

John Wesley

A brief background to the evangelical revival.

John Wesley grew up in a world which had been shaped by momentous political change; the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 had brought about the end of Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth, and with the end of the Protectorate came also the end of the Puritan era which had sought to establish Britain as a country governed by scriptural principles. During the Protectorate, the Church of England had been comprehensively dismantled and replaced by a dour form of Presbyterianism. The Book of Common Prayer was banned, and clergy who would not toe the line were ejected from their livings. Churches were 'cleansed' of 'Popish' influences; under Cromwell, mediaeval artwork had been whitewashed, religious statues destroyed, and stained glass and organs smashed as the national religion was 'purified'. Socially, life under the Puritans was austere; there was a ban on many popular public entertainments, clothing was simple and unadorned and drunkenness and immorality were punished, sometimes very harshly.

Not surprisingly, at the Restoration of Charles II there was a backlash. Charles himself was notoriously profligate and immoral, and many followed his example. 'Kings then were without mercy, and without gratitude and without truth. There were statesmen without principle...judges without justice, and bishops without religion.'⁽¹⁾ The diaries of Samuel Pepys, father of the English Navy, give an excellent insight into that era; Pepys himself was a staunch son of the Church of England who saw nothing wrong (at least in his earlier years) with being flagrantly adulterous and receiving bribes.

Upon the Restoration, the Church of England was re-established, and all Presbyterian influences were purged in their turn. A new Book of Common Prayer was instituted (1662), and nonconformist clergy were now purged in their turn under the provisions of the Act of Uniformity. John Wesley's great -Grandfather Bartholomew Westley was amongst them. Under the draconian Five Mile Act, clergy who would not take an oath of allegiance were banned from coming within five miles of any town which they had formerly acted as a minister.

In the next few decades, although some of the excesses of the Restoration had abated, the Church had become orthodox, passionless and insipid. Preaching was generally said to urge morality but to achieve little else; 'Their discourses from the pulpit are generally dry, methodical and ... delivered with the most insipid calmness, in so much that should the peaceful preacher lift his head above the cushion, he might discover his audience, instead of being wakened to remorse, actually sleeping over his mechanical and laboured composition.'⁽²⁾ As for Nonconformists, they continued to be viewed with suspicion, and laboured under many disadvantages, social, religious and educational.

If nonconformity was viewed with suspicion, so were the traditional nonconformist emphases on the central place of the bible and doctrinal preaching. 'Christianity was to be neither 'mysterious' nor miraculous, but basically rational and humane....its founder was simply a good man, neither true Saviour or Redeemer'⁽³⁾ During the beginning of the eighteenth century, rationalism was coming to the fore; revelation was distrusted. Those who believed in seeking God's guidance and blessing in a personal sense were all too often written off as dangerous 'enthusiasts', Wesley and his followers amongst them. Doubtless Bishop Butler of Bristol spoke for many of his age when he said to Wesley in 1739, 'Sir, the pretending to extraordinary revelations and gifts of the Holy Ghost is a horrid thing a very horrid thing!'⁽⁴⁾

In all, the Hanoverian Church was solemn and respectable, but it shrank from anything smacking of religious ardour or fervour. The stage was set for the Evangelical Revival.

Wesley – the early years.

John Wesley was born at Epworth in 1703, the fifteenth child of his parents, Samuel and Susanna. Samuel was a High Church Tory clergyman, sober and respectable though often in debt due to the size of his large family and perhaps also to his inability to effectively farm the glebe land which came with his living. John's mother, Susanna, was a God fearing and pious woman, and is often rightly described as the mother of Methodism.

Both John's parents came from Nonconformist families. Samuel's grandfather Bartholomew was a minister at the time of the Commonwealth and became an itinerant preacher after the Restoration; his son John, Samuel's father, was an itinerant evangelist who was for a time imprisoned under the harsh restrictions of religious freedom which then operated. Susanna's father meanwhile was the distinguished Dr. Annesley, one of the most distinguished Puritan clergy at the time of the Commonwealth. It must have surprised – and probably horrified - both families when Samuel and Susanna both became Anglicans in their teens through religious conviction.

