

**THE SOUP OF SALVATION: JOHN WESLEY'S RECIPE FOR CONVERSION  
AND THE BELOVED WOMEN IN HIS LIFE**

**A dissertation submitted to the Caspersen School of Graduate Studies  
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## ABSTRACT

### The Soup of Salvation: John Wesley's Recipe for Conversion And The Beloved Women in His Life

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John Wesley lived through nearly all of the eighteenth century (1703-1791), when the post-Reformation ferment of emerging Protestant theologies was stirring. He was an English reformer at heart and the founder of Methodism.

This dissertation contends that Wesley's general meaning of conversion, personally realized so dramatically in his Aldersgate conversion experience is closely related to the stories that swirl around his life story, including the story about the women in his life. His theology is inextricably intertwined with these stories, and they come synergistically together for him to form a "soup" of experiential epiphany and learning.

Wesley's conversion at Aldersgate Street would forever change his life and form what would become his signature stance in faith, a "heart strangely warmed." This experience became the boiling cauldron, with an overflow, which would become the essential building blocks for his theology of salvation through faith in Christ. It altered his previously legalistic way of view and God's salvific intervention.

Wesley's relationship with his mother, Susanna, very much shaped his worldview and in his life. Then, there were three lovers in his life, including his wife. These relationships both gave him a great deal of happiness, and also complete misery. Wesley's early Christian home-schooled education and later life experiences, added to various ministry experiences, together allowed Wesley to build a framework of thinking of the church outside of the conventional wisdom of the times in the Church of England. His striving for excellence in each area of his life propelled him to the great accomplishments that he has come to be known for.

It is apparent that Wesley believed that the development and practice of this theology, of this soup of salvation, could provide a hungry humanity with the means to appropriate the Christian faith through the conversion of their souls and triumph over sin and death. He believed that this message would feed the hearts of seekers all over the world, ceaselessly.

Through his intensely personal relational experiences, his theology manifested into something far more comprehensive and efficacious than what his theology would have been without such life-developing experiences.

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## INTRODUCTION

### John Wesley's Understanding of Conversion

To understand Wesley's view of God's plan of salvation we must begin with the exploration of the general meaning of Christian Conversion. 'Conversion' is the same meaning of 'Born again', 'Rebirth' or 'Regeneration' that is based on the Holy scriptures. Certainly, the specific language of 'born again', the metaphor of a 'conversion' has a long history. The New Testament uses it throughout to describe the renewal and transformation that marks the life of a follower of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Traditionally the Church has understood this 'new birth' to be linked with baptism, assuming that "born of water" (John 3:5) refers to Christian baptism. However, part of the result of the Reformation was an emphasis on salvation by grace through faith rather than simply by means of the rituals of the Church.<sup>2</sup>

The reformers made a distinction between being baptized and being genuinely Christian by faith. As a result, following the Reformation the metaphor of 'new birth' was used, not to focus on baptism, but to emphasize the newness that comes from relationship with God. If any doctrines within the whole compass of Christianity may be properly termed fundamental, they are doubtless these two, the doctrine of justification, and that of the new birth: The former relates to that great work which God does for us, in

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<sup>1</sup> George Arthur Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of The Bible: Regeneration* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984), 25.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 26.

forgiving our sins; the latter, to eat work which God does in us, in renewing our fallen nature.<sup>3</sup> In his sermon, *The New Birth*, John Wesley spells out his teaching on being born again, and his argument that it is fundamental to Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Life of John Wesley and its Impact on his Faith**

John Wesley (1703-1791) was the primary figure in the eighteenth century Evangelical Revival. Also, he was the principal founder of the Methodist movement. He was born on June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1703 in Epworth, England, to Samuel and Susanna Wesley, one of the ten surviving children of a brood of nineteen. Although both his grandfathers distinguished themselves as Puritan Nonconformists, his parents returned to the Church of England, where his father, an Anglican rector, for most of his ministry held the livings of Epworth (1697- 1735) and Wroot (1725-35).<sup>5</sup>

Life was extraordinarily hard for the family. John Wesley's father, Samuel, himself an Anglican priest who involuntarily entered prison for unpaid debts, unwillingly inflicted the stress of his absence on his family.<sup>6</sup> No doubt that this marked a time of extreme hardship for John and his family and fixed in John's mind the systemic injustices

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<sup>3</sup> Albert C. Outler & Richard P. Heitzenrater, *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 325.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 335.

<sup>5</sup> Walter A. Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1986), 1163.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 11.

suffered by the poor and imprisoned. Later he would develop extraordinary ministries to the marginalized and oppressed people of his time.<sup>7</sup>

John Wesley's early years were spent under the discipline and direction of his remarkable mother, Susanna. She was important in his emotional and educational development and was his spiritual mentor throughout his life. Traces of Susanna's love, strict order, and proactive role in John's development can be seen in his later thought and piety. It was not by accident that John Wesley would later seek Susanna's judgment before he made decisions that would change the religious life of England and America.<sup>8</sup>

Susanna Wesley operated Christian Home School for her children to save their souls. Susanna set aside one hour each week with each her child to discuss religious concerns. John's mother sought to instill in him a sense of vital piety leading to a wholehearted devotion to God.

Although a serious student in both logic and religion, Wesley was not to experience his "religious" conversion until 1725. John was then confronted with what to do with the rest of his life. His Oxford days introduced him not only to the rich tradition of classical literature and philosophy but also to spiritual classics like Thomas a Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*, Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living and Dying*, and William Law's *Serious Call*, etc.. He decided to make religion the "business of his life".<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Yrigoyen, *John Wesley: Holiness of Heart and Life* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996.), 84.

<sup>8</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1993), 57.

<sup>9</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, (London: The Epworth Press, 1952), 2.



Thomas A Kempis (1381-1471), had a wide knowledge of the Scriptures and classical philosophy, and although most of his life was spent in a Dutch monastery, he also possessed a deep understanding of human nature. His acquired wisdom convinced him of man's complete dependence on God's love and the empty futility of life without it. William Law was one of the great mystics, clerics, and educators of the Church of England.

For most of his adult life Wesley believed and taught that human beings, through God's grace, could grow towards perfection in love during their lifetimes. In his writing on *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, he wrote of the ways he was influenced by those great theological ancestors.<sup>10</sup> Both of them reinforced Wesley's conviction that salvation was impossible apart from one's total trust in the mercy and forgiveness of a loving God, who continued to influence the believer towards love and serenity after conversion.

In the year 1725, being in the twenty-third year of his age, John Wesley encountered Bishop Jeremy Taylor's *Rule and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying*. In reading several parts of this book, he was exceedingly affected; that part in particular which relates to purity of intention especially moved him. At that moment he resolved to dedicate all his life to God, all his thoughts, and words, and actions. He was thoroughly convinced that there was no middle ground. Every part of his life must either be a sacrifice to either God or to the devil.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: The Epworth Press, 1952), 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

In the year 1726, John Wesley wrestled with Thomas A Kempis' *A Christian's Pattern: or, A Treatise of the Imitation of Jesus Christ*. Wesley awakened to the nature and extent of inward religion. This religion of the heart now appeared to him in a stronger light than he ever before had seen. From this book Wesley was able to see that giving even all of his life energy to God would profit him nothing if he did not also give all of his heart. He grasped that "simplicity of intention, and purity of affection," that together constitute one whole desire that rules all that we speak or do, and comprises, indeed, "the wings of the soul." A year or two after William Law's *Christian Perfection* and *Serious Call* were put into John Wesley's hand she was convinced more than ever of the absolute impossibility of being half a Christian. He determined, through God's grace, the absolute necessity of giving all of his devotion to God, to give him all his soul, his body, and his substance. Wesley did not think this something that any considerate person could deny. Far from thinking this conviction an excess, he considered that anything less would short-change "Him who has given himself for us, and was convinced that the believer should give him ourselves, all we have, and all we are."<sup>12</sup>

In the year 1729, John Wesley began not only to read, but to study the Bible, as the one, the only standard of truth, and the only model of pure religion. From his study he saw, in a clearer and clearer light, the indispensable necessity of having "the mind which was in Christ," and of "walking as Christ also walked" of having the mind, the total commitment, and the courage to walk the walk of a changed child of God. And this was the time in his life that he generally considered religion, as a uniform following of Christ, an entire inward and outward conformity to his Master. He became unafraid. He feared

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<sup>12</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: The Epworth Press, 1952), 6.

nothing, save that he would compromise his faith for the sake of selfish ends, and thus dishonor “grand Exemplar”.<sup>13</sup>

After a brief absence (1727 - 29) to help his father served as his father's curate at Wroot, John Wesley then returned to Oxford and discovered that his younger brother Charles had founded a small band of students, a "Holy Club" composed of young interested in spiritual growth. John quickly became a leading participant of this group by their invitation, which was dubbed ‘the Methodists’. On campus they began to be ridiculed by the other students who called their group all kinds of unflattering names: ‘Bible Bigots’, ‘Bible Moths’, ‘The Enthusiasts’, and ‘The Holy Club’. ‘The Methodists’, first used as a term of derision, referred to their prescribed method of studying the Bible and rigid self-denial which included many works of charity. The label stuck and was to become the official name of John Wesley's followers.<sup>14</sup>

During this period (1729-35) both John and his younger brother Charles fell under the influence of the non-juror and mystic William Law. Although Wesley confessed that he did not at that time understand justification by faith, instead seeking justification by his own works, a self-righteousness, it was during this period that he formulated his views on Christian perfection, the hallmark of Methodism.<sup>15</sup>

John Wesley came to believe in his young adulthood that faith is a journey. There are some Christian traditions that like to see the achievement of faith as a onetime

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<sup>13</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: The Epworth Press, 1952), 7.

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Collins J., *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 32.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

experience, one moment in life. Before that instant you had no faith, after that instant you have full blown faith. That is one way that Methodism is different from some other Christian traditions. Methodism emphasizes a moment of conversion and coming to faith. But it also recognizes that, like Abraham and Peter, faith is a journey to be traveled; a journey led and prompted by the amazing grace of God through his Holy Spirit.

For John Wesley, the journey of faith was not some academic theory. It was a reality, based on his personal spiritual walk. John and Charles were very serious about their practice of Christianity. However, they lacked the joy of faith. The brothers got up at 4-5am every morning for study and prayers, visited in the prisons and with the sick and dying, helped poor families, and ran a small school. They formed a group of serious like-minded young men at the University who devoted themselves to this very regimented and disciplined Christian lifestyle. Still, despite their deep commitment to Christ's mission, John and Charles did not know the joy of the faith.<sup>16</sup>

By this time their father, Samuel, was aging, and he wanted his son, John, to return to Epworth to replace him as the village priest. John was declined by the Bishop of London because of his undue 'strictness of life'. Instead he and Charles were given the opportunity to sail to America.<sup>17</sup>

In 1735, both John and his brother Charles Wesley accompanied General Oglethorpe to the new colony of Georgia to help strengthen the British hold on it. John was to be the chaplain of the colony and had visions of converting the Indians to

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<sup>16</sup> Stanley Ayling, *John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1979), 48.

<sup>17</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley: The Mother of John & Charles Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1996), 152.

Christianity. Although the Indians eluded him, he did serve as priest to the Georgia settlers. Charles served as General Oglethorpe's personal secretary, where John's attempts to apply his then high - church views aroused hostility. Discouraged, he returned (1737) to England; he was rescued from this discouragement by the influence of the Moravian preacher Peter Bohler. During a storm in crossing Wesley was deeply impressed with a group of Moravians on board ship.<sup>18</sup>

On the trip across the Atlantic something happened that proved to have a profound impact on John Wesley's life. A great storm came up and threatened to sink their ship. It is a very interesting fact that so many faith stories include storms at sea. John was scared to death. But on that boat were also a small group of German Moravian Christians. Wesley was amazed at their calm and composure as they sang psalms until the storm passed. He wanted that kind of joy and peace for himself. But it wasn't time yet for Wesley. Soon after he came ashore at St. Simon's Island, Georgia, John was asked some challenging questions by one of the Moravian preachers. Here is the content of their serious conversation:

"Do you know Jesus Christ?" John wasn't sure how to answer, but he finally said, "I know he is the Savior of the world." "True," said the Moravian, "but do you know he has saved you?" John was taken aback, and replied that he did believe Jesus had saved him, but he knew in his heart that wasn't true.<sup>19</sup>

John was a great failure as a missionary to Georgia. His austere, joyless approach to religion caused him to be ineffectual among those in the colony as well as among the Indians. So he returned to England defeated and disillusioned. He wrote in his journal, "I

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<sup>18</sup> Reginald Kissack, ed. *Spotlight on John Wesley* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, Ltd., 1962), 19.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

went to America to convert the Indians. But, oh! Who shall convert me?" Peter Bohler, another Moravian preacher and friend gave John this advice: "Preach faith until you have it, and when you have it, you will preach faith."<sup>20</sup>

At a small religious meeting in Aldersgate Street, London, on May 24, 1738, John Wesley had an experience in which his "heart was strangely warmed." John finally discovered the joy he had been lacking. In his journal, this is what he wrote:

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 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.<sup>21</sup>

The energy and spiritual grounding Wesley received from this experience is incalculable, and can be seen in his broader and more organized thinking about order of salvation, including our faithful participation in the saving work of God.

After this spiritual conversion, which centered on the realization of salvation by faith in Christ alone, he devoted his life to evangelism. Beginning in 1739 he established Methodist societies throughout the country. He traveled and preached constantly, especially in the London - Bristol - Newcastle triangle, with frequent forays into Wales, Ireland, and Scotland. He encountered much opposition and persecution, which later subsided.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Reginald Kissack, ed. *Spotlight on John Wesley* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, Ltd., 1962), 22.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 71.

