

JOHN WESLEY

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John Wesley, Founder of Methodism, was born on June 28, 1703, at Epworth in England, where his father was Anglican rector for nearly forty years. He was the fifteenth of the nineteen children of Samuel and Susanna Wesley, both of whom are noted in history.

The Wesley ancestry went back for many generations, the name variously appearing as Wesley, Westley, Westleigh, and Wellesley. One of the family in Ireland once desired to adopt Charles Wesley, brother of John, who declined, and the lad who was adopted in his stead became Earl of Mornington and grandfather of the Marquis Wellesley and the Duke of Wellington.

Both the grandfathers of John Wesley were Clergymen who were ejected from their pulpits in 1662, but his father broke that Non-conformist tradition by becoming a Tory in politics and a High-church Anglican.

[Susanna Wesley, was one of the great mothers of history.](#)

Normally it might be supposed that with so much child bearing, and in constant ill health, she would not be able to give her children the separate attention which they needed, but the opposite was true, and [in later years John could speak of “the little part of Thursday evening” given to him and could wish that it might be repeated, since “it would be as useful now for correcting my heart as it was then for forming my judgement.”](#)

The family life at Epworth was the first great influence in shaping the life of John Wesley. There was no “mother fixation,” as some modern biographers have supposed, but certainly the early instruction in the Epworth Rectory, followed by his mother’s later letters [and her constant advice, gave her an influence on his upbringing which is difficult to exaggerate.](#)

His father, the Rector of Epworth, allowed him to become a communicant at 8 years of age, and because of the sacrifice of both parents he became a foundation scholar at Charterhouse School, an ancient Carthusian monastery in London, on January 28th, 1714.

Despite the stern discipline of Dr. Walker, the headmaster, and the spartan conditions of living, no word of complaint has ever been recorded of the six years he studied there. He is remembered in a verse of the school song, since he was [ever the loyal Carthusian](#) and visited the school many times during the course of his long life.

On January 24th, 1720, he entered Christ Church at Oxford as an Exhibitioner; this was the College where Samuel, his elder brother had preceded him, and Charles, his younger brother was to follow.

Through these years he was in constant correspondence with his parents and when in 1724 he decided to assume holy orders, both parents expressed their joy; the Rector urged him to study the languages which would give him mastery of the original text of the Bible, and Susanna advised him to read “Practical divinity.”

Thus John Wesley began to read the “Imitation of Christ” of Thomas a Kempis and Jeremy Taylor’s “Holy Living and Dying.” This was the second factor which determined his later apostolate, for in Taylor he found a spur to holiness of living. It led him to read the great mystical writers and to follow their counsel in the culture of the inner life. From Taylor he was led on to William Law’s “Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life” and “Christian Perfection.” His mother advised him to read also, Sougal’s “Life of God in the Soul of Man,” a book which later became a favorite with both John and Charles Wesley.

In 1726, when Charles Wesley went from Westminster to Christ Church, John was elected a Fellow of Lincoln College, and in the interchange of letters between him and his father occurred the Rector’s memorable phrase: “What will be my own fate before the summer is over, God knows: but wherever I am, my Jack is a Fellow of Lincoln.” His mother said in a demure tone, “I think myself obliged to return great thanks to Almighty God for giving you good success at Lincoln.”

PREACHER

In the summer of this year John went to Epworth and nearby Wroot, where he preached and assisted his father in the two parishes.

In September, 1726, he was back at Oxford, and his rising reputation was such that he was chosen Greek Lecturer and Moderator of the Classes. In the first capacity he lectured weekly on the Greek New Testament, more to instruct the undergraduates in divinity than in Greek. As Moderator he presided over the daily “Disputations” at Lincoln College and fully developed his talent for logic. When he took his Master of Arts degree on February 14, 1727, his three lectures were in the fields of natural philosophy, moral philosophy, and religion.

This life of scholar and tutor, so entirely congenial to him, was rudely broken by the need to assist his father who was becoming increasingly infirm. Between August 1727, and November 1729, John spent more time in Epworth and Wroot than in Oxford, and the Rector wanted him to stay in the Parish and in due time become his father’s successor. This was not in accord with John’s wishes, and when Dr. Morely, the Rector of Lincoln College, told him in a letter (October 21, 1729) that “the interests of the College and the obligation of the statutes” required his return, he did not hesitate to resume once more his academic teaching and studies.

