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Confessions of a Methodist foodie: how tradition can feed our (good) habits and nourish our souls

Charles Wallace

THE REVD DR CHARLES WALLACE recently retired as chaplain and professor of religious studies at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon. He has written articles on various members of the Wesley family, and published the complete writings of Susanna Wesley.

cwallace@willamette.edu
Salem, USA

This essay suggests that an examination of Methodist history from the perspective of its 'foodways' can both enliven our understanding of the movement and perhaps reinvigorate its tradition. With the recent emphasis on food studies (and food in general in our culture) this overlooked element calls for examination. My research in this area is alluded to briefly with examples from the lives and work of Susanna, John and Charles Wesley, and Wesleyan followers Samuel Bradburn, Charles Atmore, and John and Mary Fletcher. I argue that this perspective can contribute positively to a living twenty-first century Methodist tradition.

METHODISM AND FOOD • RELIGION AND FOOD • WESLEYAN TRADITION • SAMUEL BRADBURN • CHARLES ATMORE • JOHN WILLIAM FLETCHER • MARY BOSANQUET FLETCHER • JOHN WESLEY • CHARLES WESLEY • SUSANNA WESLEY

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A foodie, a Methodist and a historian walk into a bar … Wait a minute: this is not a joke; this is a bit close to home! I am neither a chef nor a gourmet, but I count myself privileged to help produce and enjoy three meals daily, and I am interested in the cultural and religious implications of what and how people eat and drink. I am also an ordained United Methodist elder (a retired university chaplain) – and I have taught religious history in colleges and theological seminaries. It's no joke, but this funny conflation of identities might still pack a theological and ethical punch line with implications for readers of this journal. Let me make my case by briefly examining each of the categories and then reflecting on some research I have been doing.

Foodies (intense and more laid back) are all around us – many of them, broadly defined, *are* us. Dedicated sections of bookstores, magazines, cable channels, websites, upscale markets and restaurants of all sorts cater to them/us. The topic's popularity, of course, raises all sorts of questions: Who gets to eat and what and where? What is a healthy diet? Who grows and prepares our food (and does or does not profit from it) and at what cost? How can we make sure that all people eat well and that our ecosystem is sustainable?

Methodism, the Christian tradition represented in this journal, actually lends itself more than some others to answer such questions. We are not just about orthodoxy, after all, but also ortho*pathy* and maybe most of all ortho*praxy* – not just right belief, but right feeling, and right behavior. As John Wesley's seal indicates, we *believe* and *love* and also *obey* – all based on his (and our own) blending of scriptural, traditional, experiential and rational ingredients. Though our numbers continue to fade (along with those of other 'mainline' denominations – at least in the UK and North America), many Methodists faithfully and passionately still strive to '*do* the right thing.' Even if we fail, David Hempton has reminded us that our 'Holiness offspring' Pentecostalism is 'poised to sweep the world.' But perhaps there's some faithful, heartfelt, practical energy still left among the current 'people called Methodists.'

History. My invocation of Dean Hempton reminds us that the study of history (even when conducted according to the critical canons of the Enlightenment) has consequences, and not always negative ones, for tradition. Clearly, what we choose to study and highlight in the area of religious history (or in any other sort of history) depends in part on our own context – what we believe, feel, and do because of who we are, and where, and how we view the world. Historians are not free to make things up, but depending on our life settings we certainly will engage in different sorts of conversations with the past: notice

new features there, find new partners to question there, and re-interrogate familiar ones. The result will be 'new' history, and when read appreciatively and critically by a community of faithful people, renewed and reinvigorated tradition.

What would early Methodism look like if we privileged the Wesleys' and their followers' use of food and drink – both in their daily routine and in their rhetorical and liturgical practice – as our hermeneutical principle? And what would the 'takeaway' be for Methodist 'traditioning' in the early twenty-first century?

I have been toiling in this field for over a decade, creating and teaching an undergraduate course called 'Soul Food: Eating and Drinking in Western Religion.' I have also signed on with the 'Religion and Food Group,' a lively program unit of the American Academy of Religion, whose purpose is to provide 'an opportunity for scholars to engage in the intersection of religion and food, foodways, and food ethics …' This collegial interest in 'examining these topics across broad geographical areas, religious traditions, and historical eras' encouraged me to investigate my own tradition from this same perspective.

