

Hagiography of Rev. John Wesley

New Members' Class
Moore's Chapel UMC
Prepared by SunAe Lee-Koo

The 18th century in England

Industrialization in England caused the gravitation of the population into cities. As the adverse reaction of Industrialization better treatment to laborers was raised as problem. For instance, even children at the age 4-13 overworked as miners (19/181). There were poverty and high death rate among children. There was absolute need for help (6/4).

Act of Toleration (1689) allowed legal protection for dissenting groups under the conditions: (1) meeting houses must be registered with the government; (2) dissenting preachers must be licensed; (3) meetings for worship must be held in the registered meeting houses, not in private homes; (4) Roman Catholic or Unitarian groups were not to be included under these provisions (9/17).

Compared to rising of Rationalism, Enlightenment, and Romanticism in Europe, Deism that views God as a watch-maker rose in England. Due to the influence by Deism many young people left the church. The church had grown corrupt; Morning Prayer was norm; Holy Communion was administered quarterly due to the want of clergy (6/ 8). Despite, the Anglican Church's intolerance (see the box in p.4: political situation), the Act of Toleration allowed some types of gatherings for spiritual growth, such as revival, outside the Church (14/ xx). John Wesley found the harvest plentiful for Christian growth because of these conditions.

John Wesley' Early Life and His Mother's Education

John Wesley, known as the founder of Methodism, was born June 17, 1703 to Samuel (Anglican priest) and Susanna Wesley. He was the 15th child of 19. When John was born there were 10 children because many had died in infancy (14/11). At the age of six the rectory at Epworth caught fire. After being rescued by a neighbor before the rectory fell down the whole family



figure 1 (Epworth Rectory in Fire)

prayed and praised God (16/ 42). John referred to himself from this grateful moment as a “brand plucked out of the fire” (recited from the Bible: Zechariah3:2, Amos 4:11). The Wesley family no longer had a place to live, they were destitute (14/18).

His mother Susanna intended to be careful raising John Wesley. Her prayer was that “I do intend to be more particularly careful of the soul of this child, instill the principles of Thy true and virtue” (14/19). Susanna due to her Puritan background emphasized the children’s obedience and raised them with strict discipline. Their lives were regimented. After their 5th birthday a certain length of time was set aside everyday for Bible reading and Lord’s Prayer (6/4). Due to the fire Susanna’s children went to live with other relatives or neighbors, through which they acquired many rude ways. John Wesley lived with at a minister’s house. Eventually the children returned home and their former way of regimented life was restored (for Susanna’s home school see Telford 13-19). John entered Charterhouse in London in 1714, which either middle class or Anglicans were allowed to enter. It was possible for John Wesley because his father was an Anglican priest. After 6 years of studying at Charterhouse he entered Christ Church College in Oxford University (6/5, 14/ xx).

John Wesley’s Life at Oxford

John Wesley was quick and logical in his childhood. He became a Lincoln College Fellow and lectured in Greek, philosophy and, logic in 1729 (6/ 5, 16/45). It had been nine years since John entered Oxford University when he was 17 years old. During that period John Wesley was ordained as a deacon in 1725, and became an elder in Anglican Church, becoming the 4th generation pastor (14/20). His puritan work ethic with which he was raised continued in his Oxford life.



figure 2--Lincoln College (JW’s room)

The Holy Club

Green states that John was more engaged into self-disciplinary life after Sally Kirkham refused his proposal (8/20-21). He began to focus on his spiritual life in Anglican

Church. When John, his brother Charles, met with William Morgan, Robert Kirkham, George Whitefield, James Harvey, Benjamin Inham, and John Gambold to study the Greek Testament and the classics, and to pray in the Oxford campus, he applied with the same regimen that his mother had taught him at his early age (see the box below). This group was known as the Holy Club, but it was often referred to as the Reforming Club, the Godly Club, Bible Moths, and Methodists (14/58, 161). Figure 3 shows the Holy Club in session at Oxford (6/8). According to Morgan's suggestion, John and other members of the Holy Club visited prisoners and the sick regularly. Samuel Wesley once wrote Morgan "broke the ice" for the Wesleys in his letter to John Wesley (14/60-61). Davies views John Wesley's life as the history of Methodism, and Oxford (1725-1735) period is the first among three phases of Methodism (7/159).

During the year 1725, John Wesley read many classics which influenced his life and theology. He pondered upon true religion in the mind after reading Thomas à Kempis' "A Treatise of Imitation of Christ" and started to keep a diary. Also, through "Rules and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying" by Jeremy Taylor he decided to contribute his life to God wholly in his words, acts and thoughts (8/21).