THE HOLY CLUB

There was not only Charles to greet him, but also the famous Holy Club which Charles had founded. The story can be told in Charles’ words: “My first year at College I lost in diversions; the next I set myself to study. Diligence led me into serious thinking; I went to the weekly sacrament, persuaded two or three young students to accompany me and to observe the method of study prescribed by the Statutes of the University. This gained me the harmless name of Methodist. In half a year after this my brother left his curacy at Epworth and came to our assistance. We then proceeded regularly in our studies and in doing what good we could to the bodies and souls of men.”

John, meanwhile, was continuing his reading of the mystics and coming to a clearer understanding of the supreme value of Holy Writ. In this very year of 1729 he said he had not only begun to read but to study the Bible: hence he said, “I saw the indispensable necessity of having the mind which was in Christ and of walking as He walked, not only in many or most respects, but in all things.”

With these views he naturally became a member of the Holy Club and as naturally became its head. At first only William Morgan of Christ Church and Robert Kirkham met with the Wesley brothers for the reading of Greek and

Latin classics and the study of the Greek New Testament. Others were added as the years went on, and the activities of the Club increased. At first, at the suggestion of William Morgan, the brothers agreed to visit the prisoners at the “castle” or prison and the poor in those parishes where permission had been received.

Strangely premonitory of John Wesley’s later interest in education, was the school he started. **He and his friends paid the mistress, and when necessary, clothed the children and supervised their work.** Children in the workhouse were taught, and books were read to the old people. The ridicule and scorn excited in the University was principally directed, not against the devotional and ascetic practices, but these works of charity.

In time the difficulties of the Holy Club so multiplied that it began to disintegrate. The early death of William Morgan was unjustly supposed to be due to the fastings and austerities which he practised and served to bring the rules into greater opprobrium. An article in *Fog’s Journal* in December 1732, severely criticized John and the other members of the Club, despite the fact that men who later were to be so distinguished as Thomas Broughton, Benjamin Ingham and John Clayton had joined. Wesley recorded in 1733 that the seven and twenty communicants at St. Mary’s had shrunk to five, and his incessant travels of around a thousand miles had loosed his grasp on the discipline and practice of the Club.

Perhaps the realization of this led to his compilation of forms of prayer for each day in the week. It was his first publication and was printed in 1733, to be followed in 1735 by “The Christian’s Pattern,” a treatise on the “Imitation of Christ” by Thomas a Kempis. Later in the Club’s history, six years after its inception, George Whitefield became a member and gladly adopted their ascetic mode of life.

GENERAL OGLETHORPE

The death of Samuel the Rector on April 23, 1735, unsettled John, and the meeting between General James Oglethorpe and himself caused him to accept the offer of a chaplaincy in the colony of Georgia. His father had been one of the first supporters of this new colony, named after George II, who granted the Charter on June 9th, 1732. Only his advanced age had prevented the Rector from offering his own services and he suggested that John Whitelamb, his curate, should be invited. Samuel, junior, the eldest son had written two poems with James Oglethorpe as the hero and a third poem had been inscribed to him.

Yet stronger than any liking of Oglethorpe, or interest in his scheme, was the fresh opportunity of leaping the wall between himself and God. All his reading of the mystics and good works could not secure him the communion with God which steadfastly he set before him as a goal. He frankly confessed that a chief reason for going to Georgia was to save his own soul. “I hope to learn the true sense of the Gospel of Christ by preaching it to the heathen.”

SAILS TO AMERICA

Georgia therefore marks a third stage in his spiritual pilgrimage. Whatever his motives, none could deny his apostolic zeal in his daily religious services and in the frequent celebration of Holy Communion. A plaque outside the Protestant Episcopal Church in Savannah makes John Wesley the founder of Sunday Schools in America, and certainly **he gave much time to the instruction of the young.** He ministered to French and German colonists by conversing with them in their own language, and he even attempted to conduct a service in Italian at the request of several immigrants. There were also Spanish Jews who sought out Wesley, and of whom he spoke so happily, declaring that some of them “seem nearer the mind that was in Christ than many of those who call Him Lord.”

