

THE LONG AND DEEP MEMORY OF EVANGELICALISM



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The rise of evangelicalism adds another—and more recent—chapter to the larger story of the history of western Christianity. This story concerns, at least in part, the great challenge that the church in the West has faced for over a millennium. It can be summed up in one question: how should the church Christianize Christendom?

It is a curiosity that we would even bother to ask the question. Why not be satisfied with the obvious triumph of Christianity and the gradual emergence of Christendom in the West? Isn't total victory and domination what we want and strive for? If everyone—even society itself—is Christian, what more can and should we expect?

The story of this triumph is hard to ignore and dismiss. If we could travel back in time to the year 1200 or the year 1600, we would be hard pressed to find a person living in the West who did not claim to be Christian, and we would observe the visible and concrete presence of Christianity everywhere. We would see church buildings, monasteries, universities, religious art and texts, feasts and festivals, priests and monks and nuns, rites and rituals, all reflecting the dominance of Christianity as a religion and the centrality of the church as an institution.

Not that Christianity was uniform, or the church united. Arguments often divided the church of Christendom, sometimes irreparably. East and West split in 1054, the former becoming the Orthodox Church, the latter the Roman Church. The Western church broke apart in the wake of the Reformation, which set in motion a process of division that has continued to this day. Nor did Christians always conduct themselves as they should have, as the Crusades and the wars of religion illustrate. Still, the West remained Christian for many centuries, with hardly a dissenting voice, except for Jews, who were not treated especially well. The arguments that divided the church were about family matters. They were *Christian* arguments and divisions, involving clashes of doctrine, practice, politics, and personality.

Still, this story of the triumph of Christianity in the West fails to satisfy us, as if we carry in our memory, often more implicit than explicit, another

story—a different and better story—of faithfulness over fashion, persuasion over power, transformation over tokenism. We want something more.

We cannot understand evangelicalism as a movement if we do not recognize this desire for “something more,” which takes us back to the early years of the Christian movement when its major doctrines, institutions, and practices were being established. It is this early story that has inspired visionaries and leaders, including evangelicals, who keep calling the church, however powerful and successful, back to the original, back to this “something more.”

The Acts of the Apostles constitutes the first chapter in this compelling narrative, which continued for more than 200 years. The setting was Jerusalem; the cast was entirely Jewish. Soon this fledgling movement outgrew the small stage of Jerusalem and Judaism and spilled over into the Gentile world. The apostles and their successors planted churches in major urban centers around the Mediterranean world, proclaimed a message of salvation through Christ, built an ecclesiastical organization, decided on a canon of sacred texts, shaped their major doctrines, and followed a set of relatively uniform practices until Christianity was well established, a force to be reckoned with.

Roman elites did not know how to classify the Christian movement, or what to do with it. Observing how different it was, some called it the “Third Race” or “Third Way.”¹ This phrase first appeared in print in a second-century letter written to a Roman official, a certain Diognetus. The author—we don’t know his name or identity—wanted to explain the peculiar nature of Christianity to a member of the Roman elite who was puzzled and curious.²

Of course a “third” way implies a first and second way. The first was the Roman way, which organized life around pagan civil religion. Civic life and religious life were virtually inseparable in the Roman world. People worshipped and sacrificed to the gods; they visited temples, shrines, and monuments; they participated in pagan feast and festivals; they experimented with and sometimes joined mystery cults. Above all, they swore allegiance to the emperor as a god. They observed these and other rituals largely to secure Rome’s prosperity as well as their own. In the end Rome’s religion was Rome itself. As long as that was clear, Rome proved to be quite tolerant of religions, both ancient and new.

The second was the Jewish way. Rome was ambivalent about Judaism. On the one hand, Rome respected Judaism because the religion was ancient and enduring. Jews had survived opposition for over a thousand years

¹ Adolf Harnack devoted a chapter in his book on early Christianity to the linguistic origin of “The Third Race.” See Adolf Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, Vol II, trans. James Moffatt (San Bernardino, 2017), 365–81.

