

JOHN WESLEY (1703-1791)

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus; who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.

—Titus 2:11-14 ¹

The Church of England in Trouble. By the early 18th century, the Church of England, also called the Anglican Church, had become almost as corrupt as the medieval Roman Catholic Church. The British government compelled all citizens to pay tithes for the support of the Church of England, so Anglican bishops were able to acquire tremendous wealth from their positions. Simony and pluralism ² were common. Nor was worldliness confined to the clergy. Most Anglican churches assigned seats based on wealth and social status. The rich sat in lockable pews near the pulpit, while the poor sat or stood in the back. When the worship service was over, the rich filed out first while the poor remained in place.

Theologically, Anglican priests emphasized morality and social issues, while saying little about sin, faith, or God's grace. Salvation and eternal judgment were seldom mentioned. Observing the hypocrisy and worldliness of the Church's leaders, many wealthy English people considered Christianity a myth. On the other hand, the working classes largely ignored—and were ignored by—the Church.

Only among the Puritans, Presbyterians, and Dissenters ³ did Christianity still flourish. But in England these groups were almost exclusively confined to the

¹ All Biblical quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible* translation.

² Simony is the buying and selling of church offices, such as that of bishop. Pluralism is the holding of multiple church offices, for the purpose of receiving the revenues of each. For more on these and other abusive practices of the medieval Church, see the article, "Predecessors of the Reformation," on this web site.

³ The term "Dissenter" seems to have originated in about 1662, when some 2,000 ministers refused to obey Parliament's Act of Uniformity, requiring all ministers to conform their preaching and practices to those of the Church of England. As such, the term is broad enough to encompass any non-Anglican, including Puritans and Presbyterians, but it is more commonly used to describe those

middle class, and even among these devout believers the future of English Christianity seemed to be in doubt. Long-accepted Christian beliefs were coming under serious attack from deists.⁴ Their criticism of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity was so successful that the Presbyterians removed belief in it as a requirement for ordination. Deists accused Christians of brutality, citing the Crusades, religious wars, and the Inquisition,⁵ and they dismissed the Old Testament as a collection of fables and lies.

The corruption of the Anglican Church, the neglect of working people, and the onslaught of criticism from deists had severely weakened Christianity in England, perhaps more than at any time since the Middle Ages.⁶ Many devout Christians sought to reverse this situation,⁷ but the man most responsible for reviving Christianity in England was the founder of the Methodist Church, John Wesley.

“A Brand Plucked from the Burning.” John was born on June 17, 1703, the son of an Anglican priest, Samuel Wesley,⁸ whose strict morals rivaled those of the

religious groups, such as Baptists and Quakers, who had little or no political power, and will be used as such in this article. This usage excludes the Puritans because they came to hold tremendous power in Parliament and briefly gained ascendancy under Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658). The Presbyterians are excluded because they held sway in Scotland, where Presbyterians were in the majority.

⁴ Deism is simply a belief in God. Anyone who believes in God is a deist, so Christians are deists. However, the term is more commonly used of those who reject the major religions’ teachings about God, such as Christianity’s doctrines concerning the divinity of Christ and His resurrection. Early English deists included Lord Edward Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648) and Charles Blount (1654-1693). Some 18th century English deists were John Toland (1670-1722), Anthony Collins (1676-1729), William Whiston (1667-1752), Thomas Woolston (1669-1730), Matthew Tindal (1657-1733), Conyers Middleton (1683-1750), Thomas Chubb (1679-1747), Peter Annet (1693-1769), and Viscount Henry St. John Bolingbroke (1678-1751). Probably the most famous of the 18th century deists was a Frenchman named Francois Marie Arouet, known to history as Voltaire (1694-1778).

⁵ For more on the Crusades, see the article, “St. Francis of Assisi,” footnote 3, on this web site.

For more on the Inquisition, see the article, “Predecessors of the Reformation,” on this web site.

⁶ Voltaire commented, “In France I am looked upon as having too little religion; in England as having too much.”

⁷ Christian apologists included, for example: Bishop Chandler of Lichfield; Bishop Thomas Newton of London; Bishop Thomas Sherlock of London; Bishop Pearce of Rochester; George Berkeley (1685-1753); William Warburton (1698-1779); Joseph Butler (1692-1752); and William Law, who is mentioned below.

⁸ Samuel Wesley lived from 1662 to 1735. John’s grandfather, John Westley, and his great-grandfather, Bartholomew Westley, had both been pastors of Dissenting congregations. But Samuel

Puritans. Samuel was the rector (that is, the parish priest) in Epworth, in the county of Lincolnshire.⁹ He preached a vengeful God—whom John learned to fear rather than love—and antagonized many of his parishioners with his sermons that emphasized the need for righteousness. His treatment of sinners was often severe, and sometimes unforgiving. Samuel once made an adulteress walk through the town in humiliating repentance. When his daughter, Hetty, spent the night with a young man who promised to marry her, but didn't, Samuel quickly arranged a marriage for her to William Wright, a plumber in London, and forbid her to enter his house again. Even in later years when she sought forgiveness and reconciliation, Samuel rejected her overtures.

John's mother, Susanna Annesley Wesley (ca. 1669-1742), was a preacher's daughter¹⁰ who was as strict with the children as Samuel was with his parishioners. Samuel and Susanna raised and educated ten children, and lost nine more in infancy.¹¹ John was their 15th child, and his brother, Charles, was number 18.

John was only six years old when the family's house (called a "rectory") burned down in 1709. The children's nanny accidentally left John behind as the family fled from the flames. When everyone gathered outside and found John

Wesley stayed within the Anglican Church his entire life.

⁹ Epworth is located in central England, about halfway between Kingston and Sheffield.

¹⁰ Susanna's father, Dr. Samuel Annesley (ca. 1620-1696), was pastor of a church in London. Although Susanna's father was a Dissenter, Susanna returned to the Church of England at the age of 13.

