Chapter 11

Australian Methodist Religious Experience

Glen O'Brien

Australian Methodist religious experience has its roots in German Pietism, English Puritanism, the Anglican 'holy living' tradition and the manner in which those tributary streams converged in the eighteenth-century evangelical awakening. John Wesley's religious experience was shaped not only by these sources but also by the spirituality of the ante-Nicene church and ascetic mysticism. Though he was in some ways more Catholic than Protestant in his outlook, it was Martin Luther's doctrine of justification by faith as mediated through Wesley's contact with Moravians in both London and the colony of Georgia that would lead to a profound revolution in his life. After 13 years as an Anglican priest, disappointed in his own efforts to achieve perfection, his evangelical conversion of 24 May 1738 brought with it a deep sense of the assurance of his salvation. After this experience of 'the new birth', his life took on a very different complexion. From being a failed rector and a failed missionary, unlucky in love and unsuccessful in religious aspirations, he became arguably the most remarkable religious figure of the eighteenth century. Through his organisational genius, tireless open-air preaching, spiritual counsel and benevolent dictatorship over 'the people called Methodist', he set a pattern for Protestant religious life that would come to characterise the following century and continues to shape evangelical piety down to the present time.

The Religion of the Heart

Wesley's conversion experience emphasises that at the heart of Christian experience is not uncertainty, guilt and shame but a joyful sense of God's acceptance. To know in one's heart that God is a loving Father who has truly forgiven one's sins is a very liberating thing indeed, bringing with it a sense of filial acceptance. Some historians, most notably perhaps E.P. Thompson in his influential The Making of the English Working Class, have given the impression that eighteenth-century Methodism was a rather gloomy affair of sexually repressed people, riddled with anxiety; tortured souls looking for deliverance
from this suffering existence whose ‘Sabbath orgasms of feeling’ made more possible their exploitation as a labour force.\(^1\) The voices found in the diaries, letters and contemporary accounts provide us with a very different picture. Certainly there were some oddballs and Methodists exhibited their share of religious mania, but overall they give the impression of being the happy children of a God of love, assured of acceptance and set free from guilt to live for the good of their neighbours.

In a sense Wesley’s own experience became a kind of template of Methodist religious experience. A person would hear the Gospel of God’s love in Christ, universally available to all, and begin to experience the conviction that his or her sins were an affront to the holiness of God. This would lead to repentance, understood not only as a sorrow for sin but a determined effort to amend one’s life. The attempt would prove futile, as sin’s hold would be experienced as simply too great to be broken by human religious effort, no matter how heroic that effort might be. What was needed was ‘faith’, not faith as intellectual assent to a set of propositions, but faith as *fiducia* – faith as trust. It is at this point that the profoundly personal and experiential nature of Methodist religious experience is brought into focus. It was not enough to know that Jesus was the Saviour; I must know that he is *my* Saviour; that he died for *me*, took away *my* sin and accepted *me* into his favour. Eighteenth-century Methodism was the religion of the first-person personal pronoun.

Once the repentant sinner had been ‘born again’, he or she could expect to receive an ‘assurance’ or ‘witness of the Spirit’ bringing a deep certainty of adoption into God’s family. Salvation did not stop there, however. Along with justification (being put right with God) came sanctification (being made like God). The believer was expected to make every effort, assisted always by the grace of God, to make salvation more certain, by living a holy life. A second experience known as ‘entire sanctification’ or ‘Christian perfection’, at which time the believer’s heart would be cleansed from its inward disposition towards sin and filled with love for God and neighbour, was also to be anticipated. Though Wesley explicitly denied that he possessed this ‘second blessing’, he passionately urged it upon others and took at face value the testimony of many who did claim it.