² *The So-Called Letter to Diognetus*, in *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. Cyril C. Richardson (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 213–14.

and, in spite of that opposition, had spread throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. On the other hand, Rome was suspicious because Judaism departed sharply from pagan belief and practice. Jews acknowledged the existence of only one God, observed a high ethical standard, and refused to participate in pagan rituals and festivals. Still, Rome did not persecute Jews (except those living in the Holy Land). Jews observed a way of life that set them apart. Their Kosher laws, for example, required that they shop in their own stores, and their dress codes made them observable to all. Their cultural isolation made it easy for Rome to keep an eye on them, making Jews less threatening.³

And then there were the Christians. They appeared to live like everyone else. They spoke the local language, wore local styles of clothing, ate local food, shopped in local markets, and followed local customs. “For Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or custom. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life.” Yet they were different, too, radically so, both in belief and in behavior. “They live in their own countries, but only as aliens. They have a share in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land.” They functioned as if they were a nation within a nation, quiet and invisible yet influential. They constituted a new race of people and followed a new way of life. Rome could not so easily monitor and control this group.⁴

This *Third Way* movement grew steadily, though unevenly, for some 250 years under Rome’s watchful and sometimes hostile eye. It is impossible to calculate exact figures. But it is safe to say that Christians numbered roughly 5,000 in the year 50 and 5,000,000 by the year 300, worshipping in some 65,000 house churches of varying sizes.⁵ Such an impressive

³ See Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, Third Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Mary Beard, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2015); and Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, Second Edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

⁴ *The So-Called Letter to Diognetus*, in *Early Christian Fathers*, 215–16.

⁵ The best we can do is estimate. Adolf Harnack was the first to calculate numbers. He identified the specific cities and towns to which Christianity spread by the year 300 and even tried to count actual numbers of churches. More recently social historians have developed and employed new techniques to count more accurately. For example, they read inscriptions on tombs to see how many make mention, however obliquely, of Christian belief. See Adolf Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, Vol II, trans. James Moffatt (San Bernardino, 2017) and Rodney Stark, *The Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (San Francisco: Harper-SanFrancisco, 2006).

growth rate would seem to require some level of state support and cultural privilege. Yet Christians enjoyed few of the benefits that Christians take for granted today, at least in the West. They faced sporadic persecution for over 200 years. Rodney Stark argues that this sustained growth over such long period of time and under those circumstances is unprecedented in the history of new religious movements.⁶

The movement was different enough from its rivals to require the church to develop a process, lasting from one to three years, that helped transition converts from paganism to Christianity. This process was called the *catechumenate*. It allowed Christianity to grow slowly but successfully over a long period of time, largely because the process itself turned a critical mass of converts into functional believers. They adapted to the culture without excessive compromise; they also kept their distance from the culture without excessive withdrawal and isolation. Rome had good reason to be nervous!⁷

Everything began to change when the emperor Constantine assumed the throne in the year 312. He set in motion a long process that led, first, to the legalization of Christianity in the Roman Empire, then, under the emperor Theodosius, to its official establishment as *the* religion of the empire, and finally, during the Middle Ages, to its overwhelming cultural dominance over the western world. This arrangement shaped the entire history and identity of Europe, and later of North America, too. It took hundreds of years, of course. And it was never complete. Not every person living in the Middle Ages was a serious and sincere Christian. Still, the movement was successful enough to justify the claim that the West had become Christian.

There was, however, a cost to the success. Over time the *Third Way*—and the *catechumenate* with it—faded as Christianity became the only way, that is, the dominant religion in the West. The emergence of Christendom—the symbiotic relationship between church and state, Christianity and culture—made the *Third Way* irrelevant and the *catechumenate* obsolete. There was no need for either as long as Christianity, having no rivals, ruled the culture. Why help people become Christian if everyone *is* Christian?

But the memory of an original, pure expression of Christianity never faded, and the vision of “something more” never died. One movement after another has emerged in the history of Christianity to call the church back

⁶ Stark, *Cities of God*.