Once in America, John Wesley ordained several of his preachers for the work there, which was officially organized in 1784. Wesley literally established "the world as his parish" in order to spread "scripture holiness throughout the land." He remained fearlessly loyal to the Established Church all his life. Methodism in England did not become a separate denomination until after his death.<sup>23</sup>

Late in life, 1751, John Wesley married Mary Vazeille, a widow of a rich merchant and a mother of four children already. John's devotional holy life was very deteriorated by a mismatch between him and his spouse, who was chosen by John mistakenly without enough thought and deep prayer, and without having fully checked up on her character and background. It became a huge trial for John's life and a big lesson for him and also for his ministry followers. However, no matter what, John Wesley continued throughout his life a regimen of personal discipline and ordered living. John kept faithfully his strict rules of marriage life which was a written *Thoughts on Marriage and Celibacy*, a pamphlet in which John maintained that, although people could be as holy married as single, nevertheless the happy few with the power to abstain from marriage were "free from a thousand nameless domestic trials, and especially from the greatest of all entanglements, the loving of one creature above all others." Perhaps he should have thought of this before he married Mary Vazeille.<sup>24</sup>

John and Mary's difficult marriage relationship was amazingly troubled for a long 30years (1751-1781), until Mary Vazeille died by accident of horse riding. Their

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<sup>23</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 139.

<sup>24</sup> Garth Lean, *Strangely Warmed: The Amazing Life of John Wesley* (Wheaton, Ill, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1979), 102.

unmatched relationship continued for a period of five years, but Mary kept coming back to John and constantly bothered and dishonored him for another two decades. They were never divorced but John tried to let her go whenever she was leaving him, without trying to stop her. This unfortunate pattern was repeated again and again. John didn't even know when Mary was dead. Moreover, of course, he couldn't attend her funeral. Finally death separated them permanently forever!<sup>25</sup> We will revisit this tangled but important relationship later.

In 1784, on the brighter side, Wesley had given the Methodist societies a legal constitution, and in the same year he ordained Thomas Coke for ministry in the United States; this action signaled an independent course for Methodism.<sup>26</sup>

Wesley died at 88, still preaching, still traveling, and still a clergyman of the Church of England.<sup>27</sup> On March 2, 1791, John finally completed his faith journey. His last words from his death bed were these: "The best of all is - God is with us! Farewell!"<sup>28</sup>

John and his brother Charles, who also had his own heart-warming experience only a few days before, went on to preach to the poor and forgotten masses in England, and sparked a spiritual awakening in the British Isles that eventually spread to America.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Maldwyn Edwards, *My Dear Sister* (Manchester: Penwork (Leeds) Ltd., 1974), 44.

<sup>26</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 138.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>29</sup> Garth Lean, *Strangely Warmed: The Amazing Life of John Wesley* (Wheaton, Ill: Tindal House Publishers, Inc., 1964), 16.



John became one of the greatest preachers of all time and the genius behind the Methodist movement. His brother, Charles, took John's message of God's grace and set it to hymn poetry. Throughout his life, Charles penned some numerous hymns, many of which are among the most beloved hymns of all time.

John Wesley rode ceaselessly all over Great Britain on horseback, covering nearly a quarter of a million miles. In 54 years of ministry, John preached more than 40,000 sermons. In fact, in his final preaching tour in the last year of his life, John Wesley preached in 96 places at the age of 87!<sup>30</sup>

As we can see, John Wesley experienced the power of God's grace all along his journey of faith and this had a huge influence on his teaching and preaching. Wesley outlined a Path of Salvation - a journey of faith each person must travel along their spiritual journey - just as he had done.

These steps along the Path of Salvation are: Original Sin, Prevenient Grace, Redemption, Justification, Rebirth, Assurance, Sanctification, and Social Holiness. These would flavor the broth of his faith, and be an anchor for his developed theology.

### **Wesley's Feminine Mystique**

Among the elements in the formation of John Wesley's character and faith, none is more important than the aura of reverence and regard he exhibited towards the females in his life, some of whom loved, protected, and cared for him, and others who hurt him deeply.

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<sup>30</sup> Garth Lean, *Strangely Warmed: The Amazing Life of John Wesley* (Wheaton, Ill: Tindal House Publishers, Inc., 1964), 17.

John's mother, Susanna Wesley, operated a Home Christian School and looked upon all her children as talents committed to her under trust by God. Although she desired that they should be versed in useful knowledge, it was her principle intention to save their souls in this life. She instilled in John a determination in his adult years to lead a life of efficiency and order. Susanna's teaching would also inform his ideas about Christian formation and the rigors it requires.<sup>31</sup>

How great a mother Susanna was for her precious children! Every mother in this world might long for and admire Susanna Wesley's way of successfully nurturing their beloved children. One might doubt actually how many mothers could do their childrearing as effectively as Susanna did with her ten children!

Susanna did know 'Jacky' (John's nickname) as 'a brand plucked from the burning' after his near escape from death when the Rectory was destroyed by fire in 1709. From that date she believed him to be spared for some special reason and in her many letters to him show how ready she was to share his confidence and offer him advice. For John Wesley, his beloved mom was a major influence on his life during her life time.<sup>32</sup>

In general, there is a very potential tendency that a son's best friend is his mother. In the case of John Wesley, there seemed to be a mother fixation in that he never seriously sought the affection of any women until after his mother's death. Even then, one could observe, Wesley's 'radar' for seeking relationships was perhaps conditioned by

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<sup>31</sup> Maldwyn Edwards, *My Dear Sister* (Manchester: Penwork (Leeds) Ltd., 1974), 15.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

an idealized image of a future partner, and invited him to compare prospective partners to his own mother. At any rate, Wesley's interest in women seemed to take a back seat to his devotion to God and divine service. Nevertheless, not only Susanna's disciplined influence, but also the heartbreak, rejection, and disappointment associated with his love life probably convinced Wesley of the fragility and temporality of human connection, and evoked his gratitude that he had found in the living God something more reliable and enduring.

Three times John Wesley experienced a 'Love Affair' in his life. The first one was with Sophia Hopkey when he was in Georgia America in 1737, as a missionary, but it was a failure with a lot of suffering and tragic trials. It ended up with his return back to England as his place of escape.<sup>33</sup>

The second love affair was with Grace Murray in Newcastle, in 1748. She was his nurse. They loved each other very much. But another man, John Bennett, was there for Grace Murray and came between Wesley and Grace. So, his brother Charles stopped their relationship because he was concerned for John's reputation among the Methodist Societies as the founder. John was greatly hurt and lost by this farewell.<sup>34</sup>

The third affair was with Mary Vazeille, right after he broke up the relationship with Grace Murray. He was still in deep pain. John confused Mary with Grace Murray and misjudged very quickly this lady's character and background, so he got married too soon in 1751. Their relationship soon became very miserable within a few years, but the

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<sup>33</sup> Maldwyn Edwards, *My Dear Sister* (Manchester: Penwork (Leeds) Ltd., 1974), 33.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

final end of it came 30 years later, by her accidental death. John learned hard lessons though this relationship.<sup>35</sup>

One thing he surely passed on to the next generation, and which could be relevant even today, is that being too hasty to commit to love relationships can lead to a constriction of life and years of misery and loneliness. And, one might think, love requires the same attentiveness, care, and discipline as a life of faith. In fact, it is not too much to say that it is only the surrender of self to the converting Spirit of God that can equip one for the unselfish gratitude and generosity of character required by committed love relationships. This is the transformation that happened to Wesley at Aldersgate.

We shall return to these women in Wesley's life later, and plunge more deeply into the dynamics and outcomes of his relationship with them. But first, it may be helpful to explore the general meaning that the tradition derives from the concept and realities of Christian conversion. This will provide the reader with the context within which John Wesley's soup of salvation was put together.

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<sup>35</sup> Maldwyn Edwards, *My Dear Sister* (Manchester: Penwork (Leeds) Ltd., 1974) 44.

## Chapter 1

### The General Meaning of Conversion

Surely, as explored in the previous chapter, John Wesley's view of God's plan of salvation rested on the general meaning of Christian Conversion (born again/ rebirth/ regeneration that is based on the Holy Scriptures). Following the Reformation the metaphor of 'new birth' was used, not to focus on the ritual of baptism, but to emphasize the newness that comes from relationship with God. Surely, this came from the Reformation emphasis on the soundness of scripture to guide the life of the believer. The scriptures, especially the writings of Paul the Apostle elaborate on the cadence of salvation: first the doctrine of justification, and then, that of the new birth. The former relates to that great work which God does for us in forgiving our sins; the latter, to the great work which God does in us, in renewing our fallen nature. John Wesley preached a sermon, *The New Birth*. In this sermon, he spells out his teaching on being born again, an argument that it is fundamental to Christianity.<sup>36</sup>

I strongly agree with John Wesley's teaching about 'conversion.' I am inspired by his sermons and give thanks to God and John Wesley for this graceful wonder of truth of that "Salvation comes only from faith in Jesus Christ." So, I can also imagine how captivating and fresh this news came to a hurting John Wesley. We will follow the scriptural path to salvation in the discussion below.

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<sup>36</sup> Albert C. Outler & Richard P. Heitzenrater, *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 335.

## **The Biblical Understanding of Conversion**

The story of Nicodemus in John 3:1-21 provides many evangelicals with the rationale for talking about Christians as being 'born again'. The key passage for the idea of being 'born again' comes from the story of Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus recounted in John's Gospel (3:1-10):

3:1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

3:2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

3:3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you. No one can see the kingdom of God without born from above."

3:4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

3:5 Jesus, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

3:6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

3:7 Don't be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'

3:8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

3:9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

3:10 Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? (NRSV)

Very clearly, Jesus immediately replied to the first question of Nicodemus right away, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:13)

This interchange leads to further comments by Jesus about belief in the Son of God (3:11-21), which revolve around the well-known verse, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 3:17 continues: "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

This narrative is typical of one of the literary techniques that John's Gospel uses to present Jesus' teaching. It begins with Jesus offering a cryptic or puzzling statement to someone with inadequate understanding about spiritual matters. That prompts further questions, which allows Jesus to explain in more detail and address any misunderstanding.

Here, Jesus corrected that misunderstanding and explained that he was not talking about a second physical birth but of a spiritual birth. It is not a birth of "flesh," that is of human origin, but a birth "of the Spirit." The question then becomes what this "born of the Spirit" means for Jesus.

According to the biblical witness, "new birth" is not a religion, not living up to a creed, not a set of rituals, or joining a church or denomination. It's a transformation. Our old nature is changed and we receive a new one. Old things pass away and all things become new in Christ. We receive a new heart, new desires, new ideas, and a new direction because of this new nature. A birth is the coming into being of a new life which has the nature of its parents. When we were born the first time, we were made a partaker of the nature of natural human beings. When we are born again, we become a partaker of the divine nature (II Peter 1:4). God can become our heavenly Father. This conversion is

one of a new, dominant affection. It is change of belief, but more. "Born again" is change in attitude, direction and change in affection. It is Conversion of human love. The believer has been loved oneself supremely; now he/she loves God supremely.

In popular thinking it is often the experience itself that marks being born again, while others emphasize faith, repentance, and the grace of God as the most important aspects. In some churches, being "born again" is the mark of a true Christian, so that those who do not claim such an experience are not truly Christians. In this usage, a "born again Christian" is substantially different from just a "Christian," which is taken to be more of a cultural designation. This often leads to rejecting other Christian traditions, for example Roman Catholics or even some mainline Protestant churches, as not authentically Christian because they do emphasize as much this singular moment of decision. This is not the Wesleyan slant on the conversion experience.

A logical question is often asked, "Why does a person need to be born again? Wesley and many other Christian theologians would take their cue from the Apostle Paul: in Ephesians 2:1 says, "And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins..." (NKJV). To the Romans in Romans 3:23, the Apostle wrote, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." So, a person needs to be born again in order to have their sins forgiven and have a relationship with God. How does that come to be? Ephesians 2:8-9 states, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." When one is



"saved," the believer has been born again, spiritually renewed, and is now a child of God by right of new birth.<sup>37</sup>

Trusting in Jesus Christ, the One who paid the penalty of sin when He died on the cross, is what it means to be "born again" spiritually. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation: the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). The teaching of the scriptures is that all Christians need a new life. We need to be cleansed from sin and its penalty (which is death) and restored to fellowship with God who made us all. That is what Jesus Christ (God's Son) meant when He said we "must be born again" (John 3:7). "...Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3).<sup>38</sup>

### **Christian Conversion in its Traditional Aspects**

The traditional Jewish understanding of the promise of salvation is interpreted as being rooted in "the seed of Abraham"; that is in the physical lineage from Abraham. Jesus explained to Nicodemus that this doctrine was in error—that every person must have two births—the natural birth of the physical body, the other of the water and the spirit. This discourse with Nicodemus established the Christian belief that all human beings—whether Jew or Gentile—must be "born again" of the spiritual seed of Christ. St. Peter further reinforced this understanding in the Bible 1 Peter 1:23, "Being born again,

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<sup>37</sup> Walter A. Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology: John Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1984), 925.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 926.

not of corruptible, by the word of God, which live and abide forever".(NIV) St. Paul's teaches in one instance that all who are Christ's by faith are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to promise. He is concerned with the fact that the promise is not being fulfilled to the seed of Abraham".<sup>39</sup>

The phrase "born again" literally means "born from above." Nicodemus had a real need. He needed a change of his heart, a spiritual transformation. New birth, being born again, is an act of God whereby eternal life is imparted to the person who believes (2 Corinthians 5:17, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come; the old has gone, the new is here!" NIV). John 1:12-13, "Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God--children not of natural descent or husband's will, but born of God." (NIV) indicates that "born again" also carries the idea "to become children of God" through trust in the name of Jesus Christ.

To repose in the blood of Christ is to rest in the assurance of Jesus Christ's completed work upon the cross. It's the assurance of having been forgiven for all our sins. However, this doesn't really occur until we are truly repentant and wholeheartedly desire to live our lives in the heavenly will of God. This is being "born again," or "born from above (John 3:3).<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> George Arthur Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of The Bible: Regeneration* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984), 24.

<sup>40</sup> Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology: John Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1984), 926.

In Christianity, to be born again is to undergo a "spiritual rebirth" (regeneration) of the human soul or spirit from the "Holy Spirit", contrasted with the physical birth everyone experiences. The origin of the term "born again" is the New Testament: "Jesus replied, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again'(John 3:3 NIV). It is a term associated with salvation in Christianity. Individuals who profess to be born again often state that they have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. For John Wesley, the saving grace of Jesus Christ is individual. Jesus Christ is the personification, the incarnation, of divine grace. The individual singular grace of Jesus Christ works in the life of the each believer.<sup>41</sup>

People vary as to their response to God's salvific initiative. For some, rebirth is expressed in a new alignment of the will, in the liberation of new capabilities and powers that were hitherto undeveloped in the person concerned. For those whose quest is intellectual it leads to an activation of the capabilities for understanding, to the breakthrough of a "vision". With others it leads to the discovery of an unexpected beauty in the order of nature or to the discovery of the mysterious meaning of history. With still others it leads to a new vision of the moral life and its orders, to a selfless realization of love of neighbor, each person affected perceives his life in Christ at any given time as "newness of life."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Walter A. Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology: John Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1984), 925.