¹¹ Of the children who survived past infancy, there were seven girls (Emily, Sukey, Molly, Hetty, Anne, Patty, Kezzy) and three boys (Sammy, John, Charles). The order of the Wesley's children was:

1. Samuel ("Sammy," ca. 1691-1739)
2. Susanna (died in infancy, 1694)
3. Emilia ("Emily," ca. 1692-1771)
- 4-5. Twin children, died at the age of one month, 1694
6. Susanna ("Sukey," ca. 1695-1764)
7. Mary ("Molly," ca. 1695-1734)
8. Mehitabel ("Hetty," ca. 1696-1750)
- 9-13. Five babies, including a set of twins, died in infancy, ca. 1696-1700
14. Anne (b. ca. 1701)
15. John ("Jackie," 1703-1791)
16. Died in infancy (accidentally smothered by nursemaid)
17. Martha ("Patty," b. 1706)
18. Charles (1707-1788)
19. Kezia ("Kezzy," 1709-1741)

missing, they concluded that he had been consumed by the fire. But John managed to climb up to the window of his second floor bedroom and attract the attention of the onlookers below. Two of them rescued him. Thereafter, Samuel Wesley called John “a brand plucked from the burning,”¹² an expression John used of himself later in life.

After the fire, John spent a year living with a family of Samuel’s parishioners while the rectory was rebuilt. He saw his family only on Sundays. The remainder of the week he spent with local farm boys. The other boys teased and mistreated John a lot at first, but he endured it stoically and was finally accepted into their group. When the time came for him to rejoin his family in the new rectory, he found that he missed these local toughs. John’s sympathy for the poor probably began then.

In 1714, John left Epworth to attend the Charterhouse School in London. Here he was often reunited with his older brother Sammy, who lived in London and sometimes tutored John in his studies. John learned Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and spent many hours reading the Bible in these languages.

The Methodists. At age 17, John attended Oxford University (about 50 miles west of London). The young man loved to read, and at Oxford he had an opportunity to indulge in a wide variety of literature, including Christian authors from both the Anglican Church and the Dissenters. But to his dismay, John soon learned that immorality—drinking, sex, cheating, and lying—was common among the students, as well as many of the teachers. For a long time he felt out of place there.

John graduated in 1725 and was soon ordained as a Deacon in the Church of England.¹³ He remained at Oxford, teaching, preaching, and working on his Masters degree, which he received in early 1727.¹⁴ He indulged in many pleasures of the day, such as cards, horse races, plays, and even pubs, and he had an occasional girlfriend. But he never allowed himself to seriously consider marriage, for he had “resolved to dedicate *all my life* to God, *all* my thoughts and words and actions. . . .”¹⁵ Such dedication left no room for a wife. In 1728, at the age of 25, John was ordained as an Anglican priest,¹⁶ and a year later he assumed the duties of an

¹² The phrase comes from Zechariah 3:2:

The LORD said to Satan, “The LORD rebuke you, Satan! Indeed, the LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?”

¹³ This ordination occurred on Sunday, September 19, 1725.

¹⁴ John received his Master’s Degree on February 14, 1727.

¹⁵ *The Works of Rev. John Wesley*, Vol. XI, pp. 366-367, as reprinted in *John Wesley*, ed. by Albert C. Outler, p. 7 (emphasis in original). (See Sources for complete citation.)

¹⁶ John’s ordination as a priest occurred on September 22, 1728.

Oxford professor. During the years 1726-1729, John spent a lot of time in or near Epworth,¹⁷ helping his father with his priestly duties, but a few years later would decline an offer to succeed his father there.

John's resolve to dedicate everything to God arose primarily from the influence of several books he read during the years 1725-1728, including: *Rules and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying*, by the Anglican bishop, Jeremy Taylor;¹⁸ *Christian's Pattern*, by Thomas à Kempis;¹⁹ and two books by William Law,²⁰ *Christian Perfection* and *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. These books stressed the need for self-control in the Christian life, and they convinced John that nothing short of total devotion to God would suffice. His letters during this time emphasize the importance of righteous behavior, as well as the need—and the desire—to shun those who engaged in immorality.

John's younger brother, Charles, came to Oxford in 1726 and soon organized a small group of Christian students who dedicated themselves to practicing their religion with methodical thoroughness—for example, reading the Bible (in Greek), fasting twice a week, and taking communion once a week. Charles' group was ridiculed by some of the other students, who derisively referred to them as the "Holy Club," "Bible Moths," "Bible Bigots," "Enthusiasts," and "Methodists." The last of these was of course the name that stuck.

John joined his brother's group in 1729 and soon became its leader. John was of small stature, standing only about five feet three inches tall, and weighing less than 130 pounds. But his self-confidence bordered on arrogance, while his sharp intellect and domineering personality made him a natural leader. Even more methodical than Charles, John rose every morning at 4:00 a.m., and carefully planned each hour of the day. He lived simply and gave most of his income to the poor. He fasted two days a week (Wednesday and Friday), and engaged in an intensive study of the Greek New Testament.

In 1730, the Methodists began to serve others, led by William Morgan,²¹ who visited a convicted murderer in prison. Soon they were visiting prisoners, collecting money to help support their families, and organizing a school to teach their children. The Methodists even raised money to help free poor people from debtors' prison by

¹⁷ John went to Epworth in April, 1726 and returned to Oxford on September 21, 1726. He was also in Epworth from August 1727 to July 1728, and in nearby Wroot (about 5 miles from Epworth) during late 1728 and most of 1729. He returned to Oxford in November 1729.

¹⁸ 1613 – 1667

¹⁹ ca. 1380 – 1471

²⁰ 1686 – 1761

²¹ William Morgan died only two years later, on August 26, 1732.

paying off their debts. As John interacted with the poor, he realized that they could not comprehend the language of the Anglican liturgy, so he began to use simpler words in his sermons. This ability to communicate with the poor in language they could understand would become critical to John's future ministry.