Holy Club—People of the Bible
Started and closed meetings with prayer,
studied Greek Testament and classics,
Reviewed the work of the past day and
planed for the morrow, and charity.
Wednesday & Friday were fasting days, and
attended Communion every week (14/59).



figure 3- Holy Club at Oxford

John Wesley's Life in Georgia

During 1735-1738 Ogelthorpe, a friend of Samuel Wesley, requested John and his brother Charles to go to Georgia for the purpose of edifying the Indians, providing relief and educating the poor. While sailing they encountered a storm on the way to Georgia and John felt the fear of death. John found Moravian group who sang in peace, unlike himself, while he was trembling in fear. The Moravians' challenge in spirituality led John to meet some of the Moravians in Georgia. A Moravian minister, Gottlieb Spangenberg challenged John asking, "Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?"

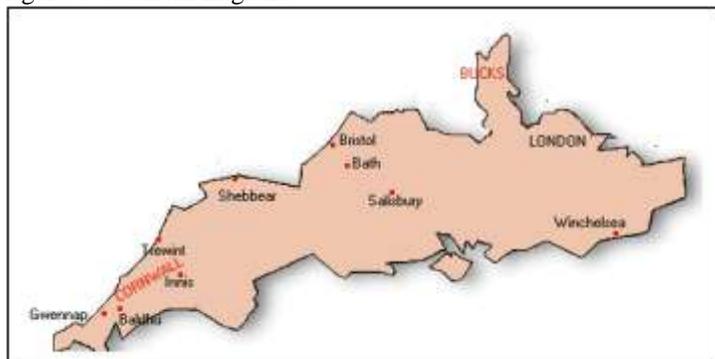
John Wesley could not say that Jesus died for him assuredly, instead “I know He is the Savior of the World.” Also he learned about instantaneous conversion from another Moravian, Peter Bohler (14/78-79, 93).

George Whitefield recorded in his Journal, “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...on that I may follow him” (14/93). Due to a personal conflict that resulted in a scandal, however, John Wesley chose to flee by night; He engaged to Sophy Hopkey and broke his engagement according to the Moravians’ advice. Sophy married and she and her husband attended the church where John was preaching, and John denied them Communion. They were so offended that they brought lawsuit against John. Shortly thereafter he left Georgia (see Telford 84-85 about Sophy Hopkey).

John Wesley’s Warm Experience

He wandered because he was not sure if he was saved. John continued to meet with the Moravians to whom John was indebted “righteousness in the language of religion, holiness of heart and life” (3/205). He visited Hernhutt (on the borders of Bohemia) in Germany, attended public services and love-feasts, and heard Zinzendorf preaching on justification by faith (14/78). Meanwhile, he went to a society in Aldersgate Street on Wednesday night in May 24, 1738. There he listened to someone reading Luther’s “Preface to the Epistle to the Romans.” He felt “heart strangely warmed... and assurance was given” (15/101). John and Moravians organized Fetter Lance Society where every Wednesday night 40-50 people gathered praying and singing (1, Vol.18/250). However, his mind was not fully at rest for all this warm experience (14/102).

figure 4- southern England



Field Preaching

In 1739, George Whitefield, a great Calvinist preacher, asked John Wesley to preach outdoors in Bristol and Kingswood (14/118). Since Anglican Church forbid outdoor preaching John first hesitated to do that. However, reading Jesus' Sermon on the Mount convinced him to preach. Tuttle describes John Wesley's first field preaching at Bristol, which 5000-6000 people listened to his "Sermon on the Mount" at 7:00 in the morning (16/119-120). When Anglican bishop asked him about field preaching which was against Anglican rule, John answered, "The world is my parish," meaning that he was not a parish minister but a Fellow at Oxford. He later in 1751 resigned his Fellowship (20/173).

John Wesley was called 'a pope,' 'a tyrant' by opponents because he directed his preachers, "Above all, you are to preach when and where I appoint" (20/243: this can be compared with the leadership of the Benedictine Order). As he himself 'an omnivorous reader' he read books while walking or riding on a horse. He advised preachers to read also (14/xx, 194-195). With absolute authority he supervised lay preachers who went out to the poor over the country. He hoped to be in Anglican Church until his death, and called their meeting 'society' as a small group in Anglican Church. People met at the society after attending Anglican service, and also gathered at class meeting on Fridays. Through this class meeting he emphasized mutual accountability for communal sanctification (14/152).