<sup>42</sup> George Arthur Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of The Bible: Regeneration* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984), 28.

In Roman Catholic history, at the Council of Trenton 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the necessity for a “second conversion” after baptism was delineated and confirmed. According to the Catechism, “This second conversion is an uninterrupted task for the whole Church who, clasping sinners to her bosom, is at once holy and always in need of purification, and follows constantly the path of penance and renewal. Jesus' call to conversion and penance, like that of the prophets before him, does not aim first at outward works, "sackcloth and ashes," fasting and mortification, but at the conversion of the heart, interior.”<sup>43</sup>

### **Protestant Aspects of Christian Conversion**

Unlike some traditional notions that rebirth happens at baptism, the popular language of "born again" focuses on the momentary or instantaneous experience of conversion that puts one in right relationship with God. But that does not at all seem to be what Jesus is talking about when he refers to rebirth. For him, the language of "born from above" and "born of the Spirit" is specifically related to the Kingdom of God: "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."<sup>44</sup>

In most of the New Testament, the kingdom of God is not a reference to heaven or salvation, but is something to be experienced now (Luke 17:21: “nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is in your midst.” NIV). Against

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<sup>43</sup> Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology: Roman Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1986), 957.

<sup>44</sup> George Arthur Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of The Bible: Regeneration* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984), 24.

the background of Judaism of the day, the kingdom of God was part of the expectation of the future action of God in which he would restore the world. Using the metaphor of the presence and life-giving power of God as breath or spirit, this future reign of God in the world would make His presence obvious to all people (Joel 2:28-29, “And afterward, I will pour my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.” NIV).

This future coming of God into the world, marked by the presence of God in the world was understood in Judaism as the coming of the Kingdom in which there would be peace, prosperity, and well- being. It was for those who were heirs of the promises of the Old Testament, the children of Abraham who were also the children of God. In other words, the expectation was that those born into the physical lineage of Abraham would be the ones to experience this coming kingdom of God. This intersection of the Kingdom of God, spirit, and being children of God provides the immediate setting for Jesus’ dialogue with Nicodemus.<sup>45</sup>

However, Jesus gave new content to these expectations. Where Nicodemus, and Judaism, expected a kingdom based on physical birth, Jesus redefined the kingdom in terms of spiritual birth. The Kingdom of God "was a spiritual reality in which God ruled sovereignly over a person's life. And that reality would not and could not become a reality apart from a spiritual birth (John 3:1-4:3). It is also important to realize that in John’s Gospel, this is not a status to be achieved. The new spiritual birth is not something

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<sup>45</sup> George Arthur Buttrick, *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of The Bible: Regeneration* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984), 25.

like a birthright that guarantees heaven. Rather it is the entering into a relationship with God that radically transforms life, so that life is lived as children of God. Jesus addresses his disciples as “little children” who are to live out this relationship: 13:34, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”<sup>46</sup>

John 13:35 states, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” While it is not fully developed in this passage, it is clear throughout John’s Gospel that this new birth is a way to talk about that radical transformation of life that genuinely brings newness to how a person lives. It is truly a “new birth” in which “everything old has passed away; indeed, everything has become new!” (2 Cor. 5:17) Also, this new birth is not something that human beings must do in order to be saved. It has been popular among evangelicals, especially from the revivalist traditions, to read John 3:7 as a command to Nicodemus: “You must be born again!” This becomes the support for calling people to make instantaneous decisions to become a Christian. While there may be a place for that, it is not what this verse is about.

There is no such command given to Nicodemus in the passage. It is simply a statement of fact. It is God’s love that is the beginning of transformation, of new life, of new birth. While other places in other writings delve into the details of grace, faith, and response, here the focus is on the need for transformation from one manner of living to another and the work of God in accomplishing that transformation. In this sense, the

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<sup>46</sup> Walter A. Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology: John Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1984), 924.

"new birth" is not about an instantaneous conversion experience, it refers to that renewal of a person when relationship with God is allowed to govern life.<sup>47</sup>

Individuals who profess to be born again often state that they have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. For John Wesley, the saving grace of Jesus Christ is individual. Jesus Christ is the personification, the incarnation, of divine grace. The individual singular grace of Jesus Christ works in the life of the each believer.<sup>48</sup>

Without the experience of the "new birth" we have no hope of enjoying the glories of heaven nor escaping the terrors of hell. From reading John Wesley's works and other scholarship, the biblical and theological origins of his understanding of the Christian conversion emerge, and add to the understanding of what would become a full-blown system of salvation.

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<sup>47</sup> Walter A. Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology: John Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1984), 925.

<sup>48</sup> Kenneth C. Kinghorn, *Wesley: A Heart Transformed Can Change the World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), 14.

## Chapter 2

### **The Ingredients: The Essential Paths of Spiritual Journey That Shaped Wesley's Doctrine of Salvation.**

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, lived in the post-reformation ferment of emerging Protestant theologies. In the thought of John Wesley, many awesome ingredients pour into his theology of salvation through Jesus Christ to distinctively flavor it and foster its wide appeal.

As we have seen, his early life experiences, such as escaping a deadly home fire and watching his father carted off to debtor's prison, coached him in the precariousness of life and the need to trust in powers not of this earth. His studies at Charterhouse School and later at Oxford provided intellectual grounding in the best thought of his day allowing him to build a framework for thinking of church outside the conventional wisdom of his time. A loving home forged in him the capacity to trust, a hallmark of mature faith.<sup>49</sup>

The relationships he had with women, including his mother, engendered in him a realism about human relationships, the cost of trust and commitment, and the power of nurturance to enhance wholeness.

Especially, all these ingredients and more seem to come together synergistically in a whole soup through his conversion experience. This conversion experience became a great turning point in John Wesley's spiritual life and shaped his ministry profoundly. Wesley believed that, while one may not always immediately feel new birth, the believe

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<sup>49</sup> Garth Lean, *Strangely Warmed: The Amazing Life of John Wesley* (Wheaton, Ill: Tindal House Publishers, Inc., 1964), 16.



can find full assurance of the justification that God has performed in his/her life. This assurance is evidenced in the believer's life by a vibrant faith, which gives power over sin, and by the hope now found within the believer's heart.<sup>50</sup>

John Wesley's conversion experience seems to stir together the prevenient ingredients necessary for a sound and tasty salvific soup. It became the boiling cauldron and the essential ingredient in his eventual theological soup.

Wesley's later doctrine of salvation, with its emphases on a divine-human partnership in effecting the plan of God, the impact of Scripture on faith formation, and the Sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in perfecting and making life whole and holy for the believer, seem to have their roots in his earlier experiences. Wesley's defining religious experience at Aldersgate brought together the forces gathering around Wesley's earlier life. Elements in his earlier life narratives, such as his brush with death in a home fire, the extraordinary discipline imposed by his mother, Charterhouse School education, Anglican faith formation, intellectual influences as scholar and teacher at Oxford, his thwarted romances, his rejection in Georgia, and his second brush with death with the Moravians on his American journey, came together in a unique and describable synergism to have an impact upon his life and were powerfully present at the conversion. It was an experience that changed and empowered his life thereafter. It is my belief that contemporary spiritual formation can be greatly enhanced by a study of Wesley's life and attention to those ingredients that are often present, as they were for John Wesley, that reach deeply into the heart under the powerful influence of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>50</sup> Albert C. Outler & Richard P. Heitzenrater, *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 340.

Wesley's Oxford days introduced him not only to the great traditions of classical literature and philosophy but to spiritual classics as well. In 1725, he read such works as Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living and Holy Dying* and William Law, who was one of the great mystics, clerics, and educators of the Church of England. Law's, *Plain and Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* added to the narrative of spiritual practices building in the young Wesley. As mentioned before, in 1726, he read *The Christian's Patterns: Imitation of Christ* by Thomas A Kempis who had a wide knowledge of the Scriptures and classical philosophy. It was during this period that he formulated his views on Christian perfection, the hallmark of Methodism.

As discussed previously, after his brief absence (1727 - 29) to help his father and serve as his father's curate at Wroot, John returned to Oxford and with his younger brother Charles drew together at Oxford University the company of students known as 'The Holy Club'. By living out the demands of call to faith, visiting people in hospitals and prisons, giving to the poor, they deepened their awareness of the cost of discipleship. One of the outcomes of these meetings was Wesley's growing but still in grace more than law, trusting rather than keeping emotional distance.

On May 24, 1738, about 8:45 p.m., at a small religious meeting in Aldersgate Street, London, John Wesley had an experience of joyful assurance in which his "heart was strangely warmed." It happened when a lay leader read from Martin Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans a passage describing "The righteous shall live by faith" (Rom 1:17), the beginning and ending of faith, the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ." Later John Wesley wrote:

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.<sup>51</sup>

From thence forward he felt trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation. This 'Conversion' experience was John Wesley's real life-changing transformation. After Aldersgate Wesley came to believe in his young adulthood that faith is a journey. There are some Christian traditions that like to see the achievement of faith as a onetime experience, one moment in life. Before that instant the believer had no faith, after that instant the believer has full blown faith. That is one way that Methodism is different from some other Christian traditions. Wesley knew that Christian spirituality emphasized a moment of conversion and coming to faith, but also recognized that, as with Abraham and Peter, faith is a journey to be traveled toward the Christian perfection by the believer.<sup>52</sup>

After his conversion at Aldersgate, John Wesley is broader and more organized in his thinking about order of salvation, including faithful participation in the saving work of God. After this spiritual conversion, which centered on the realization of salvation by faith in Christ alone, he devoted his life to evangelism.

Another ingredient in Wesley's faith journey was his experience in breaking out of the confines of strict Anglican piety. From childhood he did not doubt empathy for the poor and uneducated who was marginalized and exploited in his time and ignored by the church.

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<sup>51</sup> John Wesley. *The Works of John Wesley*, A.M. 14 vols. 3rd ed. (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1986), vol.1, Journals, 103.

<sup>52</sup> Albert C. Outler & Richard P. Heitzenrater, *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 340.

In 1739, John Wesley met Evangelical preacher, George Whitefield, and started preaching outdoors to the masses of many poor and uneducated people. He established Methodist societies throughout the country, traveled and preached constantly, especially in the London - Bristol - Newcastle triangle, with frequent forays into Wales, Ireland, and Scotland. He encountered much opposition and persecution, which later subsided.<sup>53</sup>

Wesley soon saw the need for order in these foundling circuit societies. Susanna Wesley's mentoring came to bear as insights gained from ecclesiastical literature and study of scripture seems to have come together in the rigorous production of Wesley's *Rules for Methodist Societies*, in 1743.<sup>54</sup>

John Wesley also stressed what is at the heart of Christianity as a Methodist in his a small book *The Character of a Methodist*. He declared as follows:

A Methodist is one who has "the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him"; one who "loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his mind, and with all his strength. "God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul; which is constantly crying out, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee! My God and my all! Thou art the strength of my heart, and my portion forever!"<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Albert C. Outler, ed. *John Wesley* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1964), 26.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>55</sup> Kenneth C. Kinghorn, *Wesley: A Heart Transformed Can Change the World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011). 12

John Wesley ordained Methodist ministers for the United States in 1784. He literally established "the world as his parish" in order to spread "scripture holiness throughout the land."<sup>56</sup>

John Wesley remained fearlessly loyal to the Established Church all his life. Methodism in England did not become a separate denomination until after his death.<sup>57</sup>

On March 2, 1791, John finally completed his faith journey. His last words from his death bed were these "The best of all is - God is with us! Farewell!"<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Kenneth C. Kinghorn, *Wesley: A Heart Transformed Can Change the World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), 72.

<sup>57</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 158.

<sup>58</sup> Stanley Ayling, *John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1979), 315.

## **Chapter 3**

### **John Wesley's Conversion Experience and His Doctrine of Salvation:**

#### **The Soup Boils: Let us Taste the Soup of Salvation!**

#### **The Paths of Spiritual Journey of John Wesley**

Since his early childhood, Wesley's spiritual journey was various but serious and steady with many precious essences such as his mother's religious teachings and disciplines, the inherited family trend of ministerial vocation, his religious education from Oxford, various spiritual and religious readings, and ministerial practices and services. Even though he put a lot of effort in service as a pastor and pursued formal religious education for many years, he still didn't have conviction of faith in Jesus Christ until he had the 'born again' experience, with his strangely warmed heart on the night May 28, 8:45pm, 1738, at age 35. Wesley's honest confession struck me and I came to respect and love his sincere, decent spirit before God and fellow human beings.

In this chapter I would like to explore Wesley's general theology and its basic ingredients. It seems to me that the most extremely important cue to understanding this is to trace the paths of spiritual journey that shaped his doctrine of salvation.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, lived in the post-reformation ferment of emerging Protestant theologies. In the thought of John Wesley, many awesome ingredients pour into his theology of salvation through Jesus Christ to distinctively flavor it and foster its wide appeal.

His early life experiences, such as escaping a deadly home fire and watching his father carted off to debtor's prison, coached him in the precariousness of life and the need to trust in powers not of this earth. His studies at Charterhouse School and later at Oxford provided intellectual grounding in the best thought of his day allowing him to build a framework for thinking of church outside the conventional wisdom of his time. A loving home forged in him the capacity to trust, a hallmark of mature faith.

