

A PROFILE OF JOHN WESLEY

by Tom Findlay

Professor, European Nazarene Bible College

The story is told of an old Methodist guide showing a group of tourists around London. He took them first to Wesley's Chapel, then to Wesley's house, then to Aldersgate Street where on May 24, 1738, Wesley's heart was strangely warmed; he then took them to Fetter Lane where the first Methodist Society was formed. At this point one of the members of the party, probably a Scottish Presbyterian, said: "Excuse me, please, who was John Wesley?" The old guide looked at him in astonishment and said: "What, man! Have you never read your Bible?"

It is true, I think, that we have sometimes quoted from John Wesley, when we could have, and should have, quoted from the Bible, and we have not always been careful to say exactly where the inspiration lay. But that is because John Wesley was so often in harmony with the Bible. I can remember in college, discussing the passage in Philippians where we read: "He emptied himself, and took upon himself the form of a servant." The question was asked: "Of what did he empty himself?" to which the answer given was: "Well, the Bible says he emptied himself of all but love!"

The Bible says no such thing: but Charles Wesley says it:

*He left His Father's throne above,
So free, so infinite His grace!
Emptied himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam's helpless race.
'Tis mercy all, immense and free!
For, O my God, it found out me!**

So it was Charles Wesley, not the Bible—but as we said, sometimes we confuse the two! If we quote more from John and Charles Wesley than we do from the Bible, it is not because we are mixed up in our authority, it is because in the hands of these men the message of the Bible became a living fire that spread through all the world; and perhaps by rehearsing the story of how it all happened, some belated sparks might also set our hearts ablaze.

However, I should like to justify the subject from an-

other angle. I was reading several books on the life of John Wesley. One of these was by a Roman Catholic historian, John M. Todd, who continually speaks of John Wesley as a saint. Todd says:

It is important for me to make clear that I am a loyal member of the Roman Catholic Church. So in obedience to the decree of Pope Urban I declare and protest that in using the terms "Saint" and "Sanctity" . . . I have no intention of anticipating the future judgment of the Catholic Church. . . .

"By their fruits ye shall know them." The great men and women, like good trees, are good in themselves all through from root to leaf and use well the soil in which they grow, to produce a good quantity of very good fruit. John Wesley was such a man. A Catholic believes that every man who has followed his conscience will find himself eventually in heaven, with the saints, and able to do God's work, in and through His providence. As I have come to know Wesley I believe him to be there and have prayed to God through him—not publicly as the Church prays through those declared to be saints—but privately as I pray for and to those who have been close to me.

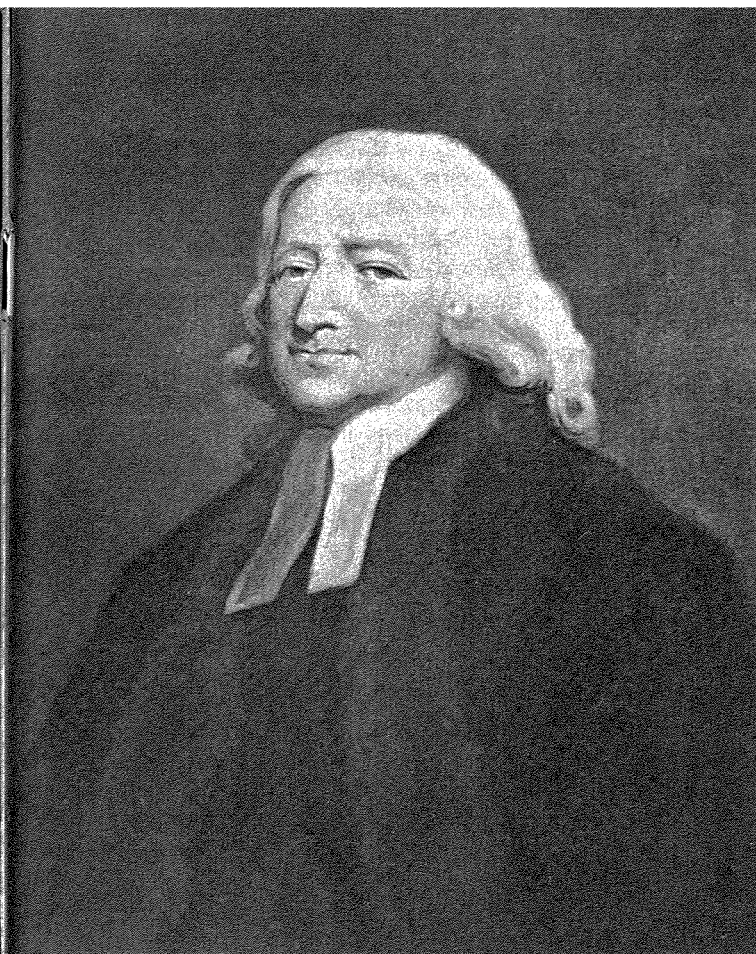
Now, if the life and work of John Wesley can have that kind of effect in the life of one declared to be a Roman Catholic, surely it is not out of place for us who claim to be his successors to permit him also to influence us—even if we do not go to the extravagant lengths of Todd.

