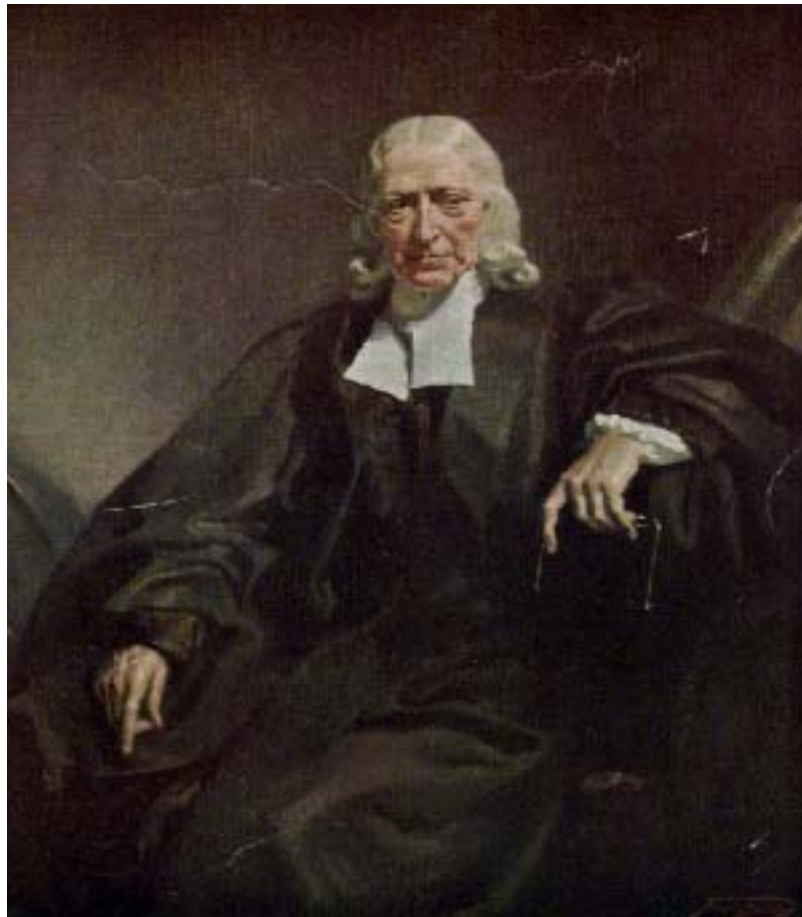


A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE LIFE OF JOHN WESLEY

Assignment 3 – Church History

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In Eighteenth century Britain God raised up a number of notable Christian leaders. John Wesley was one of these. His life was one committed to the Lord's service. His personal characteristics of courage, loyalty, perseverance and a deep commitment to serving God and man were matched by his gifts as a preacher and organiser. The work of Revival that he was a significant part of brought life into the church at a time when England was ripe for secularisation.¹ Paradoxically one of his greatest legacies was the denomination that he did not seek to establish.

John Wesley, son of an Anglican rectory was raised in a large family by godly parents. His father Samuel was a committed Anglican churchman, but both his paternal grandfather and great grandfather were dissenting ministers ejected from their parishes in 1662. His maternal grandfather, Samuel Annesley, was an eminent nonconformist minister.² His mother, Susannah, was a devoted Christian mother to whom he continued to look for guidance throughout her life.³ The Wesley's were a family that had taken their religion seriously for generations.⁴

At the age of six years he was rescued from a fire that destroyed the rectory. From that point on believed that only God's providential care had saved him.⁵ Later, at Oxford University he read such classics as Thomas a Kempis' "Imitation of Christ" and William Law's "Serious Call to a Holy life" and came to realise that only by becoming one hundred per cent Christian could he succeed in his quest to be perfect.

