

The Wesley story

John and Charles were brothers in the large family of the Anglican vicar of Epworth in Lincolnshire. They both decided to follow their father into holy orders, so went to Oxford University to study.

While they were there, they met with like-minded friends to be serious about their Christian discipleship. The group was known as "The Holy Club" and was met regularly to support the members in prayer and good works. It because of their Methodical approach to religion that they were nicknamed 'methodists'.

In 1735, the brothers sailed to Georgia, where John was intended to become the minister of the newly-formed parish of Savannah. On the voyage, the ship lost a mast in a terrible Atlantic storm. All aboard were in extreme danger, but while everyone else was panicking, a group of Moravian Christians calmly gathered to pray. John was most impressed by their strength of faith, and concluded they had an inner strength he didn't have.

The mission to Georgia was a failure. John became romantically involved with a young woman, but stepped back from marriage. Her family sued him, and although the charges were dismissed, his reputation was sufficiently damaged that the brothers had to leave. They returned to England deeply depressed, and sought out the Moravians for help and advice. They asked whether the brothers had 'saving faith', and when they confessed they had no idea, advised them to 'preach faith until you have it, and then you will preach faith.'

It was in such a questing mood that John attended a meeting in which his breakthrough moment came. This is his entry in his *Journal* for May 24th, 1738:

"In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate St, where one was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart by faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

That was the breakthrough which changed John's attitude to faith. From a serious attempt to earn his own salvation by religion and good works, he discovered that it was about a relationship of trust in the risen Jesus, who had died for him. His life and ministry were transformed, and what had been a small group led by some serious-minded young men became the seed of a vigorous plant which would grow across the country and the world.

The Methodist story

The movement spread under the leadership of the original Holy Club members and their friends. All over the country, groups were formed into 'societies' as a revival movement within the Church. However, as the years passed, more and more groups were excluded from the parish churches, and the movement gradually became a separate denomination. John Wesley never accepted this, and remained an Anglican priest all his life - despite the fact that certain of his actions virtually ensured separation from the Church. In 1784, he ordained men to work in the US to replace priests expelled after the Revolution, because he was concerned that the Anglicans had not done so. His actions infuriated his brother Charles.

After John's death in 1791, tensions between those who wished to stay with the Anglicans and those who felt it right to be independent led to several breakaway groups. They eventually became separate Methodist denominations. Some also felt that the Wesleyan Methodists were becoming too 'respectable' and losing their initial fire and enthusiasm. They broke away to form the Primitive Methodists, trying to recapture the original fire of the revival days.

By the mid-19th C, there was a whole family tree of different groups, often competing with each other as they built chapels all over the country. The movement was influential in the nation's life in many ways. Ordinary people learned how to lead meetings and speak in public through the Methodist meetings, and then learned how to use these skills in other ways in the infant trade union movement. The Tolpuddle Martyrs were a group of Methodists who were transported to Australia for the crime of forming a trade union and standing up to the bosses. The Methodist Church was also heavily involved in the campaign to outlaw slavery in the UK.

The Methodist movement not only spread in this country, but grew into a world-wide family of churches. In America, it spread across the new nation through circuit riders and travelling preachers. Methodist missionaries travelled throughout Africa, India and China.

Gradually the smaller churches in Britain joined together until by the end of the 19th C there were 3 major Methodist denominations: the Wesleyan Methodist Church, Primitive Methodist Church, and United Methodist Church. Negotiations to join together lasted for years, partly due to the interruption of WW1, and partly due to the difficulty of finding a balanced compromise between the Wesleyan stress on clergy leadership and the Primitive and United Methodist stress on lay leadership. Eventually, agreement was reached, and Methodist Union took place in 1932 to form the Methodist Church.

The Heptonstall story

The society in Heptonstall was started in 1742 by a freelance Scottish evangelist called William Darney. In 1747, Charles Wesley visited the area, and the Darney societies were offered to the Methodist movement - Darney wanted to move on and evangelise elsewhere. Heptonstall was placed in the pastoral care of Rev William Grimshaw of Haworth, a friend of Darney and the Wesleys.

The Heptonstall society did well, and was strongly represented at the first ever Methodist Circuit Meeting on October 18th, 1748 at Todmorden Edge. Both Wesleys were frequent visitors to the area; John came 21 times, and Charles fairly frequently. John's first visit to Heptonstall was on May 21st, 1747, when leadership passed from Darney to the Wesleys. (Subsequent visits include 1753 when it was extremely hot, 1755 when it was extremely wet, and 1757 when there was an earthquake...) He was always received by large crowds, and eventually it was decided to build a chapel.

