

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 73

John Wesley – Part 3

John Wesley and the Methodist Church

We have spent two weeks examining the life of John Wesley. The first week, we considered his upbringing and the formative events of his life and ministry. The second week, we studied several aspects of his ministry, considering all angles, the good, the bad, and the ugly. This week, we turn our attention to Wesley and his role in establishing the Methodist Church.

REVIVAL COMES TO GREAT BRITAIN

We have explained through other lessons the English approach to Christianity after separating from the Roman Catholic Church during the reign of Henry VIII. The Church of England was the authorized Church for the British, and for a time, those who failed to attend were fined and/or persecuted. We also studied how many separatists chose to leave England rather than continue under religious persecution.

Toward the end of the 1600's, things changed. The turbulence of the 1600's, with the execution of King Charles I, the period of the Puritan Parliament, and the restoration of the monarchy, had effects on the religious and political views of the English. In 1689, Parliament passed the Act of Toleration. It allowed those who could not (or would not) agree to the 39 Articles of the Church of England to worship freely – as long as they met certain conditions. These “dissenters” had to: (1) register their meeting houses with the government; (2) license their preachers with the government; and (3) hold worship services in the registered meeting houses as opposed to meeting in regular homes. The Act of Toleration did not extend to Catholics or Unitarians. The Act also continued the law that agreement with the 39 Articles of the Church of England (*i.e.*, membership in the Church of England) was required for anyone attending a university, holding a public office, holding an office in the military, or voting in elections.

During this same time period, there was a revival of purity sweeping through churches in Europe. In Germany, the “Pietism Movement” had taken a grip on the Lutheran church in an effort to restore core teachings of Luther as well as responsible holy behavior among members. In England, this purity revival was causing a number of religious “societies” to arise. These English societies were an effort to move people toward holiness that seemed to be missing on a national level. Many scholars see the backlash from the perceived Puritanical overthrow of

Charles I cynicism over religion and its fruits with subsequent lawlessness and callous disregard for religion. In an effort to restore holiness to the people, religious societies were set up as a means of reaching to people, beyond the confines of church walls.

We might classify these societies today as religious clubs, where membership was not based upon paying financial dues. Rather, the members were expected to live up to a club code of holiness, and those who failed were removed from the clubs.

It was in this vein as a religious club that Wesley started his groups that became labeled “Methodists.”¹ It was important to Wesley that the Methodists maintain their status as religious societies and not dissent from the Anglican Church. By simply forming societies, Wesley and the Methodists were in a position to meet, teach, encourage, and hold accountable all while never leaving the Church of England.

Wesley had received ordination in the church, and during his entire life, he never left it. That is not to say that his preaching went without hardship and persecution. As we discussed last week, Wesley frequently was persecuted in harsh and dangerous ways. Still, Wesley would go anywhere he believed he might have an audience, and Wesley would preach and teach. Wesley would do his preaching in Anglican Churches as well as in Societies or religious “clubs.”²

The powerful preaching of Wesley was a firestorm of revival in Great Britain and America (and eventually worldwide). Wesley affected other Godly men (and several Godly women) who began preaching under his authority. Many would continue under his authority and many would branch out and preach independently, yet still as a “Methodist.” Over Wesley’s lifetime, the Methodists would grow from his small group at Oxford (see the first Wesley lesson) of 5 to 10

¹ Previously, we discussed the label “Methodist” which came early on to the group the Wesley brothers established as a “Holy Club” at Oxford. The name had actually been used 50 years earlier as “New Methodists” to label a group who followed the teachings of Jacobus Arminius on free will as opposed to the normative protestant Calvinist view of predestination. In this pre-Wesley usage of “New Methodist,” the point of the term was to emphasize that these people were teaching a new method of salvation as opposed to that of Calvin. By the time of Wesley’s Holy Club, the label seems to have come because of the strict method by which the members sought to live holy lives.

² As discussed last week, Wesley also reached a point where he would preach outdoor revivals. These became some of his largest events. In all these non-church preaching opportunities, however, Wesley was always careful to see that the meetings were at times that did not conflict with ordinary church times. It was important to Wesley as an Anglican minister not to compete with the Anglican Church.

to over 70,000 in Great Britain and another 60,000 plus in America.³ Wesley quite literally brought revival to the English-speaking world.

We have a good accounting of the way Wesley preached and lived because of his thorough efforts at keeping a journal. Although it is contrary to my nature to quote at length, a typical week of Wesley's life is useful for illustrating the way revival took the land with Wesley's devotion to preaching God's messages:⁴

Sun. 15.—I explained at seven to five or six thousand persons the story of the Pharisee and the Publican. About three thousand were present at Hannam-Mount. I preached at Newgate after dinner to a crowded congregation. Between five and six we went to Rose-Green: It rained hard at Bristol, but not a drop fell upon us, while I declared to about five thousand, “Christ, our wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.” I concluded the day at the society in Baldwin-Street, that “his blood cleanseth us from all sin.”