⁷ See Gerald L. Sittser, “The Catechumenate and the Rise of Christianity,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care*, Vol. 6, Issue 2 (Fall 2013), 179–203; Edward Yarnold, S.J., *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the R.C.I.A.*, Second Edition (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1994); Michel Dujarier, *The History of the Catechumenate: The First Six Centuries*, trans. Edward J. Haasl (New York: Sadier, 1979); Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Eugen: Wipf & Stock, 1999).

to an original Christianity that existed before Christendom ruined it. Not that these movements defined or achieved the “original” in the same way. It is apparent, even to the untrained eye, that there are obvious differences. Returning to the Bible for inspiration, the leaders of these movements read, interpreted, and followed it differently. Thus Antony of Egypt would have questioned Calvin’s decision to marry, and Bernard of Clairvaux would have challenged Menno Simons’ commitment to pacifism. What unites them is their memory of and desire to return to the original. They remembered what most had forgotten. They were not satisfied with the success of Christendom. They wanted to close the gap between the Christianity and Christendom; they aimed to Christianize Christendom. Their aspiration was the same; their vision and strategy very different. Each movement—the desert fathers and mothers, early monasticism and later renewal movements within it, the mendicants and Third Orders, various branches of the Reformation, and the like—was a product of its own time and circumstances.

None of these movements was immune to failure. Over time most of them spawned new movements that addressed the failures and excesses of the very movements—now considered old and tired—that had once advocated reform and renewal.

Which leads us to the rise of evangelicalism. Evangelicalism is a more recent manifestation of the same impulse.⁸ But its concerns are obviously different, appropriate to the circumstances out of which it emerged and to which it addressed itself. Early evangelicalism shared much in common with the concerns of Pietism and Moravianism, both of which embodied reactions to what was perceived as the dead orthodoxy of the late Reformation period. To know doctrine was not enough. Knowledge of doctrine ought to engender holiness of life and love for the world.

The Pietist movement began in Germany in the seventeenth century.⁹ As devout Lutherans, Pietists believed that salvation comes through Christ alone, faith alone, and grace alone, all of which we know through Scripture alone, as the Reformers (especially Lutherans) proclaimed. But they did not stop there. Deeply aware of the problem of nominal religion that was rampant in the state church of Germany, especially after the bloody Thirty

⁸ I follow the dating provided by David Bebbington, who argues that evangelicalism began in the 1730s and 40s, or during the First Great Awakening. Moreover, many of the major leaders of the movement were converted then, too, and subsequently launched their evangelical ministries. See David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History From the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989).

⁹ For an introduction to Pietism, see Dale Brown, *Understanding Pietism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978); Ted A. Campbell, *The Religion of the Heart: A Study of European Religious Life in the Seventh and Eighteenth Centuries* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991); Ernest F. Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971) and *German Pietism During the Eighteenth Century* (1973); G. T. Halbrooks, ed., *Pietism* (Nashville: Broadman, 1981).

Years War (1618–1648), they emphasized heart-felt faith, personal holiness, and the practice of spiritual discipline. They believed that conversion to Christ implies living *for* Christ.

The most notable leader of the movement was Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705). Christian from birth, Spener became a prominent minister in the German Lutheran Church. His best known work, *Pia Desideria* (*Pious Desires*), outlines his vision of the true Christian life. The Word of God was central to his vision. Like the reformers, he believed that scripture should be put into the hands of lay people, for it has power through the Holy Spirit to transform people's lives.¹⁰ He also argued that lay people should apply the teachings of the Bible to their daily lives. "The people must have impressed upon them and must accustom themselves to believing that it is by no means enough to have knowledge of the Christian faith, for Christianity consists rather of practice."¹¹ To encourage growth in personal holiness, he established *Collegia Pietas* ("Colleges of Piety") or small groups, which became one of the distinguishing features of the movement.

Genuine conversion should inspire us to care about the world, too, the world "for whom Christ died," as the apostle Paul put it. It is not simply *our* conversion that matters to God but the *world's* conversion. No group in the history of Christianity has taken this aspect of conversion more seriously than the Moravians, especially under the able leadership of Count Nicolas Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700–1760).¹² He showed signs of unusual devotion at a young age. After completing his formal education he embarked on a grand tour of Europe. During that tour he experienced a conversion of sorts, not to Christ, which he had already experienced, but to service. In the art museum of Dusseldorf he encountered Domenica Feti's famous painting *Ecce Homo* ("Behold, the man"), a portrait of Jesus wearing the crown of thorns. The inscription below the painting read, "I have done this for you; what have you done for me?" Zinzendorf knew that he had loved Jesus his whole life, but he realized in that moment that he had not served him yet.