The octagonal shape was fashionable at the time: the first was Norwich (1757), then Rotherham (1761), followed by Whitby (1762) then Yarm, Aberdeen and Heptonstall in 1764. There were lots of them, for various reasons:

- the octagon reflects the figure 8, regarded as the ecclesiastical figure of regeneration;
- in London Blackfriars (1783) they said there were no corners for the devil to hide in;
- the real reason was that Wesley wasn't building a church, but a preaching house. John first preached in the unfinished shell of the church, and lined out his then unpublished verse:

*Ye mountains and vales, in praises abound,
Ye hills and ye dales, continue the sound,
Break forth into singing, ye trees of the wood,
For Jesus is bringing lost sinners to God.*

Look out from the graveyard over Hardcastle Crag, and you can see where he got his inspiration.

The society grew and became strong. By 1802, the chapel was too small for the 337 members, and was extended to its present "stretched octagon." By 1821, it was too small again, but by now industry was developing in the valley, and the population was beginning to move away from the hilltops. It was felt wiser to build in Hebden Bridge, and so Hebden Bridge Salem chapel was built (on the site of the present 1974 building). Heptonstall also planted new congregations at Highgate and Blackshawhead, where chapels were built. Heptonstall was the springboard for the growth of the Methodist mission in the upper Calder valley.

The Mount Zion story

Wesley preached in Halifax for the first time on August 22nd, 1748. One of those who heard him was James Riley from Bradshaw; he said "Wesley disturbed my conscience and troubled my soul." The following Sunday Riley went to Haworth to hear William Grimshaw who later came to preach at Riley's house. Riley formed a group which became a Methodist society, which grew, and the decision was made in 1772 to build a Chapel. The first building at Mount Zion was erected in 1773 and part of that was the cottage which remains - what is now the kitchen was the stable. On the 22nd April, 1774, Wesley came to preach. He records in his journal, "I rode and walked to Bradshaw House, standing alone in a dreary waste. But, although it was a cold and stormy day the people flocked from all quarters." The diamond pane windows bore many inscriptions by visiting preachers, including one saying "Time how short, eternity how long - C.W." In May, 1790 John Wesley paid his last visit to Halifax and preached at Mount Zion. He was then 87 and two friends assisted him and his memory failed. He died less than a year later.

Mount Zion was caught up in the turmoil following Wesley's death. Alexander Kilham was expelled by the Wesleyan Conference and founded the New Connexion in 1797. Because the majority of the congregation supported Kilham's reforms, it was the Wesleyans who had to leave Mount Zion and move into a barn across the road. The chapel was rebuilt in 1815; the only remnants of the old building are the sundial on the front and a foundation stone in the vestry. It is the oldest New Connexion society which still meets. The New Connexion joined with the Bible Christians and the United Methodist Free Church in 1907 to become the United Methodist Church, joining the Wesleyan and Primitive Methodist Churches in 1932.

The chapel interior was furnished in 1881 by the company who did the Admiralty in London. The pews were rented: the original rent board is still in the vestry, although nobody has attempted to collect rents for many years, and it is probably safer not to try! The organ is Belgian and installed in 1892. The graveyard is huge, containing thousands of graves. The chapel is home to the Horace Hird Collection of Methodist Ceramics, including important pieces from Wesley's lifetime.

With the formation in 2010 of the Calderdale Circuit, Mount Zion is now in the same circuit as Heptonstall, in continuous use since 1764, and Todmorden Edge Farm, site of the first Methodist Quarterly Meeting in 1748. Together they tell a great deal of the Methodist story, so that the story of the work of God in the past may help us to work with him into the future.

The Methodist Message

The Wesleys and their friends in early Methodism offered a simple and clear Christian message. The sources are the Bible, Tradition, Reason and Experience. There was no new doctrine, rather a different emphasis on the historic biblical faith. One of the best summaries of the heart of Methodist theology is the famous "Four Alls".

All need to be saved

The heart of the Christian faith is that something has gone wrong in the relationship between God and his people, and that affects all of us. It isn't about the 'sinners' who need to be saved and the 'goodies' who are OK - this affects everyone.