This pattern of repentance, faith, assurance and holiness encapsulates the four most important aspects of eighteenth-century Methodist experience. Its biblical basis is found in the New Testament, especially in Paul’s letters (Galatians and Romans, in particular) and in the First Epistle of John, which, with its focus on love, seemed to have been a special favourite of John Wesley’s. Historically these themes are broadly traceable in Augustine’s doctrines of sin and grace, Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith and the Puritan and Moravian doctrines of the new birth and sanctification. (Though ‘perfectionism’ was mostly rejected outside of Methodism, and at times within it, the importance of holiness understood as ‘progressive sanctification’, remained intact.) With many variations these three themes came to characterise the religious life of transatlantic Evangelicalism and were transmitted to the southern hemisphere through the hugely successful missionary enterprise of the nineteenth century.

**Methodist Means**

John Wesley’s Oxford classmate George Whitefield was by all accounts the greatest orator among the eighteenth-century Methodists. Through his contact with the New England Congregationalist Jonathan Edwards he contributed to the dissemination of the new Evangelicalism in British America. As great a preacher as he was, Whitefield by his own admission lacked the organisational ability of Wesley, choosing not to identify himself too closely with the machinery of any particular religious society, preferring instead the freedom of itinerancy.\(^2\)

Yet it was the special genius of Methodism that it added to Whitefield’s innovation of open-air preaching a connectional system of small group meetings for preserving and nurturing its converts. In this way, the fruit of what was often, in its initial stages, a very emotional and direct experience could be preserved in a long-term accountability-based community. The chief means established were band meetings, class meetings, love feasts and watch-night/covenant services, all encapsulated within the United Society of Methodists. Since these are covered in Chapter 12 on Methodist worship they will not be described in detail here. It is worth noting, however, that this communal structure functioned as the machinery of early Methodist religious experience and that the class meeting was its most important feature.

One did not have to be a believer in the full sense in order to participate in a class.\(^3\) The only necessary qualifications were a desire to flee from the wrath to come and to be saved from your sins. So the class meetings were mixed groups of established believers and ‘penitents’ – the type of person one might today refer to as a ‘seeker’. The class leader would routinely ask a set of very confronting questions about what sins members had committed that week, what temptations

---


\(^3\) Not a ‘class’ for instruction; the word is drawn from the Latin *clavis* for division, as in ‘classification’. A class meeting was a particular number of Methodists gathered together from the larger Society.
Methodist Revivals

One very efficient means of propagating evangelical religious experience was the 'camp meeting' or 'revival' – a protracted series of meetings, initially in rural settings but later transplanted to the urban context, designed to elicit as many conversions as possible. In the British context a certain amount of ambivalence towards revivalism had been exhibited by Wesleyans. This was not primarily because of the revivalists' aim of making converts and deepening the spiritual lives of believers; it was the fact that such activity was off the circuit plan, and thus not subject to Conference control, that led to their being viewed as an undesirable import. A number of the minor Methodist bodies had their origins in revivalism. Hugh Bourne and William Clowes, inspired by American camp meeting revivalist Lorenzo Dow, found themselves on the outer rim because of their commitment to the camp meetings at Mow Cop in Staffordshire, which led to the formation of the Primitive Methodist Church. The Bible Christian Church also emerged out of irregular revival meetings.

Notwithstanding the uncertainty about the camp meeting format, all Methodists were hungry for revival throughout the nineteenth century. Certainly in America, revivals were part and parcel of the machinery of Methodism and a key to its success on the frontier. The supernaturalism of these events and the strangeness of the phenomena that accompanied them were more akin to what we have come to expect of a Pentecostal meeting. The shakes, the jerks, shouting fits, fainting fits and other highly emotionally charged phenomena were characteristic of Methodist gatherings on the American frontier, in spite of the misgivings of John Wesley's more sedate representatives, such as Thomas Rankin. Francis Asbury, on the other hand, though he was himself too down to earth to be given to such flights of ecstasy, understood that this was what the people of the frontier wanted, it made converts and it helped Methodism grow. Why interfere with such an effective means of propagating the movement, even if it did clash with one's own personal preferences?

