

John Wesley
May 23, 2007
Compiled by Jason Terrazas

THE SPIRITUAL STATE OF ENGLAND

John Wesley's England in 1738 was an extremely dark one, yes, an extremely dark period in her history. The spiritual state of the country was at an all time low. The 18th century in fact was a time of great moral and spiritual darkness, political restlessness and social need in many parts of the world. Sin engulfed nations. Civil unrest, rioting, smuggling, and violence were threatening England. Deism, in England, had a devastating effect and the authority of the Bible was shaken. Spiritual indifference and skepticism abounded and liberty degenerated into license.

Deism is the belief in one god but denies godly revelation with a reliance on reasoning and a disbelief in the divine origin of Scripture. A deist follows and professes no form of religion but follows the light of nature and reason, a 'free thinker.'

Religion was emptied of its spirituality and power. Viewed with contempt, it became at most a code of ethics. Many clergy were only figureheads with no heart. No heart for God or people and many opposed the doctrine of salvation by faith. In higher society people laughed at the mention of religion. Lord Bolingbroke reproved a group of clergymen for their lifestyle and called it "the greatest miracle in the world that Christianity was surviving when it was committed to the hands of such unchristian men as you."

Crime was high. Pre-revival people were, for the most part, ignorant and amazingly brutal. Schools were only for the children of the elite and the prisons were crowded.

The era was once described as follows, "the whole population seemed to be given over to an orgy of drunkenness which made the very name of Englishmen to stink in the nostrils of other nations." Theatre was obscene and corrupt. Fornication, homosexuality, and polygamy were considered common. This are the times and going on when John Wesley entered the scene. This is the time God chose to raise up a John Wesley to preach his gospel. It was for such a time as this that the course of a nation was drastically altered because one man had his heart warmed. John Wesley did more to change England than all the experts and reformers of his day.

FACTS ON JOHN WESLEY

John Wesley was born in June 1703 and died in 1791 at 88 years of age. He was the 9th of 13 children that lived and the 15th of 19th in all. He was only one of 3 sons that lived past childhood. John had a brother named Charles Wesley that was a famous hymn writer, called by some to be 'the greatest hymn writer in the history of the language.' Charles wrote nearly 10,000 hymns in his life.

John's parents were Samuel and Suzanna. Samuel was an Anglican minister. John's parents were thought to be from noble blood. Suzanna had a puritan background which she relied on to raise her kids. She had a disciplined schedule for the children including morning devotions, evening devotions, and regular times for meditation and

self examination before God. One night each week they would discuss the Bible, Christ, and their own spiritual attitudes.

John entered Oxford at 17 years old. He received his Bachelors degree in 1724, his ordination in 1725, and his Masters in 1727. He was influenced by The Imitation of Christ by Thomas á Kempis and Holy Living and Dying by Jeremy Taylor.

John Wesley longed for a holy life. He sought to obtain salvation by his disciplined devotion, constant worship of God, abstention from sin, and acts of Christian service for 13 years after ordination.

At Oxford in November 1729 John and Charles formed the 'holy club.' The group met 3 or 4 times per week to discuss their subjects and Christian life. They prayed and studied the Greek New Testament and fasted Wednesday and Friday. The men sought God's will in everything and prayed with fervor. Each day they strove to develop some virtue. They sought to live by stringent rules designed to help them achieve holiness by the method of daily self examination. They strove to please God by 'methods' which caused many to begin to call them 'Methodists.'

There were signs of trouble though as 2 in the 'holy club' committed suicide. They focused on externals, externals, externals. They tried to use religion to change the outward man instead of changing the heart and having an internal attitude change.

John Wesley was part of the 1st Great Awakening or the Great Revival Awakening from 1739 to 1791. The term awakening means for the eyes of the sinner to be opened to see their sorry, backslid, and lost state and to see their need for Jesus the Savior. The term revival comes from the Latin word revivere, meaning 'to live again.' Repentance is the forerunner to revival as sinners are touched and the city is changed.

Wesley was a brilliant man, mastering 7 languages over the course of his life. He went on to study and grasp many subjects by his searching and indiscriminate mind. He was small in stature, measuring roughly 5'5" in height. He was an Arminianist who held that God by His grace restored free will to lost humanity. He preached salvation in the 'open air' to any who would listen, including the poor. His last words were "Best of all, God is with us!"