All can be saved

The good news is that there is nobody who cannot be saved by the grace and love of God. There is nobody so bad that they cannot be saved, and nobody excluded because God isn't interested in them. Anyone who turns to him can be set free from their sin.

All can know that they are saved

This was the first particularly Wesleyan interpretation, arising from John's reflection on his own spiritual awakening at the meeting in Aldersgate Street: he knew deep down inside that he had been forgiven and saved. This was the gift of assurance, by which believers is given a firm foundation of confidence in the salvation they have received. In Wesley's own writings before his Aldersgate experience, there is a recurring concern with the question of his own salvation; after Aldersgate he rarely mentions it, but is concerned for the salvation of others. He is assured of his own salvation.

All can be saved to the uttermost

This is the second particularly Wesleyan emphasis, often called Christian Perfection or Perfect Love. Salvation is not just about being saved *from* sin, but being saved *to* a new life. That new life means growing more and more into the person God wants us to be, being made more Christ-like. This is the life-long work of the Holy Spirit, enabling us to be faithful disciples here and preparing us for life in eternity

Methodist teaching has boundaries beyond which it will not go, but within which there is plenty of room for interpretation. That gives a breadth of thinking which makes room for a wide range of people, conservative and liberal, high-church or low church.

The Jesus story

The Christian message begins with the person of Jesus. He was born a Galilean Jew at a difficult time in Israel's history: occupied by Rome, facing cultural tensions between traditional Jewish life and the values and ideas of the Graeco-Roman world, and torn between a variety of Jewish sects.

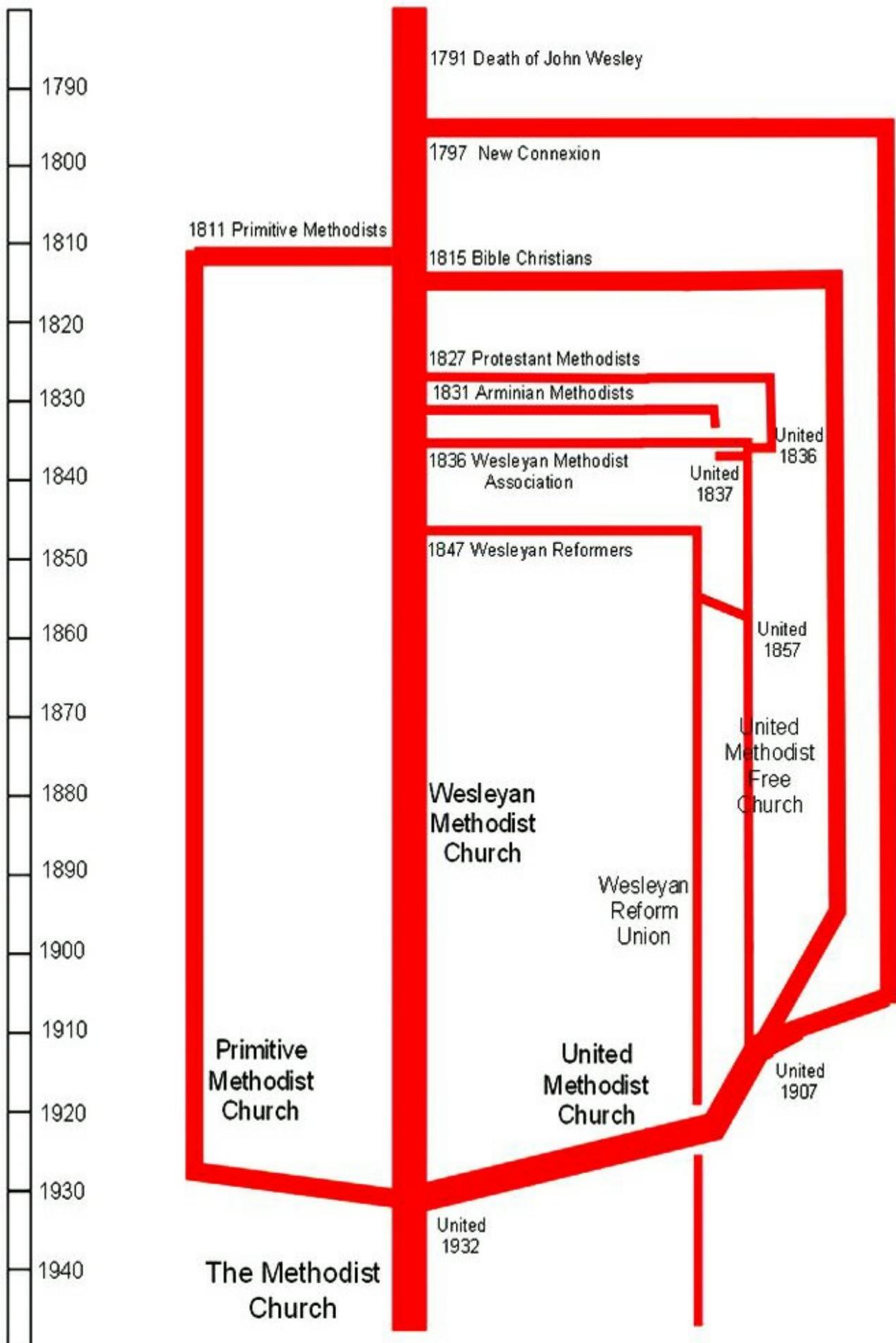
Jesus became a wandering teacher with a reputation for working miracles. He wasn't the only one, there were many, but his reputation grew and endured. Many of the stories told about him were told long after his life; the endurance of those memories says something about the impact he made. He gathered a team of disciples, like many other rabbis, and they travelled around Judea and Galilee as he taught.