Revivals were eagerly reported in Methodist newspapers and throughout the nineteenth-century Methodist world 'there was a perennial call for revival, revival, and still more revival'. Australian Methodists were no exception. The first recorded revival in NSW was in Sydney in 1835, followed by others among emancipists at Windsor and Castlereagh in 1840–41, with corresponding increases in church membership figures. In January 1835 William Schofield rode from his Windsor circuit to Sydney to attend a love feast presided over by Joseph Orton. Schofield 'made a few remarks upon the importance of waiting upon the Lord in holy expectation of receiving the accomplishment of his promises' and testified to a strong sense that the meeting should not end at the usual time while the power of the Lord was so strong upon the meeting. Orton agreed, and the meeting continued till midnight, before which time, in Schofield's words, 'Brother Simpson and I were wholly sanctified.' This incident illustrates the free-flowing nature of Methodist gatherings during this period, before being replaced by more formal structured services.

Throughout the rest of the century a good deal of organisational energy was put into revivals as part of the machinery of Methodist expansion. There were significant revivals among Cornish copper miners in South Australia at Burra (1858, 1862) and Moonta (1875). David Hilliard has shown how Methodist leaders in South Australia hoped and prayed for a repeat of the Wesleyan revival of the eighteenth century and how unprecedented growth rates in the 1880s gave them cause for such confidence, even if, as it turned out, these rates of growth were never to be repeated. One loss connected with the success of revivalism was the discontinuance of the Anglican Morning Prayer and Holy Communion services, though these were still employed by Wesleyans in some larger city churches.

8 D. Hillard, Popular Revivalism in South Australia from the 1870s to the 1920s, 2nd edn (Adelaide: Uniting Church Historical Society, South Australia, 2005), pp. 1, 6.
Though Australasian Methodism was very much a part of 'Greater Britain', and visiting revivalists such as Henry Varley and Thomas Cook were British, there were also some links with American Methodist revivalism. Perhaps the most significant in the nineteenth century was the evangelist William 'California' Taylor (1821–1902). Taylor was an evangelist in the same style as Charles Grandison Finney, utilising many of the (in)famous 'revival measures' recorded in Finney's *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, which had drawn so much criticism from Finney's 'old-school' Calvinist colleagues in America, and simultaneously proven so successful in winning converts. Taylor and members of the congregation would counsel and pray for penitents at the 'altar' (usually the Communion rail) until they 'found peace', testified to having gained remission of sins and were then enrolled in a Wesleyan class for ongoing nurture. Taylor also expected the children of good Wesleyan parents to find this experience of the new birth, and the pastoral address of the 1864 Australasian Wesleyan Conference reported many such conversions. All in all, Taylor claimed responsibility for bringing over 11,000 souls to Christ during his first Australasian tour.

Growth in Victorian Methodism was significant during Taylor's sojourn in Australia, though more extensive research would be needed before any causal link could be asserted. Membership grew from 6 per cent between 1860 and 1862 to 34 per cent in the years 1863–65. NSW also may have benefited from Taylor's itinerating. There was a 22 per cent increase in membership there between 1864 and 1865, after a static period of non-growth in the previous three years. Daniel Draper, who had been an early advocate of Taylor's work in Victoria, came later to have reservations about the genuineness of the conversions, and concluded that in the end no permanent good was effected by Taylor's ministry. On the other hand, Smith and Blamires, contemporaries of Taylor, strongly defended his work, rendering a favourable verdict with the hindsight of 20 years, over which time they would have had adequate opportunity to record any significant fall-out rate. They estimated that 16 colonial ministers working in the 1880s were Taylor converts.

Economic history can shed some light on revivals. Timothy L. Smith, in his classic work *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America*, saw economic stability as favourable to revivals and boom as detrimental. In his study of the 'Burned-Over District' of Western New York, W.R. Cross determined that a moderate but not severe depression favoured revivals, and that the revival cycle was inverse to the business cycle. This may be confirmed in NSW and South Australian Methodism where there was an increase in membership and successful revivals between 1856 and 1870 in the face of drought, unemployment and falling wage rates. The more prosperous years of the 1870s when both colonies experienced an economic boom saw a decrease in membership and fewer revivals. In turn the crop failures, drought and rising unemployment of the 1880s saw a corresponding increase in members being received on trial in both NSW and South Australia.