In 1733, John met two men who would alter the course of his life: James Oglethorpe²² and George Whitefield.²³ Oglethorpe was a member of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge in London, which helped spread the Gospel in English prisons, and also established colonies overseas for English debtors, to help them get a fresh start. John learned about the Society through his work in the prisons, and soon joined it. Thereafter he met Oglethorpe, who intended to establish a debtors' colony in America, to be called Georgia after King George II.²⁴ In September 1733, John met Whitefield, then a 19-year-old student, and convinced him to join the Oxford Methodists. Although Whitefield was shy and reclusive, and 11 years his junior, John was impressed with the young man—especially his tremendous speaking voice.

On April 25, 1735, John's father, Samuel Wesley, died. Shortly before his death, Samuel told John: "The inward witness, son, the inward witness is the strongest proof of Christianity." After Samuel's death, the words haunted John, for he knew that he lacked this "inward witness." The Anglican Church had taught John that salvation was only attainable through obedience to God's commandments, which to John meant reading the Bible, praying, fasting, going to church, and being less sinful than most other people. Yet no matter how good John tried to be, he always feared he was not good enough. For a time, he sought holiness through prayer, meditation, and spiritual exercises, but he abandoned the effort when it did not relieve his fears.

Later that same year, John received an invitation from Oglethorpe to become the chaplain in Savannah, Georgia. John was eager to go, for he saw this as an opportunity to attain the purity and righteousness he so craved—in the primitive wilderness of America, away from the temptations of food, wealth, and women that were so prevalent in England. He even recruited his brother Charles and two other Methodists to go along.²⁵

²² 1696 – 1785

²³ 1714 – 1770

²⁴ King of Great Britain and Ireland, 1727-1760

²⁵ The other two members were Benjamin Ingham and a new member, Charles Delamotte. Whitefield promised to join them later, after he was ordained. He sailed for America on January 31, 1738, the day before John Wesley arrived back in England. Ingham returned to England in 1737, and Delamotte in 1738.

In America. They left in October 1735 and reached America in February 1736. During the long sea voyage the four Methodists set up a rigorous schedule for each day's activities, which always included two hours of private prayers, two hours of public prayers, two hours of Bible reading, and an evening worship service led by some Moravian Brethren ²⁶ who were emigrating to Georgia. These devout Christians impressed the Methodists—and especially John—with the joy and courage of their faith. During storms at sea, John contrasted his own fears with the calm assurance of the Moravians, and he couldn't help thinking that something was lacking in his own faith.

Arrived in Savannah, John ran into problems because of the strictness of his religion. For example, he refused to baptize anyone who would not accept full and triple immersion; he refused to minister to non-Anglicans, denying them communion and even funeral services; and he forbid extravagant clothing. Most troublesome was his insistence that hunting and fishing be banned on Sundays, which was the only day most of the settlers had time for such diversions. His sermons, which criticized the sins of the people, were deeply resented by many of the settlers. Some even spread false gossip about John and his brother, Charles. The latter returned to England in 1736, while John remained.

Nor did he find peace from temptation. He soon fell in love with a beautiful, eighteen-year-old from a wealthy Savannah family, Sophia Hopkey, who went by the nickname Sophie (or Sophy). He gave her "religious instruction" for almost a year, and saw her with increasing frequency. But he refused to marry her, because he was convinced that God wanted him to remain celibate. After a year, Sophie grew tired of waiting and eloped with another man. ²⁷

²⁶ Moravia is a region in the southeast part of the modern Czech Republic, northeast of Austria. The Moravian Brethren movement was an offshoot of German Pietism (which was very similar to the Quakers). The movement achieved prominence when a group of Moravians fled from the persecution of Protestants in Moravia and Bohemia, and came to Saxony (southeast Germany). With the help of Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760), they established the village of Herrnhut. From there, the Moravian Brethren migrated and sent missionaries to other parts of Europe and America (in the latter, primarily to Georgia, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania).

²⁷ John temporarily removed himself from Savannah in February, 1737, in order to give himself time to think about his intentions toward Sophie. In a letter to her, dated February 6th, he says,

I find, Miss Sophy, I can't take fire into my bosom, and not be burnt. I am therefore retiring for a while to desire the direction of God. Join with me, my friend, in fervent prayer that He would show me what is best to be done.

(Quoted from "Wesley's Letters: 1737"; see Sources) On March 12, 1737, Sophie married William Williamson, an employee of Sophie's uncle, Thomas Causton. Causton was a corrupt

John disapproved of the marriage. Soon he began to find fault with Sophie's performance of her religious duties. The dispute came to a head on August 7, 1737, when John humiliated her by publicly refusing to give her communion.²⁸ John's actions split the community and its church. Many suspected his motives²⁹ and turned against him. Those who opposed him brought a chaplain from a nearby town to hold rival church services. After he was indicted by a grand jury,³⁰ and with opposition to him growing, John fled to Charleston and took ship for England on December 22, 1737. He arrived back in England on February 1, 1738.

Aldersgate. When John left America, he had a crisis of faith. He recognized that his religion was inadequate, for his faith seemed to disappear in times of crisis. He realized that he feared death, which frightened him, and he wondered if he were truly saved. He worried that even his best efforts to live a Christian life fell well short of God's requirements.

Once back in England, he turned to Peter Böhler, a preacher for the Moravian Brethren, who told John that his efforts to live a pious life were useless. Böhler advised him to turn to Christ, rather than his own efforts, for salvation. Böhler also told John that true faith would bring him both an assurance of forgiveness for all past sins and the ability to stop sinning in the future. John began to study the Bible to see if this were so.

local political leader in Savannah. He disliked Wesley, in large part because John had discovered and reported Causton's dishonesty in his dealings with the Moravian Brethren in the area. Causton was the driving force behind the eventual indictment of Wesley, and therefore played an important role in forcing Wesley to leave America.

²⁸ According to Wesley, one of his reasons for refusing Sophie communion was that she had stopped attending church services during the five months since her marriage to Mr. Williamson. However, in a letter to her dated August 11, 1737, only four days after the refusal, Wesley cites only one reason—i.e., that she had failed to notify him of her intention to take communion at least one day in advance, as required, so that he could notify the congregation of her intentions. The purpose of this advance notice was to provide an opportunity for objections from anyone who had adequate cause against her.

