

CELEBRATING JOHN WESLEY

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Part 1

John and Wesley came from the remote and not very attractive village of Epworth in Lincolnshire where his father was the rector. It was a large family with 19 children, although some did not survive beyond infancy. Their home life was not easy. Their father was a strong willed obstinate man who was incompetent at handling the family finances and spent time in prison for debt. His relationships with his parishioners were not easy and when the rectory burned down there were strong suspicions that members of the congregation were behind it.

The most sensible thing that John Wesley's father ever did was marry Susannah whose father was a Presbyterian minister in London. She was competent, businesslike, and rational. She confessed to John "Tis an unhappiness almost peculiar to our family that your father and I seldom think alike". Susanna had born her husband 14 children before John was thought of, and the family nearly stopped at that point. At family prayers Samuel prayed for King William 111 she refused to say Amen. The Rector went off in a huff to London declaring that "If we are to have two kings, we must have 2 beds", William III however died soon after and the accession of Anne made Samuel willing for a reconciliation. John was born on 17th June 1703.

The one incident that everyone knows of his childhood was the fire at the rectory when John was 5. This is the one which may have been started by disgruntled members of the congregation, John in the nursery at the top was cut off by the flames but with singular presence of mind he pushed a chest to the window, stood on it, and indicated his presence to the rescuers below. To his mother this seemed a sign of god's special interest in him. She wrote in her book of private meditations, "I do intend to be more particularly careful of the soul of this child, that Thou hast so mercifully provided for...that I may do my endeavour to instil into his mind the principles of Thy true religion and virtue. Lord, give me grace to do it sincerely and prudently, and bless my attempts with good success."

In 1720 John went up to Christ Church in Oxford. Five years later he was ordained and in 1726 was elected a fellow of Lincoln College. In the same year his brother Charles also went up to Oxford. There the Wesleys formed a group which met every evening from 6 to 9 to study and discuss the Bible. They were known as "The Bible Moths", "The Holy Club" and the "The Methodists" because they were so methodical in their way of life. To be frank they were a rather priggish group of young men with an intense inner-looking piety.

In 1735 both Charles and John Wesley went as missionaries to America. It was not a great success. They tried to impose their very narrow piety. But the colony was very

largely made up of people sent out from the London prisons and very different from a group of very pious Oxford men. John Wesley at this time was very much still a high church Anglican. He refused to allow Nonconformists to receive communion and would not even read the burial service over their graves.

His narrowness of mind can be seen by his treatment of his girlfriend. When they were alone he would read church history to her and so amazed and scandalized was he when, rather understandably, she rejected him for someone else that he excommunicated her from the Church.

During his time in America had however begun to have inner doubts about his faith. All his fanaticism had not brought him an inner peace; His religion seemed a burden not a delight. On the boat back to England, he wrote, "I went to America to convert the Indians, but oh, who shall convert me?"

Then on 24 May 1738 there came a change. He felt greatly troubled. "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 to 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."

When we hear the phrase strangely warmed this because he was not an emotional man. It was strange for him to feel strong emotion. But in this occasion a warm sense of God's forgiveness ran through him.

We sing 528 'Jesus love of my soul' it was written in 1740 just two years after the Wesley's experience of God's love.

Part 2

John Wesley's England was changing and the Churches were increasingly out of touch. This was the time of Industrial Revolution. New great industrial cities were springing up, mills, pits, factories, chimneys belching smoke. The established Church with its alliance of squire and parson had little place in this new world. Often in the new industrial city there were hardly any churches at all, and if there were those living among these dark satanic mills could find little with the old class-ridden church. As for the Reformed churches - they had gone through the fire. They had faced persecution and then social apartheid. They had survived. But they had shrunk in numbers and lost vitality. For the first time the Churches lost contact with a large section of the population.

John Wesley determined that his task was to reach out to those of the edges of society with the redeeming love of Christ. Since the poor never came near the church he began to

preach up and down the country often in the open air. Until he was 70 he travelled on horseback all over the country. It's estimated he travelled 225,000 miles and preached 40,000 sermons. Everywhere he preached little groups of Methodists grew up. At first he encouraged them to stay within the Church of England. But the Church of England would not have them and gradually "the people called Methodists" grew into a denomination.

But Wesley was never of a narrow frame of mind. "And I implore you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, that we be in no way divided among ourselves. Is your heart right, as my heart is with yours? I ask no further question. If it is so, give me your hand. For opinions, or words, let us not destroy the work of God. Do you love and serve God? It is enough. I give you the right hand of fellowship". Another time he said: "I love good men of every church".

Charles Wesley went through a similar experience of God's love to his brother. And he it was who wrote the hymns. In all he wrote 6,000 hymns. It was these which helped solve the problem which had defeated the Wesley in America. How was the zeal for the gospel they felt to be communicated to ordinary people? The hymns of Charles Wesley were part of the answer.

For Wesley above all else religion is personal. The heart of faith is each individual finding for God for ourselves. Look at the Wesley hymns. Look at the number of times you see the words me and my in them.

Tis Mercy All, immense and free,
For, O my God, it found out me.

With Wesley the gospel centres on the inner place where the love of God breaks into a life. No one can believe it for you. No one can live it for you. You must make your own way down the path. And it about the love of God for all.

Now there are dangers in this. In the wrong hands it can be introverted in a narrow kind of way. It can become like a fetid hothouse in which you spend all your time looking into your own soul. With Wesley however it lead to a commitment o others. If this experience of God is real it must lead to a changed quality in our lives. That's the test of all Christian faith. It's how you live it. The Christian gospel is faith active in love. "You will have no reward in heaven for what you lay up: you will for what you lay out. Every pound you put into the earthly bank is sunk: it brings no interest above. But every pound you give to the poor is put into the bank of heaven. And it will bring glorious interest; yea, and such as will be accumulating to all eternity."

Wesley put this wonderfully. He said

Do all the good you can
By all the means you can

In all the ways you can
In all the places you can
At all times you can
To all the people you can
As long as you can.

Part 3

John Wesley once said “The world is my parish” – today that is true in a way he could hardly imagine. Today there are 70 million Methodists in 130 countries and the number is growing by about one million a year.

The question we need to ask is what is Wesley’s challenge to us today. I think he might say that the needs of the world must be agenda for the Church. Wesley had no intention of founding a Church called Methodism. He had no intention of going field preaching. He disliked it. It went against his natural inclinations. He didn’t want to break with the Anglican Church But in the end he had to do what had to be done if the needs of the world were to be met. The genius of Wesley was that he listened to the Spirit was doing in the lives of ordinary people and made a theology out of it. The genius of Wesley was that he saw where people were and went out to meet them. Sometimes people talk of the Methodist way of doing things – what I see with Wesley is that different times, different challenges require different solutions.

What Wesley would surely be telling us is this. We are in a world where often the old churches no longer speak. Being a Methodist isn’t important. Being URC is hardly important. Church traditions are not what matters.

Listen to what the spirit is telling you through the life of your people your world, your neighbourhood. Respond to the needs of the day. Go out where people are. Answer the questions they are asking. Let church life come out of the needs of the challenge you are facing not the example of a former day. Methodists above all people ought to recognise that the kingdom is more important than the Church.

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