Given their heritage it is not surprising then that although Samuel and Susanna had both become Anglicans, nevertheless there was still a strong Nonconformist, almost Puritan emphasis about the Epworth rectory. Like many in those days, the young Wesleys were taught at home and received a conventional if pious education, learning to count, read and write, as well as read the bible and pray daily. Within the Georgian home and nursery the mother ruled, and undoubtedly Susanna's strong evangelical faith, her love of God, her carefully ordered spiritual life and her insistence on order and discipline all left a lifelong influence on John and Charles; their father too, although a faithful adopted son of the Church of England, also retained much of the stamp and theological stance of his Dissenting ancestors. John says of him in a letter to John Smith in 1748, 'My father did not die unacquainted with the faith of the gospel, of the primitive Christians, or of our first reformers; the same which, by the grace of God, I preach, and which is just as new as Christianity.during his last illness, which continued eight months, he enjoyed a clear sense of his acceptance with God....' 'The inward witness, son, the inward witness,' said he to me, 'that is the proof, the strongest proof of Christianity....I cannot therefore doubt but that the Spirit of God bore an inward witness with his spirit that he was a child of God.' (1) It is striking that John, who was to emphasise so much after his own conversion that Christians could know personally the love of God ('Christian Assurance') adds 'at that time I understood him not'.

Samuel's hopes for each of his three surviving sons – no less than ten children died at birth or in infancy – was that they would be clergymen in their turn. Accordingly John went first to Charterhouse and then to Christ Church, Oxford, where he proved to be a considerable scholar. He became well versed in Latin and Greek, read contemporary theology and also took in Spenser Shakespeare and Milton. In 1725 he was ordained deacon, and the following year was made a fellow of Lincoln College. A fellowship in those days was not just a passport to a possible academic career but was also a stepping stone to a 'good' living and the financial security which went with it. It carried an income of £28 per annum, enough for a relatively frugal, single man to live comfortably and unostentatiously.

For the next few years John Wesley enjoyed the life of a young Oxford scholar, travelling between home and Oxford, spending time with friends, and, after being ordained priest in 1728, becoming his father's curate for a while. From 1725, during the process of becoming first a deacon then a priest the more spiritual side of Wesley was developing and deepening; in that year he first read Thomas a Kempis' 'The Imitation of Christ', and after his ordination one finds him reading the early church fathers, and devotional literature such as 'Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life', by the mystic William Law. This book, first published in 1728, had a profound influence on Wesley, as did Law's earlier book 'A Practical Treatise upon Christian Perfection.' There was a strong Puritan influence in Law's books coupled with an almost Catholic, mystic, spirituality, both of which spoke to Wesley although he and Law parted company in later years. From 1725 Wesley began to live by a fixed routine and followed a rigid programme of study as he attempted to draw closer to God.

In 1729 Wesley was recalled to Oxford to serve a tutor at his old college, Lincoln, as there was a shortage of fellows able to serve in this capacity. Undoubtedly his existence as a tutor was much more leisurely than would be the case today – in 1730 he had just eleven pupils! Whilst at Oxford Wesley became involved in the Holy Club, a group of serious and pious young men who sought to improve themselves spiritually, which had been started by his brother Charles. As well as looking inward they also looked outward, visiting prisons and workhouses and assisting the poor and sick as a practical expression of their faith. However, he still yearned for peace with God.

In 1735 Wesley, still restlessly seeking God's will for him and personal peace, went to the new colony of Georgia as chaplain. The colony at this stage was still in its infancy; its charter had only been signed three years before: Charles also went, as secretary to General Oglethorpe, the Governor. . At this time John writes, 'My chief motive, to which all the rest are subordinate, is the hope of saving my own soul.' (1)

John Wesley's time in Georgia proved a complete disaster. His high church, autocratic manner did not endear him to the independent minded settlers, and it did not help at all when he got entangled with a deceitful young lady called Sophy Williamson. Eventually, Wesley refused Sophy communion, and found himself served with a writ for £1000 damages for defamation which he had no confidence would be dealt with fairly, and so he escaped one dark night with three dubious characters who had their own reasons for wishing to leave the colony. As Skevington Wood informs us, 'the official list of early settlers recorded his ignominious departure with the terse entry: 'run away.' (2)

John Wesley returned home a sadder but wiser man. He wrote of this time, 'I went to America to convert the Indians; but, oh, who shall convert me?' (3) But God's hand was upon him, and within the year the failed missionary was to become transformed by God's grace, was to play a part in the transformation of the lives of thousands in his own lifetime, and was to influence the lives of many thousands more in future generations.