²⁹ Their suspicions may not have been without foundation. In a letter to Sophie, dated July 5, 1737, about four months after her marriage to Mr. Williamson, Wesley accuses her of being deceitful regarding her intention to marry: "You told me frequently you had no design to marry Mr. Williamson. Yet at the very time you spoke you had the design." John admits in the letter that he greatly "dislike[d]" Sophie's deceitfulness in this regard. Yet he still professes his friendship toward her, and urges her to repent.

³⁰ One of the counts in the indictment against Wesley alleged defamation of character with regard to his behavior toward Sophie. The other counts concerned unrelated religious issues, such as his insistence on baptism by immersion, even for infants, the alleged use of unauthorized liturgy and hymns in worship services, and his refusal to administer the sacraments to non-Anglicans.

On May 24, 1738,³¹ John attended a Christian society meeting on Aldersgate Street in London, where someone read part of Luther's commentary on Paul's Letter to the Romans. The commentary spoke of salvation by faith, rather than by works, and the words seemed to reach into John's heart. In the *Journal* in which he wrote throughout most of his life, John described the experience:

. . . 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.³²

He immediately prayed for forgiveness for those who had mistreated him in the past, and then stood up and testified to the group about his conversion. Later, he found that he was able to resist temptations that had previously overpowered him, and that he possessed the peace that had so long eluded him. That summer, he traveled with Benjamin Ingham³³ to Marienborn³⁴ and Herrnhut, in Germany, to learn more about the faith of the Moravian Brethren.

When John returned to England, he read about—and was inspired by—the “Great Awakening” in America,³⁵ which was beginning to attract attention in Great Britain. He also tried to figure out what had happened to him. Relying on Paul's writings, John concluded that faith produces two works of grace. The first is

³¹ Charles Wesley had experienced a similar conversion three days earlier, on May 21, 1738.

³² Quoted from John Wesley's *Journal*, as reprinted in *John Wesley*, ed. by Albert C. Outler (see Sources), at p. 66.

³³ Ingham was one of the members of the Oxford Methodists, and accompanied Wesley to America in 1735. (See footnote # 25.) Ingham later joined the Moravians. He died in 1772.

³⁴ Wesley and Ingham left England on Tuesday, June 13, 1735, and arrived in Marienborn three weeks later, on Tuesday, July 4, 1735. At the time of Wesley's journey, Count Zenzendorf, the leader of the Moravians, was living in Marienborn.

³⁵ The “Great Awakening” refers to the dramatic revival and rapid spread of Protestant Christianity throughout the Thirteen English Colonies from the 1720's until about 1750. During this time, evangelism and revival meetings became commonplace, and church membership exploded. This religious eruption was accompanied by more young people becoming ministers, and increased church missions to the Indians. The early leader of this revival was Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). Whitefield later became a major contributor. Other leaders included William Tennent (1673-1746), Samuel Blair (1716-1751), and Samuel Davies (1723-1761).

A “Second Great Awakening,” also called the “Great Western Revival,” occurred in the early 19th century. It was centered in the frontier areas of Kentucky and Tennessee. The primary leaders of this 2nd revival were David Caldwell (1725-1824), James McGready (ca. 1758-1817), and Barton W. Stone (1772-1844).

“justification,” by which God treats the believer as if he had Christ’s righteousness—in effect, a pardon from God. But John decided that what he had experienced on May 24th had been the second act of grace, “sanctification,” by which the believer acquires the power of the Holy Spirit to resist temptation, to reject sin, and to do good works. Of course, John realized he was not perfect, but he also recognized that he now had a power for good that he had never known before. He worked diligently to spread this Good News at Oxford and in the few churches that remained open to his preaching, as well as in the houses of those who were sympathetic to his message. Nevertheless, he continued to suffer occasional bouts of spiritual melancholy until early in the following year, when he would experience another life-changing event.³⁶

Open Air Preaching. Meanwhile, another former member of the Oxford Methodists began reaching out to the working classes. George Whitefield became an Anglican priest in 1738. In February, 1739, he began to preach in the open fields to coal miners near Bristol.³⁷ His preaching was clear, moving, and powerful. He spoke of subjects long neglected by the Anglican Church: the wages of sin, the love of God, the death of Christ for sinners, eternal salvation, and eternal damnation. He soon drew large crowds and traveled extensively throughout England, Scotland, and Ireland. Whitefield even traveled to America—and would eventually make six more such trips—where he contributed mightily to the Great Awakening in the Colonies.

In March, 1739, Whitefield asked Wesley to join him as an open air preacher, and to take over the revival Whitefield had begun in Bristol. After consulting with his fellow Methodists, John reluctantly agreed, and on Monday, April 2nd he delivered his first open air sermon to about 3,000 people. The result was so favorable that he preached at least once every day that week, and frequently thereafter for about a year.³⁸ Wesley’s preaching was less emotional than

³⁶ For example, in two letters written by Wesley on November 22, 1738, he says:

My heart is cold and senseless. It is, indeed, an heart of stone. Oh when, when will
He take it out of the midst of me, and give me an heart of flesh!

and,

But I am still dead and cold; having peace, indeed, but no love or joy in the Holy
Ghost.

See letters to Isaac Lelong and Richard Viney, among “Wesley’s Letters: 1738” (see Sources).

³⁷ Bristol is located about 118 miles west of London.

³⁸ Wesley remained in Bristol for about a year, although he made at least two trips to London during that time. While Wesley was at Bristol, the Methodists built a school there to teach both children and adults to read, with an emphasis of course on reading the Bible.

Whitefield's, but no less effective. The crowds grew, and many conversions to Christianity followed. In his Journal and his letters, John describes meetings in which people were struck with physical pain, limpness, seizures, convulsions, trembling, and/or uncontrollable weeping, before ultimately being converted, delivered from their sins, and filled with peace and joy in the Lord. John interpreted these strange behaviors as manifestations of either demon possession or the hand of God.

