Introduction

Methodism at the End of the Eighteenth Century

John Wesley died in 1791, at a time when political change was happening in mainland Europe and its impact was being felt in Britain. Revolution in France was matched, on the one hand, by a growing wish for political reform among British people and, on the other, by a growing fear among the ruling classes that the bloodshed in France could happen in Britain too. Moreover, Britain was experiencing unprecedented changes of its own as a predominantly agricultural nation rapidly changed into an industrial society where large numbers of working people migrated to growing towns and cities, especially in the north of England.

Against this backcloth, historians have analysed the factors leading to Methodism's gradual separation from the Church of England and its subsequent splintering process.[1] The actual status of Methodism was itself ambiguous; was it a party within the Church of England or was it a new form of dissent? Whatever the views of Methodists themselves, in the eyes of the government and the Anglican hierarchy, they were Dissenters.[2] This identification created a particular problem for them, since some of the Dissenters of the time welcomed the French Revolution and the democratic ideas associated with it. There was therefore widespread suspicion that that Methodists, as Dissenters, had Jacobin sympathies. Wishing to avoid such suspicions, the response of the Methodist Conference was to make statements reminding members of their obligations to loyally submit to the king and his government.[3]

However, the issue of democracy was not so easily dispelled and inevitably began to affect Methodism following Wesley's death, particularly through the relationship between preachers and people. While a general egalitarianism prevailed among the preachers themselves, the role of lay people remained confined to society and circuit rather than district and conference. This was not entirely exceptionable, since the assumption that the preachers represented the laity was consistent with the pattern of

national government embodied in the unreformed House of Commons.[4] However, in an age when democratic ideas were gaining ground, it was unsurprising that the matter of lay representation would raise its head in Methodism during the 1790s.

But there were theological as well as political factors in the trend towards religious democracy. Robert Currie saw this trend as an antithesis to Wesley's doctrine of Christian Perfection or Scriptural Holiness.[5] The promotion of Christian Perfection, he argued, required an authoritarian regime which inevitably conflicted with the desire of people to have greater control of their affairs at local level. Conversely, Bernard Semmel argued that the pursuit of personal sanctification gave people of all social classes a greater sense of responsibility for their standing with God. By the same token, he reasoned that this made them realise that a lay ministry, with a high view of Christian holiness, could provide for their spiritual needs in a way which the professional ministry, in much of the country, was failing to do. He therefore saw Wesley's doctrine as the *source* of an incipient egalitarianism rather than an obstacle to it.[6]

To take Semmel's argument still further, some Methodist lay people had been stimulated to act even more independently by their attraction to individualistic forms of revivalism which went beyond Wesley's teaching on perfection, to the point at which they were in danger of becoming out of control.[7] Respected preachers such as Joseph Entwisle had serious doubts about some of the more extreme manifestations of revivalism, which looked more antinomian than genuinely pietistic.[8]

In the view of Julia Werner, the Wesleyan leadership became so absorbed with proving itself loyal to king and country that it failed to cope with either revivalism or the expression of lay opinion.[9] However, Methodism's leadership in the 1790s was not totally insensitive to the wishes of grass-roots members. For example, in an attempt to meet the wishes of both parties – 'Church' and separatists – the Conference of 1793 decided that each local society could choose, if it wished, to have a Methodist-supervised sacrament, provided that the members of the society were unanimous in this wish. Not surprisingly, finding that this gave the power of veto to any individual who chose to use it, this was amended a year later and put in more general terms. By 1795, the move towards separation was gathering momentum and Conference approved a Plan of Pacification, which entailed the agreement of people at local level on a wide range of issues. Then in 1797, power was devolved in even greater measure when further authority was transferred from Conference to Quarterly Meetings, with broader representation. The Conference reported, 'out of our great love for peace and union, and . . . to satisfy your minds, we have given up to you by far the greatest part of the Superintendent's

authority.'[10] But the right of all nominations stayed with the Superintendent and no meetings were allowed without his presence.

