary expedient was also pointed out: "Whereas there does not appear to be any other way of supplying them with ministers."²⁸ Initial reluctance there had been; it was not replaced by firm resolution in the face of strong opposition; America must be served.

We pass over the familiar story of the journey of Wesley's preachers to America, their welcome, Asbury's insistence on summoning a conference of his brethren rather than accepting a semi-secret ordination similar to Coke's, and the decision of the Christmas Conference to form Methodism into an independent denomination, to be called The Methodist Episcopal Church. What did all this mean in terms of Wesley's designs for them, and the substance of what they adopted and adapted?

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We have seen two principles at work in Wesley's churchmanship: his deep loyalty to the Church of England, and his conviction that he must bring about spiritual reform and renewal within her, through his societies: this we may term the spirit of Methodism. We should now examine how far the plan which he presented to his American followers was (in this sense) Methodist, and how far it was indeed an attempt to preserve and extend the ethos of the Church of England on the American continent. It will be preferable to present these generalizations about the reforming features of the new American Methodism in the same order as the eight British variations from his native Church were previously described.

(1) Spiritual fellowship continued an important element in the 1784 Methodist Episcopal Church. Class-meetings and band-meetings were described and prescribed in the American Disciplines, formed a feature of the notes in the special issue of 1798, and persisted (with diminishing effectiveness, as in England) until the middle of the following century.

(2) Open air evangelism had been and continued a part of the American Church, though practised less frequently as the Church became more fully institutionalized. In England groups such as the Primitive Methodists struggled hard to remain loyal to this early witness, and did so in part by incorporating the example of the American Lorenzo Dow's camp meetings.

(3) Lay preachers became an integral part of the ordained American Methodist ministry, as they did also in Britain, though in America their increase in status was much more rapid. In America the ordination was to the three orders of deacon, elder (Wesley's renaming of the priest or presbyter), and bishop (the American revision of Wesley's superintendent); in Britain ordination was to the single order of minister. Both nations retained a class of laymen known variously as local preachers or lay pastors; in both countries there has remained much ambiguity about the ecclesiastical status

²⁸Ibid., 267.

of the ordained and unordained preachers. That ambiguity revealed itself even at the Christmas Conference, where during the actual printing of the manuscript minutes the term "helper" was belatedly inserted, apparently in order to enfranchise those who for various reasons had still not been ordained.

(4) Spiritual discipline remained intact in Asbury's Methodism, but its enforcement dwindled during the following century, much more in America than in Britain.

(5) The organized structure of American Methodism remained basically the same as in England except for its fuzzy threefold ordering of the ministry. The central governing body was still the annual conference, though because of the vastness of the continent this was gradually divided into many annual conferences, with an all-encompassing quadrennial General Conference. The conference agenda was based upon the British agenda, and the documentary authority remained the conference Minutes, the "Large" Minutes being renamed the Discipline. This latter was deliberately adopted from British Methodism, so that three-quarters of the first Discipline was a minimally revised reproduction from Wesley's 1780 "Large" Minutes. As an important statement of purpose in those Minutes there passed over into American Methodism Wesley's formula about "God's design in raising up the preachers called Methodists," slightly revised: "To reform the nation, particularly the Church, and to spread scriptural holiness over the land" became, "To reform the continent, and to spread scriptural holiness over these lands."

(6) The doctrinal standards of Methodism remained basically the same in America, namely the emphasis upon the doctrine of universal salvation. In Britain the exemplary sources of reference for this teaching were Wesley's Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament and his early Sermons, as cited in the model deed incorporated in the 1780 "Large" Minutes. Even through the Notes and Sermons are honored in the 1784 American Minutes, however, they do not appear as doctrinal standards in the Discipline. Instead the American leaders turned to Wesley's revision of the Church of England's Thirty-Nine Articles, manufactured by him expressly for the American market.²⁹

(7) Warmhearted worship remained pretty much the same in America as in England, though the hymn-book which Wesley furnished for America was not the larger Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People called Methodists of 1780, but a much-revised version of the pioneer volume which he had first published in America in 1737, A Collection of Psalms and Hymns. This was soon replaced in popular American use by an edition revised by Coke of a pirated selection from Wesley's 1780 Collection. In due time this became the Methodist Pocket Hymn Book, and A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the

²⁹See Professor Richard P. Heitzenrater, AT FULL LIBERTY: DOCTRINAL STANDARDS IN EARLY AMERICAN METHODISM, pp. 21-34, below. Dr. Heitzenrater also adduces other evidence to show that these revised Articles became the de facto doctrinal standards of American Methodism.

Methodist Episcopal Church.³⁰ The love-feast and watch-night services continued with diminished frequency, but the covenant service almost disappeared.

(8) And finally, against vigorous British opposition, Wesley had taken the epochal step of endowing American Methodism with its own ordained ministry.