On a personal level, John had found his calling. He was a skillful and effective preacher, often speaking for an hour or longer without notes. He deliberately avoided intricate theological issues, technical terminology, and high-brow vocabulary. Instead, he focused on basic Christian themes such as faith, love, and salvation, and he emphasized Scripture in all of his sermons. On a personal level, preaching relieved the anxiety and insecurities he had long felt, even after Aldersgate, replaced by a new-found confidence. Preaching brought Wesley a serenity that, with only very rare exceptions, would last the rest of his life.

Wesley instituted many practices that we now take for granted. For example, he encouraged extemporaneous prayer, which is now common in Protestant worship, but in John's day he was widely criticized for it. He and brother Charles incorporated music and singing into the Methodist worship service, and these were no small part of Methodism's appeal. Charles contributed thousands of hymns,³⁹ and John translated many German hymns into English. John also helped spread Methodism rapidly by training lay preachers who traveled all over Great Britain, preaching and teaching.

Unlike Whitefield, John organized his converts into Methodist societies, and smaller groups called "classes," that helped them grow in their new faith.⁴⁰ These groups met frequently—as much as twice a day, and never less than once a week—to confess their sins, encourage each other, pray, sing hymns, and eat. John himself often traveled 4,000 to 5,000 miles a year, mostly on foot or horseback, preaching about 15 to 19 sermons a week wherever he found an audience—even in prisons, on ships at sea, or at inns along his way. He realized that most unbelievers would not seek him out, so he had to go to them. Rules of the Church of England required him to obtain permission from the parish priest and/or the area's bishop before preaching in a locality. However, when such consent was refused, as it often was, John

³⁹ The exact number of hymns written by Charles Wesley is somewhat in dispute. Estimates range from 6,500 to more than 7,000. Charles' hymns include "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing," "O For a Thousand Tongues," and "Christ the Lord is Risen Today."

⁴⁰ A Methodist "class" was a group of about 12 persons who lived in the same geographic area. Each class had a Leader who kept in close touch with each member of the class.

preached anyway, insisting that he must obey God rather than men.⁴¹ To those who objected that he should obtain a parish of his own in which to preach, John responded, “I look upon all the world as my parish.”⁴²

In November 1739, John was invited to preach in London, at a building called the Foundery. Soon thereafter several wealthy Methodists helped John purchase the building as a kind of Methodist church, for preaching and Methodist society meetings. In August 1747, he made his first trip to Ireland, at the request of some local Methodists there. He returned for two months in 1748 and three months in 1749.

By 1744, the Methodist movement had grown so large, and attracted so much attention, that some of its teachings were being deliberately distorted or unintentionally confused. Methodist leaders needed to set the record straight. Thus, they began to meet annually for the purpose of discussing and clarifying Methodist beliefs and practices. The first annual conference was held in June, 1744.⁴³ The Methodists published the minutes of this conference, as well as the next four, to provide the needed guidance and instruction.⁴⁴

On February 18, 1751, at age 48, John married Molly Vazeille, a 40-year-old widow who had nursed him back to health after a fall on an icy London Bridge. She traveled with him for two years, but her health and personality were not suited to

⁴¹ See Acts 5:29: “But Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God rather than men.’ ”

⁴² Quoted from John Wesley’s letter of March 20, 1739 to James Hervey (one of the members of the Oxford Methodists), as reprinted in *John Wesley*, ed. by Albert C. Outler (see Sources), at p. 72. The letter can also be found in “Wesley’s Letters: 1739” (see Sources).

⁴³ This conference was attended by John and Charles Wesley, John Hodges, Henry Piers, Samuel Taylor, John Meriton, Thomas Richards, Thomas Maxfield, John Bennet, and John Downes. The Wesleys, Hodges, Piers, Taylor and Meriton were all ordained Anglican priests, while Richards, Maxfield, Bennet, and Downes were laypersons.

⁴⁴ The 2nd annual conference convened in August 1745, the 3rd in May 1746, and the 4th in June 1747. John and Charles Wesley attended each of these conferences. The second conference was also attended by Hodges and Richards, who had been at the first conference, as well as Samuel Larwood, Thomas Meyrick, James Wheatley, Richard Moss, John Slocombe, Herbert Jenkins, and Marmaduke Gwynne.

The 3rd conference again included Hodges, Maxfield and Taylor, who attended the first, returned for the third. New attendees were Jonathan Reeves, Thomas Westell, and Thomas Willis.

Joining the Wesleys at the 4th conference were previous attendees Maxfield, Reeves, Bennet, Downes, and Piers, as well as newcomers Westley Hall, Charles Manning, John Jones, John Nelson, Thomas Crouch, Robert Swindells, John Maddern, Richard Bateman, Howel Harris, Thomas Hardwick, and Vincent Perronet.

After the first five conferences, the minutes were not published again until 1765.

John's arduous lifestyle. Both came to regret the marriage, and Molly grew bitter and hateful toward her husband. In 1758, she left, and the two of them lived apart until Molly's death in the early 1780's.

Methodist Beliefs. John Wesley endorsed the Protestant position that salvation is by faith, rather than through any good works, but he distinguished true faith from mere belief. Belief that God's Word is true will not save a person. True faith is the conviction that "Christ loved me and gave himself for me."⁴⁵ Such faith results in immediate justification before God (and thus, salvation), and it quickly progresses to love of God and others, which to Wesley was paramount. However, Wesley cautioned that a Christian must continue in this true faith in order to reach Heaven. Thus, he rejected the notion of "once saved, always saved."⁴⁶ Furthermore, he insisted that true faith necessarily includes obedience to God's commandments, making obedience essential to salvation. Indeed, he believed that willful sin forfeits a Christian's justification, and that only through true repentance can he regain it.