We turn our attention, then, to the life and work of John Wesley. We shall consider first the influences in his life that made him the man he was. Secondly, the achievements of his ministry that secured for him a place in Christian history. And finally, the message that burned in his heart, that he passed on to us to declare.

John Wesley was born in 1703 and died in 1791. Born in the first decade of the eighteenth century, he lived to the last, and his life like his influence spanned the eighteenth century like a mighty colossus with one foot planted at each end.

The most immediate and overwhelming impression of his life is made by his sheer physical achievements. From 1739 to the end of his life, it has been calculated

*From *Worship in Song*, "And Can It Be?" by Charles Wesley, No. 221.



John Wesley, at age 85. From a painting by Romney.

that he traveled 225,000 miles on horseback and preached more than 40,000 sermons, some of them to as many as 20,000 people. (Wesley was a preacher and sometimes his estimates of the crowds who listened to him were a preacher's estimates. He never counted heads; he simply calculated the number of square yards occupied by the crowd he was preaching to and multiplied by five, believing that an average of five people occupied one square yard in any crowd.)

This physical achievement is all the more surprising when we remember that at the age of 27 he was constantly spitting blood, and when he was 32 he was in the third stage of consumption. And when you consider the number of miles he covered by horseback, it was probably galloping consumption! Dr. George Croft Cell says: "Over the very door of his life he wrote 'Leisure and I have taken leave of each other,' and his biographer might add, "never to meet again." In later years he seldom celebrated a birthday without recording in his journal his surprise that he was still alive nor without giving God glory for His continued grace. "I do not impute this to any causes, but to the Sovereign Lord of all."

The grace of God! That was what kept Wesley alive, and at several points in his life this grace was demonstrated in a unique way.

When he was not quite six years old the parsonage caught fire. All the family were safely rescued—or so they thought—except young John who was seen standing at his bedroom window. The house by this time was ablaze and rescue seemed impossible. But quickly several neighbors formed a human ladder and the child was saved. Wesley never forgot the experience. The

significance of it to him was recorded in scripture. In Amos 4:11 we read, "I have overthrown some of you as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and ye were as a firebrand plucked out of the burning"; or in Zechariah 3:2: "... the Lord that hath chosen Jerusalem rebuke thee: is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?"

In both of these scriptures, the idea of miraculous salvation in the face of certain destruction is present, and so it was that in later life Wesley interpreted his deliverance. On his deathbed, when pressed by his followers for his testimony, he said: "I the chief of sinners am, but Jesus died for me!" And at his own request he had engraved on his tombstone, "Here lieth the body of John Wesley, a brand plucked from the burning."

But in later life the remembrance of this childhood experience made Wesley an evangelist. As W. H. Fitchett has said:

The burning house was a symbol of a perishing world. Each human soul in Wesley's thought was represented by the fire-girt child, with the flames of sin, and of that divine and eternal anger which unrepenting sin kindles, closing 'round it. He who had been plucked from the burning house at midnight must pluck men from the flames of a more dreadful fire. That remembered peril coloured Wesley's imagination to his dying day.

Brother Charles was also impressed by the symbolism of the event and expressed the mission of himself and his brother in these words:

*I would the precious time redeem
I want an even strong desire
To save poor souls out of the fire
To snatch them from the verge of hell,
And turn them to a pardoning God,
And quench the brand in Jesus' blood.*

The fire in the parsonage was the first step in the making of an evangelist.

The second stage in Wesley's life began in 1720 when he went to Oxford University.

