

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 71

John Wesley – Part One

Introduction

If you take some flour, add baking soda and salt, put in a bit of sugar, then add some liquids (milk and eggs with a bit of oil), you can mix together the ingredients and cook them in a hot skillet and make pretty tasty pancakes. On the other hand, you could take the very same ingredients, merely vary the amounts of each, and pour the batter into a cake pan that you bake in the oven and make a cake ready for some frosting!¹ Again, you could vary the amounts of each ingredient and fry the resulting dough in oil and make doughnuts (cake, not yeast!). The same ingredients, when the proportions and cooking technique are varied, make very different products. Now, what does this have to do with Church history?

This week, we will begin our study of John Wesley, a man many consider the most significant influence among English speakers in Church history. Our introduction to this significant person will look at the ingredients that made up his life. We will see that those ingredients are much the same as most every other human, though the amounts may vary. But the variations and what Wesley (and God!) did with those ingredients, made the product of his life unique. That life has formed a great deal of the substance of today's Evangelical Churches throughout the world.

INGREDIENTS:

- Imperfect parents
- Imperfect siblings
- Imperfect church
- Good childhood experiences
- Bad childhood experiences
- Imperfect education
- A bit of rebellion
- A great deal of self-focus (self centeredness?)
- Family conflict
- Troubled relationships
- Uncertain religious ideas

¹ I would go ahead and add some extra flavoring to the batter, either vanilla and lemon or chocolate... But no more on this...this is Church History, not Food Network.

PREPARATION:

We need to remember our historical context for the life of Wesley. England left its affiliation with the Roman Church during the reign of Henry VIII, establishing itself as simply the Church of England (or “Anglican Church”) with the King as its head rather than the Bishop of Rome (see lesson 60). Then, over the next century, the church struggled to find a middle path that was neither aligned with Rome nor with the Protestant movement. During this time, the presence of those reformers who sought to “purify” the church of its perceived Roman influences became known as “Puritans” (see lessons 65-67). The Puritans were in a constant tug-of-war with the Catholics over the control and direction of the Church of England. Both the Puritans and the Catholics fought for control against those who sought to keep the Church neither Roman nor Protestant.

When we studied the Puritans, we spent time understanding the Anglican Church during the reign of James I of the King James Bible fame (see lesson 61). James continued to push the center road for the Church. Upon James’s death in 1625, his son Charles I took the throne. Charles did not make the Puritans happy! Charles chose to marry a Catholic princess (Henrietta Maria). Charles also appointed William Laud as the Archbishop of Canterbury (the top position in the Anglican Church). Laud was seen by many to be enforcing high-church order in very Catholic ways.

Charles’s reign was not only a religious provocation to many British citizens, but also a political mess. He sought to increase his power and strip many rights of the people’s Parliament, perceiving his reign as a divine appointment from God. The net result of this was a period of Civil Wars starting in 1642 and lasting ten years. In these wars, Charles was beheaded, Archbishop Laud was beheaded, the monarchy in England came to an end, and the Puritans took over both Parliament and the Church. This was the time when the Westminster Confession of Faith was written (lesson 65).

From 1649, the year Charles I was beheaded, until 1660, when the monarchy was restored and Charles II (son of Charles I) took the throne, England’s church was markedly Puritan. During the time between Laud’s death in 1645 and 1660, the Archbishopric of Canterbury was vacant. The Puritans in Parliament made Church decisions, and the Westminster Confession of Faith was official church doctrine. With the ascension of Charles II to the throne, however, policies reversed and a new Archbishop was appointed.

The Anglican Church continued strong, but never as absolute. The Puritan interregnum established religious dissension as a force that would never be eliminated in England. But, the revolution also put a latent fear and distrust into

the Puritans and dissenters. England was still in shock that anyone would publicly execute the King. Puritans were seen as distrustful to the government and the monarchical system that served England for over 1,000 years. The Puritans also enforced a rigid morality that many ordinary British saw as an enforced morality outside the scope of what government should be doing.

In 1685, Charles II died and was succeeded by his brother, James II. James II was a Catholic. The English people revolted, James fled to France, and the crown was passed to his Protestant daughter Mary II and her husband William III.

