

The Methodist story

By [Grant Wacker](#) in the [November 1, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Methodism: Empire of the Spirit

David Hempton
Yale University Press

In 1868 General U.S. Grant remarked that the United States possessed three great parties: “The Republican, the Democratic, and the Methodist Church.” More recently my colleague Stanley Hauerwas quipped that “long after Christianity is dead and gone, the United Methodist Church will still be flourishing.” When I share those wisecracks with my preponderantly Methodist seminary students, they invariably react with nervous laughter. There is just enough truth in them to make the comments worrisome as well as funny. David Hempton’s brilliantly provocative book tells us why.

The book holds two aims. The first is to look at Methodism as an international enterprise—a global empire of the spirit. The second is to penetrate beneath the surface of Methodist institutions to grasp the “heart of something both elusive and important.” Both aims assume that Methodism has been more than the sum of its parts.

Hempton, professor of church history at Boston University, pursues those goals in eight tautly argued essays. He explores how Methodism grew from a barely perceptible impulse in the Church of England in the 18th century to a foremost expression of Christianity in the modern world; how the mixing of Enlightenment rationality and evangelical enthusiasm resulted in Methodism’s perennial doubleness of vision; how the Methodist message was heard, internalized and enacted in a bewildering variety of social and geographic locations; how opposition from outsiders fostered strength while conflict between insiders fostered weakness; how money was raised, spent and symbolized; how women and racial and ethnic minorities found nourishment in the Methodist message; how the movement managed to circle the globe completely; and finally, how a gaggle of theories about secularization might help us understand Methodism’s decline in the latter half of the 20th century. Though the eight chapters interlock, each stands as an independent essay. Since I teach in a trinitarian divinity school, it seems apt to try to convey the flavor of the whole by focusing on three chapters.

The first chapter, “Competition and Symbiosis,” asks a disarmingly simple question: How did it happen that a religious revival that first took root among the “flotsam and jetsam” of English society in the 1730s became, in just 150 years, one of the major religious movements of modern times? At the beginning of the 20th century, Methodism posted 9 million members, 36 million adherents and 150,000 ministers and lay preachers. It owned more than a half billion dollars worth of property, including hundreds of schools on six continents. Methodist steeples graced the skylines of villages, towns and cities everywhere. More important, John Wesley’s theological children had moved to somewhere near the center of the culture in most of the English-speaking world. As late as 1950 Methodists in the U.S. alone numbered nearly 10 million members and claimed 6.4 percent of the population. In the 2004 election three of the four candidates for the nation’s top jobs were Methodists. So again, how did all that come about?

Hempton is too subtle to give a single-cause answer, but he does suggest that evolutionary biology offers a clue. The secret lies in the symbiosis between the organism and the environment. More precisely, Methodist growth took place not in isolation but as an integral part of the New World order of the 18th and 19th centuries. Though Methodism remained a subspecies of the old Anglican establishment, it proved able to adapt to popular demands for seriousness over frivolity, cooperation over competition, compassion over force, and egalitarianism over deference. Hempton admits that Methodists’ special packaging of means and ends—evangelical conversion, emotional assurance, entire sanctification, itinerant preaching, bottom-up associationalism, top-down connectionalism, communal discipline and national regeneration—is well appreciated. Less well appreciated is how all of those ingredients worked together to create an elastic, mobile, aggressively expansive movement. Methodism survived as the fittest of the many religious options available.

Hempton’s third chapter, “The Medium and the Message,” says little about the message but a great deal about the medium. As for the message, he tells us that any effort to reduce Wesley’s theology to a fixed quadrilateral of reason, experience, scripture and tradition falls “spectacularly” wide of the mark. Instead, Wesley’s theology must be viewed as a dynamic quest for holy living, fueled by scripture and divine love. Even there, Hempton suggests, we come closest to the living pulse of Wesley’s thinking not by reading his texts but by asking what he was willing to fight for. Versus Moravian quietism, he fought for active spirituality. Versus Calvinist particularism, he fought for the universal availability of God’s grace. And versus almost everyone, he fought for the possibility of Christian perfection.

If Hempton skirts the intricacies of Wesley’s theology, he delivers a virtuoso performance in showing how Wesley’s words were translated into the rhythms of daily life. First of all, Methodists were noisy folk. They

preached, exhorted, sang, cried and shouted. Those sounds are forever lost, but their echoes linger in a lavish array of texts. Fortunately, Methodists were furious record keepers and soul examiners. Hempton provides a close reading of the rich testimonial literature. The accounts are as different as snowflakes yet, taken together, reflect enduring patterns. Predictably, they showcase the many modalities of the experience of conversion, assurance and sanctification. Less predictably, they showcase other experiences too, including fear of backsliding, terror of death, the critical role of sermons, the importance of mutual support, the drama of moving from a state of sin to a state of grace and, of course, the sheer joy of the telling.

Standing close by the testimonies are the sermons, many of which survive only as spidery outlines on manuscript pages; the yellowed minutes of the band, class and society meetings; and, above all, the songs. I like to tell my classes (with a wink) that if Charles Wesley, who authored 9,000 hymns and poems, had never existed, we might never have heard of John. Hempton does not go that far. But he showers attention on the content of the lyrics, the catchiness of the tunes, the ordering of the songs in the songbooks, the lustiness of the singing, and the life of music in the life of the tradition.