Evangelical Revival

Under John Wesley's preaching, people cried out aloud, prayed, and rejoiced in God (14/117). Most Methodists were underprivileged people who were not acceptable in the high Anglican Church. (6/16-17)

Through preaching John led the Revival movement and gave us doctrinal guidance (3/195). Davey calls it 'the Evangelical Revival' (6/4). There are several sermons about doctrine: "Salvation by Faith" (1738)-the central idea of the Christian religion; "The Almost Christian" (1741)-Christian ethic of life: the love of God, of our neighbor, and faith (3/199); "Scriptural Christianity" (1744). John Wesley became an active traveling preacher.

Methodists Society

Telford states that Christian fellowship sustained Methodism. As Wesley understood Christianity as social religion, proclaiming “the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion” (20/147), he encouraged people to care for each other and bear each other’s burdens (14/152). Therefore, in 1739, he built New Room in Horsefair to be the center of Methodists (7/109). John Wesley criticized individual, monastic tendency of Moravian “stillness.” The difference influenced him to be separated from the Moravians in 1740 (5/ 61). Wesley used James, “Means of Grace” and opposed antinomian tendency (2, II/ 183: see “A Dialogue Between An Antinomian and His Friend”). To become a Methodist one condition was required: desire to flee from the wrath to come.” And to stay in the Methodist Society three things were required: “doing no harm, doing good, attending upon the ordinances of God” (13/39).

Persecution

During his early traveling ministry he was not only not accepted but there came a time when a mob erupted. By the 1750s the fast growth of Methodism roused resistance and persecution (see the box for a political reason).

Mobs sporadically broke out and disturbed Methodists’ open-air meetings violently. Also, many Anglican clergies opposed Methodists for

their theology and for invasion of their parishes (6/16-17).

Political reason

The new Hanoverian Protestant kings of England, George I and II, sat on uneasy thrones for it was generally believed that subversive plotters were determined to restore the exiled Roman Catholic Stuarts to the monarchy. The unsuccessful 1715 invasion, followed by the abortive 1745 rebellion, made it all too easy to persuade simple people that the Wesleys were ‘Jacobites in disguise’ seeking to overthrow king and government (6/16)

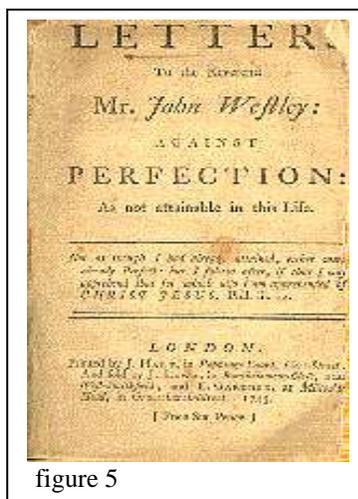


figure 5

Theological Debate

After separation from the Moravians, a Calvinist, George Whitefield separated from John when John published his sermon on “Free Grace,” for free grace “in all” and “for all” based on Romans 8:32 opposed double predestination in Calvinism (2,I/ 545) (20/149). John Wesley hesitated before preaching “Free Grace.” After casting lots he preached it in 1739, but deferred

publishing until 1740 (14, 1/103). Thus, the year 1740 became one of debate. John Wesley, however, was criticized to depend on human free will (5/45)

John Wesley tried reconciliation with Calvinists including George Whitefield through the sermon, “Catholic Spirit” (1741) (17/351, 5/24). However, the sermon on “Christian Perfection” (1741) deepened the debate and conflict. John Wesley in “The Principles of a Methodist” described that he had taught Christian Perfection over 40 years since 1740 (5/55)

John Wesley, a Traveling Preacher

He traveled England, Scotland, and Wales, 300,000 miles in fifty years of his ministry (see Figure 6). His traveling was to help the nation transform in the church and society, confessing “as long as God gives [that] me strength to labor, I must use it” (20/294, 6/4).

Contributions of Methodism

Wesley’s evangelical revival movement opened moral and religious energy among the poor through the field-preaching, and he continued to

emphasize communal sanctification through class meetings. Historian Lecky remarks that Methodism saved England in the 18th century from the inclination of the revolution as it occurred in France (14/xiv). Especially later on, class meetings influenced on the organizing of a labor union for the alienated laborers in the process of Industrialization. Methodist class meetings functioned as a union. There were 9 Methodists among 12 miner representatives, and some leaders of boycott were Methodist preachers (19/187). According to Watson,



figure 6-British Isle (the 18th century)

Methodism as an anti-cultural community was against the corrupted culture status quo (18/140-141).

