

Who Founded Methodism? Wesley's Dependence upon Whitefield in the Eighteenth-Century English Revival

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The history of Methodism has not suffered from neglect since its origin in the eighteenth century. Hundreds of volumes have been published which focus on the main personalities of the movement, John and Charles Wesley. John Wesley is usually cited as the founder of Methodism. His brilliant leadership and organizational abilities solidified the movement once it had begun. Without John Wesley, there would never have been a formal, organized Methodist Church. However, a closer examination of the early roots of the evangelical revival show that John Wesley was in fact a follower, not a leader. Furthermore, if it had not been for the prior ministry of George Whitefield, John Wesley's name may have joined a long list of noble, but forgotten, reformers in the English church. The purpose of this article is to examine closely the roots of the evangelical revival and to illustrate the dependence John Wesley had on the ministry of George Whitefield.

My approach to this subject will be divided into five sections. Each section covers a key point or event which affected the evangelical revival and later the Methodist Church. The outline is as follows: 1) The formation of evangelical societies, 2) The ministry of open-air preaching, 3) The "Founder of Methodism," as George Whitefield was called by his contemporaries, 4) The early organization of Methodism, 5) The spread of the revival to Scotland, Wales, and the America Colonies.

The Formation of Evangelical Societies

In November 1729, John Wesley became a full-time tutor at Oxford. His younger brother Charles, as a student at Oxford, met regularly with other serious, students for Bible study, prayer, and weekly attendance at Holy Communion.

Because John was older and had prestige as an Oxford tutor, he became the natural leader of the small religious study circle. ¹ This so-called Holy Club, led by John and Charles Wesley, was not evangelical. Its members knew nothing of the new birth. Rather, members attempted to merit salvation through acts of benevolence and personal piety.

When Whitefield attended Oxford in 1732, he accelerated his personal search for God. He became more outwardly pious than he had ever been, yet he lacked personal relationship with Christ. He recorded, "I now began to pray and sing Psalms thrice every day, and to fast every Friday; and to receive the Sacrament at a parish church near our college ... once a month." ² Whitefield longed to be acquainted with...

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