A CHANGED MAN

January 24, 1738 was a day that forever changed John Wesley. It was 13 years after his ordination. He was 35 years of age and was traveling home after utter failure in Georgia as a missionary. He wrote in his diary, "I went to America to convert Indians, but oh, who shall convert me?"

He landed back in England on February 1st and began to seek God. During this period of searching, he attended conferences with the Moravians where they prayed and studied Scripture. On Wednesday, May 24, 1738, he was converted while listening to Martin Luther's "Preface to Romans." He said,

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 had trusted Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and assurance was given to me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin.

Wesley's direct contracts with several Moravians played a key role in his discovery of God's active grace.

Wesley went to his birthplace to preach but the drunken minister would not even let Wesley read the Scripture lesson during the service. So, Wesley spoke outside the church in the evening, standing on his father's tomb stone in the church yard. There was such a spiritual need he stayed for 7 days visiting surrounding villages during the day and preaching in the church yard at night. A powerful revival resulted.

By the end of the week, the people were under such conviction for their sins that "many in the church yard congregation dropped down as dead." Wesley tried to preach but the cries and praises of those repenting and receiving assurance of forgiveness nearly drowned out his voice.

In Sandhill, Wesley experienced what Jesus did and since then many other men of God: the press. "After preaching to the poor people in the most contemptible part of New Castle, Wesley said, 'It was some time before I could get out of the press.'"

Where ever Wesley went his 'revival societies' sprang up. They were groups of converts who united together to worship the Lord. Wesley encouraged these converts to remain loyal members of the Church of England. He had no desire or intent to form a denomination outside of it.

Wesley developed class meetings, led by lay leaders that met an hour or two each week to encourage and admonish the people and keep things on track. After three years Wesley formed a staff of lay preachers whom he nurtured as a father while insisting on strict discipline. He would tell them,

Never be unemployed, never be trifling employed...be serious. Let your motto be holiness to the Lord. Avoid all lightness as you would avoid hell-fire, and trifling as you would cursing or swearing. Touch no woman, be as loving as you will, but the custom of the country is nothing to us. Take money of no one; if they give you food when you are hungry, and clothes when you want them, it is enough, but no silver or gold. Let there be no pretense for anyone to say we grow rich by the Gospel.

Wesley wanted to keep peace with the leaders of the Anglican Church to keep what God was doing in the borders of the Church. But these things he would not do, 1) he would not give up the doctrine of an inward and present salvation by faith alone, 2) he would not stop preaching in private homes and in the open air, and 3) he would not dissolve societies or prohibit lay preaching.

The Wesleyan revival was a revival of preaching. There were many sermons delivered in churches of his day but true preaching of the gospel hardly existed. Through the revivals of the Great Awakening, preachers with hearts ablaze for God brought the living message of Christ to a dying world. Methodism's leaders were Spirit-baptized, holy men of God. "Through Methodism, Christianity regained its rightful place in national life, gave great impetus to work among children, and instilled a new missionary vision."

Wesleyan's preachers were sanctified men who sacrificed daily. They traveled the circuits on horseback similar to Wesley himself. These circuit preachers were compelled to live in poverty for years. Often nothing was provided for their wives and

children. The lay preachers loved Wesley and were committed to him. Where ever they went they took revival fire. Wesley loved to gather his young lay preachers together and read lectures and books to them. He counted on the preachers carrying on the ministry. He quoted Paul in Timothy, "Now I live, if you stand fast in the Lord."

Methodism spread rapidly. In August 1770 there were 29,406 members, 121 preachers, and 50 circuits. In America, in the 50th circuit there were 4 preachers and 100 Methodist chapels. 7 years later, there numbers jumped to 34 preachers and nearly 7,000 members.

Wesley really worked to preach simply so that all could understand. After 1735, when he preached his first extemporaneous sermon, he never again took a sermon manuscript into the pulpit.

There were other great orators, like George Whitefield, but no preacher in the great evangelical revival preached with such power or produced such effect upon the conscience as Wesley. His words struck like a hammer and burned like fire.

