

"That Man: John Wesley"

John Wesley was born June 17th, 1703 in Epworth, England, the 15th of 19 children of Samuel and Susanna Wesley (they had 19 children in 21 years!). His father Samuel was a priest in the Church of England (himself the 25th child of a clergyman). John's mother Susanna was a very intelligent, strong-willed woman (herself the daughter of a pastor). It was Susannah who educated all their children. The day after their 5th birthday, each child began a very strict, rigorous regiment of home schooling.

When John was 5, a fire broke out at the rectory, and John almost perished in the blaze. He was the last one left in the house, and as he was lifted out of the second story bedroom just in time, Susannah quoted the words from the prophet Zechariah: "Is this not a brand plucked out of the burning?" She saw John's rescue as a sign that God had spared him for a great purpose in life.

When John was 10 he went to a private boarding school in London – and after 7 years there, the bright and witty young man got a scholarship to go to Oxford University, which by that time had fallen into ill repute academically, and also morally. But John devoted himself to his studies, and was also faithful in spiritual disciplines of prayer and reading the Bible and other religious books.

One of the books that had a profound influence on his life at an early stage was Bishop Jeremy Taylor's book *Rules for Holy Living and Holy Dying*, a book that stressed the need for *purity of intention*. Even though, by then, Wesley was already extremely religious, this book awakened in him a hunger for personal piety, the purifying of his inward motives and desires.

At this point he started to think of becoming a clergyman, and at the age of 23 he was ordained a priest in the Church of England. He continued his studies at Oxford, and began to teach at Lincoln College, giving lectures of the Greek New Testament. During this period he spent about 5 years filling in for his ailing father at his dad's parish in Epworth, a ministry that was pretty much routine and undistinguished.

So, when he went back to Oxford, he became part of a group called the "Holy Club". At first, it was just John and his brother Charles, and 2 others. They met to study the Greek New Testament, and to encourage each other to go deeper in Christ. Others at the university ridiculed them, calling them "The Godly Club", "Bible Moths", "Enthusiasts". Because those in the group lived such a disciplined, *methodical* life, someone out of derision called them "Methodists" – a name that stuck!

Eventually the group met every evening from 6 to 9 p.m. They studied, prayed, fasted. But they did more than that! They visited prisoners in jail and witnessed to them, teaching inmates to read and giving books to them. They gave a good portion of their income to the poor and needy. They cared for sick people. They gave free tuition to poor children who otherwise would not have received an education.

This planted the seed that blossomed into one of the great marks of the Methodist movement – *linking personal faith and spirituality to social action*. They understood and practiced the

biblical truth that true faith involves having a personal relationship with God through Christ, and expressing that faith in a concern for people in society.

For instance, Psalm 82:3-4 says, "Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless, maintain the right of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked."

And James 1:27 says, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

Yet, in spite of John Wesley's rigorous religious life, in spite of his being an ordained priest, he failed to find any assurance that he was accepted by God. Called to the bedside of his gravely ill father, his father Samuel spoke words to John that would greatly influence his search for salvation: "The inward witness, son, the inward witness, that is the proof, the strongest proof of Christianity."

Strangely enough, his quest for assurance of salvation led him to leave England and come to the American colony of Georgia as a missionary. He naively thought that if he could get back to a primitive, more simple life, he could more easily cultivate inward holiness. He wrote, "My chief motive...is the hope of saving my own soul".

On the way over his ship encountered a terrible storm. He was shocked to realize that he feared for his life. He was deeply impressed with a group of German Moravian Christians, who in the midst of the storm sang hymns with confidence. After the storm subsided, John asked them, "Was you not afraid?" One of the Moravians replied, "I thank God, no!" "But were not your women and children afraid?" Wesley continued. "No, our women and children are not afraid to die." All of this added to the sense that in spite of all his devotion to religion, there was something missing in John Wesley's life.

Well, to sum up his missionary venture in George, it was a disaster! He returned to England humiliated and defeated, still hungering for more in the Christian life. His dogged, determined search for personal faith and assurance of salvation finally reached its climax on May 24th, 1738. Something happened to this 34 year-old man that night that changed his life. The place was Aldersgate Street in London. Wesley had been meeting regularly with a small group of seekers to study, to share with honesty their temptations and the state of their hearts, and to pray for each other. Wesley described in his journal what happened that eventful night:

"In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust 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.

"I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitefully used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there what I first felt in my heart...".

Church historians have discussed at great length the meaning of Wesley's experience at Aldersgate. Was it a "conversion", where for the first time Wesley became a Christian? Or was it a "growth experience", where Wesley went deeper in his faith? Regardless of how we look at it, it's safe to say that this was an experience that gave Wesley *assurance*. After that, Wesley knew beyond a doubt that Christ had forgiven him and saved him! He no longer trusted Christ *and* his own good works, but *Christ alone* for his salvation! The doctrine of assurance has become an important part of United Methodist belief, that *we can know we are saved!*

Here are several Scripture passages addressing this matter. "Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts...and this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:10a, 11-13). Also, Romans 8:14-17: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs: heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if we in fact suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him."

God wants each of us to trust His Son Jesus alone for salvation, to know that our sins are forgiven, and to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that as children of God we have eternal life with Him.