¹ Isser Woloch, "*Eighteenth Century Europe :Tradition and Progress 1715-1789*," New York: WW Norton and Company, 1982 p298

² Elsie Houghton, "*Christian Hymn-Writers*" Mid Glamorgan : Evangelical Press of Wales, 1982 p77

³ Roland H Bainton, "*The History of Christianity*," London : Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1964 p356

⁴ Woloch, p298

⁵ Bruce L Shelley, "*Church History in Plain Language*," (2nd Edition) Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995 p333

To help with this he catalogued all his faults and mapped out rules to overcome them.⁶ Increasingly he adopted a more ascetic approach to life as he sought in vain for inward and outward holiness.⁷

Whilst serving as his father's curate his brother Charles started what came to be called a "Holy Club" at Oxford. The club aimed to encourage serious attention to religious duties. The members, firstly led by Charles and later John Wesley, rose early, read their New Testament in Greek, fasted two days a week, took frequent Communion, observed all Church festivals and visited the sick and prison inmates.⁸ It was through this ministry that George Whitefield was introduced to John Wesley. Despite this strenuous and consistent approach John Wesley still lacked an inner spiritual peace.⁹

In 1735 John Wesley accepted a position as chaplain in the new colony of Georgia. On the outward sea journey a raging storm was encountered which terrified Wesley. At the same time he was deeply touched by the inner peace and assurance of a group of Moravian Christians who were fellow travellers.¹⁰ Both he and his brother Charles had gone to Georgia believing that they would be bringing the Gospel to native Indians. Their dreams of reaching "unspoiled children of nature" however were exploded as they found a world of violence and sin unresponsive to the high-church approach of John.¹¹ An unhappy love affair and the aftermath ended his ministry and he returned to London in 1738. This experience brought him to a spiritual crisis as he

⁶ Shelley, p334

⁷ Trevor A Hart, (General Editor), *"The Dictionary of Historical Theology,"* Carlisle : Paternoster Publishing, 2000, p568

⁸ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *"A History of Christianity,"* London : Eyre and Spottiswoode Ltd, 1955, p1024

⁹ Shelley, p334

¹⁰ Latourette, p1024

¹¹ Houghton, p80

contemplated his own need of conversion. After twelve years of working towards perfection the Georgian experience had revealed his own spiritual bankruptcy.¹²

In London he came into contact with a group of Moravians under the leadership of Peter Bohler. Bohler impressed on him his need of a strong personal faith in Jesus Christ that would enable him to overcome sin and attain true holiness. John Wesley had long known of the doctrine of justification by faith but had considered it pure doctrine rather than a personal experience of God's forgiveness. On May 24th, 1738 at their Aldersgate Street rooms he was suddenly and wonderfully converted. As he placed his trust in Christ and received assurance that his sins were forgiven, he experienced at last the peace he had been striving for all those years.¹³

As he contemplated the future direction of his life he travelled to Germany to observe first hand the Moravian community. The warm fellowship and enthusiastic singing of hymns bound their community together.¹⁴ Wesley later adopted their use of small groups to facilitate study, worship and prayer in his own "societies." On his return to London he preached in London churches on the need of individual conversion. His urging of the need for a radical change in their lives was in stark contrast to the soothing messages and ritual of the established church.¹⁵ Churchmen, threatened by this new manifesto, soon closed their churches to him. Undeterred he continued to preach wherever the opportunity presented itself.

¹² Shelley, p334/5

¹³ Shelley, p335

¹⁴ Houghton, p81

¹⁵ Bainton, p357

In 1739 two things occurred which would have a major influence on Wesley's future ministry. Firstly he read an account of Jonathon Edwards' part in the Great Awakening in America. The power of Edwards' ministry and results left an indelible influence in his mind.¹⁶ Secondly he received a call from his old friend George Whitefield inviting him to join him in Bristol. Whitefield had been preaching in the open air to coal miners with amazing results. Wesley was reluctant to respond but when he did his "high churchly prejudices were melted by what he saw."¹⁷ As he preached to ordinary people they were converted in much the same way as he had read of in America. His anxiety, insecurity and futility were swept aside as the Methodist revival got underway.¹⁸

As Wesley and others revived field preaching many thousands gathered to hear them as they journeyed on horseback across the countryside.¹⁹ His desire to seek out those ignored by the church such as miners, weavers and artisans brought him into conflict with the Anglican Church, on two counts. Firstly his belief that a personal conversion experience was essential clashed with the established church practice of relying on ritual to assure salvation. His powerful preaching saw people crying out, even fainting.²⁰ To the clergy this was evidence of either the working of the Spirit of God or visible resistance of Satan. This was opposed as being at variance with the concepts of decency and order admired in the established church. Secondly, the church's rules precluded itinerant preaching without the local vicar's permission.