In 1721 Zinzendorf purchased an estate in Saxony from his grandmother. By then his reputation as a devout Christian was already well known, which is probably what motivated Moravian refugees to ask Zinzen-

¹⁰ "If we succeed in getting the people to seek eagerly and diligently in the book of life for their joy, their spiritual life will be wonderfully strengthened and they will become altogether different people . . ." Philip Jakob Spener, "Pia Desideria," in Peter C. Erb, ed., *Pietists: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 34.

¹¹ "Pia Desideria," 36.

¹² For sources on the Moravians and Zinzendorf, see J. Taylor Hamilton and Kenneth G. Hamilton, *A History of the Moravian Church* (Moravian Church of America, 1967); Anthony J. Lewis, *Zinzendorf: The Ecumenical Pioneer* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962); John R. Weinlick, *Count Zinzendorf* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1956); Craig D. Atwood, *Community of the Cross: Moravian Piety in Colonial Bethlehem* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

dorf to grant them asylum. Zinzendorf agreed to the request. In 1722 a handful of Moravians arrived and formed a community to which they gave the name Herrnhut. By 1726 their settlement—now including Catholics, Lutherans, Separatists, and Anabaptists as well as Moravians—had grown to 300 members. Zinzendorf provided leadership for this fledgling community which thrived and spread to other parts of Europe. Prayer and study of scripture moved them to take the Great Commission seriously. They began to send missionaries to other cultures. By 1760, the year Zinzendorf died, the Moravian Church had deployed 226 full-time missionaries around the world to preach the gospel and serve the needy.

Both Spener and Zinzendorf remained life-long Lutherans, though Zinzendorf served as an ordained minister in the Moravian church, too. They believed in Lutheran doctrine and observed Lutheran practices. They hoped to renew the Lutheran church, not leave it. This commitment to renewal has permeated evangelicalism, too, which is why it has often—and I would add best—functioned as a movement within an established theological and ecclesiastical tradition.

Early evangelical leaders, such as Edwards, Whitefield, and Wesley, embraced the concerns of Pietism and expanded them.¹³ They focused special attention on the need for conversion as the primary means of appropriating Christ's saving work on the cross. It is not by practicing various ascetic disciplines, not by receiving the sacraments, not by knowing correct doctrine, not by mastering certain spiritual exercises, however necessary and valuable these are in the spiritual life. It is through conversion. But this emphasis on conversion created a problem for evangelical spirituality, both then and now. How do we know what true conversion is? What makes it real? What if it fails to last?

At this point I want to make just three observations about modern evangelicalism as a renewal movement; first, the importance of authentic conversion; second, the virtual necessity of a conversion *experience*; and third, the strategic thinking and entrepreneurship that has often animated the movement.

One theologian in particular pondered the importance of conversion throughout his illustrious career. We could call him the theologian of conversion. He became a major catalyst of the First Great Awakening in New England, which he subsequently reported on, analyzed, defended, and explained to the wider public.¹⁴ Born in 1703, Jonathan Edwards showed signs of deep religious devotion and keenness of intellect at a young age, and he experienced a conversion sometime after finishing his education at

¹³ I drew information for the following paragraphs on evangelicalism from my *Water from a Deep Well* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 231–255.

¹⁴ There were other important leaders, too, among them Theodore Freylinghuisen, a member of the Dutch Reformed Church, and Gilbert Tennant, a Presbyterian.

Yale College, which he recorded in his *Personal Narrative*.¹⁵ After working as a tutor and pastor for several years, Edwards received a call in 1727 to the Congregational church of Northampton to serve as an assistant pastor under his famous grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, who had occupied the church's pulpit for 58 years. Edwards was soon asked to take his place as the senior minister.

Edwards immediately set out to preach the gospel and call for conversion. A few years later he witnessed dramatic changes in the church. The members of his congregation began to take a serious interest in religion. Soon the church was swept up in a spiritual awakening. About 300 people were converted in Edwards' church alone, and the awakening spread to other churches as well. Edwards continued to preach and provide pastoral care, doing his best to counsel the people who had been converted. He also recorded his observations of the awakening, which he published in 1737 as *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*.

Edwards believed that the awakening was the work of God. "This work of God, as it was carried on, and the number of true saints multiplied, soon made a glorious alteration in the town; so that in the spring and summer following, in 1735, the town seemed to be full of the presence of God: it never was so full of love, nor so full of joy; and yet so full of distress, as it was then."¹⁶ The awakening came to an abrupt end some six months later. Criticism soon followed. Elites from Boston charged that the awakening was the product of religious "enthusiasm" (fanaticism or extremism), not genuine—that is, rational—faith. Edwards conceded that there were problems but still defended the awakening as genuinely supernatural. He wrote two subsequent books to clarify his position, *Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741) and *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* (1742).