Of course, Wesley staunchly opposed all forms of antinomianism, which is the belief that Christians have been freed from God's law, and therefore may sin with impunity. The antinomians argued that good deeds and righteousness are unnecessary, because salvation depends upon faith alone.⁴⁷ Wesley responded that Christ did not free us from God's law, but from sin, and therefore to continue in sin is to repudiate Christ. Wesley eventually opposed his mentors, the Moravian Brethren, because they preached what he regarded as a form of antinomianism.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Quoted from the minutes of the First Annual Methodist Conference, on Monday June 25, 1744, as reprinted in *John Wesley*, ed. by Albert C. Outler (see Sources), at p. 137.

⁴⁶ John's letter to his brother Samuel, dated April 4, 1739, illustrates this point:

Your assurance and mine are as different as light and darkness. I mean an assurance that I am now in a state of salvation; you an assurance that I shall persevere therein.

This letter can be found among "Wesley's Letters: 1739" (see Sources).

⁴⁷ One of the leading antinomians of Wesley's day was James Wheatley, a former Methodist preacher. Wesley expelled him from the Methodist movement because of his antinomian views and practices. Other antinomians of that time included David Trathen, Thomas Webb, Robert Swindells, John Maddern, John Sandeman, Robert Sandeman, James Relly, and George Bell. To Wesley's chagrin, Thomas Maxfield (who had attended three of the first four annual Methodist conferences) also joined their ranks and became very influential. Swindells and Maddern were also former Methodists, and had attended the 4th Methodist conference. (See footnote 44.)

⁴⁸ The Moravian Brethren taught that Christians have been freed from God's commandments and therefore need not obey them, which to Wesley was antinomianism. The Brethren also taught that true, saving faith must be without any doubt or fear, so that weak faith is no faith at all. According to the Brethren, people can attain such faith only by forsaking outward works—among

In Wesley's theology, true faith leads to sanctification—i.e., the work of God's Spirit transforming us into the image of Christ, and thus producing holiness. Sanctification is a gradual process which begins at the instant of justification. Sanctification brings about an outward change in behavior, so that a person wants to do good works instead of evil deeds. Similarly, sanctification produces an inward change in character, producing such traits as honesty, patience, humility, and meekness. If these inward and outward changes are missing, then the person's faith is counterfeit, or simply useless. Wesley was convinced that prayer, communion, fasting, Bible study, and acts of service to others are all useful to this process of sanctification, because these practices help the believer stay focused on God and eternity, rather than on this earthly life. But ultimately, faith is the only essential requirement for sanctification.

Wesley believed in the importance of human reason and knowledge, considering them second only to Scripture as a guide for men's actions. So he encouraged Christians to think and decide for themselves what to believe, consistent with God's Word and each person's conscience. But he also knew the importance of what he called "spiritual senses" to discern the things of the Spirit, which flesh and blood cannot perceive. And he believed in the power of prayer and in miracles. Indeed, many miracles were attributed to Methodist prayers. However, he warned his followers to beware of dreams, visions, and revelations, which must always be tested against the Scriptures.

John Wesley made a vital contribution to the development of modern Christianity by rejecting Calvin's doctrine of predestination,⁴⁹ which had been accepted by Presbyterians, Puritans, and many Dissenters, as well as Wesley's old friend George Whitefield. As with all of his theological arguments, Wesley relied primarily on Scripture to refute the Calvinists. However, he also argued that by making salvation and condemnation depend upon God's whim instead of man's choice, Calvinism is incompatible with God's love, justice, and goodness.

which they included acts of service, attending church, taking communion, fasting, reading the Bible, and even prayer—in favor of quiet contemplation. Wesley was also bothered by some of the Moravians' practices, which seemed to him too worldly, such as wearing costly jewelry and clothing, their exaltation of Count Zinzendorf, and being less than open and honest about their religious practices, especially around strangers. In England, the leading Moravian Brethren included Philip Molther, Thomas Bray, and Augustus Gottlieb Spangenberg.

⁴⁹ For more on the topic of free will vs. predestination, see the essay, "Is Free Will an Illusion?," on this web site.

Nevertheless, he did not contend that the Calvinists were not Christians, or that they were not saved.⁵⁰

Indeed, Wesley was very tolerant of other Christians' theological opinions, so long as they were "compatible with a love to Christ and a genuine work of grace."⁵¹ He recognized that many Methodists disagreed with some of his views—and that those outside of Methodism disagreed with many of his views—but he advocated tolerance of each other's opinions in the name of freedom. And he warned his followers not to become so arrogant or conceited as to think that God opposes all opinions other than their own. He believed that Christians should unite around one overriding principle: love of God and of each other. Wesley reached out to Christians who had fundamental disagreements with him—such as Roman Catholics and Calvinists—and even advocated love of those regarded as "enemies of God." The only requirements for admission into Methodist societies were that a person believe in Jesus Christ and live a life consistent with that belief.

One of Wesley's views that caused great controversy was his belief that Christian "perfection" is possible in this mortal life. By "perfection," Wesley meant holiness, or the complete devotion to God in body, soul, and spirit—as the Scripture says, loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.⁵² In this state, all of the Christian's "thoughts, words, and actions are governed by pure love."⁵³ This necessarily meant that the "perfect" Christian would not intentionally sin, but it also meant that he would be "freed from evil thoughts and evil tempers."⁵⁴ However, Wesley conceded that such a Christian might still transgress God's perfect law through mistake or ignorance, and therefore still needed God's grace.⁵⁵ Also, the "perfect" Christian could still suffer mental and spiritual sorrow, or even agony, just as Christ did in the Garden of Gethsemane.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ On the other hand, Wesley published a tract in 1739 entitled "Free Grace: A Sermon Preached at Bristol," in which he denounced predestination as "blasphemy." Relations with the Calvinists were understandably strained after that.

⁵¹ Wesley defined an "opinion" as just this—any belief which is "compatible with a love to Christ and a genuine work of grace." See his letter of May 14, 1765 to John Newton (1725-1807), rector of Olney), as reprinted in *John Wesley*, ed. by Albert C. Outler (see Sources), at pp. 77 and 79.

⁵² See Mark 12:30 and Luke 10:27; see also Matthew 22:37.

⁵³ Quoted from Wesley's 1759 essay, "Thoughts on Christian Perfection," as reprinted in *John Wesley*, ed. by Albert C. Outler, p. 284 (see Sources).