ENTER WESLEY

Into this context, we can now consider John Wesley and his family. John's father was from old Puritan stock. History records that John Wesley's grandfather and great grandfather were both devout Puritan ministers, both persecuted by the Anglican Church. However, John's father was not. John Wesley's father was named Samuel. Samuel was dismayed that the Puritans had beheaded King Charles I, and in an act of rebellion to his parents, joined the Anglican Church. Samuel took his degrees from Oxford and Cambridge, and following ordination, became a priest in the Church of England.

Wesley's mother, Susanna, had a similar religious heritage. Her grandfather John White helped write the Westminster Confession of faith (see lesson 65). Susanna's father (Samuel Annesley) was a strong Puritan preacher.² Susanna was the 25th and last child in her household. She grew up a Puritan, but around age 13, she decided to join the religious establishment as a member of the Anglican Church.

Susanna married Samuel Wesley just a few months shy of her 20th birthday. Susanna was quite strong willed in their marriage, asserting her own opinions at times to the dismay of her husband. For example, when Samuel offered prayer for the reigning King William, Susanna refused to add her "Amen" to the prayer,

² Wesley would later publish one of his grandfather's sermons. Part of the sermon reads, "Remember these two words, though you forget all the rest of the sermon, viz., 'CHRIST and Holiness, Holiness and CHRIST'... It is serious Christianity I press, as the only way to better every condition: it is Christianity, downright Christianity, that alone can do it: it is not morality without faith; that is but refined heathenism: it is not faith without morality; that is but downright hypocrisy: it must be a divine faith, wrought by the HOLY GHOST, where GOD and man concur in the operation; such a faith as works by love, both to GOD and man; a holy faith, full of good works." Quite a sermon! *John Wesley - a Theological Journey*, Kenneth Collins (Abingdon Press 2003).

believing the king an unlawful usurper of James II's throne. Samuel moved out of the house declaring "if we have two kings, we must have two beds."³

History does not tell us how long Samuel stayed separated, but it was not too long because John Benjamin Wesley was born about one year later, on June 17, 1703. Susanna would ultimately give birth to between 17 and 19 children, although only 9 would live to adulthood. John was their 11th child (4th son). His name came from two earlier sons that died in infancy

John Wesley's life also almost ended before he had a chance to grow up. In 1709, the Wesley home caught fire and was burning rapidly during the night. John's parents and the maid gathered the children in the hall and went out the door as the roof was about to collapse. Once outside, they realized that John, who was 5 at the time, was not with them. He was still in his attic room where no one had gone to awaken him. Try as the family could, they were unable to get up the burning stairs to rescue John. Samuel knelt the family down to pray and commend John's soul to God when an onlooker saw John's five-year-old face peering out the attic window. One neighbor stood on the shoulders of another neighbor and snatched John from the window just as the roof collapsed.

As an adult, John Wesley was fond of using this account for its parable effect. He would speak of the fiery fate awaiting those asleep, the inability of one to escape the fire by personal effort, and the free rescue that anyone who is not a fool would grab hold of and trust to their own salvation.

We have a good idea of how Susanna reared Wesley because later in life, Wesley wrote his mother and asked her to put her parenting principles into writing. Until the age of 10 (save a period of time when the house was being rebuilt from fire!), John lived at home under his mother's tutelage. Many of her parenting rules are likely considered strict by today's standards. Susanna did not allow the children to talk loudly or to play. Until the age of one, children were not disciplined by spanking, but once the 1st birthday came, the children were required "to cry softly" and were taught to "fear the rod." The Wesleys expected a quiet home where children were seen but not heard. Susanna fixed a pattern where she had a private one on one talk with each child once a week (John Wesley's was on Thursday).

At the age of 10, Wesley left for boarding school in London. His typical day involved awakening at 5:00 a.m. and having bread, cheese and beer for breakfast at 8:00 a.m. There would be some exercise, but most of his day was spent studying. Over the weekends and during holidays, he would go to his older

³ Collins at 16.

brother Samuel's house (not to be confused with his father, Samuel). Samuel would keep up with his brother's progress and often write home about it.