Tues. 17.--At five in the afternoon I was at a little society in the Back-Lane. The room in which we were was propped beneath, but the weight of the people made the floor give way; so that in the beginning of the expounding, the post which propped it fell down with a great noise. But the floor sunk no further; so that, after a little surprise at first, they quietly attended to the things that were spoken.

Thence I went to Baldwin-Street, and expounded, as it came in course, the fourth chapter of the Acts. We then called upon God to confirm his word. Immediately one that stood by (to our no small surprise) cried out aloud, with the utmost vehemence, even as in the agonies of death. But we continued in prayer, till “a new song was put in her mouth, a thanksgiving unto our God.” [Ps. 40] Soon after, two other persons (well known in this place, as labouring to live in all good conscience towards all men) were seized with strong pain, and constrained to “roar for the disquietness of their heart.” But it was not long before they likewise burst forth into praise to God their Saviour. The last who called upon God as out of the body of hell, was I--E--, a stranger in Bristol. And in a short space he also was overwhelmed with joy and love, knowing that God had healed his

³ These numbers reflect those who were members of the various societies and clubs as well as some “dissenting” churches. While Wesley maintained his Anglican affiliation until his death, many others broke with the Anglican Church and set themselves up as a dissenting denomination in England, and a simple denomination in the now independent United States of America.

⁴ Wesley kept his journal most of his life. It seems a pity not to produce at least a bit of it to give a flavor of how he spoke and wrote.

backslidings. So many living witnesses hath God given that his hand is still “stretched out to heal,” and that “signs and wonders are even now wrought by his holy child Jesus.”

Wed. 18.—In the evening L--a S--, (late a Quaker, but baptized the day before,) R--a M--, and a few others, were admitted into the society. But R--a M--was scarcely able either to speak or look up. “The sorrows of death compassed “ her “about, the pains of hell got hold upon” her. We poured out her complaints before God, and showed him of her trouble. And he soon showed, he is a God “that heareth prayer.” She felt in herself, that, “being justified freely, she had peace with God, through Jesus Christ.” She “rejoiced in the hope of the glory of God,” and “the love of God was shed abroad in her heart.”

Fri. 20.—Being Good Friday, E--th R--n, T--l W--s, and one or two others, first knew they had redemption in the blood of Christ, the remission of their sins.

Sat. 21.—At Weaver’s Hall a young man was suddenly seized with a violent trembling all over, and in a few minutes, the sorrows of his heart being enlarged, sunk down to the ground. But we ceased not calling upon God, till he raised him up full of “peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.”⁵

That was a typical week in the life of John Wesley. Now, consider that this was not a rarity. It was a typical week. It happened week after week after week, month after month, year after year, decade after decade. For well over 50 years, Wesley kept up this schedule and made reaching others his sole occupation. This is consistent with the rules Wesley set down as his personal resolutions for how he lived his life. Wesley resolved:

1. To use absolute openness and unreserved, with all I should converse with.
2. To labour after continual seriousness, not willingly indulging myself in any the least levity of behaviour, or in laughter, - no, not for a moment.
3. To speak no word which does not tend to the glory of God; in particular, not to talk of worldly things. Others may, nay, must. But what is that to thee? And,

⁵ Journal of John Wesley for 1739. *The Works of John Wesley* (Zondervan 1985) vol. 1, 186-188.

4. To take no pleasure which does not tend to the glory of God; thanking God every moment for all I do take, and therefore rejecting every sort and degree of it, which I feel I cannot so thank him *in* and *for*.⁶

With such resolve, it is no wonder this man touched the lives of many.

WHITEFIELD AND FRIENDS

As mentioned earlier, Wesley was not the only preacher of the new “Methodism” coming forth from England. Back in Wesley’s early years when he, his brother Charles, and a few others started the Oxford Holy Club, another member of the club was a young Pembroke student named George Whitefield. Whitefield was eleven years younger than John Wesley, but the two were close friends (at least for many years!). Whitefield’s mother raised him in near poverty circumstances. He had a penchant for acting and was a very pious and devout Christian. Whitefield was ordained into the Anglican Church and spent his life preaching. It was Whitefield who first began preaching in open-air meetings, the predecessor to the tent revivals that would come later. Whitefield had constantly urged Wesley to follow along and seize the advantages of outdoors preaching (most notably, the ready availability of space and the unlimited crowd potential). Wesley ultimately agreed to do so, and took over an outdoor revival Whitefield had set up. The effect was huge on Wesley and the movement as a whole.