Especially, all these ingredients and more seem to come together synergistically in a whole soup through his conversion experience. This conversion experience became a great turning point in John Wesley's spiritual life and shaped his ministry profoundly. Wesley believed that, while one may not always immediately feel new birth, the believer can find full assurance of the justification that God has performed in his/her life. This assurance is evidenced in the believer's life by a vibrant faith, which gives power over sin, and by the hope now found within the believer's heart.<sup>59</sup> Wesley's conversion experience seems to stir together the convenient ingredients necessary for a sound and tasty salvific soup. It became the boiling cauldron and the essential source for his theology of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

These influences shaped Wesley's doctrine of salvation, with its emphases on a divine-human partnership in effecting the plan of God, the impact of Scripture on faith formation, and the Sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in perfecting and making life whole and holy for the believer. Wesley's defining religious experience occurred at Aldersgate. Leading up to this life-changing event were the forces gathering around Wesley's earlier life. These forces are evident in the study of his life narratives - such as

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<sup>59</sup> Albert C. Outler & Richard P. Heitzenrater, *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 340.

his Charterhouse School education, Anglican faith formation, intellectual influences as scholar and teacher at Oxford, his thwarted romance, his rejection in Georgia, and his brush with death and with the Moravians on his journey. These came together and interplayed in a unique and describable way to have an impact upon his life and were powerfully present at the conversion experience that so changed and empowered his life thereafter.

John Wesley's "born again experience" and "strangely warmed heart" at Aldersgate on May 1738, seemed to result in a great assurance of Christ, and changes in Wesley's practical, Godly life style, as evidenced by daily living disciplines based on scriptures and regular fasting. It became a way of life that many practice as faithful Christians today. It is my conviction that Wesleyan Theology could deepen and develop the knowledge and faith in God for all Christians and their churches.<sup>60</sup>

John Wesley's ecclesiological knowledge of church order, Christian doctrines and the social gospel, enabled him to teach Christians how to spiritually discipline their faith and how to organize their churches with appropriate theological knowledge. God works through social institutions to touch real people foster their holiness and develop and spiritually reform them. Wesley's contribution to the literature of spiritual formation comes partly through his demonstration of the salvific process and is pretty complex and variable.

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<sup>60</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian : The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN : Abingdon Press, 1999), 62



John Wesley's encounter with an itinerant Christian brother in faith, George Whitfield, prompted him to ride all over Great Britain on horseback, covering nearly a quarter of a million miles. In 54 years of ministry, John preached 40,000 sermons. John Wesley experienced the power of God's grace all along his journey of faith and this had a huge influence on his teaching and preaching.<sup>61</sup>

So, one might say, Wesley was on a lifetime spiritual journey. He outlined and taught to others a journey of faith, 'the Path of Salvation'. It was his belief that the followers of Jesus Christ, all Christians, must travel along their own spiritual journey in Christian faith.

### **The Arminian Connection**

One great Arminian view of predestination became extremely influential on John Wesley's theological thinking. He accepted Arminius' account of free will as well and incorporated it into his order of salvation. Although he respected the tradition of the Church, he could not agree with the idea of predestination of the reformation. He was against the theological concept of Calvin's predestination by prevenient grace. Wesley's theological focus is the saving work of Christ and the human appropriation of the work. The saving work of Christ begins with the first dawning of grace in the soul, which Wesley called "prevenient grace." For him, "Every man is born with God's supernatural gift of conscience above all his natural endowments." "The Son of God, the True Light

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<sup>61</sup> Walter A. Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology: John Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1984), 1164.

which enlightens man that comes into the world, so, that we say to every creature, he has shown you an inward check, who causes you to feel uneasy, when we walk in any instance contrary to the light which he has given you.”<sup>62</sup> He asserts that inclusiveness of all human beings which invites to salvation by both in faith and in conscience. In prevenient grace, Wesley insists on the one hand, that man cannot move himself toward God, being entirely dependent on God’s enabling grace. On the other hand, that man is responsible before God for his own salvation, being free to accept God or reject him.<sup>63</sup>

Thus, in taking what might be called a modified “Arminianism” stance, Wesley comes up against the predestinarianism of Calvin, promoting his own thoughts about prevenient grace. This is key to the development of his theological focus on “scriptural holiness.” John was assured that holiness and happiness were irrevocably linked together and were the fruits of living faith. As John Wesley pondered the need for holiness and worked faithfully toward it in his long devoted life and ceaseless fervent ministry, he preached and wrote of his experiences diligently from a scriptural basis.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley, Sermon, “On. Conscience”, vol.VII*, A.M.: 14 vols. 3rd ed. (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1986), 186.

<sup>63</sup> Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984), 41.

<sup>64</sup> John Wesley, *The Nature of Holiness* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1988), 13.

## **The Essential Paths and Ingredients of Spiritual Journey that Shaped John Wesley's Doctrine of Salvation**

The influences of John Wesley's ancestry are pronounced. John Wesley (1703-1791) was leading figure in the eighteenth century Evangelical Revival and the founder of Methodism.

In John Wesley's day, political leaders of England were pretty much corrupted and the Church of England was pretty ineffective in improving moral and social conditions. Their sermon addresses tended to emphasize what believers do for God, rather than what God wants to do for believers. The Church was not God centered, but human centered in 18<sup>th</sup> century in England. When John Wesley first time visited Newcastle, he was so shocked because of its moral and cultural depravity. Wesley expressed his feelings and his ministry for them as follows:

I was surprised; so much drunkenness, cursing, and swearing (even from the mouths of little children) do I never remember to have seen and heard before, in so small a compass of time. Surely this place is ripe for Christ, who came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” John Wesley was gripped with overwhelming reality that many people were perishing in their sins. And he believed God had called him to proclaim a clear call to repentance and faith in Christ, the world's only Savior.<sup>65</sup>

As we already know that John Wesley was born in Epworth, England, to Samuel, an Anglican rector, and Susanna Wesley, who sought to instill in him a sense of vital piety leading to a wholehearted devotion to God, one of the ten surviving children of a

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<sup>65</sup> Kenneth C. Kinghorn, *Wesley: A Heart Transformed Can Change the World*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011). 9.

brood of nineteen and inspired by his parents. John Wesley's grandfathers distinguished themselves as Puritan Nonconformists, doubtless leaving an intergenerational mark on John, a persisting force of Puritanism in his time.

John Wesley's life and ministry transformed 18th century England. His proclamation of the gospel of freedom from sin and social liberation revolutionized society. The Methodist movement was marked by structured small groups that helped people grow toward "holiness of heart and life." Wesley's theology was worked out in his ministry, much of which were shaped by his early life experiences. They included the informal influences of his family in his early childhood, especially his mother, Susanna Wesley. The discipline, nurture, and formation of these learning experiences shaped Wesley's view of Christian formation.

John Wesley's formal education at Charterhouse and Oxford provide the context for his educational perspective and the development of small groups and spiritual formation. These educational experiences were formative in the development of his spiritual life and the rise of Methodism.

John Wesley's non-formal learning experiences, including his trip to Georgia, the influence of the Moravians, and his Aldersgate experience, molded his theological framework and educational practices. These experiences are framed in a holistic educational framework.

### **John Wesley's Informal Early Childhood Home Education**

John Wesley was born on June 17, 1703, at the rectory of Epworth, England. His life-span covered nearly 88 years to his death on March 2, 1791. He was the fifteenth child of The Reverend Samuel Wesley, Rector of Epworth in Lincolnshire, England and his wife Susanna. His grandfathers were among the ministers ejected from the Church of England in 1662, so there was a strong Puritan strain in him. His father, Samuel, was rector, poet, and scholar. He spent ten years in preparing his work on the Book of Job. John and his siblings, including brother, Charles (the famous hymn writer), were brought up in the Christian faith by their godly mother. Susannah Wesley diligently trained her children in the things of God—a fact that no doubt profoundly influenced the ministries of both John and Charles Wesley.<sup>66</sup>

John Wesley's life spans nearly the entire eighteenth century (1703-1791). The home in which John was born provided much of the impetus of his later educational interests. Wesley's father, Samuel was an Anglican clergyman and a biblical scholar of considerable renown. He provided an excellent model of scholarship and instructed his children in the rudiments of liberal education and classical languages. Several of the Wesley children could read the Greek New Testament before the age of ten. Even though Samuel was a good scholar, he was a poor hand at practical affairs and displayed an overly argumentative temperament. His mismanagement of money resulted in his being placed in debtor's prison for at least a few months and was a continual controversy throughout his life. The Wesley family was large, consisting of nineteen children, of

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<sup>66</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1993), 57.

whom John was the fifteenth. Due to the poor medical practices of the day, nine of these children died as infants.<sup>67</sup>

Much of Wesley's success as an educator can be traced to factors in his own training at home. In later years, when John and his brother Charles had the opportunity to instruct thousands of people in personal spiritual growth, they employed many of the same methods their parents had used. Susanna's influence on the Wesley family was impressive. As a strong disciplinarian, she cared for children according to rule and method. She provided the primary education of her children and had a significant influence on the formation of John. Susanna would spend six hours a day at school where instruction was serious and thorough and where loud talking and boisterous playing were strictly forbidden. She refused to send her children to the local schoolmaster, John Holland, because of his notorious incompetence and wickedness.

Susanna looked upon all her children as talents committed to her under trust by God, and although she desired that they should be versed in useful knowledge, it was her principle intention to save their souls. This would add tempered steel to the disciplined determination of John in his adult years to lead a life of efficiency and order. It would also inform his ideas about Christian formation and the rigors it requires.

John Wesley, 'a brand plucked from the burning' was rescued by a neighbor, as a five year old boy, from the second story of his father's Epworth manse, as it burned to the ground. The dramatic detailing story is as follows:

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<sup>67</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1993), 11.

Five of children, including Charles, fourteen months old, slept in the attic. The nurse grabbed up the baby and ran downstairs shouting to the others to follow her. But in the confusion 5year old John was forgotten and left asleep. His frantic father in the yard below counted the precious heads and missed the boy's auburn curls. He dashed back into the smoke, but found the stair already ablaze and gave up hope. Falling on his knees, he commended the dear soul to God. Just then John awakened to see the flames creeping along the rafters above his head. With coolness beyond his years, he dragged a chest to the window, and climbed upon it, crying for help. Brave neighbors made a human ladder and rescued him through the window just as the roof fell in.<sup>68</sup>

After the near tragic death of John during the burning of the Epworth Rectory, Susanna made a habit of spending one evening a week with each child separately. She devoted Thursday evening to John, and was especially careful of him, seeing in his miraculous escape from the fire some deep providential meaning. The near-death experience communicated to John and Susanna not only God's superintending providence, but also that the Lord had a noble purpose for John's life. Even its pretty different set up of time and situation but it gives us a recall of the relationship of Jesus Christ and his mother, St. Mary. Also, it is not a big leap to speculate that Wesley's second chance at life after the fire predisposed him to feel that it was God's purpose to give all a second chance, an ingredient in his idea of conversion to the Christian faith.

Susanna's educational practices were very influential in John Wesley's educational perspective. Wesley derived more of his convictions concerning the education of children from his cultured and pious mother, Mrs. Susanna Wesley, than from any other source. During the absences from Epworth she continued family worship and held services Sunday evenings for her children and servants, which neighbors also

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<sup>68</sup> James Richard Joy, *John Wesley's Awakening* (New York, New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937), 25-26.

joined, often packing the house. Susanna prepared literature and books suited for children's needs, finding none that met her severe requirements. Susanna influenced John's theological foundations of his educational practices. Susanna's theology was to educate children into salvation. She provided nurture and care for John in the midst of a much regimented life. However, many scholars state that Susanna's child-rearing practices were not as severe as John's educational practices. She permitted her children to play games of chance and skill, and cards, in the Epworth home.<sup>69</sup>

Susanna Wesley was a woman of patient yet firm intelligence. Her methods of child rearing and education are a discipline of strict and persistent, but withal calm and unhurried. It shows that Susanna, governed by inflexibility, ruled nearly every detail of her children's lives - their physical growth, their play, their study and work, and their piety and devotion. Susanna's influence cannot be overstated, for she modeled an approach to education that was adopted and practiced by John. Both Samuel and Susanna had strong religious convictions and strong personalities, with earnest and sincere hearts. It was their influence at the Epworth Rectory that instilled an uncanny seriousness in moral and spiritual affairs in many of their children with the good result that all three of their sons, Samuel Jr., John, and Charles, would eventually become priests of the Church of England.<sup>70</sup>

Another primary influence on John Wesley's educational perspective modeled by Susanna was discipline. Wesley, following his mother, conceived the training of children

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<sup>69</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1993), 65.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.



to be a twofold task. One branch of it is discipline, the other reading. The disciplinary work is to correct the bias of nature by curing the diseases of nature. It is done chiefly in two ways, the one negative and the other positive. The growth of the disease should not be stimulated; it should not be fed. Also, parents should follow positive methods to root out the diseases and to heal them. Thus, the parent's task was that of a disciplinarian. The religious instruction of children begins before their formation is complete, merging with it and supplementing it. The dawn of conscious religion should be coincident with the dawn of reason. The combination task should begin as early as possible. As Wesley stated, Scripture, reason, and experience jointly testify that, inasmuch as the corruption of nature is earlier than our instructions can be, we should take all pains and care to counteract this corruption as early as possible.<sup>71</sup>

Susanna's emphasis on discipline is adapted by John and provides an important aspect to his educational perspective. As discussed above, it stems from their theological conviction of original sin and the need to "break the will of the child". One of the key tenets of Methodism is clearly evident in the educational philosophy of Susanna Wesley: the management of the human will. Susanna considered the mastery of the child's will to be the decisive factor in character molding. As stated above, the emphasis on personal discipline and spiritual submission became the essential component of John Wesley's educational strategy as he applied it, not only to children, but also to the urban masses that crowded into England's industrial centers. Although John Wesley was the founder of Methodism, Susanna Wesley gave Methodism its methodical nature. She sought to bring

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<sup>71</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1993), 61.

every activity, word, and even thoughts and motives into a well-regulated regimen. She passed on to her children the discipline of time management and orderly conduct.<sup>72</sup>

However, life in the Wesley household was not totally oppressive. Susanna and Samuel showed real concern for the spiritual well-being of their children. Samuel influenced his sons through his own devotion to scholarship. Also, Samuel was a dedicated Anglican pastor who influenced his sons with a high view of the sacraments and the Eucharist. In addition, the Wesley household embraced a number of different styles of devotional literature. Wesley was indeed indebted to his family. His childhood offered a strong blend of Puritan devotion and Anglican sacramentalism and churchmanship, all of which influenced John Wesley's own educational practice.<sup>73</sup>

### **John Wesley's Formal School Education**

On January 28, 1714, John Wesley became a student at Charterhouse, London. Even though the treatment meted out to the school boys was Spartan, he always felt a true love for his school.

