

John Wesley

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He served as a Methodist missionary for many years, first in China where he had to leave during the revolution and then in Indonesia.. He is now living in an elder home in Lomma. His life story is worth a book.

First of all I want to thank Kacy for lending me the book, which she says that she found by chance some time ago. The book is called "The Life Story of John Wesley", published 1906.

Part 1

Let me begin these four sessions of study about the Methodist Church, by stating that I have found, that it is necessary to know and at least try to understand the life history of John Wesley, the formation of his faith, and of his religious ideas about what a Christian life should look like.

Therefore this whole session is devoted to just this part of the story of Methodism.

(p 1 ff) John Wesley was born in the little town of Epworth in Lincolnshire.

It is said about the population of that town that: the majority of them had little reverence for the parson or the squire. Few of them could read or write; their manners were boorish, their speech vulgar and profane, their domestic morals corrupt. Of religion, even of its outward and conventional observances, they were for the most part quite oblivious.

To this uninviting parish came, at the beginning of the year 1697, the Rev. Samuel Wesley bringing with him his wife and four children. And in this rectory was born, on June 28, 1703, his most famous son, John.

Samuel's grandfather, Bartholomew, and his father, John, were both Oxford men and clergymen. From both grandfather and father Samuel Wesley inherited the sturdy personal, independent character of the Wesleys.

(p 7 ff) Samuel's wife Susanna was a woman to be regarded with some awe. Lacking in humor she had instead a remarkable dignity and poise of character. She was always accustomed to do her own thinking.

When the nineteen children arrived one after the other it is said that Susanna's religious training of the children received her most careful attention. She prepared for them an admirably clear body of explanation upon the Catechism and the Creed, and she was accustomed to meet them separately once a week, at a specified time, for an hour of religious conversation and instruction. Long afterward, John Wesley, when a Fellow of Lincoln College, wrote to his mother begging her to give him an hour of her thought and prayer every Thursday evening, as she used to do when he was a boy at home.

(p 10) From his mother John Wesley inherited his logical mind, his executive capacity, his

inflexibility of will, his union of independence of judgment with respect for authority, his deep religious temper. His precision and order, his gift of organization and mastery of details, his notions of education, even some specific rules and customs of his religious societies, can be traced to his mother's discipline. It is often said that Methodism began in the University of Oxford, but with more truth it might be said that it began in Susanna Wesley's nursery.

(p 12) Of the early boyhood of John Wesley only one incident is recorded. On a February night in 1709 the rectory was burned. Fifteen minutes after the fire was discovered, the slight, thatch-roofed structure was consumed. The family, hurrying out in terror, left the boy John sleeping in his attic chamber; and he was taken out through a window only an instant before the blazing roof fell in upon his bed. In later years he described himself as "a brand plucked from the burning."

(p 15, 18) In January, 1714, John Wesley was entered in the Charterhouse School, London. In June, 1720, he went up to Christ Church College, Oxford. During his stay at Charterhouse and the earlier years in Oxford, his character was ripening for the decision soon to come with opening manhood.

It might be of interest to know that when in London, in later years, he would often look into the dingy little court and recall the days when he used to run around it three times every morning for exercise, as his father had bidden him.

(p 20) The year 1725 marks the beginning of a new chapter in the religious life of John Wesley. In the early months of that year he made up his mind to study theology in order to enter the ministry. In the autumn he was ordained deacon.

Wesley began his distinctively academic work in Lincoln College in Oxford with a characteristic method and vigor that might have shamed the indolence of the average Oxford man. "Leisure and I," he writes to his mother, "have parted company." They never met again. He laid down a scheme of work for every day. Mondays and Tuesdays he gave to Greek and Latin; Wednesdays to logic and ethics, Thursdays, to Hebrew and Arabic; Fridays to metaphysics and natural philosophy; Saturdays to oratory and poetry; Sundays to divinity.

(p 27) At this same time it is said about Charles Wesley, John's brother, who was also at the Lincoln College, that for two or three years his life was thoughtful and religious. Two or three of his friends of like earnest religious purpose associated themselves with Charles in the purpose to lead a more strict and ordered life. The performance of all their duties, secular as well as religious were so exact that they soon gained the reputation of being "Methodists". The happy nickname was caught up at once, and before the close of 1729 seems to have become their usual designation.