Wesley was an excellent student, learning Greek and Hebrew as well as Latin. As Wesley looked back on his teenage years, he would write that it was a rebellious time in his life. Rebellion for Wesley, however, was not what we might consider rebellious today. He would continue to read his Bible and pray morning and evening. By all accounts, his behavior was exemplary.

Shortly before his 17th birthday, John Wesley followed his older brother, Samuel's, footsteps and enrolled at Oxford. Wesley continued there and studied for a Masters Degree. The school awarded Wesley a fellowship (which meant a degree of financial independence) giving an indication of the high regard not only for his academic performance but also of his character. Graduating from Oxford, a now ordained John Wesley took a job as his father's assistant in the Anglican Church.

Meanwhile, John Wesley's sister, Hetty, had become pregnant out of wedlock. To cover up the pregnancy, Hetty eloped with William Wright, a plumber. John Wesley's father disowned Hetty exclaiming, "She is lost to me." The father refused to ever speak to Hetty again. Hetty's baby died before its first birthday, and the marriage did not fair much better. Hetty reached a point in her life where she confessed and repented of her sin, but their father would never take her back into the family. John Wesley's opinion was that his family did not properly acknowledge Hetty's repentance.

Now as his father's church assistant, John had frequent opportunities to fill in and preach at this father's church. While preaching one week, John's sermon covered the issue of forgiveness. The sermon explained the Christian opportunity and obligation to forgive. John Wesley waited until the very last part of the sermon to add that the congregation could watch the way his father treated his sister, Hetty, and get an excellent example of unholy behavior that was the opposite of Christian virtue. Needless to say, John Wesley's father and boss, was furious over John Wesley's proclamation from the pulpit. John Wesley apologized to his father; although, he wrote that he was surprised his sermon would have brought offense. John Wesley promised his father never to contradict him again, and after tears and kisses, John Wesley's father forgave him (though still not Hetty).

The following Sunday, John Wesley had an opportunity to preach again. John Wesley forsook his sermon on forgiveness and chose as his sermon topic, Judgment as in "just not lest ye be judged." It seems that at the end of the sermon, John Wesley again took an opportunity to point out that his father had not learned his lesson from the forgiveness sermon the week before and was still wrongfully

judging his sister, Hetty. John Wesley nearly lost his job over this and his father would not talk to him for months.

In 1729, at the age of 26, John Wesley was recalled to teaching duties at Oxford. John's younger brother, Charles, was studying at Oxford at the time. It was during this time period at Oxford that John and Charles began bringing together various students in a group they called the "Holy Club." This group thought to methodically work through holy living. They met regularly, set up very rigid rules for behavior, and held each other accountable to those rules. These meetings were held 3-4 times a week and were opportunities to eat and pray together.

John was the leader in the Holy Club. He would provide instructions on which books should and should not be read. He would also set an example of methodical Christian living by a personal daily review of all of his deeds. John kept a daily journal and would write down everything he did classifying what was useful to God and what was fruitless. John would keep track of his time on a daily basis in an effort to make sure that he eliminated anything outside of that, which brought glory to God. During this time, John threw away forever what he considered to be frivolities such as dancing, card playing, and chess.

Those outside this Holy Club had a number of less than polite names they would call the group. One name that ultimately stuck (and was embraced by the Wesley brothers) centered on the group's methodical approach to Christian living. Hence, the group was called "The Methodists."

John's oldest brother Samuel was one of many who thought that John was taking religion to an extreme. Others' parents whose children were in the Holy Club often felt much the same. Still, in spite of the complaints and attacks, the Holy Club continued and even grew in intensity. John proceeded to a point where he performed his spiritual audit on an hourly basis scoring himself on a scale of 9. At this time, John was what is theologically termed a "legalist." He felt that his acceptance before God would be based upon whether or not he was performing adequately in his life (living up to God's legal code). John taught this legalism to those in the Holy Club. Wesley himself would ultimately write that at the time of the birth of his Methodist movement, he was attempting "salvation by works."