¹⁶ Shelley, p336

¹⁷ Latourette, p1025

¹⁸ Shelley, p336/7

¹⁹ Bainton, p358

²⁰ Williston Walker, *"A History of the Christian Church,"* (Revised Edition) New York : Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959, p460

Wesley considered that parish boundaries were artificial as he proclaimed, “The World is my parish.” Later this would become the Methodist motto.²¹

It was not just conflict with the established church however. His rejection of Calvinism’s doctrine of predestination was based on his belief that God willed the salvation of all men and that man himself could choose whether or not to accept God’s offer of grace and forgiveness. He saw his role as preparing anyone seeking salvation to accept it.²² Unusually, he held that those once converted could in fact lose and regain their salvation. Calvinists regarded this as a reversion to salvation by works. Wesley responded that those perfected continued to be dependant upon grace and faith.²³ Wesley was the only prominent leader of the Revival holding this view.²⁴ Whitefield, Wesley’s old friend, remained a committed Calvinist and regarded the Arminianism Wesley promoted as devaluing the Sovereignty of God.²⁵ In 1740 they parted company but were reconciled some time later. They continued to be committed to their own theological positions for the rest of their lives.

Wesley’s style of preaching, his Arminianism and his aim to take the Gospel to those outside the church provoked enthusiasm.²⁶ To him the Gospel was for all people but his special ministry to the coal miners demonstrated some of his personal traits. He would meet the miners as they went down into the pits at five in the morning and later in the afternoon when they returned to the surface he would be waiting for them. As he preached to them and showed concern for both their physical and spiritual welfare,

²¹ Latourette, p1025/6

²² Woloch, p298

²³ Hart, p569

²⁴ Shelley, p338

²⁵ Shelley, p338

²⁶ Woloch, p299

men, women and children would break down, tears streaking their blackened faces.²⁷ To these forgotten people Wesley presented a new way of life, a new birth leading to a sober, chaste and humane life. This radical change required mutual support from fellow Christians. This brought out another aspect of Wesley's character – he was a gifted organiser.²⁸

He developed small groups similar to the German Moravians. These small groups, led by a mature Christian,²⁹ operated like monastic cells with their members living regular lives in the outside world.³⁰ Only converted members were permitted to join and by introducing a quarterly renewable membership, a continual sifting of the membership occurred.³¹ As the virtues of frugality, sobriety and hard work were promoted within a spiritual framework, their members prayed together, shared experiences of the Lord's working and sang hymns. For the first time in their lives these new Christians gained a sense of dignity and self worth. These groups became the nucleus of the organisation that continued to grow.³²

While many appreciated Wesley's ministry, many did not. In the early years especially, Wesley, as he preached would be pelted with fruit, other missiles thrown at him, stock were driven into the crowds (sometimes with the local clergyman's connivance) and attempts made to shout him down.³³ On one occasion he was dragged through the streets of Walsall by his hair.³⁴ This allowed him to demonstrate another outstanding personal attribute – he never lost his temper but remained cool

²⁷ Bainton, p358

²⁸ Woloch, p299

²⁹ Latourette, p1026

³⁰ Woloch, p300

³¹ Walker, p460

³² Bainton, p358

³³ Bainton, p357

³⁴ Houghton, p81

and in control at all times. Many were won over by his personal courage and composure under pressure. Years later when riding into the same towns his short, slight figure with snowy white hair would be greeted with veneration – such was the esteem he was held in.³⁵