On John Wesley's return to Oxford in the autumn of 1729, he became at once the recognized leader. In the beginning they met on Sunday evenings only, but later every evening. They read the classics as well as the Greek Testament. They discussed questions of duty, laid down a definite scheme of self-examination. At first there were only four of them, the two Wesleys and two of their friends, but in 1735 there were fourteen of them meeting regularly.

(p 28 f) In August, 1730, one of them started to make regular visits to the prison in Oxford. Next he determined to make visits to the sick poor and urged the Wesleys to join him. By his father's advice John applied to the Chaplain of the prison and to the Bishop of the diocese for the approval of their benevolent work and from both received hearty sanction and encouragement. Soon they collected the poor children of the outlying villages into classes and taught them the Catechism. They deprived

themselves of all but the barest necessities in order to save money to purchase food and medicine for the destitute. Wesley began then this lifelong practice of giving away all he could save. One year he had an income of thirty pounds; he lived on twenty-eight and gave away the two. In the fourth year, still living on twenty-eight pounds, he could give away ninety-two.

(p 31) It was noticed that these young men were living a life of punctilious religious observance. They rose at five in the morning. They fasted twice a week. They partook of the holy Communion every Sunday. They repeated a Collect at nine, twelve and three every day. It took John Wesley long to learn that this is not the spirit of Christianity: that Jesus would not have founded a Holy Club (as they now were called). John Wesley, self denying, devout, scrupulously observant of every outward religious requirement, certainly was a Christian, and of a noble sort. It is worth remembering what he has written to a number of people at about this time: "My chief motive is the hope of saving my own soul". So he was not yet the preacher and reformer who could renew the religious life of a nation.

Part 2

(p 40) In the summer of 1735 General James Oglethorpe came back to London after having founded the new colony, Georgia, in the New World. He came in order to solicit aid for his new colony. Among other things that he wanted, was to find some young English clergyman, who would serve as Chaplain to the English community at Savannah and as missionary to the Indians. One of the teachers at Oxford recommended John Wesley. At first John declined, but as the invitation was urgent, and after some pressure from family and friends, John decided to go. He persuaded one of the Oxford group to accompany him, and one other of his friends insisted on joining the party. And at the last moment Charles Wesley, who had just been ordained, decided to go as Oglethorpe's secretary.

One of the reasons for John's decision to go was, as he him-self has written, that he hoped to learn the purity of the Christian faith by observing its effects upon the untutored mind of the red man.

However after having worked in Georgia for two years he writes that he has not taught the Indians because he has "not found or heard of any Indian on the continent of America who had the least desire of being instructed"

(p 45 f) Nor were the results of his labor as pastor to the colonists altogether satisfactory. He gave himself to that work, when he found that he could do nothing for the Indians. But to a community like the one in Savannah the priestly and ascetic type of religion which Wesley practised must have been specially repugnant. But perhaps the deepest reason for Wesley's lack of hold on the community is to be found in the fact of his own spiritual restlessness during those years in Georgia. He felt that his usefulness in Georgia was over and decided to return to England. (p 50) He sailed from Charleston on the 22d of December 1773.

Part 3

John Wesley's mission to the Indians had failed entirely. His influence as a teacher and a preacher among the colonists had declined. The memory of his stay in Georgia could hardly have been reassuring for future work.

But the keenest cause of disappointment Wesley found in his own spiritual condition. He had gone to Georgia to "save his own soul" and his own soul was nor saved. The faith I want, he writes in his

diary, is "A sure trust and confidence in God, which none can have without knowing that he has it."

For three years he was reading the writings of German mystics, and coveted their temper of security and contemplation. It was an emotional experience he craved, a calmness and elevation of feeling rather than any mere intellectual conviction.