⁵⁴ Quoted from Wesley's 1741 essay, "Christian Perfection," as reprinted in *John Wesley*, ed. by Albert C. Outler, p. 170 (see Sources).

⁵⁵ Wesley did not view such inadvertent transgressions as "sin," so long as they were motivated by love.

⁵⁶ See Matthew 26:36-44; Mark 14:32-39; and Luke 22:39-44.

Wesley encouraged Methodists to make as much money as they could, so long as they did so legally, morally, and without harm to self or others. He then implored them to spend it wisely, without extravagance, and to give away as much as possible to God and to the poor. Wesley himself made a substantial income from writing.⁵⁷ His books were inexpensive, but they sold well. Wesley gave away most of the money he earned to the Methodist movement and to the poor.

Methodist Practices. On a more practical level, Wesley accepted and encouraged infant baptism (i.e., that infants can and should be baptized, even though they are not yet capable of understanding). And he allowed baptism by any of a variety of methods, including the mere sprinkling of water on the person's head. He considered only three things essential for baptism: (1) that it be administered by someone authorized to do so, (2) that water be applied, and (3) that it be done in the name of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). For Wesley, baptism was the Christian equivalent of Jewish circumcision—an outward sign of our covenant with God.

Wesley insisted that Methodists should receive communion as often as possible, for he saw it as a Christian's duty, in view of Christ's command, "Do this in remembrance of me."⁵⁸ However, for most of his life he required Methodists to do so within the Anglican church, rather than as part of Methodist worship services. Of course, Wesley did not accept the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation,⁵⁹ but he did regard the bread and cup as important symbols of Christ's body and blood, and of the grace mankind received as a result. Unfortunately, some Anglican priests excluded Methodists from communion in the Church of England.

The Methodist societies which John organized reflected his beliefs. Prayer, hymns, and preaching were key elements of their worship services. Women were of course welcome, and were not usually segregated from the men, although the women sometimes met separately in the small group meetings. Believers accepted and enforced among themselves a moral code almost as rigorous as that of the Puritans, and each member was expected to participate in public worship, private prayer, fasting, communion, Bible study, and service to others. If a member violated any of these requirements, and persisted in doing so after being warned, he was quietly excluded from the society.

⁵⁷ Late in life, in 1778, Wesley started *The Armenian Magazine* to publish Methodist views, including of course his own. Wesley edited the magazine for most of the rest of his life.

⁵⁸ See Luke 22:19.

⁵⁹ Transubstantiation is the belief that the bread and cup are miraculously transformed into the actual body and blood of Christ as the believer partakes of communion.

Methodism made its greatest gains among the long-neglected working classes and poor, from whom Wesley's lay preachers were drawn. Wesley himself advocated many reforms on behalf of the poor, such as prison reform, fairer representation in Parliament, moral reform in politics, and the abolition of slavery.

Opposition and Persecution. As Methodism grew, so did its opposition. The Anglican clergy objected to Methodism for a variety of reasons, including its emphasis upon sin, heaven, and hell, its use of lay preachers, its practice of allowing laypersons to pray extemporaneously, and the "enthusiasm" often associated with the movement (that is, seizures, trembling, crying out, etc.). Church leaders also opposed Wesley personally because he ignored Church prohibitions against preaching without permission of the parish priest. Wesley often fared no better with non-Anglican Christians, many of whom deeply resented his rejection of Calvinism, which was then a widely accepted belief in England.

Many accused the Methodists of trying to create a schism within the Church of England.⁶⁰ Even Charles Wesley suspected Methodist intentions, and eventually left the movement due to his fears that Methodism would break off from the Anglican Church.⁶¹ Yet John remained loyal to the Church of England, despite working outside of it for most of his life. He encouraged Methodists to attend Anglican services, denied his lay preachers authority to administer the sacraments, refused to associate his movement with the Puritans or Dissenters, and suppressed every effort to divorce English Methodism from the Anglican Church. The same could not be said of many of his Methodist followers, who complained that some of the Church's teachings were contrary to Scripture, and that Anglican ministers were not only ignorant of what the Scriptures said, but taught and lived contrary thereto. Wesley granted the accuracy of these complaints.⁶² He sometimes criticized Church leaders for the lack of sincerity in their religion, yet still refused to separate from the Church. But despite his loyalty, Methodist preachers, including John and Charles

⁶⁰ As we shall see, the Methodist movement in America broke away from the Church of England after the American Revolution. However, the official break between English Methodism and the Anglican Church did not come until after Wesley's death.

⁶¹ Charles Wesley began to reduce his involvement with the Methodists in 1755, and eventually became estranged from his brother, John. Charles and his family settled in Bristol, where he lived until 1771. He then moved to London, where he died on March 29, 1788.

⁶² In a 1743 essay, Wesley tells clergymen of the Anglican Church: "There are among yourselves ungodly and unholy men, openly, undeniably such—drunkards, gluttons, returners of evil for evil, liars, swearers, profaners of the day of the Lord." Quoted from "An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion," as reprinted in *John Wesley*, ed. by Albert C. Outler, p. 411 (see Sources).

Wesley, were routinely excluded from Anglican pulpits and shunned by Church leaders.

While the Anglican clergy shunned Methodism quietly, or opposed it with arguments and warnings, the common people sometimes assailed it violently. Methodist preachers were often assaulted, and a few were killed.⁶³ George Whitefield was stoned in Ireland and narrowly escaped death. In other locations, people attacked the Methodists with animals, such as an ox, a bull, or dogs. At Wednesbury, a mob destroyed Methodist property, beat Methodist men, and abused Methodist women. John himself was beaten on occasion, and threatened on many more, but always faced his persecutors with courage and prayer. Many other Methodist preachers displayed similar bravery, winning both respect and new converts. Ordinary Methodists faced ostracism from their friends and family.