But even these books did not put the issue to rest for Edwards. He wanted to define the nature of authentic conversion, or what he called "true religion." Why, he asked, do some people who seem to experience genuine conversion show so little evidence of it later on? Were they truly converted, he wondered, or did they just give the *appearance* of being converted? How could the inherently subjective nature of conversion prove to be truly objective? Was there a rational foundation to conversion itself? Was it reasonable and not merely emotional? Edwards wrote *Religious Affections* at least in part to answer this question.

His central argument is simple and elegant. "True religion, in large part, consists of holy affections."¹⁷ Edwards defined the "affections" as a

¹⁵ John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema, eds., "Personal Narrative," *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 281–295.

¹⁶ "A Faithful Narrative," 63.

¹⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. James M. Houston (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996), 5.

natural and intense reaction—whether positive or negative—to things of real consequence to us. We are thus strongly attracted to those things that are valuable to us; we are strongly repulsed by those things that are odious to us. By its very nature religion involves things that are profoundly significant and supremely consequential, for religion is concerned with the being of God, who is ineffably glorious, beautiful, and holy. It is impossible to claim to know such a being and not be overcome with delight, longing, and love. Thus the only appropriate response is, as Edwards argued, “holy affections”—the intense inclination of the soul towards God. Such is the nature of true religion or conversion. It is bound to lead to change of life, to consistent *practice* of faith, which manifests itself in holiness of life, delight in God, and love for neighbor.¹⁸ It is *outcome* of conversion—its impact on how we live, love, and serve—that establishes the authenticity of conversion. “You will know them by their fruits,” Jesus said.

Edwards believed that he did not in any way plan or cause the awakening that swept through his church. It was, as he said, a *surprising* work of God, the result of divine intervention, not human invention. But many evangelicals who followed Edwards seemed to want less surprise. They turned conversion into a human enterprise, though never denying that it was a divine work, too. Two changes occurred. First, evangelicals put increasing stress on the *experience* of conversion, believing that the intensity and immediacy of the experience would somehow authenticate the reality of it. This led them to use methods that made conversion more likely and predictable. Second, they developed *strategies* to win and disciple converts, which turned evangelicalism in an entrepreneurial direction. Both experience and strategy became the distinguishing characteristics of evangelicalism in the nineteenth century.

Edwards saw the change coming. We catch a glimpse of his foresight in his evaluation of George Whitefield’s preaching. Whitefield had a similar conversion experience to most of the other early evangelical luminaries. While studying at Oxford, Whitefield (1714–1770) had fallen in with the Wesley brothers, joining their “Holy Club.” After experiencing a dramatic conversion at the age of nineteen, he began almost immediately to preach the gospel, often with dramatic results. It was not long before he expanded his evangelistic efforts to America (which he visited many times), where he became both famous and popular.

In 1740 Edwards invited the flamboyant Whitefield to preach in his pulpit. By the time he arrived in Northampton Whitefield was already well known throughout the colonies as a superb preacher and successful evangelist. He seemed to win countless souls for Christ every time he opened his mouth. His impact in Northampton was immediate and sensational.

¹⁸ *Religious Affections*, 179.

But Edwards had reservations, too. He noted that the transient nature of itinerancy tended to produce transient results—"sudden conversions are very often false," he said. He also expressed doubts about the spiritual efficacy of Whitefield's dramatic style because it drew too much attention to itself and appealed to those people—the "stony-ground," as Edwards called them—who embraced religion only when "exceedingly taken with the eloquence of the preacher" and "pleased with the aptness of expression, and with the fervency, and liveliness, and beautiful gestures of the preacher." Whitefield's style was apt to produce more hypocrites than true converts. In the end Edwards supported Whitefield, but his concerns anticipated changes in the evangelical movement that were about to occur.¹⁹ Edwards prayed and preached for revival, but he did so as a pastor. Every Sunday he mounted his pulpit to preach and every week he cared for his flock. He had to face the vicissitudes that were endemic to the life of a pastor who has to work with the same group of people over a long period of time.