(p 54 f) It was at this stage of his searching for a solution to his problem with the question of what faith really is, that Wesley met with another Moravian theologian, Peter Böhler, who was sent by Zinzendorf as a missionary to America. On his way there he stopped over in England and there he met with Wesley. It seems that Böhler at once assumed the position of religious guide and Wesley listened to his teachings with eager humility. What Böhler was teaching was the central doctrine of justification by faith. Such a faith must inevitably bring to its possessor a sense of safety and assurance.

(p 56) If such emotional experiences were needed for faith, Wesley avowed he had no faith. But just here Böhler gave him counsel worth all the rest of his teaching: "Preach faith," he said, "till you have it, and then because you have it, you will preach faith." Wesley followed this advice and became a missionary as never before.

(p 57) On May 24 1738 Wesley writes in his Journal the passage which has become the locus classicus in the annals of Methodism: "In the evening I went, very unwillingly, to a society in Aldersgate Street 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 through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my 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."

It is true that the Wesleys did teach, all their days, that, in a very real sense, men might know their sins forgiven. They preached a religion that could not only be professed and believed but also experienced. Therein is the secret of the success of the whole Methodist movement.

(p 64 f) The work of Wesley during the late 1738 and early -39 was mostly that of religious adviser and confessor. He preached in churches whenever opportunity offered; but most of the London pulpits were closed to him.

But most of Wesley's influence in the latter part of 1738 was exerted through another form of organisation destined to play a very important part in all his later work.

In Oxford he had favoured the union of religious persons in societies for mutual counsel and encouragement. One of these societies held their weekly meetings in a room in Fetter Lane, and it became for a time the centre of Wesley's London work until March, 1739, and a new and wider field of labour opened before him.

(p 67) George Whitefield had on his return from Georgia started to preach in churches in London and Bristol. But by and by the churches were closed to him. So he took the most important resolution. Four miles from Bristol was a rough area called Kingswood. There the colliers were the worst specimens of the English population. It was to these people Whitefield now turned. On February 17 he preached in the open air on Kingswood Common for about a hundred grimy, brawling colliers. Three weeks later there were ten thousand to listen to him. He had found a new pulpit and an audience no church could ever have collected. Filled with enthusiasm at the success of

this new form of missionary effort, he also wanted to preach to people in London. So he called on Wesley and urged him to come to Bristol and take charge of the great work begun there. Wesley hesitated.

(p 69) But after some deliberation Wesley arrived in Bristol on Saturday March 31. The following day, April 1, after some hesitation Wesley preached for three thousand listeners and his text was: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor

(p 70) That Monday was a fortunate day for him and for the world. A new chapter in his religious life was beginning. John Wesley, had become the evangelist and reformer, his parish the world and his message was directed to all sorts and conditions of men.

Part 4

In the year 1740 the morals and the religion of England were in need of reform. The public manners of good society were everywhere very lax. Drunkenness was hardly a matter of reproach, and profanity, loud and open, might often have been heard on the lips of fine ladies. The testimony of history and literature forces us to believe that never before had the best society of England shown less refinement, intelligence, or purity than at just the moment when John Wesley began his work.

(p 74) At the opposite social extreme was the great mass of ignorant, restless, half-brutalised population which we have learned to call the under world. The picture of the under side of life in England during the second quarter of the eighteenth century is appalling. Drunkenness was almost universal. Assault and robbery were not uncommon. It was an age of highway robbery.

(p 75, 76) Throughout the country things were little better. Cock-fighting and bull-baiting were the favourite amusements. There were as yet few good roads to connect the larger towns. Wherever any form of industry called together large numbers of ignorant, unskilled workmen, the restraint of orderly society were almost entirely removed. The church seemed powerless to take religion to them. It was certain they would never come to the church.

Yet it was among these people that the first Methodist preachers found attentive audiences. A few weeks before Whitefield began to preach to the Kingswood colliers, in a Bristol riot, they were "playing such mad pranks that one would doubt there were any law still in being". Six months later, hundreds of them were enrolled in Wesley's societies, and were supporting a school established for them. If the lowest classes in England grew better through the last half of the century it was in no small degree due to the influence of the Methodist movement.