Whitefield took his preaching over to America and into the state of Georgia after Wesley’s return to England. Wesley warned Whitefield against going, citing Wesley’s particularly vexing time there, but Whitefield went anyway. Whitefield’s stay there was as positive as Wesley’s was negative. Whitefield would return to America preaching throughout the country. He became friends with the American preacher Jonathan Edwards (see lesson 70), and spent a good bit of time bringing revival to New England. Whitefield is reckoned as one of the great influences behind the Great Awakening in America.⁷

At one of Whitefield’s outdoor events in Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin attended. Earlier, Franklin dismissed reports that Whitefield was preaching to tens of thousands outside. After hearing him preach, Franklin conducted an experiment. Franklin walked away from the sermon until he reached a point where Whitefield’s voice could no longer be heard. Franklin then measured the distance from Whitefield, calculated the area of a semi-circle based on that

⁶ *Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1 at 86.

⁷ Whitefield established an orphanage (Bethesda Orphanage) in Georgia, which still exists today as the Bethesda Home for Boys outside Savannah, Georgia.

distance, allotted two square feet per person, and then deduced that Whitefield was and could in fact speak to and be heard by over thirty thousand at such outdoor events. It is noteworthy that Franklin became friends with Whitefield and even published some of his material, although Franklin never affiliated himself with Whitefield's teachings.

Since we have already started this lesson with a large quotation, we might as well continue in that vein! Franklin records a most informative and even humorous insight into Whitefield in his autobiography:

In 1739 arrived among us from Ireland the Reverend Mr. Whitefield, who had made himself remarkable there as an itinerant preacher. He was at first permitted to preach in some of our churches; but the clergy, taking a dislike to him, soon refused him their pulpits, and he was obliged to preach in the fields. The multitudes of all sects and denominations that attended his sermons were enormous, and it was matter of speculation to me, who was one of the number, to observe the extraordinary influence of his oratory on his hearers, and how much they admired and respected him, notwithstanding his common abuse of them, by assuring them that they were naturally half beasts and half devils. It was wonderful to see the change soon made in the manners of our inhabitants. From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seem'd as if all the world were growing religious, so that one could not walk thro' the town in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street.

Mr. Whitefield, in leaving us, went preaching all the way thro' the colonies to Georgia. The settlement of that province had lately been begun, but, instead of being made with hardy, industrious husbandmen, accustomed to labor, the only people fit for such an enterprise, it was with families of broken shop-keepers and other insolvent debtors, many of indolent and idle habits, taken out of the jails, who, being set down in the woods, unqualified for clearing land, and unable to endure the hardships of a new settlement, perished in numbers, leaving many helpless children unprovided for. The sight of their miserable situation inspir'd the benevolent heart of Mr. Whitefield with the idea of building an Orphan House there, in which they might be supported and educated. Returning northward, he preach'd up this charity, and made large collections, for his eloquence had a wonderful power over the hearts and purses of his hearers, of which I myself was an instance.

I did not disapprove of the design, but, as Georgia was then destitute of materials and workmen, and it was proposed to send them from Philadelphia at a great expense, I thought it would have been better to have

built the house here, and brought the children to it. This I advis'd; but he was resolute in his first project, rejected my counsel, and I therefore refus'd to contribute. I happened soon after to attend one of his sermons, in the course of which I perceived he intended to finish with a collection, and I silently resolved he should get nothing from me, I had in my pocket a handful of copper money, three or four silver dollars, and five pistoles in gold. As he proceeded I began to soften, and concluded to give the coppers. Another stroke of his oratory made me ashamed of that, and determin'd me to give the silver; and he finish'd so admirably, that I empty'd my pocket wholly into the collector's dish, gold and all. At this sermon there was also one of our club, who, being of my sentiments respecting the building in Georgia, and suspecting a collection might be intended, had, by precaution, emptied his pockets before he came from home. Towards the conclusion of the discourse, however, he felt a strong desire to give, and apply'd to a neighbour, who stood near him, to borrow some money for the purpose. The application was unfortunately [*made*] to perhaps the only man in the company who had the firmness not to be affected by the preacher. His answer was, "At any other time, Friend Hopkinson, I would lend to thee freely; but not now, for thee seems to be out of thy right senses."