A commitment to social welfare and social reform had some impact on the lessening of enthusiasm for revivals, but it was the salvation of individual souls which remained central to Methodism's task. Methodists were as much concerned for and active in social reform as other Protestants of the period, but they clung perhaps more resolutely than any others to the insistence that it was an explicitly Christian reform that was required, spearheaded by personal conversion, understood as the only valid catalyst for social change.

**Entire Sanctification**

The doctrine and experience of 'Christian perfection' or 'entire sanctification' remained an important part of Australian Methodist spirituality from the Church's struggling colonial beginnings through to its growth and consolidation in the late nineteenth century. An expression of Methodist confidence in enabling grace, the doctrine drew its optimism and pragmatism from Enlightenment ideas of progress, and was at the same time a religious expression of Romanticism with its stress on an intensely personal experience of transformation.
Testimonies to an experience of entire sanctification were frequently heard among Australian Methodists of the nineteenth century. Certainly the doctrine was reinforced at a later stage by representatives of the American Holiness movement, but its true trajectory is in a straight line from John Wesley to the earliest preachers in the colony of NSW. William Schofield recorded in his journal on 26 November 1825, ‘the Lord took full possession of my heart by cleansing it from all sin ... and in the same precise moment I was divinely assured that I was sanctified throughout body, soul and spirit.’ In 1865 ‘California’ Taylor testified to entire sanctification saying that he had received it 20 years prior and had openly testified to it 17 years before. In NSW, William G. Taylor, John Watsford, J.S. Austin and J.A. Bowring all preached perfection and some testified to a present enjoyment of the experience. John Cowley Coles, who visited and prayed with Ned Kelly at the Melbourne Gaol while the latter awaited execution, included in his memoirs a chapter on ‘The Doctrine of Entire Sanctification by Faith.’

It is doubtful, however, that entire sanctification was ever the everyday concern of colonial Methodists. Rather it seems to have featured prominently in certain revivals at irregular intervals. A revival in 1835 saw many testify to ‘the blessing’ and a Holiness Association was formed in Sydney in 1885, which met monthly after an initial meeting drew a crowd of 1,200 people. York Street was the headquarters of Holiness concern in Sydney but its influence spread as far abroad as Wagga Wagga, the Hunter Valley and Kempsey. According to R.B. Walker, ‘Open profession of Christian perfection was apt to arouse feelings of repulsion and rejection among mere sinners, who perceived serious flaws in the possessors of perfect love. Most Wesleyans were content to believe in the doctrine and not to enjoy it and claim it for themselves.’

Some degree of interest in the doctrine and experience of sanctification did, however, continue well into the twentieth century. Even such a ‘Methodist moderniser’ as Edward Sugden, Master of Queen’s College, Melbourne, was a keen exponent of entire sanctification as a central doctrine of Methodism, though he, like others in the early twentieth century, attempted a reformulation of the doctrine on the basis of newer insights. In 1928 Sugden was able to include ‘entire sanctification’ as one of ‘the doctrines emphasised by John Wesley’ at a

---

25 The Spectator 54, no. 13, 28 March 1928, p. 299.
the Australian Methodist landscape, becoming a matter of purely academic and historic interest. Nonetheless, perfectionism should be seen as a distinguishing feature of early Australian Methodism, apart from which its spirituality was hard to distinguish from other Protestant denominations.30

A Shift in Emphasis

The 1901 census reported 504,101 self-described Methodists, comprising 13.3 per cent of the population. It is difficult to get an accurate picture of the numerical strength of Methodism, however, since there is a discrepancy between adherence and attendance, as well as a distinction among Methodists between formal members and more casual adherents. In 1907 a decline in church membership was registered for the first time and this decline would continue unchecked through most of the century, though there was quite dramatic growth between 1945 and the end of the 1960s.31 Tracing statistical change may be seen as a simple matter of tracking numbers; attempting to identify possible causes of spiritual change is a complex and difficult business and one should be cautious of setting up simplistic schemes. Those who harbour the dream that a return to revivalism is the way forward for today's moribund Church may point to the loss of confidence in the older style spirituality as a cause of the present dilemma. Others, convinced that the methods of the past cannot simply be applied to the challenges of the present, look to other measures of spiritual health.