All this clearly shows that the Methodism which Wesley's followers had ventured upon in America nearly twenty years earlier, which his first preachers had begun officially to supervise in 1769, to put under the direction of annual conferences from 1773, and had now brought up to date, was still basically identical to Methodism in England. But what about Wesley's response to their assumed desire, "still to adhere to the doctrines and discipline of the Church of England"? Here some months of hard editorial work and bold ecclesiastical experimentation had furnished them with all that they would wish. For the American Methodists Wesley had revised the Book of Common Prayer; he had replaced prayers for the Royal Family by supplications for "the Supreme Rulers of these United States"; he had altered the Ordinal to fit the American situation; he had amended both the Calvinist theology and the monarchical politics of the Thirty-Nine Articles; with the aid of other Anglican clergy he had supplied the American Methodists with new ministers and the means of securing a constant supply according to the revised forms of the Church Ordinal; he had furnished them with revised Anglican orders for the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. What more could he do?

It was up to them, of course, how they responded to his massive and thoughtful preparations. In general they seemed to welcome Wesley's revitalized version of the Church of England. Even though in practice The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America was not used in large numbers, it was used, and was reprinted in 1786, 1788, and 1792; from its pages there passed into regular Methodist currency at least the sacramental orders, the Ordinal, and the Articles.

The title chosen for the new Church was apparently suggested by John Dickins,³¹ an English transplant; in drawing up his letters of orders Wesley had referred generically to "the Church of Christ," a favourite phrase which characterized his ecumenical dream of this hypothetically ideal church.

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In the meantime Samuel Seabury had been consecrated bishop in Scotland, on November 14, 1784. Although he would not return to America until 1785, the potential leaders of the Protestant Episcopal Church in America were gathering themselves together, and apparently trying to gain the allegiance of the new Methodist Episcopal Church. Their joint gathering on December 31, 1784, however, proved a failure. The Revd. John Andrews concluded that it was hopeless, for the Methodists would insist "that Mr. Wesley be the first link of

³⁰See Louis F. Benson, The English Hymn, Richmond, Virginia, John Knox Press, 1962, 285-91.

³¹Ware, op. cit., 106.

the chain upon which their church is suspended."³² Undoubtedly Asbury thought that American Methodism had nothing to gain from this tentative approach. Wesley himself, after hearing of Bishop Seabury's consecration, wrote to Freeborn Garrettson (June 26, 1785): "I do not expect any great matters from the Bishop. . . . You want nothing which he can give." Coke was "reserved" at the meeting on New Year's Eve, but in 1791 made his own secret overtures to the Protestant Episcopal Church, which earned him the opprobrium of the American Methodists.

These overtures mattered little, however. With Asbury's critical yet warm collaboration, Wesley had succeeded in transferring to America both an enriched Methodism and an enriched Church of England, a unique blend of parish church and Methodist preaching-house. This was nearer to his ideal of the true Church of Christ than had been attained either by the Established Church or by the Methodist Society in England. Indeed, to vary slightly a passage written on another occasion: "John Wesley's dream of a Church of England renewed by means of his Methodist Societies did not come true in his native land. In America, however, a new episcopal daughter entered into the heritage of an Anglican mother as well as that of a Methodist father, so that John Wesley's ecclesiastical vision was to be more fully realized in the United States of America than in England itself."³³

questions of motivation and, specifically, in Coke's case, the personal ambition that he was consumed by. To attempt to get close to the man behind the public figure was to ignore that issue, and I hope that much of what I have to say will throw light on it. At the outset, I will simply repeat what I have said elsewhere: usually, that no man ever achieved anything worthwhile without some element of ambition; that this inevitably produces the insidious and the mediocre to resentment or jealousy; that there is a significant difference between this and the kind of consuming self-seeking ambition of which Thomas Coke has been accused ever since his own lifetime; and that the accusation, however frequently repeated, can be traced to sources which are both identifiable and explicable. How far this is so will, I hope, become clearer in the next half-hour. I turn then to my first question: (a) what kind of a person was Thomas Coke? and (b) what status and role did he enjoy in earlier Methodism by the 1780's? "What manner of man" was this? In almost every respect, he stood out in the company of the early Methodists. What of these, could preachers and people, were of humble origin, and this was still largely so despite Wesley's repeated exhortations over the growing prosperity of his followers and the consequent risk of falling from grace. By contrast, Coke came of a well-to-do, middle-class home, his father an apothecary who, in the absence of a qualified and conscientious medical profession, went well beyond the mere dispensing of medicines. He was, too, an only child, two earlier sons having died in infancy. The consequences of this are amply

³²John Vickers, Thomas Coke, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1969, 90-91.

³³Baker, "The British Background of Methodism in North Carolina," in Ingram, Methodism Alive in North Carolina, 1976, 17.