Whitefield was not a pastor but an itinerant.²⁰ He and his heirs used a variety of innovative techniques to win converts, largely by emphasizing and aiming for a conversion *experience*. He turned the pulpit—the platform, really—into a kind of stage and captivated listeners with his dramatic style and winsome message before moving on to the next town. He was one of the first evangelicals to try open-air preaching, borrowing a method he learned from Howell Harris, the Welsh evangelist. It was not unusual for Whitefield to preach to crowds of five or even ten thousand people.²¹ The impact was often sensational.

Itinerancy suited Whitefield's personality and unusual gifts. But it also suited the evangelical movement. This strategy prevailed, which has influenced the evangelical movement ever since. Most of the well-known evangelists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—including Whitefield—experienced dramatic conversions and became itinerants, which affected how they viewed conversion and how they operated as evangelists. Their autobiographical accounts reflect a highly experiential view of conversion and tell a story of innovation, resourcefulness, and entrepreneurship.

John Wesley provides one such example. Like Whitefield, he experienced a dramatic conversion and became a zealous evangelist, using open-air preaching to win converts who were alienated from the Church of England. But Wesley took the movement a step further, too. He became the primary strategist and organizer of the evangelical movement. Under his leadership it exploded.

¹⁹ Ava Chamberlain, "The Grand Sower of the Seed: Jonathan Edwards's Critique of George Whitefield," *New England Quarterly* (September 1997), 368–385.

²⁰ See Timothy D. Hall, *Contested Boundaries: Itinerancy and the Reshaping of the Colonial American Religious World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

²¹ Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

John Wesley (1703–1791) grew up in a devout Anglican home.²² He was ordained as an Anglican minister after studying at Oxford, where he and his brother organized “Holy Clubs” to encourage spiritual growth among the students. For close to ten years he preached, ministered to prisoners, and served as a missionary in Georgia. Thus in every way he gave the impression of being a true Christian. But his conversion was still in the future.

While sailing to America, Wesley encountered a group of Moravians, who impressed him with their quiet, fervent faith. At one point during the voyage the ship ran into a squall that threatened to sink it. Everyone panicked, fearing death—except the Moravians, who calmly prayed and sang hymns. After arriving in Georgia he met Peter Boehler, who observed Wesley’s spiritual uneasiness and asked pointedly if he had assurance of faith. The question haunted Wesley. His failure in ministry and lack of victory over sin only exacerbated his doubts. “In this vile, abject state of bondage to sin,” he wrote in his journal, “I was indeed fighting continually, but not conquering. . . . I fell, and rose, and fell again.”²³

The struggles continued after he returned to England. Once again, he looked to the Moravians for help. He experienced a conversion while listening to someone read from Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans at a meeting of Moravians at Aldersgate. His conversion was sudden and emotional. “I felt my heart strangely warmed,” he wrote in his journal. “I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* . . .”²⁴ This kind of experience set the pattern for the millions of conversions that would follow. It is now commonplace for many—if not most—evangelicals to be able to identify the exact time and place of their conversion. They feel security and gain confidence because they had an *experience* of conversion, which confirms the truthfulness of God’s promise and the genuineness of their faith.

John Wesley spent some 50 years traveling and preaching throughout England, often in open air. But he was a superb visionary and organizer, too. He adapted the structure of the Holy Club to nurture converts in the

²² Stephen Tomkins, *John Wesley: A Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Robert G. Tuttle, Jr., *John Wesley: His Life and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978); Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984); Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., *John Wesley: Holiness of Heart and Mind* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996); Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley’s Spiritual Christianity: A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

²³ Elisabeth Jay, ed., *The Journal of John Wesley: A Selection* (New York: Oxford, 1987), 32. For a compilation of Wesley’s various writings, see Frank Whaling, ed., *John and Charles Wesley: Selected Prayers, Hymns, Journal Notes, Sermons, Letters and Treatises* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981).