John Wesley's Philanthropy

Wise shares several stories that witness John Wesley's philanthropy. At Bristol, one cold winter hundreds of people were laid off. John took public collections for 100-150 people to be fed. Also he employed 12 of the poorest people and gave them jobs because he understood the opportunity of job. In 1763, the great frost caused the Thames to close and thousands of people lost their jobs. When John saw many people

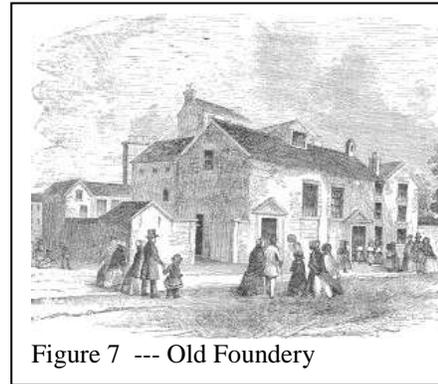


Figure 7 --- Old Foundry

begging bread door to door, he opened the Foundry to feed them (20/261-282, see figure 7).

Foundry, the house for the poor was established in 1772, and provided a place for widows, boys, the sick, and also for preachers. In 1785 Strangers Friendly Society started in London for the homeless, and it spread through the nation later on (13/131-139).

His treatise, "Thoughts Upon Slavery" (1774) and a letter to Wilberforce (1787) witness John Wesley's "a prophetic epitome of the history of emancipation" (14/348). However, there was opposition both by slave merchants and slave holders (17/509).

In the 18th century, many people in the lower socio-economic class were sentenced to death for only stealing 5 shillings, cutting a young tree, ... etc (10/78). Wesley's concern for these people led him to visit the prisoners. His efforts to improve the conditions of prisons, to increase the prisoner's wages, and his counseling and prayers for them were recorded his journal (2.Vol.4/478). Also, John concerned himself with education for children. He opened Kingswood School in 1748 for children from lower income levels, and an orphan house called New House (13/139, 9/167).

John Wesley's Feministic Attitude

Wesley had seven sisters and two brothers who reached maturity. Among them only John and other two brothers were educated at Oxford, other sisters were uneducated. The lives of his sisters doesn't seem to be happy, because "the sisters faced all the different kinds of

frustrations, heartaches, poverty, despair, happiness, triumphs and defeats characteristic of the soap operas of today” (11/4). John Wesley who was susceptible to females (14/xxvi), married widow Molly Vazeille but, like his sisters, he didn’t have a happy marriage (16/293, See Tuttle 287-310). For all, having a strong-minded mother, he allowed women to preach and lead class meetings. Sarah Crosby, Mary Bosanquet and Sarah Mallet were among those who preached and exhorted people (4/137, 251).

John Wesley’s Tithing

John Wesley’s tithing habit was worthy to notice. Telford describes that John Wesley limited his expenses to the same sum (28 pounds) through his ministry; therefore he was able to give away a lot of money every year (14/65). Through his sermon “Use of Money” (1760) he emphatically asserted “gain all you can...save all you can...give all you can” (2, Vol 7/129). John at the age of 51 decided to write his epitaph which conveys his life of honorable poverty:

A brand plucked out of the burning:
 Who died of consumption in the fifty-first year of his age?
 Not leaving, after his debts are paid,
 Ten pounds behind him:
 Praying,
 God be merciful to me, and
 unprofitable servant! (16/306)

John Wesley’s Rest

John Wesley continued to exhort, until his death, that Christians should read and pray to live “not by sitting still; but by stirring up the gift of God that is in them... to do all that in us lies to-day, leaving the morrow to God” (16/326, 351). In the latter years of his life, John Wesley was admired by people, and died March 2,



figure 8

1791. People sang and prayed when he died. He was buried in the graveyard of City Road Chapel, London.

Heritage

Methodists eventually separated from the Anglican Church because of a need to ordain clergies (1784) in the North American colonies, yet, John Wesley's loyalty to Anglican



figure 9 -City Road Chapel

Church remained in Methodism (6/30,10/243). He added his own experience to the Anglican theological criteria, Scripture, Church tradition, and reason. Hence, Wesleyan theological criteria that still influence The United Methodist Church are known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Church tradition, experience, and reason. In England there are many important sites for Methodists open to public. Each place has memory about John Wesley who lived as a traveling preacher, a writer. He is noted as the founder of Methodism. Methodist Heritage website provides most of the places John Wesley preached (See <http://www.forsaithe-oxon.demon.co.uk/methodist-heritage/southern/>, and <http://gbgm-umc.org/UMW/Wesley/index>).