Some of Mr. Whitefield's enemies affected to suppose that he would apply these collections to his own private emolument; but I who was intimately acquainted with him (being employed in printing his Sermons and Journals, etc.), never had the least suspicion of his integrity, but am to this day decidedly of opinion that he was in all his conduct a perfectly honest man, and methinks my testimony in his favour ought to have the more weight, as we had no religious connection. He us'd, indeed, sometimes to pray for my conversion, but never had the satisfaction of believing that his prayers were heard. Ours was a mere civil friendship, sincere on both sides, and lasted to his death.

The following instance will show something of the terms on which we stood. Upon one of his arrivals from England at Boston, he wrote to me that he should come soon to Philadelphia, but knew not where he could lodge when there, as he understood his old friend and host, Mr. Benezet, was removed to Germantown. My answer was, "You know my house; if you can make shift with its scanty accommodations, you will be most heartily welcome." He reply'd, that if I made that kind offer for Christ's sake, I should not miss of a reward. And I returned, "Don't let me be mistaken; it was not for Christ's sake, but for your sake." One of our common acquaintance jocosely remark'd, that, knowing it to be the custom of the saints, when they received any favour, to shift the burden of the obligation

from off their own shoulders, and place it in heaven, I had contriv'd to fix it on earth.

He had a loud and clear voice, and articulated his words and sentences so perfectly, that he might be heard and understood at a great distance, especially as his auditories, however numerous, observ'd the most exact silence. He preach'd one evening from the top of the Court-house steps, which are in the middle of Market-street, and on the west side of Second-street, which crosses it at right angles. Both streets were fill'd with his hearers to a considerable distance. Being among the hindmost in Market-street, I had the curiosity to learn how far he could be heard, by retiring backwards down the street towards the river; and I found his voice distinct till I came near Front-street, when some noise in that street obscur'd it. Imagining then a semi-circle, of which my distance should be the radius, and that it were fill'd with auditors, to each of whom I allow'd two square feet, I computed that he might well be heard by more than thirty thousand. This reconcil'd me to the newspaper accounts of his having preach'd to twenty-five thousand people in the fields, and to the ancient histories of generals haranguing whole armies, of which I had sometimes doubted.

By hearing him often, I came to distinguish easily between sermons newly compos'd, and those which he had often preach'd in the course of his travels. His delivery of the latter was so improv'd by frequent repetitions that every accent, every emphasis, every modulation of voice, was so perfectly well turn'd and well plac'd, that, without being interested in the subject, one could not help being pleas'd with the discourse; a pleasure of much the same kind with that receiv'd from an excellent piece of musick. This is an advantage itinerant preachers have over those who are stationary, as the latter can not well improve their delivery of a sermon by so many rehearsals.

The approach of Whitefield to preaching was a bit different than that of most other preachers. While most preachers of the time were reading their sermons, Whitefield spoke extemporaneously. Whitefield also took his flair for drama to the pulpit, often acting out biblical scenes and stories.

In his biography on John Wesley, Stephen Tomkins quotes the actor David Garrick (an actor alive at the time of Whitefield's preaching) as saying of Whitefield, "I'd give a hundred guineas if I could say, 'Oh!' like Mr. Whitefield ...he could bring an audience to tears with his delivery of the word, 'Mesopotamia'."⁸

⁸ Tomkins, *John Wesley: a Biography* (William B. Eerdmans 2003) at 70.

Although friends and co-laborers, Whitefield and Wesley had a falling out. The issue was predestination. Wesley was strongly Arminian (see lesson 64) while Whitefield believed in Calvin's doctrine of predestination (see lesson 59). For a while, the two men continued as two headlights on the same car, preaching their revivals in full fellowship with each other and leaving the divisive issue of predestination aside. There came a point, however, where that changed.

On April 26, 1739, Wesley records in his journal that while preaching on "He that believeth has everlasting life," Wesley was "insensibly led, without any previous design, to declare strongly and explicitly" the doctrine of free will. Wesley punctuated his anti-Calvin words with the affirmation that "if this were not the truth of God, he would not suffer the blind to go out of the way; but if it were, he would bear witness to his word." Wesley then relates that of the audience, "immediately one, and another, and another sunk to the earth: They dropped on every side as thunderstruck."⁹ Wesley saw in this God's affirmation of his free will message.

While Wesley continued to preach, correspond, and even travel with Whitefield, there came a time where Wesley decided to start publishing on the predestination issue. The division between the two friends was harsh and strong. There are indications that Whitefield tried to mend the fence on several occasions, but Wesley refused. Much later in life, Wesley and Whitefield returned to joint fellowship, in spite of never finding resolution on the issue.