This necessity to learn German, French and Spanish helped him when he came to his great work of translating hymns. His first hymn book, entitled a “Collection of Psalms and Hymns,” was published at Charleston in 1737. In it he included hymns of Isaac Watts, three of his father’s and others of his brother, Samuel, in praise of the Trinity. But the outstanding feature of the book is John Wesley’s superb translations from the German of such hymns as Lange’s “O God, Thou Bottomless Abyss.” Freylinghausen’s “O Jesu Source of Calm Repose,” and Richter’s

“Thou Lamb of God, Thou Prince of Peace.”

Finally, in Georgia was laid the foundation of the [system of classes](#) which later became a distinguishing mark of the British Methodism. Wesley said in his Journal that since no door had been opened for a mission to the Indians “We agreed (1) to advise the more serious among them to form themselves into a little society and to meet once or twice a week in order to reprove, instruct and exhort one another; (2) to select out of these a smaller number for a more intimate union with each other which might be forwarded, partly by conversing singly with each other and partly by inviting them all together to one house, and this accordingly, we determined to do every Sunday in the afternoon.” It appears that the members were largely German and while the Society met once or twice in a week, the inner circle had its own Sunday afternoon gathering.

MORAVIAN INFLUENCE

There were a number of Moravians on the ship “Simmonds” on which Wesley sailed to Georgia, and his contacts with these people constituted another important factor in his conversion and subsequent life. He was greatly impressed with the unperturbed behavior of the Moravians in a storm and learned that even their women and children were [unafraid because of their faith](#). Later one of their Leaders, August Gottlieb Spangenburg asked him pointedly, “Do you know Jesus Christ?” Wesley replied, “I know that He is the Savior of the world.” “But,” persisted the Moravian, “do you know he has saved you?” Wesley replied in the affirmative, but he confessed in his Journal, “I fear they were vain words.” This episode created a spiritual dissatisfaction in Wesley’s heart which eventually, and under the tutorship of another Moravian, Peter Bohler, led to his evangelical awakening.

Wesley’s mission in Georgia was not successful and even he regarded it as a failure. George Whitefield, however, declared, “The good Mr. John Wesley has done in America is inexpressible. His name is very precious among the people and he has laid a foundation that I hope neither men nor devils will be able to shake. O that I may follow him as he has followed Christ.”

Nevertheless, his usefulness in the colony was strictly limited and his mission ended in a near fiasco. His rigid High Churchmanship divided the people and turned many against him. He had a mismanaged and unfortunate [love affair](#) with Miss Sophy Hopkey, and when he foolishly repelled her communion when she married another man, it led to his indictment. In the end he was obliged to leave the colony under something like a cloud.

ALDERSGATE

Wesley returned to England in deep spiritual dejection, which our fathers would probably have called “[conviction for sin](#),” though he was certainly no sinner if the term implies moral wrong doing. But he reproached himself over and over again, declaring that he was “carnal sold under sin,” in a “vile abject state of bondage to sin,” and “altogether corrupt and abominable.”

When he reached England he met Peter Bohler, who told him that salvation was by faith alone and finally convinced him of the truth of the doctrine. Wesley’s first impulse was to cease preaching, but the Moravian told him to “[preach faith until you have it, then because you have it you will preach it](#).” Wesley followed that advice and at once great success attended his ministry. This led on May 24, 1738, to the experience about which he wrote what are perhaps his most famous words:

“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 that 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.”

The Belgian priest, Father Maximin Piette, in his book “John Wesley in the Evolution of Protestantism,” has

minimized this Aldersgate experience but actually it was the source of Methodist teaching on salvation, assurance, and holiness. It was the watershed of Wesley's whole career and it gave him charter and compass for a course from which he never deviated. Even more, it gave him the spiritual energy for his pilgrim's progress, so that never again was he Christian with a burden on his back. Until his dying day Wesley dated his experience, his message, and his doctrine back to this date of 1738.

CHANGE OF ATTITUDE

At Oxford and in Georgia he had sought salvation through devotional exercises and by good works through unremitting service of his fellows. But neither had brought him peace with God. In his own way he came to know that neither righteousness nor merit can earn God's favor nor fit man for heaven. After years of travail he saw in a flash that salvation cannot be worked for nor merited, but can only be received by simple faith.

His first action after conversion was to help in drawing up Orders for the Religious Society which he had been attending in Feters Lane. Then he preached before the University at St. Mary's, Oxford, on "By grace are ye saved through faith." This was, as the University authorities were quick to realize, a new emphasis by a new voice in a new and disturbing fashion. It was the manifesto of the new Revival.