A heart strangely warmed – Wesley's conversion

During the return voyage to England Wesley's mind was in torment; fear of death haunted him, he believed he lived by the teachings of the bible and yet desired to be saved but didn't know how, and longed for peace with God. Nevertheless, during this period he continued to preach to the crew and to give religious instruction to a Frenchman and two young negroes.

On his way to Georgia in 1735 he had travelled on the Simmons with twenty six Moravians, members of a German church which had its origins in the preachings of John Hus. Hus had tried years before to draw the church of his day back to a simple, bible inspired faith but had been put to death for heresy, and his followers brutally suppressed. The upright Wesley would not admit the Moravians to Communion but admired their faith, their serenity, and their unselfishness. He learned German from a locksmith, Ambrose Tackner, and was soon deep in conversations with them and their bishop, David Nitschmann.

During the voyage, a terrible storm blew up, and split the mainsail. As water poured between the decks, the English on board began screaming, but the Moravians continued to sing praises to God. This greatly impressed Wesley, and he asked one of them afterwards, 'Was you not afraid?' The man answered that he wasn't. Wesley pressed him: 'But were not your women and children afraid?' The man replied, 'No, our women and children are not afraid to die' (1). This must have made a tremendous impression on Wesley, given his lack of assurance about God's love and his fear of death.

During the voyage Wesley continued with his by now rigorous programme of daily prayers, readings and fasts. The Moravians, probably aware that Wesley was trying to earn his place in heaven by good works, shared with him the great Reformation doctrine of justification by faith, the belief that we cannot be put right with God by our own actions or merit but solely by our faith, a

doctrine which finds its origins in the letter of Paul to the Romans chapters four and five. Wesley, however, wrote a couple of years later that he ‘understood it not at first – I was too learned and too wise.’

Whilst in Savannah he met a Moravian Pastor, August Spangenberg. It was a very significant meeting for Wesley. In his own words:- ‘I soon found what spirit he was of; and asked his advice with regard to my own conduct. He said, “My brother, I must first ask you one or two questions. Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit, that you are a child of God?” “I was surprised, and knew not what to answer. He observed it, and asked, “Do you know Jesus Christ?” I paused, and said, “I know he is the Saviour of the world.” “True,” replied he; “but do you know he has saved you?” I answered, “I hope he has died to save me.” He only added, “Do you know yourself?” I said, “I do.” (2) Wesley adds, rather sadly, ‘but I fear they were vain words.’ In his own reflections, written on the way back from Savannah, Wesley records, ‘I want ... that faith which enables everyone that hath it to cry out ‘I live not; but Christ liveth in me; and the life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.’ (3)

Back in England, he met another Moravian who was also to have a profound influence upon him, Peter Bohler. Bohler had had a sudden revelation from God that he could only be put right with God by His own power, and so was a living testimony to justification by faith. Wesley, meanwhile, had come up with yet another list of religious observances which he desired to adhere to in the hope of drawing closer to God but yearned for the peace and the blessing that he saw in Bohler. On 23rd. March Wesley records ‘I met Peter Bohler again who now amazed me more and more, by the account he gave of the fruits of living faith, — the holiness and happiness which he affirmed to attend it.’ (4)

Despite this, for some time Wesley was not sure that the change from could happen instantaneously. ‘I could not comprehend what he spoke of an *instantaneous work*. I could not understand how this faith should be given in a moment: How a man could *at once* be thus turned from darkness to light, from sin and misery to righteousness and joy in the Holy Ghost. I searched the Scriptures again, touching this very thing, particularly the Acts of the Apostles: But, to my utter astonishment, found scarce any instances there of other than *instantaneous* conversions; scarce any so slow as that of St. Paul, who was three days in the pangs of the new birth. I had but one retreat left; namely, “*Thus, I grant, God wrought in the first ages of Christianity; but the times are changed. What reason have I to believe he works in the same manner now?*” (5)

It seems that it is not just this present age which assumes that God works in different ways in different generations!