In eighteenth-century England, many families sent their children to a private boarding school. The formation of Susanna and Samuel were limited to the first ten years of John's life, for then he entered the Charterhouse Boarding School at ten years of age. Wesley's experiences at the Charterhouse were not always pleasant and influenced his

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<sup>72</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1993), 62.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 136.

view of childhood education. Also sometimes the Charterhouse school gave him painful experiences, because some of the too strict restrictions at Kingswood, but John Wesley never forgot his boyhood, nor did age wither his affection for Charterhouse. Susanna's home school trained John well enough to persevere through any strict educational venture!

On June 24, 1720, he was elected to Christ Church, Oxford. He remained there until he was ordained deacon by Bishop Potter in 1725. Wesley attended Oxford and received his bachelors' degree in 1724 at age of 21 after five years of competent study. He demonstrated considerable proficiency in classical studies, but his greatest delight was logic and debate. Wesley was not an exceptionally good student during a bad period of Oxford's educational history, particularly early in his career. However, it was at Oxford where Wesley's formal education was most influential. It was a place where Wesley experimented with "practical divinity" and developed an appreciation for both the classics and a wide range of devotional literature. This took place primarily through group formation.<sup>74</sup>

### **The Formation of John Wesley's Theology of Christian Perfection**

About this time of 1725, Wesley became acquainted with Bishop Taylor's *Rules and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying*. He says:

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<sup>74</sup> Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity Vol. 1: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 11.

In reading several parts of this book, I was exceedingly affected with that part in particular which relates to purity of intention. Instantly I resolved to dedicate all my life to God: all my thoughts, and words, and actions.<sup>75</sup>

After his graduation from Oxford, Wesley began to contemplate ordination in the Church of England and to dedicate his life to the priesthood. His father had encouraged his technical theology with special emphasis on the study of biblical languages and the scholarly preparation that a clergyman might need. On the other hand, Susanna, reflecting her deeply ingrained Puritan training, urged him to give his primary attention to practical experiential divinity. However, it was not the advice of his parents that impacted his decision, and young John began to examine his life to determine whether he could attain to such a high calling. It was the influence of Thomas A Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* (1426), Jeremy Taylor's *The Rule of Exercise of Holy Living* (1650), and *The Rule of Exercise of Holy Dying* (1651), and William Law's *Christian Perfection* (1726), and *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1728) that converted Wesley to a disciplined lifestyle. The classics, especially A Kempis' work, had a profound influence on Wesley's life and thought:

I met with 'a Kempis's 'Christian Pattern.' The nature and extent of inward religion, the that giving even all my life to God (supposing it is possible to do this, and go not farther) would profit me nothing, unless I gave my heart, yes, all my heart to him.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: The Epworth Press, 1952), 6.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

In March, 1726, he was elected Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford. It is with this College, rather than Christ Church, that Wesley's name is so closely linked. It is at Lincoln College that Wesley would take into his heart what Thomas A Kempis so beautifully states. Through this sage Wesley saw that 'simplicity of intention, and purity of affection,' one desire in all that we speak or do, and one desire ruling our tempers, are indeed 'the wings of the soul,' without which she can never ascend to the mount of God.<sup>77</sup>

In August, 1727, Samuel Wesley being infirm, John Wesley went to his help, and remained in his parish for about two years. He then returned to Oxford. It was apparently of the time-frame, 1727 to 1728, Wesley writes:

A year or two after, Mr. Law's Christian Pattern and Serious Call were put into my hands. These convinced me more than ever, of the absolute impossibility of being half a Christian; and I determined through his grace, (the absolute necessity of which I was deeply sensible,) to be all devoted to God, to give him all my soul, my body, and my substance ... In the year 1729, I began not only to read, but to study, the Bible, as the one, the only standard of truth, and the only model of true religion. Hence I saw in a clearer and clearer light, the indispensable necessity of having 'the mind which was in Christ,... even of having, not some part only, but all the mind which was in him ... I then saw, in a stronger light than ever before, the only one thing needful, even faith that works by the love of God and man, all inward and outward holiness; and I groaned to love God with all my heart, and to serve Him with all my strength.'<sup>78</sup>

Wesley preached at St. Mary's, Oxford, before the University, on January 1, 1733 on *The Circumcision of the Heart*. In this message, we can see that, even prior to his new

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<sup>77</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: The Epworth Press, 1952), 5.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

birth, John Wesley's concepts about the essence of Christian perfection were becoming quite clear: "It is that habitual disposition of soul which, in the sacred writings, is termed holiness; and which directly implies the being cleansed from sin, 'from all filthiness both of flesh and spirit'; and, by consequence, the being imbued with those virtues which were in Christ Jesus; the being so 'renewed in the image of our mind,' as to be 'perfect, as our Father in heaven is perfect.'" Commenting on this sermon later, Wesley said:

January 1, 1733, I preached the sermon of the 'Circumcision of the heart'; which contains all that I now teach concerning salvation from all sin ... This was then, as it is now, my idea of perfection ..."

For Wesley, this marked a pivotal time in his life, one that would propel him into the future, one that he would never forget.<sup>79</sup>

After John Wesley was ordained deacon of the Church of England on September 19, 1725 with the blessing of Susanna and Samuel Wesley, he seemed ever more grounded in both scholarship and religious practice. In 1734, John Wesley's father pled with great insistence that he should take his work and rectory at Epworth. Wesley declined, feeling that he should remain at Oxford. Upon returning to Oxford, he discovered that his brother Charles had gathered a small group of men around him to read the New Testament. John Wesley joined this Holy Club, and soon became its leader. This was the little group of devout men who had been derided as "Methodists." He had become a tutor at Oxford after his graduation in 1729. As a Fellow at Lincoln College, he was eventually appointed to supervise and tutor this group of undergraduates in both academic and spiritual progress. Their diligence can be seen in their meeting four nights

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<sup>79</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: The Epworth Press, 1952), 7.

weekly for study of the classics and reading the Greek New Testament. In addition to their classical studies they practiced Bible reading, prayer, fasting, confession, and frequent partaking of the sacrament. In addition, the students served others by visiting the sick, elderly, and imprisoned, and provided clothing and financial aid where they could. The holy clubs became very influential in Wesley's adult education practices in his ministry. His educational theory and practices were being developed through these group encounters. He demanded a balance between both cognitive and intellectual stimulation as well as the practical application. Wesley was concerned that these formal groups be laboratories for living out what had been learned in the context of their education.<sup>80</sup>

The previous discussion centered primarily on the influence of Wesley's childhood experiences and the informal learning that took place within his family and during the early years of his life. The influence of Wesley's formal education and the formation of the Holy Clubs are described. Both his family and education formed his theology and educational perspective. However, other primary influences were his trip to America, his encounter with the Moravians, and his Aldersgate experience. These non-formal learning experiences were instrumental in his overall theology and educational practices. Hence, these experiences were educational and provide a background for his order of salvation. They were fiber in the soup, and gave it structure and body.

Even though we cannot have any evidence of the profound influence on John Wesley's captivation by the Christian conversion experience of his father, it would

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<sup>80</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 31.

appear that Samuel Wesley may have tasted the fruits of a genuine new birth. Before his death, he spoke words to John that were no doubt good for him to hear:

“The inward witness John, my son, the inward witness, that is the proof, the strongest proof of Christianity”. To Charles he said: “Be steady. The Christian faith will surely revive in this Kingdom; you shall see it, though I shall not.”<sup>81</sup>

### **A Mission to the Colony of Georgia for the Native American Indians**

As far as a searing and important emotional and theological experience goes, perhaps none is more profound than John Wesley’s ministry to the American colony of Georgia. In 1735, Wesley was invited to go on a mission to Georgia. His father was now dead, but he mentioned this offer to his mother. Susannah Wesley’s reply to him is noteworthy. She said that if she had twenty sons, she should rejoice if they were all so employed, though she might see them again.

John and Charles Wesley embarked for the American colony from Gravesend on Oct. 14, 1735. John Wesley said concerning his reason for going to Georgia: “My chief motive is to save my own soul ... I hope to learn the true sense of the Gospel of Jesus Christ by preaching it to the heathen.” On the voyage, as at Oxford, he was meticulous and strict in apportioning his time. He studied German and his Greek Testament, and held services even amidst the storms. A party of Moravians on board greatly impressed him. Their conduct in the tempest demonstrated to him that they were not alarmed. They went right on singing, and Wesley asked one of them, “Were you not afraid?” He replied, “I

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<sup>81</sup> Ole E. Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments: a Theological Study* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Francis Asbury Press, 1972), 307.



thank God, no.” “But were not your women and children?” “No, our women and children are not afraid to die.”<sup>82</sup>

Wesley reached Savannah on Feb. 6. 1736, where he soon met Spangenberg, the Moravian, who asked him:

“Do you know Jesus Christ?” “I know He is the Savior of the world.” “True, but do you know that He has saved you?” “I hope He has died to save me.” Spangenberg then asked, “Do you know yourself?” Wesley answered, “I do,” but, in telling the story of this conversation, says, “I fear they were vain words.”<sup>83</sup>

The Moravians had made a significant impression on his life by their humility and devotion and their fearlessness in the storm. Wesley found that the Moravians were delivered from pride, anger, and revenge. They even sang in the midst of the storm, while the English passengers were trembling and screaming with terror.

Wesley had fully intended to become a missionary to the Indians. This purpose was frustrated by the governor of Georgia, General Oglethorpe, who wanted him to minister in the European settlement.<sup>84</sup>

John and Charles Wesley had sailed for Georgia on October 21, 1735 with high hopes of accomplishing some important things for God. Indeed, John’s missionary journey was motivated by a desire to work out his own salvation and a longing to preach

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<sup>82</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 40.

<sup>83</sup> James Richard Joy, *John Wesley’s Awakening* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937), 43.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

Christ to the Indians. John had expected that, under the leadership of Colonel Oglethorpe, a friend of Samuel Wesley, he and Charles would accomplish these desires. However, their missionary work to the Indians was abandoned at Oglethorpe's urging and John became the pastor of the English churches at Savannah and Frederica.<sup>85</sup>

One can only surmise that Wesley was more than a little disappointed in being denied his chief end in coming to Georgia. Still, as a rigorous High Churchman, he methodically and diligently sought to pursue God's work and fulfill his assignment: teaching children, reproving sinners, preparing communicants, repelling those whom he thought unworthy, and gathering a few people together for mutual conversation. In a subsequent appraisal of his condition at that time, Wesley said that he "was a child of wrath, an heir of hell," but in later years when he reassessed his writings, he said: "I believe not... I had even then the faith of a servant, though not of a son."

Grave misunderstandings arose between Oglethorpe and John and Charles Wesley which were later reconciled. But, suspicions and misunderstandings flourished in the colony.

John's religious zeal resulted in his being sent by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to evangelize the American Indians in Savannah, Georgia. But his attempts to convert the Indians were a disaster. He later said that he went to Georgia to convert the Indians and discovered that he himself was unconverted.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> James Richard Joy, *John Wesley's Awakening* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937), 45.

During John Wesley's nearly three years of service in America (1735-1738) the influence of the Moravians had a crucial impact on John's spirituality. He went to be a missionary to the Indians, but found that his experiences were a means to his own spiritual growth. It was through his conversations with the Moravians and their religious piety that Wesley was forced to question his own spiritual condition. During their voyages in a succession of storms, Wesley, ashamed of his unwillingness to die, asked himself, "How is it thou hast no faith?"

One of the primary lessons learned from the Moravians was their belief that God granted individuals salvation instantaneously. At that moment, he observed, a person is born-again and could be assured of this divine favor by the subjective experience they called "the witness of the Spirit." Mr. Spangenberg, a Moravian minister from Savannah, asked Wesley a few questions:

His first question, "Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?" Wesley was so surprised by the question that he didn't know what to answer. The German observing this asked, "Do you know Jesus Christ?" He paused, and said, "I know He is the Savior of the world." "True", was the reply, "but do you know He has saved you?" Wesley answered, "I hope He has died to save me." Spangenberg only added, "Do you know yourself?" Wesley replied, "I do." "But I fear they were vain words," was his comment Wesley's heart was stirred by this faithful friend. He made many inquiries about the Moravian Church at Hernhuth, and spent much time in the company of the German settler. John's experience with Moravians and his missionary work were formative in his own salvation.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> James Richard Joy, *John Wesley's Awakening* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937), 43.

### John Wesley's Return to England

John Wesley fell in love with Sophia Hopkey, the niece of the chief magistrate of Savannah, Mr. Causton. While John was hesitated to propose to Sophia, her affection changed, and she swiftly married a Mr. Williamson. Soon after this, Wesley barred her from the Holy Communion. Though he had determined that she was not in a fit state of heart to receive it, on the surface it appeared like the act of a disappointed man. Her uncle brought a charge against John Wesley. He refused to acknowledge the power of a civil court in ecclesiastical affairs.

John Wesley realized that no further good would come from his ministry in Georgia, so left the colony, and sailed for England on Dec. 22, 1737. In spite of his careful devotion and diligence in the performance of religious duties, Wesley felt that somehow, he himself still needed to be converted.<sup>88</sup>

Wesley deeply desired with all his heart to find that faith which would deliver him from fear and doubt, and bring the assurance of the acceptance of God. Wesley's interaction with the Moravians was very influential in his own spiritual journey. Wesley returned to England very defeated and disillusioned. He continued to preach in England, but became very dissatisfied with his preaching. He was ready to quit. He contacted Peter Bohler, a German pastor and Moravian, for guidance. Bohler encouraged Wesley to seek after an experience of instantaneous conversion as the solution to his personal dilemma.

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<sup>88</sup> James Richard Joy, *John Wesley's Awakening* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937), 50.

### **John Wesley's Conversion Experience with 'Strangely Warmed Heart'**

Wesley was spiritually hungry, but he still needed to get rid of his false concepts about the means of salvation. After his return to England he met Peter Bohler, who told him:

“My brother, my brother, that philosophy of yours must be purged away.”  
 “Preach faith, till you have it, and then because you have it you will preach faith.”  
 Wesley did so, but still had difficulty concerning momentary saving faith versus a lifetime holy living as a medium of bringing one into salvation.