Methodism and the American Revolution. Meanwhile, Methodism continued to grow. By 1765, more than 20,000 counted themselves Methodists, including about 2,800 in London alone. In 1769, the annual Methodist conference⁶⁴ sent two preachers, Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmoor, to the 13 Colonies in America, to preach to the Methodists who had immigrated there in the 1750's and 1760's. In 1771, those two preachers were joined by two more, Richard Wright and Francis Asbury.⁶⁵ By 1773, America had 10 preachers and more than 1,100 Methodists. By 1777, the number of American Methodists had grown to over 6,000, and by 1784 to about 15,000.

As the American Colonies moved ever closer to revolution, Wesley called upon Methodists to remain neutral, even as he urged both sides to be more understanding and tolerant of each other's positions. However, when war finally broke out, Wesley proved to be a loyal Englishman. He ordered his Methodist preachers to return to England; all but Francis Asbury did so.⁶⁶ John also wrote numerous pamphlets and letters in support of the English cause in the war.

⁶³ The first Methodist martyr was William Seward, who was assaulted in Hays, South Wales, in mid-October 1740 and died a few days later, on October 22nd.

⁶⁴ The first Methodist conference was held in 1744.

⁶⁵ 1745-1816

⁶⁶ Francis Asbury was a Methodist lay preacher. During the American Revolution, he preached in favor of independence. After the war Asbury became the unquestioned leader of American Methodism. He traveled and preached throughout the 13 United States and into the frontier lands of Tennessee, Kentucky, and Ohio. By the time of his death in 1816, American Methodists numbered about 200,000.

After the war, in 1784, John took the radical step of appointing Asbury and Dr. Thomas Coke⁶⁷ as “joint superintendents” of the Methodists in the United States, and authorized them to ordain Methodist ministers there. John also dispatched two of his lay preachers, Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey, to America, and raised them to the level of “elders,” with authority to administer the sacraments of baptism and communion. These appointments further estranged Methodism from the Church of England, which forbid the ordination of priests and bishops by a mere priest such as Wesley. But John realized he had no choice—under Anglican rules, American Methodists could no longer receive the sacraments of baptism and communion, since they were no longer loyal to the English King. John understood that, in America at least, Methodism had to break away from the Church of England.⁶⁸ John would later ordain Methodist bishops in Scotland, and even in England.

Wesley’s Later Life. Wesley’s health began to fail at age 86. Nevertheless, he kept preaching and visiting the Methodist societies as long as he was able. He survived his younger brother, Charles, who died in March, 1788, at the age of 80. In 1790, at the age of 87, John went on a five-month preaching trip throughout England and Scotland. Huge crowds greeted him—most people sensed that they would never see him again. In late February, 1791, John became feverish and very weak. With his last few breaths, he sang praises to God. He died on March 2, 1791, at the age of 88, and was buried in the graveyard of City Road Chapel, in London.

John Wesley had an enormous impact on both Christianity and English society. His efforts helped reduce the corruption and vice which were widespread in 18th century England. On social issues, English Methodism worked for prison reform, the abolition of slavery, and the protection of industry workers. English Methodists also built medical clinics and orphanages, and worked to relieve the misery of the poor. These efforts helped prevent the French Revolution of 1789 from spreading to England. More importantly, Methodism reinvigorated Christianity in England and the United States, rescued the faith from deism, and helped pave the way for the extensive spread of the Gospel in the 19th and 20th centuries. Methodism spread worldwide and become one of the largest Protestant

⁶⁷ Thomas Coke (1747-1814), a former Anglican priest, came to America in 1784. Later that year, he and Francis Asbury were elected as the first “bishops” of the American Methodist church by the Methodist conference in Baltimore. Together, Coke and Asbury organized and led the Methodist Episcopal Church, a new and independent denomination in the United States.

⁶⁸ An unintended consequence of the independence of the American Methodists was that they soon began to ignore John Wesley’s desires, such as his directive that Richard Whatcoat should become the American “Superintendent” in 1787.

denominations. In the United States, Methodists outnumber all other Protestants except Baptists.

Sources:

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- (4) *A History of Christianity, Volume II (Reformation to the Present, A.D. 1500 to A.D. 1975)*, by Kenneth Scott Latourette (Harpers and Row, New York, 1953, 1975).
- (5) *Exploring Church History*, by Howard F. Vos (Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1994).
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- (7) *Journey in Faith: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*, by Lester G. McAllister and William E. Tucker (The Bethany Press, Box 179, St. Louis, MO 63166, 1975)
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<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~gentutor/susanna.html>
- (9) “Thomas à Kempis,” in the Catholic Encyclopedia, found at
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14661a.htm>.
- (10) “John Wesley Trial: 1737 - The Case Against Wesley,” found at
<http://law.jrank.org/pages/2348/John-Wesley-Trial-1737-Case-Against-Wesley.html>
- (11) “John Wesley and Savannah,” by Kathy W. Ross and Rosemary Stacy, part of the Savannah Images Project, headquartered at the History Department, Armstrong Atlantic State University, Savannah, Georgia, and found at <http://www.sip.armstrong.edu/Methodism/wesley.html>
- (12) “Why A Sanctoral Cycle? Or, Are We Ready for Methodist Hagiography?,” from the Material History of American Religion Project, found at:
<http://www.materialreligion.org/journal/saints.html>
- (13) “Wesley’s Letters: 1725,” “Wesley’s Letters: 1726,” “Wesley’s Letters: 1727,” “Wesley’s Letters: 1728,” “Wesley’s Letters: 1737,” “Wesley’s Letters: 1738,” “Wesley’s Letters: 1739,” and “Wesley’s Letters: 1740,” at the *Wesley Center Online* web site, found at the following links:
http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/letters/1725.htm

http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/letters/1726.htm
http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/letters/1727.htm
http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/letters/1728.htm
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http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/letters/1740.htm

- (14) In addition, the following web sites were useful regarding the geography of some of the locations mentioned in this article:

Drive Alive! - <http://www.drive-alive.co.uk/>

msn encarta World Atlas –

<http://encarta.msn.com/encnet/features/mapcenter/map.aspx> (web site no longer available)