Bohler promised to produce living witnesses to the change which the Spirit of God can make, and was as good as his word. On 23rd. April four of them gathered to convince John Wesley and others; Wesley heard their testimony and, according to Peter Bohler, then said that four examples did not convince him, whereupon Bohler undertook to produce eight! However, later that evening Wesley professed himself convinced.

During all this time, beginning when he landed in England, Wesley acted as a roving missionary, reading prayers, ‘conversing seriously’ or studying the bible with those he happened to meet, making the most of every opportunity. He also spoke in many churches, especially in London.

At that time there was great interest in the colony of Georgia and, in the days before newspapers, as a recent arrival back from the colony he was in great demand. He tended however, despite his

own spiritual condition, to preach for conversion even before he had been converted himself – his first sermon upon his return had been on the same topic as his first sermon in Georgia, ‘Naked to follow the naked Christ’ – and frequently his Journal for this period records that the officials of a particular church thought once was enough - on Feb. 12th 1738, for example, he records, ‘Oh, hard sayings! Who can hear them? Here too, it seems, I am to preach no more.’ (6)

During that period John and Charles Wesley had both been mixing with various religious societies, and on May 1st, they and a few others began their own, a little society at Wild Street within the church of England, similar to many at that time, which was to be a forerunner of the Methodist Societies. It later moved to Fetter Lane, and is therefore normally referred to as the Fetter Lane Society.

On May 24th, as is well known, he felt his heart ‘strangely warmed’ by the Holy Spirit – that sense of God’s forgiveness, love and presence for which he yearned. ‘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 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.’ (7) Although he was troubled for some days by doubts, largely because he did not feel the joy the Moravians told him he should be feeling and was not free from temptations, nevertheless he had found peace with God, and the capacity to overcome temptations when they arose.

Even during the few weeks whilst working through his thoughts and doubts he continued to preach the gospel upon every opportunity – not, by now, ‘naked to follow the naked Christ’ but ‘This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.’ (8) Perhaps that choice of topic illustrates as well as anything that Wesley had truly moved from Law to Grace. After spending a few months at the Moravian settlement in Herrnhut, during which he learned a great deal about the way in which God works in the lives of believers, Wesley returned to England in September, and ‘began again to declare in my own country the glad tidings of salvation’ (9).

‘The power of God came mightily upon us’

Wesley arrived in England on the 16th September. Immediately he took up his preaching ministry again, speaking in churches and the religious societies, including the one he had helped found, which now had over thirty members.

Increasingly over the next few months he found himself excluded from Anglican churches, including ones which had formerly made him welcome. The more direct and confident his message became, the stronger opposition to it seemed to become. However, his ministry was beginning to take root in the hearts and lives of individuals as never before. In late September we find him meeting with a Mr. Jennings:- ‘One who had been a zealous opposer of “this way,” sent and desired to speak with me immediately. He had all the signs of settled despair, both in his countenance and behaviour. He said, he had been enslaved to sin many years, especially to drunkenness; that he had long used all the means of grace, had constantly gone to church and sacrament, had read the Scripture, and used much private prayer, and yet was nothing profited. I desired we might join in prayer. After a short space he rose, and his countenance was no longer sad. He said, “Now I know God loveth *me*, and has forgiven *my* sins. And sin shall not have dominion over me; for Christ hath set me free.” And according to his faith it was unto him.’ (9) This has been said to be Wesley’s first conversion – though doubtless there were at that time some in the Fetter Lane society who would have contradicted this.

During this period he was frequently under attack concerning his preaching upon the nature of salvation and assurance, but retaliated with great confidence; his replies show that even at this early date he was well advanced in thinking and praying through in detail the theology which was eventually to underpin Methodism.

In October he considers the New Birth and its nature, and, interestingly, regards himself as reconciled to God although the peace he sought still eluded him. The Moravians taught if one was truly born again then a result was a peace which excluded fear and doubt, and a death of all passions which were not fixed on heavenly matters, and the Journal of Wesley's time at Herrnhut records several testimonies of those who had found this to be true for them.