(p 78) The middle class of the population was becoming a reading class. For them the pamphlet was written, but they had very little regard for religion, they rather prided themselves on their emancipation from conventions. Many were virtually without any religion. Yet to them the positive demands and promises of Methodism made a powerful appeal. These were the people who filled Wesley's societies and furnished all his lay preachers. - The majority of the English people were then, as they always have been, decent and virtuous folk, but they were not religious. Most people did not think about religion. On the lower classes neither the promises nor the warnings of Christianity seemed to have any influence.

(p 82) Such was the world in which John Wesley began his preaching in Bristol in 1739. With his methodical habits he formed a plan for his work, which occupied him almost every hour of every

day in the week. Thus he preached on an average twelve times a week.

He built a chapel near the centre of Bristol, which would also serve as a headquarters of Methodist work in the city. Interested as he always was in the education of the people he established a school for the children of the poor. He secured money, erected a building and also provided instruction for the colliers.

(p 86) It was in this connection that he wrote a letter to a friend, and in it we find one of the most important statements of Wesley, which has become a bylaw of the Methodist church. He writes: "God in scripture commands me, according to my power to instruct the ignorant, reform the wicked, confirm the virtuous. Man forbids me to do this in another's parish; that is, in effect to do it at all: seeing I have now no parish of my own, nor probably ever shall, whom then shall I hear: God or Man? **I look upon the world as my parish**; thus far, I mean, that, in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty to declare unto all that are willing to hear the glad tidings of salvation."

Part 5

(p 90) Wesley had no thought of founding a new sect, or building up any elaborate religious organisation. He was intent on carrying the Gospel everywhere, especially to those who had little chance of hearing it. But the religious movement, which was now beginning over a great part of the south of England, needed some direction and control. Hundreds of people were beginning a religious life, who had never seen the inside of a church. It was important that they should have some uniform and intelligent teaching, and some sort of helpful religious association.

(p 94) After the break between the Moravians and the Methodists at the end of 1739 eight or ten persons came to Wesley, with a request that he would meet with them regularly for prayer and counsel. He agreed to do so, as long as possible, and named Thursday evening as the time for such meeting. In telling the story, he says: "The first evening about twelve persons came; the next week thirty or forty. When they were increased to about a hundred, I took down their names and places of abode, intending, as often as it was convenient, to call upon them at their houses. Thus, without any previous plan, began the Methodist Society in England, - a company of people associating together to help each other to work out their own salvation."

(p 94 ff) This was the first of those United Societies, which were the units of the great Methodist organisation that was soon to spread over the country. This society found, almost as soon as it was formed, a place of meeting, which was to be known as the Foundery. After repairs and alterations were finished you could find a chapel, band room, parsonage, school, book store, dispensary and loan office. This building was for thirty-eight years the headquarters of Methodism. Almost every day through those years its little bell called London Methodists to some service of prayer or praise or preaching. By the close of 1741 it numbered more than a thousand members.

(p 96) In London Wesley soon found it necessary to appoint certain members of the society to visit the sick and the poor. Soon these persons became leaders of "classes" numbering twelve people. It was largely to receive reports from these class leaders, and to give to the leaders his personal counsel and oversight that Wesley, in the next forty years, made his continual journeyings from one end of England to the other.

(p 102) The next step, which was taken by Wesley, was the appointing of Lay preachers. It is very interesting to read about how that started. A certain Thomas Maxfield had gone from Bristol to

London as the companion or servant of Charles Wesley. One day early in 1740, word came to Bristol that Thomas Maxfield had been preaching before the Foundery Society. Wesley in alarm hurried up to London to stop such presumption. But his mother met him with a protest, "John, take heed what you do with reference to that young man, for he is as surely called to preach as you are." Admonished by this counsel from his mother, Wesley reluctantly consented to hear Maxfield preach. After listening he exclaimed: "It is the Lord's doing; let him do what seemeth him good. What am I, that I should withstand God?" Convinced, in spite of deep-rooted disinclination, he sanctioned Maxfield as a lay preacher. - Within a year there were twenty lay preachers.

At first it was understood that they were to be employed only in cases of necessity, when the service of a clergyman was not to be had.