He came into conflict with the authorities, as his radical simplicity challenged their authority. He was also very popular, and they could see that his popularity itself could be a danger to them, even while it protected him. Eventually, after a demonstration in the Temple which they feared could have become a riot, they arrested him. His trial was a secret and illegal affair; he faced charges which could result in his execution, and such trials should have been held during the day. However, the whole point was to get rid of him. Jewish and Roman authorities colluded, Jesus was sentenced to death, and executed by crucifixion, a horrific death reserved for seditious offenders. It was designed to warn anyone against threatening those in power.

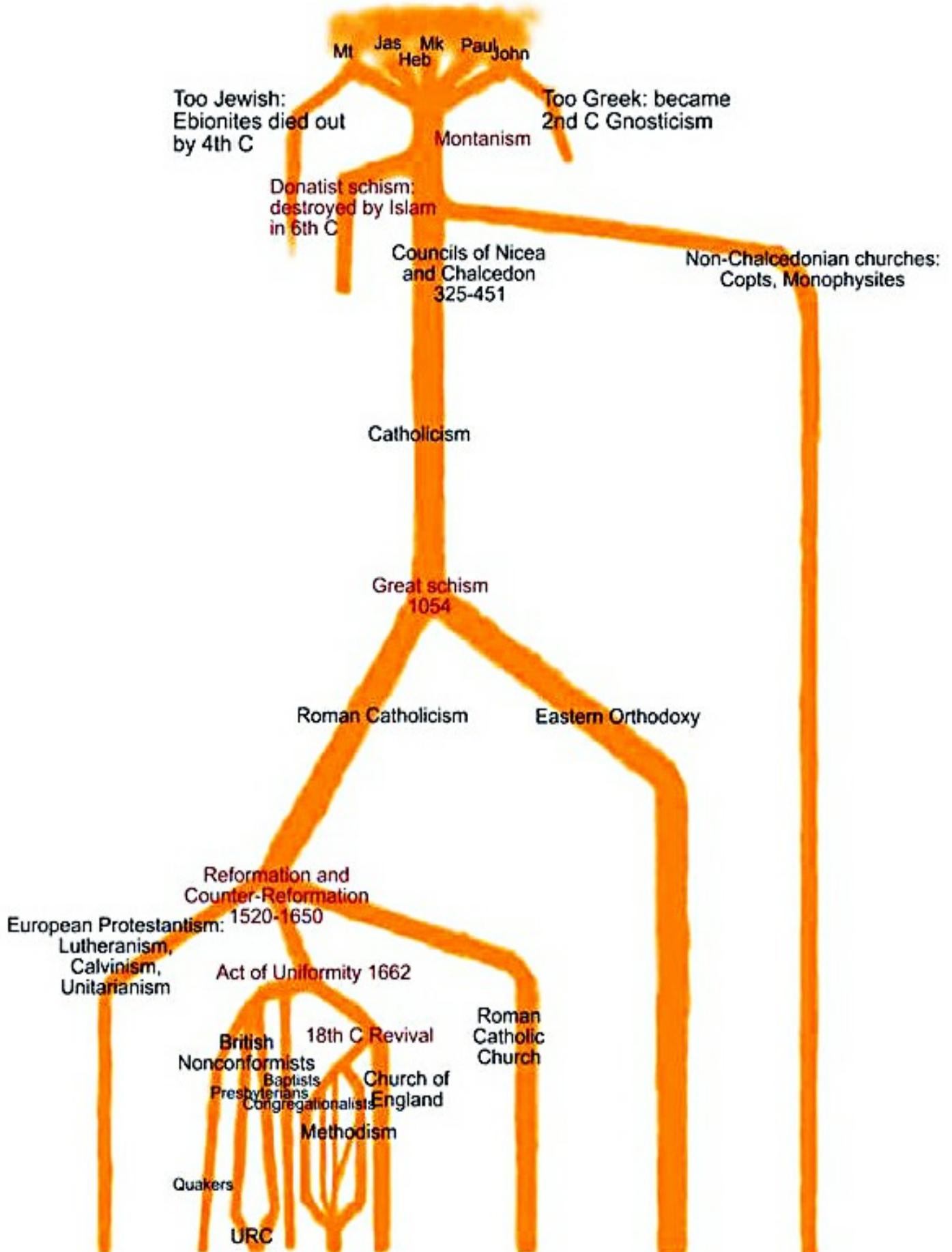
Jesus' death and burial should have been the end of the story. However, rumours spread very quickly that he had been raised from the dead, and had been seen by some of his friends. Those friends, who had been frightened into hiding by his death, were speaking fearlessly about him as the One whom God had sent to save the world. Despite the warnings and occasional opposition of the authorities, the movement spread like wildfire across the Mediterranean world and beyond. Even one of their fiercest opponents was converted to the new faith, Saul of Tarsus becoming the Apostle Paul, a formidable advocate of Jesus as Messiah, the one who fulfilled all the hopes of the ancient Jewish faith, and took it further, to include the Gentiles in the good news.