When, eventually, it was clear that Methodism was separating from the Church of England, certain consequences inevitably followed for a body which had not previously defined itself as a church. Societies which had met in borrowed premises now needed registered places of worship – so chapels had to be built. The itinerant preachers became *de facto* pastors, as the people no longer looked to the incumbents of their local parish churches for pastoral care. Costs rose and these were passed on to the people. In areas where there was great poverty, this caused discontent and even resistance well into the next century. In some cases, the Conference had little alternative but to heed local reactions, as at Warrington in 1796 (then in the Northwich Circuit), when Conference decided that the town's Bank Street Chapel should have its own itinerant. The leaders wrote back, said that they were well enough served by their local preachers and, in any event, they were too poor to pay an itinerant. The matter was not raised again until 1812.[11]

Despite the Conference's moves towards greater democratisation, the itinerants still held great authority at local level, with power to decree what activities should or should not take place in the societies and also disciplinary powers in relation to members. This brought inevitable tension where local people were now used to having some degree of discretion and it proved the flashpoint which brought two of the earliest Independent Methodist groups into being, in Warrington and Manchester.[12]

Initially, neither radicalism nor revivalism succeeded in splitting Methodism, but in 1796 the former issue brought one of the itinerant preachers, Alexander Kilham, into conflict with the parent body. Kilham was concerned with what he saw as the social inequalities in Methodism. Arguing through speeches and pamphlets that all men were equal *spiritually*, he pressed for a social expression of that equality by according all believing members of Methodist societies a vote at every level.[13] Eventually, he was brought to trial on charges of disrupting Methodism and duly expelled. Kilham and those sympathetic to him subsequently banded together to form the Methodist New Connexion, the first of Methodism's post-Wesley schisms.[14] While the numbers involved were not great, the process of severance indicated the underlying stresses in Methodism.[15] As Hempton has commented, Kilham had 'struck raw nerves of anti-clericalism'[16] among artisan Methodists; those nerves would be exposed even more fully as the Independent Methodists emerged over the next 25 years.

However, worship in the New Connexion was indistinguishable from that in the Wesleyan chapels and, although lay people now had a greater say in the government of local societies and the Conference of the New

Connexion, order and discipline remained. Consequently, there were defections when some found that insubordination was not accepted;[17] others left to pursue a spirituality which was more overtly revivalist. Some of the defectors from the New Connexion became part of the embryonic Independent Methodist movement which appeared to offer them greater freedom.[18] Having made a major step in defecting from the main Methodist body to become New Connexionists, a second defection probably seemed less daunting. The mould had been broken and new shapes would take time to form.

Revivalism, local autonomy, fraternal equality and opportunities for lay leadership were some of the issues that would lead to Methodist fragmentation up to the middle of the nineteenth century. Each of the new groupings would emphasise some or all of these issues, but the Independent Methodists were probably the most radical of all of them, rejecting both connexional government and the Methodist concept of the pastoral office. The following chapters will show how they formed churches in different locations and eventually coalesced to become a new denomination.

Notes to Introduction

1. For example: J.M. Turner, *Conflict and Reconciliation* (London: Epworth, 1985), 9ff.; J. Walsh 'Methodism at the end of the Eighteenth Century' in R.E. Davies and G. Rupp (eds.), *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain* (4 vols.; London: Epworth, 1965) 1:277ff.
2. See Walsh, *HMCGB,* 1:303 for the varying views within Methodism on its status.
3. *Ibid,* 304; Turner, *Conflict and Reconciliation,* 118.
4. Walsh, *HMCGB,* 1:281.
5. R. Currie, *Methodism Divided* (London: Faber, 1968), 80f.
6. B. Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution,* (London: Heinemann, 1973) 112.
7. C. Dews, *Ranters, Revivalists, Radicals and Reformers* (Leeds Methodist District, 1996), 45. See also the account of the Bandroom Methodists of Manchester in Chapter 3.
8. *Memoir of the Rev. Joseph Entwistle by his son,* (Bristol, 1848), 212f.
9. J.S. Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion: Its Background and Early History* (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984) 4.
10. *Methodist Conference Minutes,* 1797, I. 377, 392, 394.
11. *IMMag* 1907, 27.
12. See Chapter 1.
13. Alexander Kilham, *The progress of liberty amongst the people called Methodists* (Alnwick, 1796), 35f.
14. J.T. Wilkinson, 'The Rise of Other Methodist Traditions', *HMCGB,* 2:286ff.
15. Turner, *Conflict and Reconciliation,* 119.
16. D. Hempton *Methodism and Politics in British Society 1750-1850.* (London: Hutchinson & Co. 1984), 71.
17. Wilkinson, *HMCGB,* 2:290.
18. See Chapter 1.