This was not Wesley's experience and is not the experience of many of his Spirit filled followers down through the generations – one cannot help feeling that it was perhaps easier to feel a death of earthly passion and a heavenly peace if surrounded by like minded members of a Christian commune as opposed to living one's faith in the 'real world' of greed, evil and temptation. .

On 1st. January 1739 Wesley, his brother Charles, George Whitefield and others met with the Fetter Lane Society for a Lovefeast, a sacramental meal of bread and water popular amongst Puritans in the previous century. During that meeting, the power God fell upon the meeting. Let Wesley tell it in his own words.

'Mon. January 1st. 1739. Mr. Hall, Kinchin, Ingham, Whitefield, Hatchins, and my brother Charles, were present at our love-feast in Fetter-Lane, with about sixty of our brethren. About three in the morning, as we were continuing constant in prayer, the power of God came mightily upon us, in so much that many cried out for exceeding joy, and many fell to the ground. As soon as we were recovered a little from that awe and amazement at the presence of his Majesty, we broke out with one voice, "We praise thee, O God; we acknowledge thee to be the Lord." (1)'

Nor was this the only sign that God was moving. The journal for January and February records several conversions and the first baptisms of converts were also mentioned. It is interesting that Wesley differentiates between the one who knew a 'thorough, inward change by the love of God filling her heart' (2) and those who were born again in what Wesley calls the lower sense – those who received the remission of their sins. Some, he caustically comments, when judged by their subsequent behaviour were not born again in either sense!

In March 1739 Wesley's work was to enter a new phase. He received a letter from George Whitefield, a fellow member of the Holy Club and a protégé of Wesley's, who invited him to join him at Bristol where there had been a considerable revival. Whitefield, like Wesley, had had a profound experience of the Holy Spirit, and had become an itinerant evangelist; in February 1739 he had found himself excluded from the pulpits, and had begun preaching within the religious societies and in the open air, where he attracted thousands of listeners.

After seeking advice from the Fetter Lane society Wesley accepted Whitefield's invitation, and soon, having seen for himself the unrivalled opportunities field preaching offered to reach those who would never have entered a church, Wesley began the open air ministry which was to occupy the rest of his life. He had found his message in 1738; now he had found his method.

Subsequent chapters will include

Wesley's understanding of the Holy Spirit
– researched, and part written

The work of the Spirit in those Wesley preached to and ministered to – part researched.

Wesley's concern for the individual – part researched.

And a Conclusion – part written.

Footnotes –

A brief background

1. The Ejectment of 1662 and the Free Churches N.C.E.F.C., 1912.
2. Collected works of Oliver Goldsmith vol.III p. 151, quoted in 'The Burning Heart' (Wood) p. 14.
3. John Wesley (Green) p. 4.
4. The letters of John Wesley vol II p.134

The early years

1. The letters of John Wesley vol III p.188
2. Burning Heart p. 56, quoting from 'A list of the Early Settlers of Georgia'.
3. The Journal of John Wesley (afterwards referred to as Journal) 24th. Jan 1738.

A heart strangely warmed.

1. Journal, 25th. Jan 1736.
2. Journal, 8th. Feb 1736.
3. Journal, following 29th. Jan. 1736
4. Journal 23rd. Mar 1738
5. Journal 22nd. Apr 1738
6. Journal 12th. Feb 1738
7. Journal 24th. May 1738
8. Journal 28th. May 1738
9. Journal 17th. Sept 1738

'The power of God came mightily upon us'.

1. Journal 1st. Jan 1739
2. Journal 25th. Jan 1739

Booklist (part)

All books mentioned in footnotes plus:-

'Pepys' Richard Ollard
'Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life' William Law
John Wesley's Theology Today - Colin Williams

Sermons on Several Occasions – John Wesley
Primitive Physic
Wesley and his Horse
John Wesley – John Pollock
Whitefield - the Evangelist - John Pollock
Wesley – the Preacher – John Pollock
History of the Methodist Church vols 1-4.
A heart set free - Arnold Dallimore
A new history of Methodism vols 1 – 2
John Wesley Contemporary Perspectives ed. Thornton
The Elusive Mr. Wesley – Vols 1-2 – Heitzenrater
Wesley and the People called Methodists – Heitzenrater
Our Calling to fulfil – Harris