Meanwhile in his restlessness of spirit he determined to go to the fountain head of the Moravian movement, Count Zinzendorf and the members of the Herrnhut settlement in Germany. He stayed many days there and while in their services and schools he saw much to admire, there were some niggling doubts which later were to grow in his mind. The Moravian reliance upon God's grace could lead to a passivity in which even the means of grace, known and used by the Church in all centuries, could be neglected.

The breach with the Church of England, which Wesley never acknowledged, led almost at once to the closing of London churches against his brother and himself. In the course of 1739 only four were open to him, but at Newgate jail among condemned prisoners, both John and Charles discovered that if conventional means of proclaiming the Gospel were forbidden, unconventional opportunities were ready to hand.

FIELD PREACHING

In the spring of 1739, another event of large importance for the revival occurred. This was the beginning of field preaching, or preaching in the open air, which was forced on the leaders by the closing of the churches against them. George Whitefield began preaching in the field to the miners at Kingswood, near Bristol, and he attracted great throngs of spiritually neglected people. Leaving for America, he asked John Wesley to take over this work. **The idea was repugnant** to the correct and proper presbyter of the Church of England, who declared that he had been "so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that **I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church.**"

Nevertheless, on April 2, 1739, he began the work. In words to become immortal he said, "At four in the afternoon **I submitted to be more vile**, and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining to the city to about three thousand people ..." His life's work had begun.

He preached in the open air all over England. At Gwennap Pit in Cornwall he preached to a throng estimated at thirty thousand. One of the most famous episodes of his career was his sermon from his father's tomb at Epworth when he had been refused the pulpit and denounced by the curate.

HIS WIDE CIRCUIT

Wesley became "the soul that over England flamed." **For fifty years he rode over almost every road in the British Isles and preached in every conceivable place.** Twenty times he toured Scotland, twenty-four times he was in Wales, twenty-one times in Ireland. Reading and writing as he rode along, he travelled a quarter of a million miles and preached more than forty thousand times. Only Francis Asbury in America surpassed him as an itinerant.

PERSECUTION

Wesley and his preachers encountered persecution and physical violence of the most bitter kind. The attacks came mainly from those in the Church of England, chiefly squires and parsons, who strongly disapproved of the practice of preaching in the open air and thus [disregarding the parish boundaries](#). They were repelled and disgusted by some of the emotional excesses which characterized the Revival in the opening years. The fact that only a few people became hysterical and that the Wesleys did not countenance such behavior could not allay the suspicions of the enemies.

The opposition was strengthened by the fact that when Charles Stuart tried to gain the throne of England, the Methodists by their classes and “nocturnal meetings” seemed possible Papists and Jacobites in disguise, and therefore traitors. On numerous occasions rabble-rousers egged on by parson and squire set upon Methodists and maltreated them. Even John and Charles Wesley, as well as some of their assistant Preachers, were in danger of their lives. The brothers rode the storm triumphantly because they showed no fear; they never turned their backs to the rioters and they always went unhesitatingly to the leader of the mob. The decade of rioting ended with the frightful excesses in Cork where priest took the place of parson.

LITERARY ATTACKS

The fighting was done with pens as well as fists. William Warburton, Bishop of Gloucester, wrote his “Office and Operations of the Holy Spirit,” and Wesley replied in a devastating “letter” which effectively scotched his accusations. A more important literary opponent was George Lavinton, Bishop of Exeter, who published a work in three parts entitled “Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared.” He argued that John Wesley was a Papist in disguise. He reached this conclusion by comparing certain sayings from Roman Catholics with extracts from the Journals and writings of Wesley and Whitefield. Wesley not only refuted the charge, but convicted the Bishop of woeful ignorance, and, in places, of downright dishonesty.

[All these attacks gave the Wesleys nation-wide publicity and sympathy](#) from the general public, while stimulating the loyalty and devotion of their followers. The movement spread rapidly and groups were formed everywhere.

THE FIRST CHAPELS

In 1739 Wesley erected the first chapel for his societies. It was a small building at Bristol and was known as the New Room in the Horsefair. It had a preaching place, living quarters, a conference room on the second floor, and a stable for the preachers’ horses. It is still in existence, the oldest Methodist shrine in the world.

