

A Year with John Wesley and Our Methodist Values, 31–32.
Randy L. Maddox et al. Nashville: Discipleship Resources, [2008].

John Wesley's Stress on Connection in the Christian Life Randy L. Maddox

What is the essence of “Methodism” as a distinctive part of the larger Christian family? Wesley’s most common response to that question refused identifying a particular doctrine or set of worship practices, presenting Methodists instead as mainstream Christians who simply sought to experience and embody the fullness of the transforming impact of God’s love in their lives (see *Character of a Methodist*). At the same time, if one watches carefully, a stress on the importance of *connexion* (as the British spell it) emerges repeatedly in Wesley’s accounts of Methodism.

For example, Wesley’s various historical accounts of Methodism begin not with the deepened stress on grace after Aldersgate, but with the gathering of a small community at Oxford to support one another in pursuit of more vital Christian life. Conversely, when assessing George Whitefield’s ministry, Wesley’s strongest criticism was not his preaching of predestination, but that Whitefield did not follow up his powerful preaching by organizing those who responded into supportive groups: “They had no Christian connexion with each other, nor were ever taught to watch over each other’s souls. So that if any fell into lukewarmness, or even into sin, he had none to lift him up” (“The Late Work of God in North America,” I.7). It was this vital contribution of connexion to spiritual growth that Wesley had in mind when he insisted that “there is no holiness but social holiness.”

For all of its benefits, if one stresses only such connexion to a small group, there

is danger of insularity and bigotry. Wesley recognized this danger, and that the best counter lay in a further layer of connexion—with the larger Christian family. His sermon “Catholic Spirit” is a classic call for embracing the full spectrum of the Christian community in fellowship and honest dialogue. Importantly, he grounds this call in the recognition that, as humans, we ought always to be open to the possibility that we could gain further insight into Christian truth through encounter with those who differ from us (and offer them insight as well). Ideally, through such connexion we would all be drawn toward more adequate understanding and greater consensus.

Implicit in the sermon “Catholic Spirit” is a third important dimension of connexion for Wesley. He was trying to strengthen cooperative ministry among the wings of the evangelical revival in England. Wesley recognized that the church exists for more than just the edification of believers, it is called to participate in God’s redemptive mission to all persons. He also sensed that effectiveness in this role is enhanced by broad connexion with other Christians, both because it spreads the labor and because it embodies the reconciliation that we proclaim.

In some of Wesley’s last sermons he directs attention to yet another important dimension of connexion—our integral relationship with the whole creation and our accountability for its care (see particularly “The General Deliverance”). Wesley’s emphasis on this point led to Methodists being strongly associated with concern for animal rights in England at the turn of the nineteenth century!

While other dimensions could be distinguished, the preceding is sufficient to make the point that when we describe United Methodism as a “connectional church” we have in mind more than just a particular polity. We are inheritors of Wesley’s appreciation for the vital contributions of connexion to the life and work of the church.