

Twice-Told Tales

Richard P. Heitzenrater



The Wesleyan Story

One of the nineteen children born to Samuel and Susannah Wesley was John Benjamin Wesley, named for two of his deceased siblings. When he was six, John was miraculously saved from the burning rectory at Epworth, causing his mother to fall to her knees and thank God for preserving him as “a brand plucked from the fire.” This providential deliverance gave him a sense of special destiny.

Susannah knew several languages and was John’s main theological tutor through his university days.

His brother Charles started the Holy Club at Oxford. John took it over upon his return to the University in November 1729 and the group began to meet regularly in his rooms at Lincoln College. One of his friends who soon joined the group was George Whitefield. The Holy Club thought they could earn their salvation by doing good works, so they were very active in visiting the prisons and feeding the poor. They were of one mind in matters of theology and discipline, and followed the formal Anglicanism of John Wesley.

Unwilling to succeed his father in the Epworth living, John decided to leave his position at Oxford and become the priest in Savannah, Georgia. Unfortunately, his mission and ministry there was a total disaster.

No histories of Methodism begin, “Once upon a time...” And yet many of the stories we tell about our denominational past bear about as much resemblance to historical reality as some of the fairy tales that we have enjoyed since childhood.

Recently, I drew up a list of assertions from hither and yon that are commonly part of the Methodist story but are either untrue or historically unverifiable. The list quickly reached two pages in length. With just a little cutting and pasting on the computer, I constructed a fairly complete story (*see left*) of the rise of Methodism, all of which sounded very “traditional” but **not a sentence of which was accurate or true.**

Although this beginning of the story has a very familiar ring, there are at least two dozen errors of fact in those ten sentences.*

The Wesleyan Sayings

A similar situation exists with many of Wesley’s best-known sayings. The words are often repeated without any sense of their original context or meaning. So we misquote Wesley as saying “The world is my parish,” and use the phrase as a motto for world missions, which Wesley was reticent to support in his day. We mistake his use of the biblical phrase, “If your heart is as my heart, give me your hand,” as the equivalent of “Think and let think,” forgetting that Wesley had a list of more than fifty questions that determined whether your heart had the “right” preconditions for such a handshake.

We also ignore the implications of the strong adverb “strangely” inserted before the description of his heart as “warmed.” We use his phrase “social holiness” to mean programs of “social concerns” rather than the fellowship of Christian community. We forget that the “man of one book” in fact published hundreds and read thousands of books, and threatened to dismiss preachers who claimed that, as “men of one book,” they read only the Bible.

We don’t really want to know that Wesley once wrote to his brother, “This is the mystery: I never loved God.” And we seldom plumb the depths of meaning in his final words, “The best of all is, God is with us.”

In this busy age, we tend to rely on time-worn phrases such as the above, which are repeated over and over in the literature and in sermons. The wider corpus of Wesley’s writings lay unopened, and we miss a host of other sayings that are pregnant with meaning. How often could we benefit from remembering his injunction, “Let your words be the genuine picture of your heart.” Though we are reminded at times that Wesley considered reli-

gious conversation as a means of grace, we should also probably remember that he once pointed out in the minutes of Conference, “Do not you converse too long at a time?” And how many preachers would we like to inform of Wesley’s homiletical advice: “To scream is to commit murder against God.”

Many times, people ascribe words to John Wesley that he never said or wrote. So the motto of our 1996 General Conference was the nice “Wesleyan” phrase, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity,” which Wesley never used. Likewise, “Wesley’s Rule” as listed in *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations*, has a familiar ring: “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.” It sounds very Wesleyan, but it is not to be found in Wesley.

Sources of the Problem

How do these unhistorical stories and these misuses of phrases get started? If one traces the origins of the stories, the trail often leads us back to some of the major early biographers of Wesley and historians of the movement. At times, the contemporary anti-Methodist literature contains the same perspective we now repeat. In many cases, the original misrepresentation of a story can be traced to Wesley himself. He was not interested in writing “history” as we now think of it. He was usually interested in making a point, and a slight shifting of names, telescoping of time, exaggeration of facts, often helped him make the point more strongly.

The sayings are most often misused because of our own laziness. We repeat words as we remember them, or as we want to remember them. We squeeze them into our own setting to meet our needs and we really don’t care what the original context and meaning might have been. The words take on a separate identity and meaning of their own, with only a tangential connection to Mr. Wesley—just enough to give our interpretation some authority by association. We selectively proof-text from Wesley. We impose our views on Wesley. We “update” Wesley into “modern” terminology (read “translate his meaning into our meaning”). We ignore the parts of Wesley we don’t like. We revise the parts of Wesley that challenge our positions. And

we repeat *ad infinitum* the parts of Wesley that we love.

These observations are not intended to steer people away from trying to understand, quote, and use Wesleyan ideas. Although these problems in recapturing the truth and vitality of our heritage all exist, they pale in comparison with the more serious problem: apathy toward our tradition. We cannot ignore who we have been as we look to who we can become.

Tradition and History

Traditions are grounded in history. Good history depends upon careful research, accurate facts, informed interpretations, and appropriate conclusions. But in the end, whether the enterprise is worthwhile or not depends upon how well it contributes to our self-understanding—as individuals and groups. Traditions also entail interpretation, propriety, and understanding. And the traditions we hold and practice almost always reflect what we perceive to be true and important about us from the past.