In the same year, 1739, Wesley acquired a ruined cannon factory in London which he repaired and remodeled. This was the famous Foundry, the second Methodist meeting house in the world, and was London headquarters of the Methodist movement for forty years. It was a chapel, residence, publishing house, and center for a wide variety of social activities.

The third center was at Newcastle-on-Tyne, where Wesley established his noted Orphan House in 1742. It also housed many activities and was headquarters in the north of England, but the original intention of developing a home for orphans was never realized.

[It has been said that Methodism built a school before it built a church](#). As a matter of fact the New Room at Bristol was at first called the New Schoolhouse in the Horsefair, and it had a school with four masters and a mistress. The same was true of the Foundry at London, where sixty children were taught. But the first great educational venture of the Methodists, also in 1739, was a school for miner’s children at Kingswood, the cornerstone of which was laid by George Whitefield. In 1748 Wesley established at Kingswood a “New School,” alongside the “Old School;” this was mainly for the sons of the preachers. It was officially adopted by the Conference in 1756. In 1851 it was removed to Bath [and is today one of the finest public Schools in England](#).

LAY PREACHING

Almost coincident with the building of the first chapels, lay preaching began. This was to become one of the most potent instruments for the spread of Methodism, not only in England, but also in America and other parts of the world.

The first lay preachers were Thomas Maxfield and John Cennick. Maxfield was a convert who was employed by Wesley at the Foundry “to pray and expound the Scriptures, but not to preach.” However, in 1740 or 1741 he began to preach in earnest. This outraged Wesley, who rushed to London to bring an end to such irregularity.

But his mother cautioned him to hear the young man before passing judgment; this Wesley did and immediately gave Maxfield permission to preach. He was later ordained as an Anglican clergyman and separated from Wesley on points of doctrine.

John Cennick was converted in 1737 and soon began preaching.

It was said that “there can be no doubt that he was one of Wesley’s lay preachers before Maxfield was.” He became master of Kingswood School but he embraced Calvinism and was disowned by Wesley and joined Whitefield and the Calvinistic Methodists, but left them for the Moravians.

ORGANIZATIONS

By the 1740’s the Methodist movement had become so strong that some kind of organization was needed. Thus emerged the Class Meeting, the first of which was at Bristol in 1742. In due course a threefold plan was adopted. **The Society** consisted of all the members who met and worshiped together. **The Class** was a dozen or more persons, under a leader, who made financial contributions and met weekly for testimony and discipline; later tickets were required for admission, and these quarterly tickets were proof of good standing.

The Band was a smaller group of the same sex and marital status; the Band soon disappeared but the Class meeting continued and is still found in many places.

About this time “Religious Societies” were springing up in many places, often under Moravian auspices. One of these was in Fetter Lane in London. For a time Wesley attended its meetings but he became alarmed at disregard of the outward means of grace – and in 1740 he led his followers out of the Fetter Lane group and formed his own Society at the Foundry.

Then the most important of all Methodist organizations, **the Conference**, appeared. The first was held at the Foundry in London on June 25-30, 1744. In addition to the two Wesley brothers there were four clergymen of the Church of England. There were also four of Wesley’s lay preachers, including Thomas Maxfield, but these were not admitted to all the sessions; of these only one, John Downes, continued to the end as a Methodist preacher.

The subjects discussed were three: What to teach, how to teach, and what to do. The discussions were called “conversations” and to this day the procedure in British Methodism both in Congress and Synod is the asking and answering of questions. The minutes of this first Conference are preserved. It was stated that all the Methodists regarded themselves as members of the Church of England and that it was to be defended in preaching and life.

This conference published no statistics, which were slow in appearing. In 1746 the circuits were divided into seven areas, with thirty sub- areas. In 1748 there were nine divisions and sixty seven circuits, and the numbers continued to increase year by year. In 1766 the first tabulation of membership was included; it showed ninety-seven preachers, not including the Wesleys themselves, appointed to forty circuits with 19,761 members, with some omissions. There was a complete report in 1767, when 25,911 members were listed.

THE CALVINISTIC CONTROVERSY

In the Seventies the Calvinistic Controversy reached its height. George Whitefield, the Countess of Huntingdon, Sir Richard and Rowland Hill and others were strongly biased toward the theology of Calvinism, the [predestinarian](#) aspect of which the Wesleys and most of their followers opposed. When the Conference met at Bristol in 1771 a rival conference was held of Calvinistic sympathizers, and Wesley was asked to receive a deputation representing them. They held a two-hour discussion and retired thoroughly discomfited, their leader acknowledging publicly that he had been mistaken.