As an American 'preacher's kid' raised in the 1950s and 60s I was aware that we Methodists 'didn't drink' (though by the time I reached seminary I had heard a counter story: 'Methodists are people who don't recognize each other in a liquor store'). That was about the same time my mother started spooning crème de menthe on her ice cream in hopes that someone would report her to the Women's Christian Temperence Union and her membership would be revoked. I also observed during my boyhood that most preachers I knew may have abstained from beverage alcohol, but compensated with prodigious appetites at the dinner table. And many of their rural Maryland churches raised money putting on annual Oyster and Ham Dinners or Pancake Breakfasts – 'All you can eat $3.75, children under 5 free!' Such experiences predisposed me to look for the untold story that might lurk in our tradition – and indeed I have found lots to chew on (if you'll forgive the sort of expression that is an occupational hazard to those of us in this line of work).

It's not that scholars and Methodists haven't been vaguely aware of the subject matter for years. For instance, food and drink figure prominently in each of Wesley's three major categories in his 'General Rules' of 1739. Under 'do no harm' we find the prohibition of 'Drunkenness: buying or selling spirituous liquors, or drinking them, unless in cases of extreme necessity.' The initial

injunction in the 'doing good' list calls for attention to people's bodily needs, specifically 'by giving food to the hungry, by clothing the naked, by visiting or helping them that are sick or in prison.' And two of the six 'ordinances of God' Wesley prescribed are food-related: 'The Supper of the Lord' and 'Fasting or abstinence.' It turns out, though, that such an official menu is only part of the story. From my research over the past decade I have detailed the various formal and informal rules, practices and experiences that make up early Methodist foodways and therefore contribute to our history. I offer a chronological listing of some of these details in hopes that readers might find them useful in handing on our tradition. My inner historian apologizes for the lack of fuller quotations and citations, but my inner Methodist believes parts of my list might well 'preach' these days – and my inner foodie is just happy to see this crucial part of human life being brought into the conversation.

Susanna: Disciplined nurture, 'food insecurity,' addiction, kitchen as sacred space

Methodist matriarch (if not Methodist Madonna) Susanna Wesley is the source for my story's 'prequel.' Well before the conventional dating of the Evangelical Revival, she combined in her person elements of both dissent and High-Church Anglicanism that would later influence her sons' work. Her writings attest to the 'methodical' ways that food and drink figured in her faithful practice. She worked hard to supply her large rectory family with sustenance and thus demanded an early dining-room discipline even from her young children, as readers of her childrearing letter to her son John well know.

She also deserves our scrutiny and sympathy as one who experienced the 'food insecurity' (if not the starvation) that continues to plague our planet to this day. In a conversation with the Archbishop of York when her husband was languishing in debtors' prison, she recalls saying:

> I will freely own to your grace, that strictly speaking, I never did want bread. But then I have had so much care to get it before 'twas eat, and to pay for it after, as has often made it very unpleasant to me. And I think to have bread on such terms is the next degree of wretchedness to having none at all.

Overseeing her children's appetites, she also struggled with her own. Early letters to her son Samuel away at school demonstrate her parental concern with the intoxicating beverages he might be tempted to misuse in London. Further, it turns out, she recognized herself as potentially too dependent on social drinking: she found George Herbert's aphorism, 'stay at the third glass', a useful guideline both for Samuel Jr's situation and her own.

It is also not beside the point that the Epworth *kitchen* became a controversial sacred space when Susanna invited neighbors in for Sunday evening prayer against the wishes of her rector husband. What would a wider recognition of Susanna Wesley's experiences around food and drink contribute to our self-understanding today?

John: reclaiming tradition, exploring the latest 'research,' practicing the messianic banquet

Of Susanna's two most famous 'home-schooled' pupils, John gets more credit for founding and nourishing Methodism: we know him as preacher, organizer, 'folk' theologian, writer and publisher. But focusing on food and drink favors our understanding of his approach in new ways.

The product of High-Church piety, John readily took to a disciplined traditional regimen at Oxford and soon thereafter in Georgia. That meant not only frequent Holy Communion, but also Wednesday, Friday and seasonal fasting and a predisposition toward the agape meal, the Love Feast that he was soon to experience under the tutelage of his Moravian friends. That last practice, of course, became a key innovation, a kind of sacrament of community and identity for early Methodism. Bread (or cake) and water substituted for communion elements, and free-flowing testimonies by all present took the place of the Prayer Book liturgy, making the gathering almost equivalent to the Eucharist, but much more accessible to its lay-led people in the days before the movement evolved into a full-fledged church.

But clearly John was not just a traditionalist; he also found practical application for the medical and dietary 'science' of his own day. He turned, for instance, to Dr George Cheyne, Scottish physician to the rich and overweight in Bath, who convinced him to try a vegetable diet and who provided him with rules for eating and drinking that later found their way into his own *Primitive Physic: Or an Easy and Natural Method of Curing Most Diseases*.