John Wesley could not see how such a sudden crisis experience could take the place of a lifetime of devout worship in church in bringing a soul to God. About one month before Wesley's new birth, Bohler brought four of the Brethren to Wesley, each of whom testified to him of their momentary salvation by faith and instant assurance that their sins were forgiven. When Wesley still had difficulty believing that this could be so, Bohler told him that he could bring eight more to him that would testify in like manner. That was enough! Wesley could only cry, “Lord, help Thou my unbelief!”<sup>89</sup>

Wesley searched the Scriptures trying to find the solution to his spiritual condition. After several weeks of relentless searching, he found the answer. While attending a Society meeting in Aldersgate Street where someone was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle of the Romans, He finally saw into the truth of genuine saving faith, and soon he would experience its happy joyful results in his own heart. He gathered

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<sup>89</sup> James Richard Joy, *John Wesley's Awakening* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937), 64.

with the members of the little society in Fetter Lane. On May 24, 1738, Wesley came to the day of his true conversion!. The breakthrough came on Wednesday, 24th May, 1738.

Here are Wesley's words:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, London, where someone 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 of a person through faith in Christ, 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."<sup>90</sup>

Wesley at once began to pray earnestly for his enemies and publicly testified to all present what he now felt. Wesley's Aldersgate experience resulted in a "heart-felt" religion that became the central thrust and aim of Methodism. His preaching and educational endeavors were centered on the transformational power of the experience. The influence of the Moravian's focus on instantaneous conversation was foundational for his doctrine of sanctification and "holiness of heart and life." John's experience affected him deeply, and his ministry and story has undoubtedly been recounted to millions of people. William Willimon, a United Methodist bishop and seminary professor, sums up Wesley's conversion experience in this way:

C.S. Lewis spoke of his life before his conversion as "before God closed in on me." Conversion - being born again, transformed, regenerated, Detoxified - is God's means of closing in on us, of getting God's way with the world, despite what that reclamation may cost God or us. Deep in my Wesleyan once-warmed heart is a story of how a priggish little Oxford don got changed at Aldersgate and thereafter. John Wesley's life was well formed, well fixed by a host of positive Christian influences upon him, before the evening on Aldersgate Street.

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<sup>90</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 62.

Yet what happened afterward has led us Wesleyans to see his heart “strangely warmed” as nothing less than dramatic ending and beginning, death and birth, a whole new world.”<sup>91</sup>

Wesley’s instantaneous conversion is highly significant in the whole movement of Christian history, theological discussion, and the relationship between doctrine and experience. Undoubtedly, Wesley’s story had an energizing impact on the missionary movement of Christians in world history, the Pentecostal movement, the teaching of holiness and not least of all, in the worship life of the church. Charles, the poet, and John the theologian, set faith to song through evangelical singing of quality theological hymns, loud and ‘lustily’ over a period of nearly three hundred years. England received the benefits of Christian Revival, and is in large part, due to the life and ministry of John Wesley, and his brother Charles Wesley. Such matters continue to attract reflection and research. It is John, the organizational genius and energetic, mobile preacher on whom we will focus.<sup>92</sup>

John Wesley, from the time of his conversion until the end of his life, sought to be formed in the perfection of love in all of his human relationships and in his relationship to God in Jesus Christ. His was an honest search for truth, as he processed his experience of salvation, and pursued his labors to spread scriptural holiness over the land. Out of his tremendous efforts, and the spiritual effects of his charismatic proclamation, Methodism

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<sup>91</sup> William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012), 226.

<sup>92</sup> James Richard Joy, *John Wesley’s Awakening* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937), 65.

spread across the globe, and has continued through the centuries to be a powerful avenue to Christian faith for multitudes of people.<sup>93</sup>

After detailed research of John Wesley's lifetime experiences, and the influences of his early years, education, relationships, later formal study, and his adult confrontation with the God and Christ of faith, the aromas of his salvific soup are detectable. His early life experiences were critical in shaping his faith and his educational ministry practices. The influence of his family, especially his mother Susanna shaped his view of education and Christian formation. His formal educational experiences at Oxford shaped intellectual pursuits and his understanding of group formation, through his participation in the "Holy Clubs." His experience with the Moravians gave direction to his theological understanding of sanctification as an instantaneous act, and his Aldersgate experience resulted in a religion that included the heart as well as the mind. The influence of all these experiences molded John Wesley's educational practices later in his life and ministry. Along the way Wesley developed his views on Christian perfection and whole sanctification, which were to become a hallmark of his teachings on Christian formation.

The story of John Wesley's journey to faith illustrates the difference between being religious and being born again. John Wesley's ecclesiological knowledge of church and Christian doctrines and social gospel through church order enabled him to teach Christians how to spiritually discipline their faith and how to organize their churches with their appropriate theological knowledge of all doctrinal standards and reflections of church order. God works through social institutions to touch real people, develop their Holiness, and spiritually reform them. A close study of John Wesley's transformation in

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<sup>93</sup> James Richard Joy, *John Wesley's Awakening* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937), 70.



faith demonstrates how complex and variable the salvific process is. Especially informative are the outcomes of this crisis and resolution of his faith. His born again experience, having his heart "Strangely Warmed" at Aldersgate, his great assurance in Christ solidified within him his strong, evangelical Christian stance. His practical, Godly life style, as evidenced by daily living disciplines based on Scriptures and regular fasting demonstrate that his conversion was not a fluke, but rather an ongoing the Holy Spirit led dynamic that lasted a lifetime. It became a way of life that many practice as faithful Christians today. Wesleyan Theology has something powerful to say about how to deepen and developing their knowledge and faith in God for all Christians and their churches.

By no means should the student of John Wesley idealize the man and ignore his flaws. Wesley's Doctrine of Christian Perfection, and some of his arguments with George Whitfield on Election, is perhaps open to criticism. His home life as father and husband probably lacked significantly. Yet, his effort to serve Jesus Christ by preaching him eagerly to others is probably profoundly the best, without reservation, it is number one!

A Wesleyan scholar, Garth Lean wrote with a great admiration in his book, *Strangely Warmed: The Amazing Life of John Wesley* the cover page as follow:

John Wesley's life (1703-1791) spanned almost entire period of the eighteenth century. He saw and was a part of it all. In a day of decadence and despair, God touched a man who changed nation.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Garth Lean, *Strangely Warmed: The Amazing Life of John Wesley* (Wheaton, Ill: Tindal House Publishers, Inc., 1964), Cover page.

John Wesley was acquainted with the leading men of England, both in Church and civil state. He was interested intelligently and keenly interested in its politics, its literature, music and drama, and its philosophy: no contemporary can compare with him in the extent of his personal contacts with men and women in every grade of society, especially the masses of unlettered and neglected workers. It was a weak and sickly England into which Wesley was born. The political and religious conflicts of the previous century had left not only ghastly scars, but running sores.<sup>95</sup>

England was sick at heart also. Many, even in high position in the church, believed that God was defeated, and that the Church was in its last days. Bishop Butler is said to have put away the suggestion of his name as Archbishop of Canterbury on the ground that it was now too late to save the falling Church of England.<sup>96</sup>

John Wesley's evangelical preaching was the medicine for that sick century. It not only warmed hearts, it cleared minds, calmed fears, soothed nerves, rebuked specific sins, and kindled a love for one's fellow creatures, Wesley's preaching was a concrete address to the situation of many poor and struggling souls. I did not end in fruitless sentiment, but found expression in substantial acts of benevolence. He taught people at the very foot of the social ladder, and with little opportunity or ambition to climb it that they were all children of God. John Wesley passionately assured them that, though sinful by nature and choice, they might find pardon and peace, and the joyous assurance of divine acceptance. Understanding the human tendency to avoid responsibility for their actions, Wesley

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<sup>95</sup> Maldwyn Edwards, *My Dear Sister* (Manchester: Penwork (Leeds) Ltd., 1974), 9.

<sup>96</sup> Garth Lean, *Strangely Warmed: The Amazing Life of John Wesley* (Wheaton, Ill: Tindal House Publishers, Inc., 1964), 110.

insisted that first, the ‘saved’ person should demonstrate the genuineness of the believer’s faith by bringing forth works meet for repentance. This meant not merely attending class, taking communion, saying prayers and singing hymns, though all this was expected.<sup>97</sup>

It is to John Wesley’s credit that he was greatly responsible for the change of heart and health which all historians remark in the English people in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Though the membership of his societies did not exceed 130,000 in his lifetime, they influenced every city and town, drawing their membership mainly from the workers and small tradesmen. The more serious members of the older religious bodies soon took notice of the power and spiritual integrity of Methodists. They increasingly were drawn to the societies as they came to appreciate that Wesley and his followers were not a fly by night fanatics, but found much in common with the reformers. With exception of his disclaimer about predestination and the “decree” Wesley seemed to them to parallel even Calvin in his thought.<sup>98</sup>

The Aldersgate experience was in the fullest sense of the word an awakening. All his slumbering spiritual gifts and powers were aroused to vigorous and productive life. The vision which there burst upon him was like the throwing of an electric switch, releasing energy into the marvelous mechanism prepared by nature, nurture, and all his previous training.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Garth Lean, *Strangely Warmed: The Amazing Life of John Wesley* (Wheaton, Ill: Tindal House Publishers, Inc., 1964), 113.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 70.

John Wesley carried with him from Aldersgate to his deathbed the sure consciousness of personal fellowship with the eternal fellowship with the Eternal Spirit. That has been the experience of millions down through the Christian ages from Pentecost to Aldersgate, and after. John Wesley was able to articulate that, whatever our generation, we can become so proud, self-centered, and critical of everything that we cannot nail down or measure, that we lose sight of the spiritual realities that influence our lives just as surely, naturally, and dynamically. These, Wesley pointed out, cannot be measured by human study or observation, but must be apprehended by the human heart. By recognizing this truth, Wesley, with his analytical and powerful mind, forged a whole new chapter in religious history.<sup>100</sup>

Perhaps our generation needs John Wesley's spirit of revival to convince us of God, to confirm our reliance on God's Holy Word, to revive that sense of guilt and need of pardon which we still confess at the communion table. Too often without making the words of the ritual in truth our own, we fail to rise up in the liberty wherewith God has made us free, and take up afresh the task which was set two centuries ago for the people called Methodists. John Wesley, for the seeking Christian, became a sure guide in faith who was awakened at Aldersgate, and who from that hour dedicated himself and his followers to the business of spreading holiness throughout the lands!<sup>101</sup>

In the years following Aldersgate, the awakened Wesley drove himself in ministry as if each year were to be his last. Horace Walpole (49 years old), who once amused himself by attending a Methodist service at Bath, tells what he heard there:

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<sup>100</sup> James Richard Joy, *John Wesley's Awakening* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937), 117.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

I have been at one opera- Mr. Wesley's. They have boys and girls with charming voices, that sing hymns in parts to Scotch ballad tunes; but so long that one would think that they were already in eternity, and knew not how much time they had before them. Wesley is a clean, elderly man (63years old), fresh-colored, his hair smoothly combed, but a little soupcorn of curl at the ends. Wondrous clever, but as evidently an actor as Garrick.<sup>102</sup>

Wesley deemed hymn singing as essential to worship, and experience the devout should not miss.

John Wesley worked extremely hard and sowed seeds of faith wherever he could. Eventually, a season of flowering came, then an abundant harvest of God's blessing for the Wesleyan movement.<sup>103</sup> But the energy and vital spirit of the movement was fueled by the faith of an awakened post-Aldersgate Wesley who had transcended the imitations of his previous life.<sup>104</sup>

### **John Wesley's Successful Outdoor Preaching**

John Wesley, by upbringing and temperament, was not easily drawn to preaching in the out of doors, to audiences whose responses he could not predict. For a time he occupied himself with more orderly pursuits that he felt advanced his cause. Wesley allied himself with the Moravian society in Fetter Lane. In 1738 he went to Herrnhut, the Moravian headquarters in Germany, to study. On his return to England, Wesley drew up rules for the "bands" into which the Fetter Lane Society was divided and published a

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<sup>102</sup> Garth Lean, *Strangely Warmed: The Amazing Life of John Wesley* (Wheaton, Ill: Tindal House Publishers, Inc., 1964), 95.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 97.

collection of hymns for them. He met frequently with this and other religious societies in London but did not preach often in 1738, because most of the parish churches were closed to him.<sup>105</sup>

From 1739 onward, Wesley and the Methodists were persecuted by clergy and magistrates for various reasons. Though Wesley had been ordained an Anglican priest, many other Methodist leaders had not received ordination. And for his own part, Wesley flouted many regulations of the Church of England concerning parish boundaries and who had authority to preach. This was seen as a social threat that disregarded institutions. Clergy attacked Wesley and his followers in sermons and in print, and at times mobs attacked them. Despite the hardships and abuse they encountered they continued to work among the neglected and needy. They were denounced as promulgators of strange doctrines, fomenters of religious disturbances; as blind fanatics, leading people astray, claiming miraculous gifts, attacking the clergy of the Church of England, and trying to re-establish Catholicism. Wesley felt that the Church was failing to call sinners to repentance, that many of the clergy were corrupt, and that people were perishing in their sins. He believed he was been commissioned by God to bring about revival in the Church, and no opposition, or no persecution, nor obstacles could prevail against the divine urgency and authority of this commission. The prejudices of his high church training, his strict notions of the methods and proprieties of public worship, his views of

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<sup>105</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press), 71.

the apostolic succession and the prerogatives of the priest, even his most cherished convictions, were not allowed to stand in the way.<sup>106</sup>

Following the example of George Whitefield, Wesley reached out to poor and marginalized people through field preaching. This must have been a stretch for the proper John Wesley, but he was unwilling that people should perish in their sins. Given that they were unreachable from the church pulpits of the time, he took to the open spaces where crowds gathered.<sup>107</sup>