Oxford has not changed much. Then, as now, there was much carousing and drunkenness among the students. For one as conscious of his spiritual needs as Wesley, involvement in such a life was out of the question. So while he was at Oxford he met regularly with a group of friends for 'the sake of the health of his soul. This small group fasted every Wednesday, never spoke idle words or gossiped in the Church, met regularly for prayer and the study of the Greek New Testament, and in an attempt to keep themselves pure from unclean thoughts, strove to ever remember the omnipresence of God. For these practices the group was branded the Holy Club. Later on, when reading Jeremy Taylor's "Rules for Holy Living and Dying," the group drew up a set of rules that they sought rigidly to observe. They were most methodical in their conduct of life, so a second nickname was given them: The Methodists. Although there were no churches or members or pastors, the name Methodist was given then to the followers of John Wesley, and it has remained with them to this day.

While Wesley was at Oxford he received an invitation from his father to be his successor as pastor of the parish at Epworth. He had been ordained a pastor in the

Church of England and, so his father argued, had committed himself to the care of a local parish. Wesley wrote to his bishop to inquire if this were so and received as a reply: "It doth not seem to me that at your ordination you engaged yourself to undertake the care of any parish, provided you can as a clergyman better serve God and His Church in your present, or some other situation."

It was enough for Wesley: he refused his father's offer and accepted an invitation to come to Georgia in the New World as a missionary. Already his sights were not

Have you received a clear, direct witness that you are saved from inbred sin?

limited to any local situation, but "the field was the world." Later, as an itinerant evangelist, he was once told by an Anglican clergyman to go and preach in somebody else's parish or get one of his own. Wesley replied: "The world is my parish!"

On the voyage to Georgia a fierce storm arose which was so violent that the mainmast of the ship was split and water began pouring in. During this time of general panic, a small group of German Christians gathered quietly together and, showing no signs of panic, prayed and sang hymns.

After the storm passed, Wesley asked: "Were you not afraid?" "I thank God, no," was the reply. "But were not your women and children afraid?" "No; our women and children are not afraid to die." "The reply," says Philip Watson, "shook Wesley more than the storm." These German Christians were Moravians, and when they arrived in Georgia, Wesley sought out their leader, Augustus Spangenberg. Wesley sought Spangenberg's advice about his work in America and was confronted with some personal religious questions. "Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?" he was asked. He felt very uncomfortable at this blunt question, but Spangenberg persisted. "Do you know Jesus Christ?" "I know," replied Wesley, "He is the Saviour of the world." "Do you know," Spangenberg asked again, "He has SAVED YOU?"

"I hope He has died to save me," said Wesley. "BUT DO YOU KNOW YOURSELF?" he was asked. "I do," he replied, in order to get such an embarrassing inquisition off his back. When reflecting on it later in his life, he said, "I fear they were but vain words!"

And here we are at the heart of the matter—religion. New Testament religion is something intensely personal. And after his experience in 1738 Wesley realized this for himself.

In the evening [of May 24, 1738] 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 in Christ, Christ alone for my 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.

It was this message of *personal* salvation that Wesley proclaimed to all who would hear. Indeed, many have seen in this the one single, lasting contribution of Wesley to religion. H. B. Workman says it is the complete expression of that individualism, the desire for which lay at the root of the Reformation. There can be no doubt that it was extremely important for Wesley. Everywhere he went, he carefully inquired as to the personal experience of the believers. George Croft Cell said of this facet of his work: "He began on a scale never before carried into practice to put every issue of the Christian faith into the test tubes of experimental thinking and to try out every question of theology in the laboratory of applied Christianity."

Ronald Knox put the matter more succinctly when he said: "Wesley must be forever taking the lid off, to see [if] his Gospel is working!"

So much for the man. What about his message? The message of the Wesleys can, I think, be summed up in two phrases.

1. Full Salvation
2. Full Assurance

*Lo the Fountain open'd wide
Streams through every land and nation
From the Saviour's wounded side
Full salvation
Streams an endless crimson tide.*

*Oh! the glorious revelation
See the cleansing current flow
Washing stains of condemnation
Whiter than the driven snow
Full salvation!
Oh the raptuous bliss to know.*

*Love's resistless currents sweeping
All the regions deep within
Thought and wish and senses keeping
Now and every instant clean.
Full salvation
From the guilt and power of sin.*

For Wesley, *full salvation* was the natural outcome of the death of Christ. As the finished work of Christ, the Atonement is complete, and the perfection which belongs to it belongs also to the new relation to God into which we enter by faith in the death of Christ. There is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus. Their relation to God is not determined now in the very least by sin and law, it is determined by Christ the propitiation and by faith. The position of the believer is not that of one trembling at the judgment seat, or of one for whom everything remains somehow in a condition of suspense; it is that of one who has the assurance of a divine love that has gone deeper than all his sins and has taken on itself the responsibility of them, and the responsibility

of delivering him from them. A relation in which sin has nothing to say, but which is summed up in Christ and His perfect atonement for sin. Full salvation NOW is the burden of Wesley's gospel. It is this great gospel that is the gospel to win souls—this message of a sin-bearing, sin-expiating love that pleads for acceptance, which takes the whole responsibility of the sinner unconditionally, if only he will accept it. Only the preaching of full salvation now, as Wesley tells us, has any promise in it of revival.