Interestingly, a lot of scholars place Whitefield as a leader over Wesley in terms of numbers reached in revival during their lifetimes. But, Wesley had a knack for organization and discipling after-care that was missing from Whitefield's broad array of talents. Whitefield would blaze through an area alighting it with the gospel fire, while Wesley would try to set up accountability groups and monitor those converting long afterwards. Wesley also trained up and placed a number of preachers to oversee those to whom both Wesley and Whitefield preached.

As a result, during the lifetime of these two Godly men, there was actually a larger number of predestination Methodists than free will Methodists. Not long after the death of Whitefield, however, those numbers changed. Wesley had in place a structure that would outlast both men, whereas Whitefield did not.

⁹ *Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 1 at 188.

POST WESLEY

Wesley never left the Anglican Church. As many Methodists in England were filing for status as dissenter churches, Wesley always fought to keep the Methodists affiliated with the Church of England. In his later years, Wesley seemed to acknowledge that the Anglican affiliation would not last, but Wesley died before he severed the tie.

Meanwhile in America, Wesley had sent a number of missionaries to preach Methodist revival. Most notably, Wesley sent a young man named Francis Asbury. Ordained in the Church of England at age 22, Asbury was just 36 when he traveled to America to preach in 1771. Five years later when the American war for independence broke out, the Methodist missionaries all returned home to England, save Asbury. He stayed behind and continued his work, preaching in courthouses, fields, churches, or wherever else he could find an audience.

After the war ended, Wesley sent Thomas Coke over to work with Asbury, making them “Co-Superintendents” of the work in America. This is considered the beginning of the Methodist Episcopal Church of the USA.” The “Episcopal” portion of the name reflects the Anglican tie, even though the now independent America would no longer have an Anglican church with the King of England as its earthly head.

Asbury continued to preach in America long after Wesley’s death in 1791. By the time Asbury died in 1816, the Methodists in America had grown from 1,200 in 1771 to over 200,000 with some 700 ordained preachers, and a number of schools. Nearly a century after Asbury’s death, a Methodist seminary and college were named in his honor.

The Methodist church has undergone a number of divisions, re-uniting, and name changes. The splits would produce Methodist churches for and against slavery, for and against Episcopal Church governing, for and against charismatic gifts, for and against perfectionist doctrine, and a number of other issues. The Methodist movement would birth great hospitals, great orphanages, great schools (S.M.U., Boston University, DePauw University, etc.), and a number of famous people. One need only look at the 2007 political landscape in America to see that President Bush, Senator Clinton, and Senator John Edwards are all Methodists. A number of churches from this heritage still carry the Methodist moniker, and a number do not (*e.g.*, the Nazarene Church, the Wesleyan Church, etc.)

POINTS FOR HOME

1. God seeks to be more than our teacher. He seeks to be our Lord. He desires that we follow him in what we do. He wants our plans to be His plans. This is plain in scripture. When Jesus finished washing his apostles' feet, he asked them if they understood what he had done. In the process, Jesus said, "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet" (John 13:12-14). Do we notice the point Jesus makes when he changes the order of his titles or roles? While the apostles may have considered him first and foremost their rabbi or teacher, Jesus makes it plain, in a manner of incredible humility while washing feet that he is first and foremost "Lord," and then, we can see him as teacher. Wesley saw this. He sought for his own life, and he taught to others, that God is Lord. We are to worship and follow him. His plans are to be ours. His will is to be ours. It is the highest calling of any human.
2. Others watch what we do. They do not have to be Ben Franklin to observe when we are honest and when we are not. We have a ministry based not only on words but also on actions. Are we what we preach? Or, do we say one thing and do another? We might well heed the words of James, "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can *that kind of* faith [Lanier translation here, the N.I.V. uses the term "can *such* faith" but the meaning is the same. James means a faith that is mental assent only, no conviction, no commitment, and no heartfelt trust] save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:14-17). James goes on to say that one could never show another his faith except by the way it changes one's life and the way it is lived. While God can see the heart, we humans see actions. So, a saving faith will always be able to be seen by the world by the deeds it produces. We should remember it is not the deeds that save, but that saving faith is never without such good works!
3. Splits in the church – Bad news! Let us hold fast to the truth. Preach it in season and out of season, but let us also seek to lay hold of the unity that Jesus prayed for: "I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to

complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17:20-23). In our unity, we proclaim Jesus to the world. Let us not sacrifice it for anything less than God’s most central truth.

4. One of the hardest aspects of Christian life is finding balance. One needs to find the importance of holiness, but never forget proper humility and the necessity of God’s forgiveness through Christ by faith. One key is the wisdom of learning the limits to our life. The psalmist prayed, “Show me, O LORD, my life’s end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life.” (Psalm 39:4). In that way, we might more carefully contemplate the importance of our words and deeds.