(p 111) In the spring of 1742 John had been invited by one of the lay preachers to visit Newcastle. As he rode into the town he was shocked at the wretchedness and vice that filled the streets. So much drunkenness, cursing and swearing even from the mouths of little children he had never heard before. At seven o'clock Sunday morning he walked to the meanest part of the town, and, standing at the end of a street, began to sing the Hundredth Psalm. When he had finished his preaching the people crowded upon him with expressions of joy and gratitude, beseeching him not to leave them. He was obliged to deny them this, but that Sunday convinced him that Newcastle must be a centre of his work in the future.

(p 117) With his visit to Newcastle begins Wesley's itinerant life. He had no abiding place. He is always on the road, passing from one end of the country to another. It is estimated that in the last fifty years of his life he travelled over two hundred and fifty thousand miles on land. And most of this journeying was done on horseback. On his eighty fifth birthday he writes in his journal that he has never lost a night's sleep, sick or well, on land or sea, since he was born.

(p 124) In 1743 Methodist societies had been gathered in so many places, that Wesley felt it wise to call others to his aid, and to form some plan of methodical visitation and oversight. Accordingly he requested several clergymen in sympathy with his work to meet his brother Charles and himself, with a few of the lay helpers in order to "confer" about the advancement and direction of the work spreading over the country. This first Methodist Conference met in the Foundery the last five days of June 1744. Wesley probably had then no definite plan for future meetings of this sort, but this proved to be the first of a series of Annual Conferences which have continued to this day, and have determined largely the doctrine and polity of Method-ism.

(p 146) There is quite a strong temptation to record many of the stories, about very strong opposition, which the movement experienced during the following years. Let it be enough to state, that in many places there were riots and fist fighting, and in quite a few places the preachers had to flee for their lives.

But it was a different thing to encounter the opposition of those from whom he had a right to expect sympathy and encouragement. For more than a score of years, the Church, blind to her great opportunity, had no sympathy for him, no recognition for his work. Her pulpits were closed to him, her clergy regarded him with suspicion, often with the most outspoken hostility.

(p 158) The fact is that this opposition had taken form before Wesley could have been charged with any irregularities. So we must find the ground of the hostility to Wesley and early Methodism in his teaching. Yet he was teaching nothing that could not be found in the articles of the English Church.. His preaching was simply the old Protestant doctrine of justifica-tion by faith. He spoke of religion

as something to be experienced, not as a profession but as a life.

Part 6

(p 190) I want to finish today's teaching by quoting a page from the book I have been using:

"The last thirty years of Wesley's life were years of recognition and success. After about 1760 active opposition to his work mostly ceased. It was only seldom that his preachers encountered any violence from the mobs. The English clergy were no longer actively hostile. A strong evangelical sentiment had grown up within the Church Establishment, which recognised the beneficent character of Wesley's work, and sympathised with his motives, though not approving all his methods. No one could fail to see the good that had been wrought. Whole communities had become temperate, law-abiding, and thrifty. Wesley now feared for his people the temptations of wealth, since there was nothing to hinder Methodists from growing rich, and he would urge upon them his own maxim: "Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can.." Best of all, to Wesley's thoughts, a more vital religion was spreading steadily among the English people, a religion that could be experienced as well as believed, that transformed the outer life by renewing the inner life, that gave strength for all duty and hardship, hope in all trial or sorrow. The phrases in the New Testament which had been taken as the figurative expression of an unattainable ideal became realised in the daily life of thousands of devout people.

(p 263-4) On February 25 1791 Wesley returned to London and repaired to his room in City Road. During the three following days, his strength was fast ebbing, and it was evident that the end was near. On the following Tuesday he repeated the grace after meals, which he had used from childhood: "We thank Thee, o Lord, for this and all Thy mercies. Bless the Church and King, and grant us truth and peace through Jesus Christ our Lord." And then gathering all his strength, uttered in a clear, loud voice those words that became a watchword of Method-ism, "The best of all is, God is with us."

At ten the next morning, Wednesday, March 2 1791 he opened his eyes and said distinctly: "Farewell" and was gone.