*Let others hug their chains,
For sin and Satan plead,
And say, from sin's remains,
We never can be freed:
Rejoice in Hope, rejoice with me;
We shall from all our sins be free.*

The other side of the coin is full assurance NOW.

Assurance had been much on Wesley's mind before his conversion. Before he set sail in 1735, he was called to the bedside of his dying father. The words Samuel Wesley had for his son John were these:

"The inward witness, my son, the inward witness, this is the proof, the strongest proof of Christianity."

The repeated question that Spangenberg put to him was: "Do you know . . . , have you the witness?" And the glory of that evening in Aldersgate Street was that now Wesley knew; he had the witness.

In his various journeyings around the country he would ask: "Have you even received a clear, direct witness that you were saved from inbred sin?" "At what time? In what manner?" Or to another he writes: "One fruit given at the same instant (at least, usually) is a direct positive testimony of the Spirit that the work is done." "There cannot," he says, "be a lasting, steady enjoyment of pure love without the direct testimony of the Spirit concerning it."

What this is, he tells us in a sermon on the subject: "The testimony of the Spirit is an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses to my spirit, that I am a child of God, that Jesus Christ hath loved me and given himself for me, and that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I am reconciled to God."

So vital was this that Wesley urged all his followers to receive it and to preach it.

It more nearly concerns the Methodists clearly to understand, explain, and defend this doctrine (of the witness of the Spirit), because it is one grand part of the testimony which God has given them to bear to all mankind. It is by His peculiar blessing upon them in searching the Scriptures, confirmed by the experience of His children, that this great evangelical truth has been recovered, which had been for many years well nigh lost and forgotten.

WESLEY'S CHAPEL SPEAKS

On November 1, 1778, Wesley's Chapel in City Road, London, was opened for public worship. Of this building John Wesley wrote in his *Journal*, "It is perfectly neat, but not fine and contains far more people than the Foundry."

The chapel was not built without many difficulties. Money had to be collected and sometimes work was held up because the workmen's wages were in arrears. Once some thieves broke in and stole the workmen's tools. Many folks helped to pay for the chapel and Wesley raised money on his preaching tours. King George III, who has never been a popular figure in American history, gave the masts from war ships, which are now in the vestibule of the church, as supporting pillars.

The lectern, pulpit, Communion table, choir stalls, and baptismal font from John Fletcher's Church at Madeley typify the central acts of evangelical Christian worship.

Wesley Chapel is pulpit-centered, thus signifying the centrality of the

preaching of the gospel. Bishop Hall rightly said, "Gospel ministers should not only be like dials on watches or milestones upon the road, but like clocks to sound the alarm to sinners. Aaron wore bells as well as pomegranates, and the prophets were commanded to lift up their voices like trumpets. A sleeping sentinel may be the loss of a city."

Mr. Wesley wrote, "I advise the elders to administer the Supper of the Lord on every Lords' Day." The frequency of the administration may differ in our practice, but we dare not neglect it completely. Our ritual reminds us that our Lord himself ordained this sacrament and commanded us to partake of it. My personal concern is not that we do it too often but not often enough.

Our ritual also calls to mind the fact that baptism is the sign and seal of the new covenant of grace. The font in the front of the chapel reminds us that there is more than one accepted mode of baptism and our church recognizes the rights of the individuals to select their desired mode. We must never under-

estimate the importance of water baptism in the life of the believer, and we must be prepared to offer this rite to every newly converted person in our congregation.

The choir stall emphasized the importance of singing as an act of worship and praise. From the pen of Charles Wesley and out of his poetic heart flowed 6,500 hymns. The sheer quantity of his production forbade excellence in all of them. Such hymns as "Jesus, Lover of My Soul," "A Charge to Keep I Have," and "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" are examples of the singing of the early Methodists. There is nothing more uplifting and heartwarming than the sound of voices raised in congregational singing of gospel songs.

Innovation in worship is not wrong. The desire for change in the structure of our services is often voiced. Let us remember that there are some basics that are of vital importance in the program of our corporate worship. They have stood the test of time. The ancient church building on City Road calls us to remember these important things.

—Ross W. Hayslip