Wesley said about God's anointing on his messages, "It is indeed the gift of God, and cannot be attained by all the efforts of nature and art united." "God Himself made the application" and "truly God preached to their hearts."

Sometimes the anointing was so strong that Wesley did not know when to stop, going on for two or three hours and demonstrating great power.

Wesley published his brother's hymns at cheap prices so all could afford them.

Wesley seemed to see into men's souls, putting his finger on hidden sins. People felt as if Wesley was speaking to them alone. Often the effect on the people was so overwhelming that they almost all bowed down before the presence of God. Remarkable conviction of sin occurred during his ministry.

In Kingswood, to Wesley's surprise, he began to experience the Holy Spirit powerfully convicting people of their sins while he preached. Well dressed, mature people suddenly cried out as if in the agonies of death. Both men and women, outside and inside the church buildings, would tremble and sink to the ground. Wesley prayed for them and they found peace and rejoiced in Christ.

One Quaker was displeased with the groans and cries of the people who were convicted of their sins. He was then suddenly smitten to the ground in deep agony over his own sin. Afterward Wesley prayed and the Quaker called out, "Now I know that thou are a prophet of the Lord." Wesley did not encourage these emotional reactions and recognized that there could be imitations. He himself always spoke in a clam, unemotional voice. He also recognized that God's power was at work, convicting and transforming person after person.

John Wesley was not so much an innovator as a gifted organizer who creatively exploited other people's new ideas. George Whitefield and Welshman Howell Harris had pioneered field preaching but it was Wesley who became the great organizer of itinerant, outdoor evangelism. And again it was the Moravians who had pioneered the small group cell meeting. But it was John Wesley who attended diligently to organizing these small group cells into bands, societies, and circuits, and in doing so founded the Methodist Church.

At times hostile crowds closed in around him and made such noise that Wesley could be heard only by a few. Often people who came to contradict, disturb, and blaspheme left in tears instead. Mobs threw large stones at places where Wesley spoke.

They hit him with large clubs, struck Wesley in the chest, hit him with stones, and punched him in the mouth.

In order to preach the gospel to the poor Wesley was willing to go outside the box and make a break with everything he knew, even things that defined his own life, i.e. preach outdoors as encouraged by Whitefield. Wesley and Whitefield preached assurance of salvation and were scorned and nearly excluded from the church.

John Wesley rose daily at 4am and was frequently preaching at 5am to working men. He traveled 225,000 miles, mostly on horseback and often in wind, hail, sleet, and cold. He did all this from 1739 to 1791. He died at age 88 after 52 years of ministry.

Wesley preached over 50,000 sermons and wrote 233 books on all sorts of subjects, including home and health remedies and one of the earliest texts on electricity.

He left behind 750 preachers in England including 350 in America alone. At his death, there were 76,968 Methodists in England and 57,621 in America.

Wesley disciplined himself in diet and exercise. His contemporaries were amazed at his 50 year pace.

The revival God began through John Wesley and his colleagues continued to spread in revival fire for some years on both sides of the Atlantic. One hundred and fifty years from the outpouring of the Spirit on New Years Day, 1739, the Methodists worldwide equaled in number the total population of England in Wesley's day.

The move, by God's grace, from externals, externals, externals to internals, internals, internals was the changing factor in the life of John Wesley. While in Bible School, I and many others would hear these stories and then try to live them. Our motivations were 'that's what a man or woman or God 'looks like.' That must be what we are supposed to do. Well, we are men and women of God also. The historic people we are looking at were deeply touched and motivated by an incredible, almost mysterious love for Jesus. So let our motives be to love and get to know Jesus better. Then see where that takes us.

4 Key Things to Me:

1. Even though John Wesley was so methodical in his search for God and came from a line of clergy, it wasn't until 13 years of seeking and searching at 35 years old that he received assurance of salvation. Leonard Ravenhill says he was converted at this time, meaning that he served in the ministry for 53 years (88-35).
2. Wesley was a master at fathering and disciplining those around him. He spent quite a bit of time with his people.
3. I did not read of major or creative healings in Wesley's ministry.
4. I was a bit frustrated at the books I read. I wanted to learn more of the human side of John Wesley.