While the answers that traditions give us might tend to oversimplify the questions that comprise the historian’s task, we should also recognize that such simplicity often contributes to understanding. If then history is an important part of our quest for self-understanding and tradition is also an attempt to express and celebrate important aspects of our self-understanding, perhaps we should try to see how each can help the other in the process.

Recapturing the Vitality of our Heritage

We have a grand history and a lively heritage, neither of which need be exaggerated or skewed in order to be exciting and helpful. We don’t have to misrepresent Wesley as a gifted orator (that was Whitefield) in order to point out that what he said was the channel for the Spirit by which thousands of lives were changed.

Many of the stories that we tell from our past are not only wrong, they are boring. They don’t even sound real. They are cleaned up versions of real life. They read like the “lives of the saints.” In an age where as many marriages fail as succeed, perhaps we should tell the story of John’s failed marriage and try to learn something that will help our times.

We don’t have to be triumphalist in

order to show that Methodism has made a mark on the world. Perhaps we should stop telling stories about early Methodism spreading like wildfire across England and instead recognize that the movement grew relatively slowly and remained a very small group because of the enforced demands of discipleship.

If we look at Wesley’s words more closely in context, we might discover more than a simplistic application. It might be valuable to realize that by looking upon “all the world” as his parish, Wesley was talking about breaking down the limitations of parish boundaries in England and arguing for innovative ministries to meet local needs wherever one might be.

Wesley’s ideas may have been grounded in the eighteenth century, but they often deal with issues that are still pertinent today, if we are willing to press them a bit. Perhaps when we discuss the “quadrilateral,” we could spend as much time talking about the implications of the term “scripture” as we spend debating the concept of “primacy.”

Wesley still has much to say to us today. Our heritage has many valuable lessons for us to learn—if we will look hard with a critical eye and listen carefully with an appreciative ear. Ray Petry used to emphasize the necessity of the critical temper in the practice of tradition. Wesley himself looked hard at his Christian and Anglican heritage as he shaped his own perspective, and he was willing to change his views in the face of sound criticism. The process of passing on the heritage depends upon both the faithful practice and the critical temper.

We can best honor our heritage on the occasion of celebrating Wesley’s three hundredth birthday by remembering who we were, as accurately as possible, and thereby envisioning who God can help us be. □

**The electronic edition of Circuit Rider includes identification and correction of the 12 errors. Go to www.cokesbury.com and select Circuit Rider magazine. Select this article from the contents page of the May/June 2003 issue.*



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Twice Told Tales (Part 2)
Identification and Correction of the 12 errors

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Samuel Wesley could not remember whether Susanna (note spelling) had given him eighteen or nineteen children, and the records are inconclusive. Earlier deceased children of Samuel and Susanna were named John, Benjamin, and John Benjamin, but copies of baptismal records list our John without a middle name. When he was five, John was saved from the burning rectory at Epworth. There is no record that his mother ever referred to him as “a brand plucked from the fire,” much less on the spot. John consistently denied that this occasion gave him any sense of special destiny. There is no evidence at all that Susanna knew several languages, rather the contrary. She did tutor John as a child and correspond with him throughout his life, as did Samuel, but she was not a sophisticated theologian and would not compare with the many theologians that John read and heard during his university days.

Late in life, in order to gain some power in the midst of conflict with his brother John, Charles Wesley claimed that he started the movement at Oxford, which is unsupported by contemporary evidence. Charles relied upon John’s prior experience for patterns for thought and action. The group was not called the “Holy Club” at the beginning. It did not have an recognizable identity even when John came back to the University in June of 1729. When the group did begin meeting regularly the following year, the rooms of all four members provided the location. John had almost no contact at all with George Whitefield while he was at Oxford; Whitefield associated with the group through Charles and very late in their history. The group was called “the Holy Club” for only six months or so in 1730-31 and after 1732 were generally called “Methodists.” They did not follow a pattern of works-righteousness, but as early as the beginning of 1733 developed an inward focus that came to be known as Christian perfection. Their interest in visiting the prisons and feeding the poor arose from a desire to love their neighbor, the second half of the great virtue. The four dozen persons associated with Oxford Methodism exhibited a great diversity of opinion on almost every matter of theology and discipline. Although Wesley followed some of the formalities of Anglicanism, he exhibited some of the “low church” tendencies of the Puritanism of his mother.

Although he first declined his father’s request to succeed him at Epworth, John tried unsuccessfully to lobby for the position after Samuel died. He did not consider leaving his fellowship at Oxford until after his marriage in 1751. The SPG appointed him a volunteer missionary to Georgia in 1735; he was subsequently appointed priest of Savannah in 1736. His mission and ministry had mixed results: he revitalized the life of the Savannah parish, he started a Methodist society in Frederica, and in contacts with various groups of colonists he honed his language skills in German, French, Spanish, and Italian, but his contacts with the native Americans did not live up to his expectations and his personal relationship with Sophy Hopkey led to trumped-up indictments from a Savanna grand jury, which led to his abrupt exodus from America.