

EXCERPT

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The Spirit of Methodism *From the Wesleys to a Global Communion*

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"Jeffrey Barbeau has provided a clear account of John and Charles Wesley as the founders of Methodism, a reliable outline of Methodist history in Western nations, a sensitive account of current controversies within Methodism over issues of human sexuality, and a particularly welcome account of Methodism in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The result is a first-rate primer, but, with its appeal for a Methodism balancing doctrinal fidelity and compassionate outreach, it is much more than just a primer."

Mark Noll, emeritus history professor from the University of Notre Dame, author of *The New Shape of World Christianity*

Methodism in Crisis

Almost everything I know about Christianity, I learned as a child. At least that's what I sometimes think. Each week my grandparents brought my brother and me to a cluster of brown brick buildings that stand alongside the main road in my hometown of Hyde Park, New York. Since my parents didn't regularly attend church, the weekly ritual of gathering us for Sunday school was uncomplicated. My brother and I knew that a few minutes before the beginning of lessons, the phone would ring in our home. The two of us would push and shove each other to avoid being responsible for answering the call, standing dutifully close to the phone while simultaneously avoiding the obligation to pick it up. More than one ring of the phone meant trouble, and neither of us wanted to be responsible for waking our parents. Most weeks, my brother and I hatched a plan: we'd quickly explain that we simply weren't ready or had overslept and wouldn't be able to make it due to illness. If the task fell to me, I knew what had to be done. I swiftly lifted the receiver, but before I could get a word out, my grandfather would exclaim, "We're on our way!" and abruptly hang up the phone. No matter how groggy or sickly we made our voices, our plan almost always failed. Within minutes, our grandparents would arrive in our driveway and shuttle us off to church.

Once we arrived, we sang songs, played games, and worked on Bible lessons with newsprint and flannel board figures, just like other children at Methodist churches all over the world. I received my first Bible in that local church, and it was inscribed with our pastor's name. Somewhere along the way I heard the names of John and Charles Wesley. During the main church service following Sunday school, I went to the front of the sanctuary and listened to stories about the Wesley brothers and learned about how Methodism spread far and wide across the world. I may even have heard of Francis Asbury or sung along to a hymn by Fanny Crosby. To be sure, years passed before I could name a single other Methodist from Great Britain, North America, or the rest of the world. Yet no matter how little I knew, my participation meant that I belonged to a vast, global communion.

What holds this worldwide communion (often called a "connection") together? The most common answer is *grace*. The heart of Methodism is not an abstract doctrine, however, but the active presence of the Spirit of Christ. For nearly three hundred years, preaching, teaching, and writing about the grace of the Holy Spirit has served as the glue holding Methodists together from different nations, cultures, classes, and experiences. We are brought to the love and knowledge of Jesus Christ by the Spirit, and Methodists love to talk about Jesus because we believe the Spirit is actively working all over the world to bring about renewal and change.

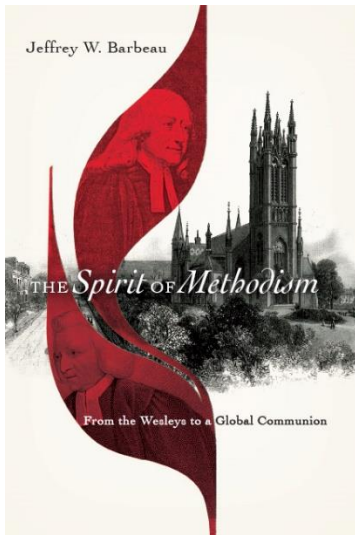
In this book, I offer a fresh look at Methodism by explaining the history of the movement, exploring the lives of laity and clergy, and providing a coherent vision of Methodism today. Methodists tend to oversimplify the movement. Some focus on evangelical beliefs attributed to John Wesley and neglect significant developments since the mid-1700s. Others ignore the origins of the movement in favor of progress, innovation, and new understandings of Christian faith in a pluralist world. The proliferation of competing narratives has resulted in confusion in both the pulpit and the pew alike. Methodism, many believe, is in a state of crisis.



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This book provides a coherent account of Methodism through the global history of the movement, attention to influential Methodists through the centuries, and guidance for thinking about the challenges that threaten to further divide Methodist churches in this generation. Part history, part narrative, and part reflection, this book is my effort to help sort out why Methodism seems destined for division in a time of confusion. In short, I provide a historical and theological framework for understanding Methodism to help Methodists (and those who want to know them) think clearly about the meaning of one of the most influential and fruitful movements in Christian history.

—Taken from the prologue



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