The loss of the class meeting during this period is sometimes cited as a reason for a corresponding loss of spiritual fervour but it is more likely to be the case that the reverse was true – the overall decline in the spiritual fervour of Methodists led to a loss of interest in the spiritual hot-house atmosphere of the class meeting. In any case, by 1890 participation in class meetings had fallen to somewhere around a quarter to a third of members.32 The General Conference of 1891 replaced the class meeting as a test of membership with attendance at a monthly congregational meeting. In 1904 even this minimum requirement was dropped. Whatever the direct result of this may have been on Methodist piety it was certainly the end of the class meeting's function as perhaps the most distinctive ecclesial feature of Methodism. Involvement in interdenominational Christian Endeavour groups came to replace the older classes; by 1900 one-third of Wesleyans were members of Christian Endeavour groups.

Renate Howe has traced a movement in the demographic of nineteenth-century Wesleyan Methodism in Victoria from skilled artisan to small business owner which had an effect in lowering the religious heat of Methodists.

This occupational mobility resulted in a change of religious attitudes rather than religious affiliation. Few of the Wesleyans who had 'improved' themselves joined either the Anglican or Presbyterian churches, but found themselves less enthusiastic about, and with less time for, Methodist Pietism. Many avoided the excesses of spiritual fervour associated with the class meeting ... [Such] occupational mobility aided the decline of pietistic religion among the Wesleyans.33

The loss of the class meeting necessarily meant the loss of class leaders, which contributed to a more clergy-led church, with less work for the laity, though the local preacher tradition remained quite strong. The newer more critical approach to the study of the Bible led to a loss of religious certainty and to division between liberals and conservatives. By 1901 Methodism had been 'rounded into the common pattern of Protestant nonconformity ... its pietism had become more sophisticated; its individualism was now tempered by the social gospel; and its perfectionism and revivalism were now peripheral rather than central to its vigorous life.34

The model of conversion shifted from crisis to process as more and more people simply 'grew up Methodist' rather than experiencing a dramatic conversion as had been the case in the earlier period. William C.H. Brimton, in a testimony given at the 1928 Victorian Conference, illustrates this well. 'I have known no great moment of conversion [but] I was intensified by a period in Cliff College.35 The admission of having known 'no great moment of conversion' is typical of the published testimonies which appeared in The Spectator during this period. For Edwin Gordon Harris it was 'the earliest influences of [his] home [which] made for a real belief in Christ'. Ralph G. Hunt could speak only of 'a deepened sense of call to be an ambassador for Jesus. 'There was a call for Home Missionaries', recalled Philip H. James, 'and the thought came insistently to me: "Why should I not offer?"' Arthur G. Jewell's testimony is certainly no 'Damascus Road experience' when he professes, 'I am the product of the quiet routine work of our Methodist Church.' Similarly, Herbert W.R. Malseed is able to say, 'My Christian experience is a story of progression through the various departments of our Sunday School and Church.' George A. Osmond makes the origin of his sense of calling clear: 'I had the privilege of being brought up in a

30 Walker, 'Growth and Typology', p. 344.
34 Walker, 'Growth and Typology', p. 347.
35 The Spectator 54, no. 13, 28 March 1928, p. 296.
Christian home. My call to preach came rather through the need for men, than by a direct call of the Spirit.\textsuperscript{36}

Hugh Gilmore, an influential though perhaps not typical Primitive Methodist leader, spoke in the 1890s of conversion as 'a continual process going on and on' rather than 'one definite spiritual condition to which we attain by one great exercise of faith in one supreme moment.'\textsuperscript{37} The English Methodist W. Russell Malby, concerned at the lack of definiteness in Methodist testimony, lamented the 'poor exchange' where the 'ladder let down from heaven, whose foot was on the earth and top in the skies' had been replaced by 'an escalator with its foot in the Sunday School and its top in Church membership.'\textsuperscript{38} Writing of the British Methodism of the 1930s, Gordon S. Wakefield recalled that 'although the necessity of "evangelical conversion" was implied in the tradition ... the majority of the members were rather squeamish about it, dubious about public appeals, frightened of emotionalism.'\textsuperscript{39}