George Whitefield, Wesley's Oxford 'Holy Club' friend, was also excluded from the churches of Bristol upon his return from America. Whitefield was a poor Gloucester boy, a tapster in a tavern, who worked his way through Oxford as a 'servitor,' fell in with John and Charles Wesley there, and joined The Holy Club shortly before they sailed for Georgia. They came back to find that he was ordained and had already caught the public ear with his dramatic eloquence, but in response to Wesley's call for help was just starting for Savannah. A few months later he was again in London, drawing crowds with his passionate sermons. He was also able, with his "piteous appeals" to unbutton the pockets of the prosperous and raise substantial money for his Georgia orphanage. But when he preached salvation by faith alone, the clergy gave him the cold shoulder, and church doors were slammed in his face. Despairing of success in London, and being a West Countryman himself, he went to his sister's in Bristol, then second city of England, where he was no stranger. The clergy there were also cool to him, partly, no doubt,

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<sup>106</sup> James Richard Joy, *John Wesley's Awakening* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937), 70.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

because he was after money, but chiefly because he was already identified with Wesley and the Wesleyan Movement. This left Whitefield in a quandary. His orphans had to be housed, clothed, and fed, and he was the only one to secure the funds.<sup>108</sup>

Whitefield turned towards the Kingswood region. It lay just outside of bustling Bristol, with its shipping, its shops and banks. Kingswood had once been a royal chase, but was now a black waste of coalpits around which clustered the grimy shacks of the colliers, swarming with ragged and unkempt children. There was not school there, and the parish church was miles away. It was a tough community. In hard times these rough miners would terrorize the city, whose wealth in part was drawn from their toil. When Whitefield had been in Bristol before going to Georgia, someone had asked him: “Why cross the ocean to find heathens to preach to? There are Indians enough in Kingswood!” Into this “no man’s land” he now went, and taking a stand lifted up his voice in preaching and prayer-sounds seldom heard in that community. At first a few hundred curious idlers listened, entranced with Whitefield’s passion and eloquence. The next day, however, a Bristol church opened its pulpit to him, and crowds came to listen. But the doors were being barred. So, Whitefield preached to larger crowds in churchyards, on the bowling green, and at Kingswood, repeatedly to thousands of colliers. The collection did not suffer, and he was soon off to Georgia, begging John Wesley to take his place.<sup>109</sup>

Though in frail health, Wesley went on to Bristol March 31, 1739. He had never been there before. He set up half the night hearing George Whitefield’s story. He felt that

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<sup>108</sup> James Richard Joy, *John Wesley’s Awakening* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937), 71.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.



he could meet the societies and talk in the jails, but could he, a clergyman, bring himself to preach anywhere except in a church, duly consecrated by a bishop. He had never done that, except in Georgia, where there were no bishops and no churches, and once at Tyburn, when he was moved to address a crowd gathered to see a man hanged. But next day he stood by consenting, when Whitefield, a clergyman no less than he, preached on the bowling green and at Kingswood. That night, as John was meeting with one of the societies, his theme was "The Sermon on the Mount." Which, he noted, "It was a remarkably good precedent for field-preaching!" The next day, April 2, he preached in a brickyard. Later he preached in Whitefield's Tabernacle. Wesley had hesitated to accept Whitefield's call to copy this bold step. Overcoming his scruples, he preached the first time at Whitefield's invitation sermon in the open air, near Bristol, in April 1739.

Wesley was unhappy about the idea of field preaching as he believed the Anglican Church had much to offer in its practice. Earlier in his life he would have thought that such a method of saving souls was "almost a sin." Wesley recognized the open-air services were successful in reaching men and women who would not enter most churches. From then on he took the opportunities to preach wherever an assembly could be brought together, more than once using his father's tombstone at Epworth as a pulpit. For five decades Wesley continued entering churches when he was invited, and taking his stand in the fields, in halls, cottages, and chapels, when the churches would not receive him. Even though, John Wesley was well educated, widely read, gentlemanly and his speech was controlled, courteous, and cultured, he was spit upon, beaten, and abused. In

spite of those all sufferings, John Wesley advised the Methodists not to return violence for violence.<sup>110</sup>

John Wesley's encounter with one of brothers in faith, George Whitefield, prompted him to ride all over Great Britain on horseback, covering nearly a quarter of a million miles. In 54 years of ministry, John preached near 40,000 sermons. He experienced the power of God's grace all along his mobile journey of faith and this circuit riding ministry had a huge influence on his teaching and preaching. Wesley would outline a Path of Salvation -- a journey of faith each person must travel along their spiritual journey -- just as he had done.<sup>111</sup>

Late in 1739 Wesley broke with the Moravians in London. Wesley had helped them organize the Fetter Lane Society, and those converted by his preaching and that of his brother and Whitefield had become members of their bands. But he believed they fell into heresy by supporting quietism, a Christian philosophy that proposed that in being in a state of quiet contemplation, forsaking verbal prayer, and focusing on response from God, one might actually reach a sinless state. So, Wesley decided to pull his followers out of the Fetter Lane contingent and form them into a separate society. "Thus," he wrote, "without any previous plan, began the Methodist Society in England." He soon formed

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<sup>110</sup> James Richard Joy, *John Wesley's Awakening* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937), 73.

<sup>111</sup> Garth Lean, *Strangely Warmed: The Amazing Life of John Wesley* (Wheaton, Ill: Tindal House Publishers, Inc., 1964), 50.

similar societies in Bristol and Kingswood, and wherever Wesley and his friends made converts.<sup>112</sup>

Through his close and trusting relationship with Whitefield, John Wesley had become convinced of what he needed to do, overcoming all of his doubts and hesitations. He says, “At four in the afternoon I submitted to be more vile and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation to about three thousand people from the appropriate text:

‘The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted; to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind; to set liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.’ He might have searched his Bible from cover without finding a more suitable text. He never regretted the plunge and he never retreated, though he says, ‘I could scarcely reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching, having been all my life so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin, if it had not been done in a church!’<sup>113</sup>

Wesley’s systematic instruction of the Bristol societies added so many members that the usual meeting places were soon outgrown. Here was a problem. Wesley solved it by buying a small inside lot between Broadmead and the open space called the Horsefair, from which it was entered by a narrow alley. On May 12, 1739, the corner stone was laid, and an unpretentious structure was begun. It was the first building erected anywhere in the world for Methodist use; the first of more than one hundred thousand. Reconstructed

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<sup>112</sup> James Richard Joy, *John Wesley’s Awakening* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937), 70.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

of bricks in 1748, when an apartment for John Wesley and a stall for his horse were added, it is still owned and used by Methodists.<sup>114</sup>

Soon he saw that the work was too much for him alone and the few he gathered around him, so he was led, as early as 1739, to approve local preachers. These men, who had not been evaluated nor approved by the Anglican Church to preach or do pastoral work, were organized and sent out by John Wesley. This expansion of lay preachers was one of the keys to the growth of Methodism. John Wesley emphasized to them that the inner assurance only comes from the witness of the Holy Spirit.<sup>115</sup>

Throughout his life Wesley remained within the Established Church and insisted that his movement was well within the bounds of the Anglican tradition. His maverick use of church policy put him at odds with many within the Church of England, though toward the end of his life he was widely respected and referred to as "the best loved man in England." From the start, John Wesley's aim had never been to revile the Church of England, but to renew it.<sup>116</sup>

Susanna Wesley's mentoring as well as insights gained from ecclesiastical literature and study of scripture seems to have come together in the rigorous production of Wesley's Rules for Methodist Societies, 1743. And in 1784, he ordained Methodist ministers for the United States. He literally established "the world as his parish" in order to spread "scripture holiness throughout the land." He remained fearlessly loyal to the

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<sup>114</sup> James Richard Joy, *John Wesley's Awakening* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937), 73.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 114.

Established Church all his life. Methodism in England did not become a separate denomination until after his death.<sup>117</sup>

On March 2, 1791, John finally completed his faith journey. His last words from his death bed were these: "The best of all is - God is with us! Farewell!"<sup>118</sup>

### **John Wesley Established Methodism Organization and Chapels**

John Wesley began to provide chapels, as his societies needed houses to worship in, first in Bristol at the New Room, then in London and elsewhere. His organizational brilliance and competence in worldly affairs once again showed itself. The Bristol chapel (1739) was at first in the hands of trustees. A large debt was contracted, and Wesley's friends urged him to keep it under his own control, so the deed was cancelled and he became sole trustee. Following this precedent, all Methodist chapels were committed in trust to him until by a "deed of declaration", all his interests in them were transferred to a body of preachers called the "Legal Hundred". Disorder sometimes arose among some members of the societies. To counter this matter, Wesley issued tickets to members, with their names written by his own hand. These were renewed every three months. Those whose sincerity or behavior was deemed unworthy did not receive new tickets. They

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<sup>117</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press), 142.

<sup>118</sup> Ingvar Haddal, *John Wesley: A Biography* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1961), 97.

were dropped from the society without disturbance. Because they were written upon by Wesley himself the tickets were regarded as commendatory letters.<sup>119</sup>

Communal responsibility for the sustenance of worship spaces was insinuated into the chapel fellowships in the form of proposed rules that Wesley promulgated. When the debt on a chapel became a burden, it was proposed that one in 12 members should collect offerings regularly from the 11 allotted to him. From this grew the Methodist class-meeting system in 1742. In order to keep the disorderly out of the societies, Wesley established a probationary system. He undertook to visit each society regularly in what became the quarterly visitation, or conference. As the number of societies increased, Wesley could not keep personal contact, so in 1743 he drew up a set of "General Rules" for the "United Societies". These were the nucleus of the Methodist Discipline, and are still its basis:

General Rules:

It is therefore expected of all who continue therein that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation,

First: By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is more generally practiced, such as . . . ;

Secondly: By doing good; by being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all men. . . ;

Thirdly: By attending upon all the ordinances of God....<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> James Richard Joy, *John Wesley's Awakening* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937), 75.

<sup>120</sup> Ted A. Campbell, *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 110.

As the number of preachers and preaching places increased, doctrinal and administrative matters needed to be discussed; so John and Charles Wesley, along with four other clergy and four lay preachers, met for consultation in London in 1744. This was the first Methodist conference; subsequently, the conference became the ruling body of the Methodist movement with Wesley as its president. Two years later, to help preachers work more systematically and societies receive services more regularly, Wesley appointed "helpers" to definitive circuits. Each circuit included at least 30 appointments a month. Believing that the preacher's efficiency was promoted by his being changed from one circuit to another every year or two, Wesley established the "itinerancy" and insisted that his preachers submit to its rules.<sup>121</sup>

In 1788, some objected to the frequent changes, Wesley wrote, "For fifty years God has been pleased to bless the itinerant plan, the last year most of all. It must not be altered till I am removed, and I hope it will remain till our Lord, Jesus Christ comes to reign on earth."<sup>122</sup>

By the 1760s, almost every English town or village had a Methodist society. Many of these assemblies built chapels. The National Church of England gradually came to recognize the magnitude of John Wesley's ministry. Wesley eventually gained respect for his successful ministry to reform of the England!<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Ted A. Campbell, *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 111.

<sup>122</sup> Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley: And Patterns for Church Renewal* (Eugene Pasadena: Wipe & Stock Publishers, 1996), 64.

<sup>123</sup> Kenneth C. Kinghorn, *Wesley: A Heart Transformed Can Change the World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011). 46.

### John Wesley's Ordination of Methodist Ministers

The Wesleyan societies multiplied. And they more and more looked like church systems. Though Wesley seemed to anguish over his differences with the Church of England, they only widened. Some of his followers urged that they pull away from the Anglican communion altogether. But Charles Wesley opposed it strenuously. John refused to leave the Church of England, believing that Anglicanism was "with all her blemishes, nearer the Scriptural plans than any other in Europe." In 1745, he wrote that he would make any concession which his conscience permitted, in order to live in peace with the clergy. He could not give up the doctrine of an inward and present salvation by faith itself. He would not stop preaching, nor dissolve the societies, nor end preaching by lay members. As a cleric of the established church he had no plans to go further. "We dare not", he said, "administer baptism or the Lord's Supper without a commission from a bishop in the apostolic succession."<sup>124</sup>

When in 1746 Wesley read Lord King on the primitive church, he became convinced that the concept of apostolic succession in Anglicanism was a "fable". He wrote that he was "a scriptural episkopos as much as many men in England." Many years later Edward Stilling Fleet's *Irenicon* led him to decide that ordination could be valid when performed by a presbyter rather than a bishop. Nevertheless, many believe that Wesley was consecrated a bishop in 1763 by Erasmus of Arcadia, and that Wesley could not openly announce his episcopal consecration without incurring the penalty of the *Premunire Act*, a law designed to prevent the assertion of papal power over that of the

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<sup>124</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press), 87.



King of England. In 1784, he believed he could no longer wait for the Bishop of London to ordain someone for the American Methodists, who were without the sacraments after the American War of Independence. Once the U.S. became a country on its own, the Church of England was disestablished in the southern colonies that had recognized it. The Church of England had not yet acted to appoint a United States bishop to what would become the Protestant Episcopal Church in America.

In a rare bold move, Wesley ordained Thomas Coke by the laying on of hands although Coke was already a priest in the Church of England. Wesley appointed him to be superintendent of Methodists in the United States. He also ordained Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey as presbyters. Whatcoat and Vasey sailed to America with Coke. Wesley intended that Coke and Asbury should ordain others in the newly founded Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States. John Wesley's brother Charles grew alarmed. He begged John to stop before he had "quite broken down the bridge" and to not embitter his beloved brother Charles' last moments on earth, nor "leave an indelible blot on our memory." John Wesley tried to placate Charles by assuring him that he had not himself severed ties with the Church of England, nor did he intend to. However, he reiterated, he felt compelled to do what it took to save as many souls as he could while alive, "without being careful about what may possibly be when I die." In his heart, John Wesley was glad that the Methodists in America were free. But he advised his English followers to remain in the established church, and he himself died within it.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press), 138.

### **John Wesley's Support for Abolition**

John Wesley helped to organize and form societies of Christians throughout Great Britain, North America and Ireland, as small groups that developed intensive, personal accountability, discipleship and religious instruction among members. One of his more successful innovations was to appoint itinerant, non-ordained preachers who travelled widely to evangelize and care for people in the societies. Under Wesley's direction, Methodists became leaders in many social issues of the day, including the prison reform and abolitionism movements.