In 1735, John Wesley had an opportunity to leave Oxford and go to the Province of Georgia in America. This was a time of strong revival in America. In 1734, Jonathan Edwards (see lesson 70) brought revival into New England with a sermon that was strong on Luther's justification by faith. When Wesley showed up in Georgia, his responsibility was for the Anglican Church there. Both on the

voyage over and while in Georgia, Wesley first encountered Christians coming from Germany as part of the Pietist movement.⁴

While in Georgia, John's methodical, strict legalism was not well received. John ultimately left Georgia after being sued for defamation. With a lawsuit pending, Wesley held an evening prayer, shook the dust off his feet, and left in the middle of the night to return to England.

Once back in England, John was plagued by doubts of his own salvation, his adequacy before God, and his ministry in Georgia and other places. John was also plagued by his conversations with the Moravians who seemed to have a more personal and emotional relationship with God. During this time, John was working closely with his brother, Charles, and Charles reached a point where he suddenly found himself at peace with God. In Charles' words, "I saw that by faith I stood and the continual support of faith...kept me from falling."⁵ John wanted what Charles experienced.

John forced himself to go to a meeting of the Moravian society in London on May 24, 1738. It was there that the Moravians were reading from Luther's preface to Romans. Wesley would later write, "about a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. 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 from the law of sin and death." John would later write that this was his salvation experience. This moment was when John Wesley finally "felt" accepted before God and saved.

It is interesting to note as one reads John Wesley's journals that he kept for the next several decades that John often tied his acceptance to God to his personal feelings, rather than objective understanding. Because his personal feelings would fluctuate based upon life's circumstances and the weather, John often felt insecure in his salvation. But, more on this next week when we cover: John Wesley, the Good the Bad and the Ugly!

⁴ The Pietist movement started in the late 1600's in Germany as an effort to restore Luther's justification by faith. The movement emphasized: (1) earnest Bible study in private meetings; (2) an active laity in church government; (3) holy living as evidence of Christian conviction; (4) kind treatment towards unbelievers and misguided believers; (5) a greater emphasis on devotional life as opposed to simple educational knowledge; and (6) simple preaching to emphasize faith that produces good works. This movement was linked to the Moravian denomination and its strong hymn singing tradition, extemporaneous prayer and preaching with a great deal of emphasis on the emotional aspect of one's spiritual life.

⁵ It was two days after this that Charles embarked on a career as a hymns writer, ultimately writing thousands of Christian hymns (Charles is the subject of a later class).

POINTS FOR HOME

Countless books have been written on Wesley's personal experiences because there is a dearth of information available out of his journals and writings. As we begin our study of him, as we examine the ingredients of his life, several points stand out:

1. Do not ever "arrive." Hopefully, we never consider ourselves fully understanding God and his mind and heart for us. There is a huge difference between understanding God truly and understanding God fully. Paul makes the point that we are daily "being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory" (2 Corinthians 3:18). This point is because we all have the need to grow in our understanding of God. We all join Paul in this life as ones who "sees but a poor reflection as in a mirror," whereas in heaven we "shall see face to face." Paul emphasizes his point saying, "Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Now, if Paul knew only in part, then how dare we assume to know more? Let us commit to study and devotion to better learn of God and his desire and plan for our lives (Phil. 3:7-14).
2. God works in ways that should rightly cause us to fall on our faces in worship. The world is his tapestry where he "is sovereign over the kingdoms of men" (Daniel 4:17). God "changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them" (Daniel 2:21). Yet, this same God, who moves through space, time, and, history to bring his ultimate plan to fruition has an interest in details. He knows when a sparrow falls and how many hairs we have on our heads (Matthew 10:29-31). This is the wonderful God in whom we trust and by whom we face the world, for we can choose to live in His service!
3. God works in the midst of success and failure to call individuals to him. The call is not simply because God wants people obeying his rules. The call is because God wants his children in a relationship with him. This is why Jesus explained that "this is eternal life: that they [insert your name!] may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3). That relationship will never adequately be based on following rules, or even on "feeling" right with God. This relationship is simply based upon a desire by us to accept forgiveness in Christ and allow God to begin working in our lives. We then have the confidence of standing right before God based upon our faith in Christ. This is a confidence that reassures us "whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything" (1 John 3:20).