This trend continued well into the twentieth century. Kenneth Dempsey's research on rural Methodists in an anonymous rural community (now known to be Uralla) in northern NSW in 1966 showed that lay Methodists of that period understood the role of the Church in 'fundamentally moralistic terms'. Fewer than a dozen (of the 109 people interviewed) ascribed to the Church a theological role. The bulk thought of it as a useful agency for teaching the young 'the importance of such things as kindness, courtesy, frugality and honesty, and the virtues of participation in family life.'\textsuperscript{40}

Much of the revivalist fervour of nineteenth-century Methodism may be seen as finding ongoing expression in Pentecostalism, birthed as it was from a Methodist matrix. The Pentecostal pioneer Janet 'Mummy' Lancaster, born in Williamstown, Victoria, was a Methodist who, in 1908, experienced 'speaking in tongues'. She opened the Good News Hall in North Melbourne in 1909, which became the centre of the Pentecostal Mission she would lead until her death in 1934. Lancaster wrote an editorial in 1930 in which she displayed her Methodist origins and sought legitimisation of her cause in statements on Pentecost made by prominent Methodist clergymen. She quoted headlines from \textit{The Spectator} and speeches given at the Methodist centenary celebrations. The Rev. T.C. Rentoul admitted the Church's 'impotence and failure with a sense of shame, readily allowing that education had increased the power of analysis, which deadens the tendency to emotion.'\textsuperscript{41}

Lancaster bemoaned 'the fellowship so familiar and so vital to the Methodism of an earlier day [as] almost nonexistent' and saw a revival of Pentecostal manifestations as the answer to the problem.\textsuperscript{42} The Methodist Church did not welcome the new Pentecostal message and the 1935 Conference directed Methodist minister Arch Newton and local preacher Gordon Bowling 'to withdraw their Pentecostal influence or withdraw themselves from the Methodist ministry.'\textsuperscript{43} Bowling left, to become a minister in the Apostolic Church, but Newton stayed. The second earliest Australian Pentecostal ministry, the Southern Evangelical Mission, was also established by a former Methodist, the home missioner Robert Hone. He had been involved with the Keswick movement and began his own independent work in the Melbourne suburb of Caulfield in 1911.\textsuperscript{44}

The charismatic movement of the 1960s and 1970s saw Pentecostal phenomena such as 'speaking in tongues', faith healing and an emphasis on miracles enter mainstream denominational circles, including Methodism. Charismatic fellowships within mainline churches exhibited many of the traits of earlier Methodist piety, with a stress on prayer, repentance, conversation and subsequent experiences of spiritual intensification and an interest in 'signs and wonders'. As significant a Methodist as Alan Walker, while liberal and progressive in his social outlook and political activism, was profoundly evangelical in religious experience. Drawn to aspects of the Charismatic movement he was also profoundly aware of the revivalist tradition of his own Methodist heritage. Ian Breward is correct in pointing out that while the Charismatic movement was 'in some respects a recall to the conversionist foundations of Methodism ... in other ways it was subversive of Connexionalism and classic Methodist identity.'\textsuperscript{45} The average Australian Methodist churchgoer of the twentieth century settled for a life of moral and civic uprightness, and the more activist Methodist was drawn to social engagement rather than the kind of intense personal devotion that had characterised Methodism's earlier period.

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{The Spectator} 54, no. 13, 28 March 1928, p. 296. All of the testimonies given here are drawn from this source.


\textsuperscript{38} \textit{The Spectator} 54, no. 17, 25 April 1928, p. 402.

\textsuperscript{39} Wakefield, \textit{Methodist Devotion}, p.14.


\textsuperscript{42} Chant, \textit{Heart of Fire}, p. 287.

\textsuperscript{43} Chant, \textit{Heart of Fire}, p. 174.


\textsuperscript{45} Breward, 'Methodism', p. 414.