Nevertheless it was a pyrrhic victory, because the offended Lady Huntingdon proceeded to regroup her forces. The attack came in two waves.

First was the written slanders of such bitter controversialists as Augustus Toplady and the Hills, mainly in the columns of the GOSPEL MAGAZINE but also in pamphlets. Second, the Calvinistic preachers were sent to evangelize where Methodism was strong, [in attempts to disrupt the Societies](#). There were troubled days for Wesley but his victory was complete and, in spite of the attacks, Methodism continued steadily to increase.

Lady Huntingdon built her own chapels in many places. She founded Trevecca College as a training school for preachers. The main field of Calvinistic Methodist operations was in Wales, and there are today more than one hundred thousand members in the Welsh Presbyterian Church, as the group is now known.

A SEPARATE CHURCH

Another important development was the virtual emergence of Methodism as a separate Church, although it did not become definite until after the death of Wesley. On March 28, 1784, Wesley signed the historically significant Deed of Declaration, making the annual Conference through the “Legal Hundred” preachers [the heir of Wesley](#) and establishing the principle of itinerancy. Wesley, by the hard logic of facts, was providing for a Church which would continue after his death, distinct in form and ethos, from the Anglican Church which gave it birth.

WESLEY'S ORDINATIONS

Perhaps of still greater importance was Wesley's ordinations in 1784. The Deed of Declaration made possible a British Church, but the ordinations led to a world Church. The action was taken after his fruitless attempt to persuade Bishops to ordain men for America following the close of the War of American Independence. The Methodists in America were demanding the ordinances at the hands of their own preachers, and on one occasion a group seceded and ordained each other.

Wesley had become convinced by reading King's book on the PRIMITIVE CHURCH that presbyters and bishops were of the same order.

Therefore, in September, 1784, at Bristol, he ordained Dr. Thomas Coke as “superintendent” for America and sent him to the New World.

There was convened the famous Christmas Conference at Baltimore at which Francis Asbury was elected and consecrated superintendent and the Methodist Episcopal Church was organized. Wesley's ordinations continued, in spite of vigorous [protests from his brother Charles](#); he ordained a total of eighteen persons.

THE WORLD PARISH

It is a remarkable instance of Wesley's invincible youthfulness that at the end of a long life he was still looking upon the whole world as his parish. Already the work in the West Indies was spreading, since its inception by Nathaniel Gilbert in 1760, and when violent storms drove Dr. Thomas Coke and three young missionaries nearly 2000 miles off their course to Antigua in 1786, the labor of the local preacher, John Baxter, there found powerful re-

enforcement. Other islands were visited and evangelized. Before he died Wesley could see a fulfillment of his brother's lines:

When he first the work begun,
Small and feeble was His day;
Now the world doth swiftly run,
Now it wins its widening way.

THE SPREAD OF METHODISM

When [John Wesley died in 1791](#), Methodism had spread all over the United Kingdom and had nearly 75,000 "numbers in the Society" in 115 circuits. It did not greatly influence either the upper classes or the agricultural laborers. Success was chiefly in the Northeast, the West country, and Cornwall. Wesley's greatest trophies were the miners of Kingswood, Cornwall, and Newcastle. The movement also found ready lodging with artisans, small tradesmen, and the workers flooding into the new industrial areas of Lancashire and Yorkshire.

There were reasons for the astonishing spread of the Revival.

In the early days the England that he travelled on horseback was mainly pastoral and agricultural, and the woolen industry was in the Cotswolds rather than Yorkshire. There were faint indication of the coming industrialism, but the progress was not strongly marked until the later years of George II. Wesley dealt with a population considerably less than modern London, and the absence of densely crowded towns, together with the open nature of the country, enabled him to address huge crowds in the open air in every part of England.

To evangelize industrial England would have been too great a task for any evangelist, but it was within the compass of a devoted and growing army of preachers and people, and by the end of the century the work could safely be entrusted to Wesley's spiritual children.

Methodist success was also largely due to the parochial and conservative habits, outlook, and machinery of the Church of England.