By 1741 it was apparent that John and Charles Wesley needed assistance with their itinerant ministry. John Wesley, committed as he was to the idea of an ordained ministry, opposed the concept of lay preachers. It was Susannah Wesley who persuaded her son to accept the idea.³⁶ Although lay preachers were introduced Wesley saw them as his personal helpers, and resisted having them authorised to administer the sacraments.³⁷

Lay preachers were to become an integral part of the Methodist movement. As it grew new structures were developed. In 1744 the First Annual Conference was held in London where under Wesley's guidance doctrine and practice could be shaped.³⁸ Among the important structural steps taken were the establishment of Circuits under the charge of superintendents.³⁹ Within these Circuits lay preachers were rotated from chapel to chapel with the aim of avoiding their becoming embroiled in local politics. Preachers remained under the control of the Methodist Conference who could then deploy them quickly to areas of need as they were identified.⁴⁰ This essential structure remained intact, even after Wesley's death in 1791.

³⁵ Latourette, p1027

³⁶ Latourette, p1027

³⁷ Shelley, p339

³⁸ Walker, p461

³⁹ Walker, p461

⁴⁰ Woloch, p300

Throughout his life Wesley remained a committed Anglican. He regarded his movement as an auxiliary to the established church. While members were expected to become and remain members of the societies they were urged to worship and take Communion at their parish church. Wesley himself resisted the establishment of a separate denomination. He saw his role as renewing the established church at a time when the church itself was out of touch with the burgeoning working class of the new industrial areas and enmeshed in the politics of the time.

The singing of hymns was an aspect of the movement that owed much to both Wesley brothers. The Wesley family was a musical family who sang together in the family home at a time when this was uncommon. Throughout his ministry, John, encouraged the signing of hymns. He was the first to introduce the singing of hymns in America in 1737.⁴¹ He saw hymns as a form of creed in verse which had an edifying effect as well as being for fellowship and enjoyment.⁴² Charles is remembered for his massive output of hymns but John translated many German hymns for use in the societies and chapels. Song has continued to be a notable adjunct of Methodism worldwide.⁴³

John Wesley's ministry had a strongly practical side. Throughout his long life he was an inveterate reader and writer. He loved reading and recognised the social value for his converts to be able to enjoy this pastime. From the royalties earned on his own writings he financed the publication of good books, both Christian and secular, at an affordable price. In addition, from the same source, he provided aid to the "deserving

⁴¹ Houghton, p83

⁴² Houghton, p84

⁴³ Latourette, p1028

poor” and lent money to struggling Christian businessmen.⁴⁴ His kind-heartedness meant he regarded his own provision as secondary to others.

In 1784 as Wesley sought to plan ahead and to deal with a critical shortage of ordained ministers in America he undertook the ordination of ministers for the American colonies.⁴⁵ This was an innovation as the established church regarded Episcopal ordination as the only legitimate form. Wesley, having studied the New Testament believed that since Presbyters and Bishops were equal, he as a Presbyter was entitled to do so. At the same Conference a Committee was established to lead and guide the movement after his death.⁴⁶ To the end John Wesley retained the view that the movement he had established was simply an auxiliary to the established church. After his death the final separation occurred as the Methodist Church was established. Later the new church would constitute the largest non-conformist group in England, second only to the Baptists in America and one of the “Big Three” in Canada, Australia and New Zealand.⁴⁷

John Wesley was a man called by God at a particular time in history to revive and renew a church desperately out of touch with the lower and middle classes of England. His courage and tenacity in seeing the task through to the end is perhaps best summed up with the following quote – “after his conversion experience, it is said his future course was sealed and for more than fifty years he laboured, through evil report and good report, to spread the everlasting gospel, travelling more miles, preaching more sermons, publishing more books and making more converts than any one man of

⁴⁴ Latourette, p1028

⁴⁵ Latourette, p1028

⁴⁶ Walker, p463

⁴⁷ Latourette, p1029

his day or perhaps of any day, and dying at last, in harness, at the patriarchal age of eighty-eight years.”⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Houghton, p80

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