Questions

- Why is John Wesley's life still important today?
- What kind of heritage is in The United Methodist Tradition that is from John Wesley?
- What do you think of "casting lots" for decision making?
- His usage of hymns from the Georgia mission period influenced worship greatly, but it was new at that time. Also field-preaching was unacceptable. What do you think about trying a new approach preaching the Gospel or worship when it is not the tradition of the church?
- John Wesley was loyal to the king of England as his father was. However, some of his preachers during the American War of Independence couldn't follow Wesley's way. What do you think about Wesley who claimed the loyalty in England commanded people in America?
- John Wesley's self-discipline was very much related to his priorities regarding time. He was methodical. For example he always got up at 4:00am for daily devotion. What kind of discipline would you try?
- Since John Wesley traveled so many miles, many horses became lame or died. How far would you be willing to travel to spread the Gospel?
- It is well known that John and his wife Molly had a very unhappy marriage. Do you think God used his unhappy life to make him traveling preacher?
- John Wesley met oppositions from mobs, Anglican clergies, even from his wife.
What do you feel that St. John Wesley had been opposed by many others for some time?
- His tithing habit was very generous. Actually he used 1/10th of his income for his personal needs and gave away 9/10ths. How does this compare to your own personal tithing?
- If you had a mother like Susanna who was so Puritan, how would you react?
- John Wesley lived as a preacher and at the same time as a social reformer. In your personal life, going to church- and the changes that have occurred as a result- can you think of some examples of how your behavior has influenced society?

Reference in Text

1. Wesley, John. *The Works of John Wesley* (Bicentennial edition), Vol. 18 (Journal and Diaries V), ed. by W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993.
2. Wesley, John. *The Works of John Wesley* (Bicentennial Edition), Vol. 1 (Sermons I), ed. by Albert C. Outler. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984.
- 2-1. _____. *The Works of John Wesley* (Bicentennial Edition), Vol. 2 (Sermons II), ed. by Albert C. Outler. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985.
- 2-2. _____. *The Works of John Wesley* (Bicentennial Edition), Vol. 3 (Sermons III), ed. by Albert C. Outler. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986.
3. Cell, George Croft. *The Rediscovery of John Wesley*. New York: Henry Holt And Company, 1935.
4. Chilcote, Paul Wesley. *John Wesley and the Women Preachers and Early Methodism*. Duke Univ. 1984.
5. Coppedge, Allan. *John Wesley in Theological Debate*. Wilmore, Kentucky: Wesley Heritage Press, 1987.
6. Davey, Cyril. *John Wesley And The Methodists*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985.
7. Davies, Rupert & Rupp, Gordon. *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, Vol. I. London: The Epworth Press, 1965.
8. Green, V. H. H. *John Wesley*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1987.
9. Heitzenrater, Richard P. *Wesley and The People Called Methodist*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995.
10. Marquardt, Manfred. *John Wesley's Social Ethics*, trans. by John E. Steely & W. Stephen Gunter. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992.
11. Maser, Frederick E. *The Wesley Sisters*. Peterborough: Foundery Press, 1990.
- 12 Norwood, Frederick A. *The Story of American Methodism*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974.

13. Sherwin, Oscar. *Friend of People*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1961
14. Telford, John. *The Life of John Wesley*. London: The Epworth Press, 1947.
15. Wesley, John. *The Letters of John Wesley* (Standard Edition), Vol. I. Ed., John Telford. London: The Epworth Press, 1931.
16. Tuttle, Robert G. *John Wesley: His Life and Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978.
17. Tyerman, L. *The Life and Times of The Rev. John Wesley, M.A.*, Vol.III. New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1872.
18. Watson, David L. *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*. Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1987.
19. Wearmouth, F. Robert. *Methodism and the Working-Class Movements of England (1800-1850)*. London: Epworth Press, 1947.
20. Wise, Daniel. *John Wesley*. New York: Jennings & Pye.

Reference for Pictures in Text

Figure 1-1: <http://gbgm-umc.org/gifs/historical/hyde/jwesleyhisfavorite102detail.jpg>

Figure 1. <http://rylibweb.man.ac.uk/data1/dg/methodist/jwo13.html>

Figure 2. <http://www.lincoln.ox.ac.uk/tour/function/wesley/>

Figure 3. <http://rylibweb.man.ac.uk/data1/dg/methodist/jwo13.html>

Figure 4. <http://www.antique-maps.co.uk/brit.htm>

Figure 5. <http://gbgm-umc.org/gifs/historical/hyde/jwesleyhisfavorite102detail.jpg>

Figure 6. www.ancestry.com/search/rectype/reference/maps

Figure 7. <http://rylibweb.man.ac.uk/data1/dg/methodist/jwo13.html>

Figure 8. <http://rylibweb.man.ac.uk/data1/dg/methodist/jwo13.html>

Figure 9. <http://rylibweb.man.ac.uk/data1/dg/methodist/jwo13.html>