Another element in *Primitive Physic* also witnesses to the experimental/experiential side of Wesley's world-view. By its twenty-fourth edition dozens of his cures and recipes were affirmed as 'tried' – by Wesley himself. And he certainly recommended vegetarianism to others on the basis of his own experience. Similarly, he also advised abstaining from tea – it made him too jittery to write, and he discovered that the money he and other Methodists thereby saved could aid those who were poor and hungry.

Similarly, surprising as it might be to real ale advocates in the UK or craft brewers in North America (not to mention the Women's Christian Temperance Union), John's 1789 letter to the *Bristol Gazette* argued against the use of hops in ale recipes, but in the process it also revealed him to be at least an occasional home brewer.

A last example of Wesley's own practice comes from the Foundery, his early London headquarters with its ever-changing community, where he describes a typical meal time in 1748:

> we have now nine widows, one blind woman, two poor children, two upperservants, a maid and a man. I might add, four or five Preachers; for I myself, as well as the other Preachers who are in town, diet with the poor, on the same food, and at the same table; and we rejoice herein, as a comfortable earnest of our eating bread together in our Father's kingdom.

Charles: hymns for the Lord's Supper, poetry for the tea table, a middle-class food budget

Charles Wesley's own 1738 'conversion hymn' ('Where Shall My Wond'ring Soul Begin?') celebrates the evangelical believer's central experience in gastronomic terms:

> O how shall I the goodness tell,
> Father, which thou to me hast showed?
> That I, a child of wrath and hell,
> I should be called a child of God!
> Should know, should feel my sins forgiven,
> Blest with this antepast of heaven!

That the assurance of salvation should be styled an *antepast*, a foretaste, the 'antipasto' of the meal, should further pique our appetite for more of Charles's 'foodways.'

Most obviously, we might dip into *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* (1745), or those intended for the Love Feast, or those that functioned as grace at meals. But even his most avid fans are likely unaware of another genre. In his collection *Hymns for the use of Families* (1767), Charles Wesley even wrote a hymn 'To Be Sung at the Tea-Table.' While there is no direct reference to the oriental beverage once criticized and abandoned by his older brother John, there is strong allusion to the happy gathering occasioned by it. I quote only a few verses:

1. How happy are we
   Who in Jesus agree
   To expect His return from above!
   We sit under our Vine,
   And delightfully join
   In the praise of His excellent love.

2. How pleasant and sweet
   (In His name when we meet)
   Is His fruit to our spiritual taste!
   We are banqueting here
   On angelical cheer,
   And the joys that eternally last.

3. Invited by Him,
   We drink of the stream
   Ever-flowing in bliss from the throne;
   Who in Jesus believe
   We the Spirit receive
   That proceeds from the Father and Son.

The 'cup that cheers, but does not inebriate,' indeed! No occasion too familiar or familial (or worldly!) that it cannot be improved. In fairness, though, this particular lyric made it into the canon of the important 1780 hymnal as the first entry under 'The Society … Giving Thanks.'

Interestingly, this more acculturated, settled Wesley also left records of his actual eating habits, evidencing a comfortable upper-middle-class London existence. The family's budget in 1775 amounted to over £405, of which over

one-quarter was spent on food and drink. Under the latter category tea was the largest annual expense at £13, but wine, beer, ale, and milk followed respectively at £8, £6, £4, and £3.

The (other) People Called Methodists: abstemious, appreciative, healthy and political eating and drinking

The Wesley family modeled (as well as preached) varying lifestyles involving food and drink: giving thanks for it in prayer and hymn; sharing it with others; fasting from time to time; employing it in sacrament and Love Feast; searching for the best diet to follow and recommend. However, the lay people and itinerant preachers of the wider Methodist family played an increasing part in developing the movement's ethos, especially as the founding generation faded from the scene in the late eighteenth century. How did these non-Wesleys receive, reinvigorate and pass on the heritage?

The Swiss immigrant, Anglican clergyman and Methodist theologian John William Fletcher and his wife Mary, née Bosanquet, were two good examples of the more abstemious side of the young Methodist tradition. Fletcher's fasting, some thought, was ruining his health. One supporter, a wealthy Bristol sugar merchant, rebuked him, sending him a food (and wine) basket to encourage him toward better nourishment. Mary Fletcher, whose holiness credentials also are still held in high esteem, had spent the majority of her life in women-centered communities in Essex and Yorkshire. At one point she traveled an even more adventurous route, reading and commenting positively on the dietary work of the famous seventeenth-century vegetarian (and heretic) Thomas Tryon.