“Methodists absorbed their faith through the words of their hymns and sacred verse.” No wonder. The songs, like the sermons, were practical. Jammed with active verbs and first-person pronouns, they encouraged pilgrims to shun the perils and embrace the promises of the Christian journey. They spoke of melting experiences, freedom in the spirit, communal support and the joys of Zion.

If the book has a jewel in its crown, it is the seventh chapter, “Mapping and Mission.” The first of its many virtues is that it exists at all. We know a lot about European and North American missionary endeavors but surprisingly little about Methodists’ contribution. For Hempton, the study of Methodist missions represents more than just filling holes in the literature. Rather it serves as a key for unlocking the whole enterprise. “To penetrate to the heart of Methodism as a missionary movement,” he tells us, “is as good a way as any to understand the essence of the movement in its entirety.” And what was that essence? The clue lies in the action-packed terms that drive the narrative: “momentum,” “restless mobility,” “expansionist dynamic,” “rise to globalism,” “expansion begat expansion” and, most memorably, from a 19th-century African bishop, “spread or die.”

Missionary history is fiercely contested terrain, yet Hempton proves evenhanded. On one side, he offers little comfort to modern-day triumphalists. He makes clear that Methodist missions spread through the arteries of two great and expanding cultural impulses: British colonialism and American commerce. Everywhere, Methodist missionaries faced a fight. In Latin America, they went toe-to-toe with the Roman Catholic Church; in Europe, they took on the “protected monopolies” of the state churches; in the American West, they had to deal with other whites’ treachery to the Indians. On the flip side, Hempton also makes clear that the gains, though modest, were real, especially in the American West and in Korea. By 1875 the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church was supporting more than 3,000 domestic missionaries alone.

Several themes recur in the book as a whole. One is the symbiotic fit between Methodism and America, especially the opportunities it afforded religious entrepreneurs in the 19th century. Not the least of history’s ironies is that just 150 years after Wesley’s death, three-fourths of the world’s Methodists resided in the nation whose birth he fervently opposed.

A second theme is the “dialectical friction” that has marked most aspects of Methodist life. Competing ideals have marched like twin soldiers through the tradition’s history: rationality versus enthusiasm, discipline versus ecstasy, wealth versus frugality, learning versus innocence, structure versus voluntarism.

A third theme, more implied than hammered in, is Methodism’s steady accommodation to the conventions of middle-class life. The book’s epigraph, which comes from George Eliot’s *Adam Bede*, is telling. There was a time, Eliot wrote in 1858, when Methodism represented not “sleek grocers, sponging preachers, and hypocritical

jargon,” but men and women who drank in a faith that “linked their thoughts with the past, lifted their imagination above the sordid details of their own narrow lives, and suffused their souls with the sense of a pitying, loving, infinite Presence.”

Finally there is the theme of global Pentecostalism, which Hempton comes close to crowning as Methodism’s spiritual child. To be sure, there were differences. Methodism emerged from a state church, retained establishment trappings, occupied Gothic sanctuaries, colonized corporate boardrooms and built great universities. But the commonalities outweigh the differences. Both Methodism and Pentecostalism represented a revolution from below. Both grew without external sponsorship, embraced youthful mobile populations, gave a public role to women, featured voice over text, exploited open spaces in the social system, aggressively globalized their message, adapted to local settings, attracted the marginalized, and established clear yet selective boundaries between themselves and the surrounding culture. Just two paragraphs into the narrative, Hempton appreciatively quotes Philip Jenkins’s prediction that Pentecostals are likely to number 1 billion adherents before 2050. And he closes by stating, with evident satisfaction, that the next Christendom “would not look the same if Methodism had never existed.”

With a book so perceptive (and so charitable to other historians), it would be churlish to ask for more. But for the sake of the sport I will toss out two suggestions. The first pertains to the writing. Though the text glitters with sparkling one-liners, it is crafted with such economy that one desires amplification. Too many ideas are compressed into too few lines. The next edition really should be—I hardly can believe I am saying this about a history book—a hundred pages longer.

The second suggestion pertains to sins of omission. Briefly put, we need more clarity about the components of Methodist identity. What did it take to be Methodist in 1750? 1850? 1950? Last week? How did this vary regionally? Hempton argues that it is possible to discern a “recognizably Methodist, not just evangelical,” pattern of belief and behavior wherever the tradition established itself. To say the least, this claim requires elaboration and parsing. Consider, for example, current Methodist attitudes about same-sex unions in Washington state and in the Ivory Coast.

The problem here is that over the centuries the Methodist tent has proved remarkably capacious. In America alone, it has accommodated contemporaries or near-contemporaries as different as Francis Asbury and Richard Allen; Phoebe Palmer and Borden Parker Bowne; Hillary Clinton and George Bush. But how useful is a tent so big, with flaps so wide, as a category of historical analysis? When historians say that someone was, or is, Methodist, have they said anything in particular?

Hempton’s narrative intimates that the sun is setting on the Methodist empire of the spirit and is not likely to rise again. But it also intimates that besides counting noses in the pews, there may be better ways to measure success. Assessing faithfulness is one of them. By that measure, the rows of seminarians who file into my classroom fall after fall, expecting to work hard and to be paid little to serve the church they love, inspire confidence that a century from now another historian will write the sequel to Hempton’s masterful account. Who knows? She may call it *Methodism: Harvest of the Spirit*.