Its strength lay in the south and it was unable to adapt itself to new conditions. In the eighteenth century the parochial system was still the same as at the Reformation. There was not a single Bishop in Lancashire or the West Riding of Yorkshire until 1826, when the Bishop of Ripon was appointed. Manchester did not have its Bishop until 1847. Leeds, which early became an important Methodist center, was one parish of 150,000 people until the middle of the century.

Because Methodism was more mobile, adaptable, and freer from custom and prejudice, it was able to seize an opportunity which the Church of England lost.

Deeper than these immediate reasons for the growth of the Revival was the man and his message. Wesley was a natural leader of men who excited their lively respect, obedience, and affection. The experience of John Nelson who on Moorfields Commons heard Wesley for the first time must have been similar to that of many. "My heart beat like the pendulum of a clock and when he spoke I thought his whole discourse was aimed at me." When he talked with Wesley he declared that it had been a "blessed Conference." "When we parted, he took hold of my hand, [and looking me full in the face, bade me take care I did not quench the spirit.](#)" All who met Wesley knew his effortless mastery of men and recognized that he was the undisputed father of his people.

With the man went the message. Wesley declared a Gospel which was an invitation to a more abundant life. He taught men they could accept it by faith, they could enjoy it, and they could possess it to the full. In an age when nationalism had cast a blight upon religion, when enthusiasm was frowned upon, and probability was the guide to life, it was small wonder that the sheep who had not been fed moved quickly to these lush pastures. The Christian

faith was invested with color and gaiety because it acquired a new meaning.

In distinction from Charles, who had a quick and fiery temper, John Wesley retained remarkable composure and self-control even under the most serious provocation. His wife was a termagant who could rise to ungovernable fury, but there is no instance of him losing his temper and retorting to her in kind. This evenness of disposition was allied to a magnanimity which prevented him from using the same weapons as his traducers. It was said of his generosity that it knew no bounds except an empty pocket. When his own simple wants were provided he gave away all that he had.

The final impression of the man is the completeness of his dedication to God and the work God gave him to do. He was as frugal and abstemious in habit, as he was neat and simple in appearance. As Whitehead said, “a narrow pleated stock, a coat with a small upright collar, no buckles at his knees, no silk or velvet in any part of his apparel, and a head as white as snow, gave an idea of something primitive and apostolic.” He rose early each morning and devoted many hours daily to praying and reading. In no life was the balance between the culture of the soul and the service of the people so exquisitely maintained.

END OF THE JOURNEY

In the final decade of the century Wesley had little more than one full year to live, but to the end he made his ambitious itineraries, and he died striving to maintain his promise to serve the Methodist people in Leatherhead. It was fitting that the text of his last sermon should be, “Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near”.

The next day, feverish and ill, he stayed at Balham, and fought off his sickness sufficiently to write to [William Wilberforce](#) the best known of his letters: “Go on in the name of God and in the power of His might, [till even American slavery \(The vilest that ever saw the sun\) shall vanish away before it.](#)”

He returned to the City Road chapel in London in growing bodily weakness. [Like all the Wesleys he knew how to die well.](#) At first he tried to sing Isaac Watts’ hymn, “I’ll praise my Maker while I’ve breath”, and later, when singing had become impossible, he made a supreme effort and cried, “The best of all is God is with us.”

Thus died John Wesley, on March 2, 1791. His life spanned practically the whole of the century.

The funeral took place a week later, and although it was at the very early hour of five o’clock in the morning it was attended by thousands. When Dr. Whitehead, his physician and officiating minister, in the prayer of committal, substituted for “brother” the word “father”, the effect was immediate and overwhelming. A low wave of sobbing swept the crowd, because they realized that under God their father had been taken from them. It was a last spontaneous tribute.

He rests in the graveyard of Wesley’s Chapel on City Road in London, which he had formally opened in 1778. Across the street in the Nonconformist cemetery of Bunhill Fields, is the tomb of his mother, Susanna Wesley. Both of these sacred spots for nearly two centuries have been visited by Methodists from all parts of the world.

OTHER LITERATURE AVAILABLE

LEST WE FORGET, by Louise Stahl

THOMAS COKE, by Warren Thomas Smith

FRANCIS ASBURY, by Elmer T. Clark

CHARLES WESLEY, THE SINGER OF THE EVANGELICAL REVIVAL, by Elmer T. Clark

I'LL PRAISE MY MAKER – ISAAC WATTS, HYMN WRITER EXTRAORDINARY, by Elmer T. Clark

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JOHN WESLEY
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