John Wesley's experience with God at Aldersgate is not the end of the story! In fact, in a way it's just the beginning! Although after Wesley's heart was "strangely warmed" his life was still filled with conflicts and struggles that are part of life, that experience at Aldersgate transformed him from being just an undistinguished priest and scholar to being a dynamic force for Christ in England and beyond. He began to preach with a new fervor, and new emphasis on "justification by faith alone" – in other words, that we are made acceptable to God not through our good works, but trusting Christ alone for salvation. But the established church – the Church of England, was so close-minded and spiritually dead that the message sounded like heresy! The doors of churches began to close on Wesley. He wrote in his journal different times, "I am to preach here no more", or "I was informed I was not to preach any more in either of these churches." Amazing!

However, these rejections were a blessing in disguise. They forced Wesley to preach to the masses of people *not connected to the church*. He was reluctant at first to preach outside the church sanctuary, but he changed because he wanted to see people saved. He began to preach in open fields – wearing his robe! Dirty faced miners were converted – tears streaming down their soot covered faces. Sometimes mobs tried to interrupt his preaching with taunts, or threaten him

physical harm. Often stones were thrown at him. He made it a rule to always look a mob in the face! The Church of England grew firmer in its opposition to this Wesleyan/Methodist movement. Anti-Methodist literature was circulated. But Wesley stood his ground. Thousands of people believed, and a spiritual revival began in England.

One of the problems Wesley now faced was what to do with all these new converts! How could things be organized so that they would grow in their new found faith? Sadly, the Anglican churches were not sympathetic towards them, or ready for them. Anglican clergy in established congregations were irritated when crowds of new converts came to church services! They denied these "outsiders" Holy Communion, since they weren't members of the parishes. So, these new converts began to rely more and more on preachers like John Wesley to care for their souls.

To provide a place for the masses of people coming to Christ, Wesley bought a large, abandoned cannon foundry. He used that as a place for preaching services and meetings – as well as living quarters for himself. Since the movement was spreading so fast Wesley couldn't possibly give personal instruction and leadership to all the new converts. So, believers organized into groups called *societies* – where people could meet weekly for spiritual growth and fellowship. These were open to all who had "a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and be saved from their sins." Members were required to avoid evils and vices that could harm their relationship with their fellow men. They were admonished to do all the good they could to all people, and to observe the ordinances of God. If they didn't do this, they were expelled from the group!

Soon the societies were further divided into *class meetings*, also held once a week. These class meetings were made up of about 12 persons, with a lay person in charge. The class leaders would rebuke, instruct and give encouragement. Class members would confess their sins to one another, encourage and pray for each other, and also take an offering to support the preachers.

So, the modern "small group movement" is not so new at all! Back then, in the 1700's, Wesley saw the need and the value of having believers meet regularly with each other for spiritual growth and development.

With the revival movement growing so rapidly, there was a desperate need for more preachers. For the first time, non-ordained persons, *lay people*, began to preach. Wesley at first didn't like the idea at all, but he came to realize God was raising up lay people to be effective in that ministry. He developed study courses for training preachers, and he supervised their work.

Eventually, the movement spread from England to the American colonies, and became the seeds for Methodism. While the Methodist churches directly stemmed from John Wesley's ministry, the former Evangelical United Brethren churches (Community UMC is a former EUB church) also were born from leaders influenced by Wesley's ministry, and holding similar beliefs as his.

John Wesley was still going strong in his 80's! At the age of 83 he wrote, "I am a wonder to

myself...I am never tired (such is the goodness of God!), either writing, preaching, or traveling." Several stories are told of Wesley, in his 70's and 80's, walking his horse up to 20 miles a day in heavy snow, or braving a raging current of water. But eventually, he began to slow down. His eyesight weakened. Sometimes he slept in (a new thing for him). He never preached more than twice a day, and never at 5 o'clock in the morning, as he used to do. His life ended March 2nd, 1791.

It's estimated that Wesley during his life traveled 250,000 miles (an average of 18-19 miles a day), on foot and horseback. He preached 40,000 sermons, and wrote 231 books. His life spanned the 18th century, and God used him and his followers to bring a spiritual awakening that transformed not only English society, but the whole world.

So much for John Wesley. Why preach a sermon about John Wesley? *Well, today is "Aldersgate Sunday"* It's the Sunday closest to May 24th, the day John Wesley had his Aldersgate experience. I believe his life can be an inspiration for us.

Maybe, like Wesley's in his early years, we're religious, and involved in the church, but we haven't had that personal experience of Christ. Or we don't have that assurance that we are saved. But we can, if we seek the Lord with all our heart, admit our situation, and lay it all on the Lord. Our heart, too, can be strangely warmed, and we can have our "Aldersgate".

Furthermore, looking at Wesley's life shows us what God can do with a man or woman totally committed to the Lord! John Wesley was a very imperfect human being (you see this if you read any of the biographies of his life), but God did amazing things through this one man, sold out for Christ!

Also, God brought about a far-reaching spiritual revival through Wesley. English society in the early 1700's was a mess! Moral decadence abounding. Inhumane treatment of certain groups in society. Child labor abuses. Yet, through the Methodist movement God brought about a spiritual awakening that literally changed 18th century England, and spread throughout the world. If God could do that in Wesley's time, could God possibly bring a massive spiritual awakening here, in the U.S.? It's something to earnestly pray about!

Finally, for United Methodists, Wesley laid the foundation of our spiritual heritage. Linking *evangelical faith* – the need for a personal relationship with Christ that brings salvation and a change in people's lives – to *social action*, addressing the practical needs of people in society. Whenever the United Methodist Church – or any church, any congregation – is faithful to the Biblical record, these two will always be linked: *evangelical fervor*, and involvement in the needs of people in society.

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