²⁴ *The Journal of John Wesley*, 34–35.

faith. Called “classes” in the Methodist movement, these small groups of twelve met regularly for confession of sin, Bible study, prayer, mutual accountability, and strict discipline.²⁵ They also met as larger “societies” for midweek instruction and worship, often singing his brother’s hymns. Wesley was especially committed to the exercise of discipline. “Is it any wonder that we find so few Christians,” he asked, “for where is Christian discipline? In what part of England is Christian discipline added to Christian doctrine? Now, wherever doctrine is preached, where there is no discipline, it cannot have its full effect upon its hearers.” He even provided a list of questions that leaders were to use when members of the class gathered for their weekly meeting.²⁶

Wesley appointed and trained lay people to lead these classes, which generated a large supply of ready and able leaders as the movement expanded. Such was the *method* behind Methodism. In essence it turned his large-scale ministry of evangelism into a small-scale ministry of discipleship. The societies in turn took up a wide range of benevolent causes—evangelism, foreign missions, Bible distribution, abolitionism, temperance, prison reform, suffrage, Sabbath day observance, care of widows and orphans, and so much more. In effect, Wesley and his followers helped to build a kind of benevolent empire that expanded the ministry of the church beyond its own narrow interests.²⁷

Wesley wanted to Christianize Christendom, which brings us full circle. He had a long and deep memory. He called the Christendom of his day, by then already fading, back to the Bible. Wesley aimed to restore Christianity to the original, and he often cited “primitive Christianity” as the ideal to which he wanted the church to return. He emphasized conversion, faith in Christ, holiness of life, service and missions. He called the church to produce disciples, not merely converts and churchgoers. In his mind early Christianity provided the template, not only in doctrine but also in practice.

²⁵ Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2014).

²⁶ Kevin M. Watson, *A Blueprint for Discipleship: Wesley’s General Rules as a Guide for Christian Living* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2009); Charles Edward White, “Spare the Rod and Spoil the Church,” *Christian History* (Issue 69), 28–30.

²⁷ David Hempton, *The Religion of the People: Methodism and Popular Religion, c. 1750–1900* (London: Routledge, 1996); Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994); J. Kent, *Wesley and the Wesleyans: Religion in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History From the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989); John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); H. B. Mc Gonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace: John Wesley’s Evangelical Arminianism* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2001); H. D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1989).

He cited the early Christian catechumenate, for example, as a practice that was worthy of adaptation. Writing of early Christian converts, he said: “But as soon as any of these were convinced of the truth as to forsake sins and seek the gospel salvation, they immediately joined them together, took an account of their names, advised them to watch over each other and, and met these *kathcoumenoi* (catechumens, as they were then often called) apart from the great congregation, that they might instruct, rebuke, exhort, and pray with them and for them, according to their several necessities.”

Wesley diagnosed England more severely than his contemporaries. England, he said, was no less heathen than the First Nation tribe that he had failed to reach during his initial—and unsuccessful—visit to America. He viewed the Methodist movement as God’s means of reaching a Christendom that was hardly Christian, if Christian at all. He appropriated both message and method from early Christianity for the renewal—the conversion, really—of the church. Tory Baucum argues, “This ‘catechumenal’ precedent to evangelism is a noteworthy instance of Wesley’s way of re-appropriating Christian antiquity for the revitalization of the Church.”²⁸ His system (bands, classes, societies) reached back across the centuries to reclaim a forgotten method of discipleship to Christianize Christendom and renew the church in the West.

Wesley remained a life-long Anglican, just as Spener and Zinzendorf remained life-long Lutherans, which fits the vision of evangelicalism as a renewal movement within a larger, more established tradition of faith. Spener espoused Lutheran doctrine and Wesley used his Book of Common Prayer. Their work spawned new movements, to be sure; but they remained faithful to the old.

The genius of evangelicalism is exactly that. Calling for authentic conversion to Christ, emphasizing the necessity of immediate and often emotive experience, developing strategies to win the lost, disciple people in the faith, and meet practical needs, often through the founding of Christian non-profits, evangelicalism breathes life into the dry bones of moribund traditions. It might lack the depth of, say, Roman Catholic sacramentalism, Anglican worship, Reformation doctrine, and Anabaptist ethics, but it has power to renew these and other traditions. Left to itself, it can quickly become thin and shallow, subject to fashion and prone to secularization, as we see, for example, in the health and wealth movement. But attached to these traditions, it retains richness and depth even as it effects renewal and grows the church.

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²⁸ Tory K. Baucum, *Evangelical Hospitality: Catechetical Evangelism in the Early Church and Its Recovery for Today* (The Scarecrow Press, 2008), 38–39, 48–50.