Charles Atmore, on the other hand, followed the more relaxed, sophisticated view of food and drink represented by Charles Wesley and other Methodists who by century's end were improving socially and economically. One of the inner circle of preachers at the time of John's death, Atmore worked for the ecclesiastical independence of Methodism and served as President of the Conference in 1811. A characteristic little noticed in the tradition, though, was his appreciation of good food. Contemporaries knew him as one who was liable to show up just at dinner time and avail himself of the best cuts of meat. His friend John Pawson recognized this issue and saw it as well among the

preachers, who were embarrassingly (and expensively) eating and drinking between meals at the 1796 Conference. Fortunately, such indulgence was not always the rule (though it seems to have persisted in the Maryland Methodism of my childhood!).

Samuel Bradburn, the rhetorically effective but somewhat erratic preacher known as the 'Methodist Demosthenes', discovered a much different approach. His socially progressive ministry in Manchester included the founding of a Strangers' Friend Society to provide for those who were poor in the wider community. When Parliament voted down the slave trade bill in 1791, the abolitionists took a more activist approach. One influential pamphlet urged a national boycott of sugar and rum – items tainted not by their empty calories or alcohol content, but by the massive role of slavery in their production. In it the author challenged the Methodists to join the campaign already begun by Quakers, other Dissenters and Anglicans. Bradburn took up the challenge, published a strong Methodist-focused pamphlet of his own, and thus supported a socially progressive use of food that gave people (even those without the franchise in those pre-Reform days) a way to make their political point.

Takeaway?

Fast forward from this sampling of early Methodist anecdotes to the present where spirited food-related conversation and activities typify not just religious communities, but also the wider cultures we inhabit. Think of the conditions we face and the responses we offer: famines, food deserts, food banks, and community gardens; 'soul food' and other identity-based foodways; justice for agricultural and food workers and radical hospitality for all who are hungry and homeless; healthy diets, vegetarianism, and 'slow food'; environmental sustainability, legislative campaigns, food aid, and food boycotts; yes, and coffee hours, fellowship suppers, agape feasts and the Eucharist. Why do we participate in these matters? For one thing these embodied worldly concerns are neither obscure nor abstract. For another they intersect with the Christian story at many points – and with a varied set of Wesleyan practices in particular! Emphasizing a 'gospel' of food we might even discover in such activity a foretaste of the messianic banquet, the coming commonwealth of God, a 'welcome table' around which believers of all stripes and those with little spiritual pretension may gather.

Serving on a university campus in the Pacific Northwest has connected me with just such a crowd, 'people of all faiths and of none,' as my job description put it. They are not 'cultured despisers' of religion, just indifferent and disengaged to belief and practice as they understand it. It can be discouraging trying to re-present Christianity to a population predisposed not to believe or practice. But the food connection helps me (and maybe them) get back to basics: the real incarnated hungers and injustices suffered by the planet and its peoples, the equally authentic (albeit often fleeting) tastes and fulfillment found in welcoming community.

The traditional nourishment is all there. We may need to revise some of the recipes, more carefully cultivating the ingredients, adding new flavors, updating preparation, and upgrading the way nourishment gets distributed to all who need it. But we who are predisposed to believe, love, and obey in a Wesleyan Christian sort of way are being called to take some responsibility.

Jaroslav Pelikan's oft-quoted aphorism applies: 'Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.' If it were even possible, handing on an unchanged orthodoxy (or orthopraxy or orthopathy) from the first century or the eighteenth would at best illustrate moribund traditionalism in the twenty-first. The 'living faith of the dead,' the bounty that we *have* received from the past always requires of us the same critical selection and application it has already demanded of our forebears in the faith. There will be continuity, a family DNA in our believing, feeling, and practice, but it's our job to find and reapply those ancestral strands that will prove lively and faithful when woven into our own context.

Just as today's foodies might recommend a traditional core (for example, 'heirloom' vegetables, 'artisanal' recipes, and, in general, ingredients that our great-grandmothers would recognize), we Wesleyan Christians might unpack 'holiness of heart and life' in both its personal and social dimensions, as the center of our spiritual and religious tradition. And just as contemporary foodways will also adapt a time-honored national or regional cuisine to contemporary scientific, environmental and multicultural realities, shouldn't current varieties of Wesleyanism emphasize a version of their inheritance that feeds the particular contemporary hungers ('real' and metaphorical) of the same world? Jesus' comment on every scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven applies here as well: she is 'like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.' Not a bad recipe for tradition.

One way 'to serve the present age our calling to fulfill' is to share meals (and other intimate behavior like laughter and important work) with all sorts and conditions. Living tradition might even be discovered in the lively table talk of a foodie, a Methodist, and a historian – over Wesley-approved (healthy) pub-grub and pints of a *very* lightly hopped Lincolnshire Mild.

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