From that day to this, the Christian faith has been controversial. Resurrection is so far outside normal experience as to be utterly implausible: there have been endless attempts to explain it away as hallucinations, dreams, or even lies and conspiracies. However, while all of these alternatives could plausibly explain parts of the story, none of them can account for all of them. The only thing that adequately explains the explosive beginnings of the Jesus movement is that something truly out of the ordinary did happen: that God raised Jesus from the dead, a sign that something very big was happening.

The Methodist family tree



The Christian Family Tree



The Jesus Movement

It began as a small group, the followers of a Galilean rabbi; it became a rapid movement spreading around the Roman world and beyond; it kept going in all directions, until it has become a major world-wide religion. The story of that movement is huge, transforming almost beyond recognition as it grew.

It began as a Jewish revival, believing Jesus to be the One long-expected, but then as it spread into Gentile society was forced to translate itself into different concepts which made sense to non-Jews.

It began as a movement suspected by Jewish and Roman authorities, often persecuted, but was then adopted as the official religion of the Roman Empire. Becoming official freed the Church from persecution, but gave it power which became a temptation as much as a tool for the work.

It spread into Eastern and Western cultures, continually re-translating itself into forms which made sense where it was, but weren't always understood by those who saw it change. Branches of the same family tree were suspicious of each other, and misunderstanding often became enmity.

In Europe, the Church became part of the fabric of Western society and government. That made it part of the institution, leading to a tension between the Church and the radical reforming message it preached. So there were regular points at which the message led some to break out and go further than their Church would permit, only to see their revival movement become itself an institution which resisted change. Luther, Calvin, and the Protestant Reformers set out to renew and reform the medieval Catholic Church, and led to the Reformed Churches. John Wesley set out to renew the Church of England, and his movement led to the Methodist Church. The Pentecostal revivals of the early 20th C broke out of the mainstream churches, and by the end of the century had become church movements in their own right. In the last decades of the 20th C, charismatic renewal repeated the story, leading to movements of independent house-churches.

The Ecumenical Movement in the 20th C led to the different denominations talking to each other, finding ways to work with each other, and occasionally joining in new joint churches. There is still disagreement between the denominations, but more and more we are able to work together as friends and family. The 21st C has brought its own set of challenges, as traditional forms of religion are left behind by more and more people, and the churches seek new ways to live the Christian faith and attract new disciples.

The Church is a very different shape now to when it began. Theology and doctrine have developed over the centuries, as have layers of tradition. The one constant is that we seek to follow, serve, and proclaim Jesus as the Son of God.