Later in his ministry John Wesley was a keen abolitionist. He spoke out and wrote against the slave trade. He published a pamphlet on slavery titled *Thoughts Upon Slavery* (1774). To quote from one of his tracts against the slave trade: "Liberty is the right of every human creature, as soon as he breathes the vital air; and no human law can deprive him of that right which he derives from the law of nature". Wesley was a friend of John Newton and William Wilberforce who were also influential in the abolition of slavery in Britain.<sup>126</sup>

### **John Wesley's Literary Works and Social Activities**

Wesley was a logical thinker and expressed himself clearly, concisely and forcefully in writing. His written sermons are characterized by spiritual earnestness and simplicity. They are doctrinal but not dogmatic. His Notes on the New Testament are

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<sup>126</sup> Charles Yrigoyen, *John Wesley: Holiness of Heart and Life* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 64.

enlightening. Both the Sermons and the Notes are doctrinal standards. Wesley was a fluent, powerful and effective preacher. He usually preached spontaneously and briefly, though occasionally at great length.<sup>127</sup>

As an organizer, a religious leader and a statesman, he was eminent. He knew how to lead and motivate people to achieve his purposes. He used his power, not to provoke rebellion, but to inspire love. His mission was to spread "Scriptural holiness"; his means and plans were such as Providence indicated. The course thus mapped out for him he pursued with a determination from which nothing could distract him. He formed societies, opened chapels, examined and commissioned preachers, administered aid charities, prescribed for the sick, and even helped to pioneer the use of electric shock for the treatment of illness. Ever compassionate and concerned with the spiritual and educational fortunes of underprivileged and forgotten children he enrolled schools and orphanages.<sup>128</sup>

Wesley's prose *Works* were first collected by himself (32 vols., Bristol, 1771-74). His chief prose works are a standard publication in seven octavo volumes of The Methodist Book Concern' (New York) and *The Poetical Works*. Also, there are his *Sermons*, his *Notes* and his *Journals*. Furthermore, John Wesley wrote several books such as, *The Doctrine of Original Sin* (Bristol, 1757); *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* (Bristol, 1743); *An elaborate defense of Methodism*; and *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1766). Wesley also adapted *The Book of Common Prayer* for use by

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<sup>127</sup> John Wesley, *The Nature of Holiness* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1988), 7.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

American Methodists for their Watch Night service. Wesley also firmly believed that Methodists would profit and grow in spirit by renewing their covenant with God in a Covenant Service he constructed for them. 'The Wesley Covenant Prayer' is one of his most moving and remembered prayers. John Wesley incorporated writing into his life style and was quite diligent in his literary endeavors. He devoted himself to a most notable and famous contribution to Christian liturgy. He was also a noted hymn-writer, translator and compiler of a hymnal.<sup>129</sup>

Wesley lived out the forgiveness and reconciliation as the veritable nutrients in what he preached. In 1770, at the death of George Whitefield, Wesley wrote a memorial sermon which praised Whitefield's admirable qualities and acknowledged the two men's differences: "There are many doctrines of a less essential nature ... In these we may think and let think; we may 'agree to disagree.' But, meantime, let us hold fast the essentials..."<sup>130</sup>

The great heart of Wesley stopped on 2, March 1791, in his 87th year. As he lay dying, his friends gathered around him, Wesley grasped their hands and said repeatedly, "Farewell, farewell." At the end, he said "The best of all is, God is with us", lifted his arms and raised his feeble voice again, repeating the words, "The best of all is, God is with us." He was entombed at Wesley's Chapel House, City Road in London, which he built

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<sup>129</sup> John Wesley, *The Nature of Holiness* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1988), 7.

<sup>130</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press), 127.

in Greater London, in England. The site also is now both a place of worship and a visitor attraction, incorporating the Museum of Methodism and John Wesley's House.<sup>131</sup>

Because of his charitable nature he died poor, leaving as the result of his life's work increasing new members and itinerant preachers under the name "Methodist". It has been said that "when John Wesley was carried to his grave, he left behind him a good library of books, a well-worn clergyman's gown" and the Methodist Church.<sup>132</sup>

John Wesley's teachings, known as Wesleyanism, provided the seeds for the modern Methodist movement, the Holiness movement, Pentecostalism, the Charismatic Movement, and Neo-charismatic churches, which encompass numerous denominations across the world. In addition, he refined Arminianism with a strong evangelical emphasis on the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith.<sup>133</sup>

As the father of Methodism, John Wesley was primarily responsible for its spread into ninety seven countries, with a community membership of nearly forty million people. In numerical strength and influence it ranks as one of the greatest of all world Churches.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Stanley Ayling, *John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1979), 315.

<sup>132</sup> Maldwyn Edwards, *My Dear Sister* (Manchester: Penwork (Leeds) Ltd., 1974), 123.

<sup>133</sup> John Wesley, *The Nature of Holiness* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1988), 13.

<sup>134</sup> Maldwyn Edwards, *My Dear Sister* (Manchester: Penwork (Leeds) Ltd., 1974), 9.

Wesley continues to be the primary theological interpreter for Methodists the world over; the largest bodies being the United Methodist Church, the Methodist Church of Great Britain and the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Wesleyan teachings also serve as a basis for the holiness movement. Wesley's call to personal and social holiness continues to challenge Christians who attempt to discern what it means to participate in the Kingdom of God.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), 20.

## **Chapter 4**

### **John Wesley's Theology and Doctrines**

What makes the exploration of Wesley's theology and doctrines so fascinating is the way in which he synthesized and systematized the products not only of his learning but of his experience. Thus, the outcome is a sensible and understandable body of teachings that the catechumen can grasp and live. The story of this faithful intellectual journey is one of the strong narratives that make his "soup" of salvation so attractive.

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Wesleyan scholar Albert Outler argued in his introduction to the 1964 collection *John Wesley* that Wesley developed his theology by using a method that Outler termed the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. In this method, Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture; and the Bible was the sole foundational source of theological or doctrinal development. John Wesley trusted that the Bible was not a compilation of imperfect human theories; it was a perfect divine revelation inspired by the Holy Spirit. Although he was well-read for his day, the centrality of Scripture was so important for Wesley that he called himself "a man of one book (The Holy Bible)", and he described his intention about this matter these words:

I am a spirit come from God, and returning to God: Just hovering over the great gulf; till, a few moments hence, I am no more seen; I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing -- the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: For this very end he came from heaven. He has written it down in a book. O, give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: Here is knowledge enough for me.

Let me be a man of one book.<sup>136</sup>

However, he believed that doctrine had to be in keeping with Christian orthodox tradition. So, tradition was considered the second aspect of the Quadrilateral. Wesley contended that a part of the theological method would involve experiential faith. In other words, truth would be vivified in personal experience of Christians, if it were really truth. And every doctrine must be able to be defended rationally. He did not divorce faith from reason. Tradition, experience and reason, however, were subject always to Scripture, Wesley argued, because only there is the Word of God revealed "so far as it is necessary for our salvation."<sup>137</sup>

John Wesley also designated that what is the 'True Religion' and the 'Religion of the Heart' as follows:

True religion is "seated in the heart," and that God's law extends "to all our thoughts as well as words and actions." He often warned his hearers and readers that authentic religion does not consist merely of forms, morality, or orthodoxy. Rather, biblical religion is God's grace made personal in individuals, so as to transform their attitudes and actions. Anything else, he insisted is "wide of the mark." He said, "Religion is nothing worth, without the religion of the heart; that 'God is a Spirit, and they who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth;' that, therefore, eternal worship is lost labor, without a heart devoted to God."<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Kenneth C. Kinghorn, *Wesley: A Heart Transformed Can Change the World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), 13.

<sup>137</sup> United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publ. House, 1984), 74.

<sup>138</sup> Kenneth C. Kinghorn, *Wesley: A Heart Transformed Can Change the World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011). 52.



### John Wesley's Theology of God's Prevenient Grace

The doctrines which John Wesley emphasized in his sermons and writings are prevenient grace, present personal salvation by faith, the witness of the Spirit, and sanctification. Prevenient grace was the theological underpinning of his belief that all persons were capable of being saved by faith in Christ.<sup>139</sup>

To get inside of Wesley's theological world, it is essential that we factor in a most critical ingredient in his theology, one that flavored his theological doctrines with zest and potency. Wesley continued until the end of his life to believe that the soup of salvation was of God's making, through prevenient grace, but that the initiatives that are taken by prospective believers also affect the outcome of their salvation. As we previously observed, Wesley did not believe in Calvin's doctrine of predestination, that is, that some persons had been elected by God for salvation and others for damnation. He understood that Christian orthodoxy insisted that salvation was only possible by the sovereign grace of God. He expressed his understanding of humanity's relationship to God as utter dependence upon God's grace. God was at work to enable all people to be capable of coming to faith by empowering humans to have actual existential freedom of response to God.<sup>140</sup>

Furthermore, this collaboration of God and humans in the making of faith renders Wesley's considerable appreciation for Arminian theological thought more explainable.

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<sup>139</sup> Collin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984), 41.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. 42.

One great Arminian view of predestination became extremely influential on John Wesley's theological thinking. He accepted Arminius' account of free will as well as developed into the order of salvation. He always respected the tradition of the Church, but he could not agree with the idea of predestination of the Reformation. Wesley's theological focus is the saving work of Christ and the human appropriation of the work. The saving work of Christ begins with the first dawning of grace in the soul, which Wesley called "prevenient grace." For him, "Every man is born with God's supernatural gift of conscience above all his natural endowments." "The Son of God, the True Light which enlightens man that comes into the world, so that we say to every creature, he has shown you an inward check, whoever causes you to feel uneasy, when we walks in any instance contrary to the light which he has given you."<sup>141</sup>

John Wesley asserts that inclusiveness of all human beings, which invites to salvation by both in faith and in conscience. In prevenient grace, Wesley insists on the one hand, that man cannot move himself toward God, being entirely dependent on God's enabling grace. On the other hand, that man is responsible before God for his own salvation, being free to accept God or reject him.<sup>142</sup>

Wesley held that, in this life, Christians could come to a state in which the love of God "reigned supreme in their hearts", allowing them to attain a state of outward

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<sup>141</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, A.M.: 14 vols. 3rd ed. (Peaboy, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1986), 186.( vol.V11, sermon, *On Conscience*)

<sup>142</sup> Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press,1984), 43.

holiness. His evangelical theology was firmly grounded in sacramental theology and he continually insisted on means of grace as the manner by which God sanctifies and transforms the believer, encouraging people to experience Jesus Christ personally.<sup>143</sup>

George Whitefield's theological stance inclined to Calvinism. In his first tour in America, he embraced the views of the New England School of Calvinism. When in 1739 Wesley preached a sermon on Freedom of Grace, attacking the Calvinistic understanding of predestination as blasphemous, as it represented "God as worse than the devil," Whitefield asked him not to repeat or publish the discourse, as he did not want a dispute. Wesley published his sermon anyway. Whitefield was one of many who responded. The two men separated their practice in 1741. Wesley wrote that those who held to unlimited atonement did not desire separation, but those who held 'particular redemption' would not hear of any accommodation. Whitefield and Wesley, however, were soon back on friendly terms, and their friendship remained unbroken although they travelled different paths.<sup>144</sup>

In 1778 Wesley began the publication of *The Arminian Magazine*, not, he said, to convince Calvinists, but to preserve Methodists. He wanted to teach the truth that "God wills all men to be saved." A "lasting peace" could be secured in no other way. His

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<sup>143</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press), 133.

<sup>144</sup> Garth Lean, *Strangely Warmed: The Amazing Life of John Wesley* (Wheaton, Ill: Tindal House Publishers, Inc., 1964), 116.

system of thought has become known as Wesleyan Arminianism, the foundations of which were laid by John Wesley and John Fletcher.<sup>145</sup>

For John Wesley, the saving grace of Jesus Christ is individual. Jesus Christ is the personification, the incarnation, of divine grace. The individual singular grace of Jesus Christ works in the life of the each believer. Wesley defined the witness of the Spirit as, "...an inward impression on the soul of believers, whereby the Spirit of God directly testifies to their spirit that they are the children of God." He based this doctrine upon a certain Biblical passage, Romans 8:15-16. It says:

For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God.(NIV)

This doctrine was closely related to his belief that salvation had to be "personal." In his view, a person must ultimately believe the Good News for himself or herself; no one could be in relation to God for another.<sup>146</sup>

John Wesley very clearly emphasized the importance of 'The witness of the Holy Spirit', as seen in his words below:

It is very hard to find words in the language of men, to explain the deep things of God. Indeed there are none that will adequately express what the Spirit of God works in His children. But perhaps one might say . . . by the testimony of the Spirit, I mean an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God

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<sup>145</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press), 135.

<sup>146</sup> James C. Logan, *How Great a Flame: Contemporary Lessons from the Wesleyan Revival* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources), 31.

immediately and directly witnesses to my spirit, that I am a child of God; that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God.”<sup>147</sup>

This theology of John Wesley is defined how the Holy Spirit witnessed the sanctifying savioric work of the God’s Spirit in believers’ hearts as a testimony to them as the children of God. The inner witness of the Holy Spirit is one of the distinguishing marks of Wesleyan traditional theology.

### **John Wesley’s Doctrines of Justification and Sanctification**

These two doctrines are very closely associated. They are crucially important doctrines of John Wesley that often cause some confusion to believers and his followers. However, Wesley is quite clear in distinguishing between his doctrines of justification and sanctification. He said:

“By justification we are saved from the guilt of sin, and restored to the favor of God; by sanctification we are saved from the power and root of sin, and restored to the image of God.” Wesley further explained sanctification: “It is love excluding sin; love filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul. It is love ‘rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, in every- thing giving thanks.’”<sup>148</sup>

John Wesley taught that sanctification was obtainable after justification by faith, between justification and death. The Atonement is the foundation of justification and

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<sup>147</sup> Kenneth C. Kinghorn, *Wesley: A Heart Transformed Can Change the World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011). 53.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 55.

sanctification. The believer is justified by faith because of Christ's atonement. After the believer justified by faith in Christ, the believer's sins are forgiven and accepted by God. It is directly and immediately linked up with Jesus Christ's Atonement by dying on the Cross for our sins as High Priest. For sanctification is as the consequence of Christ's royal office of High Priest and the work of the Holy Spirit. Justification is defined as "what God does for us through His Son, Jesus Christ." The definition of Sanctification is "what God works in us by His Spirit." Justification and sanctification are the differentiation of salvation into the separate stage of a process.<sup>149</sup>

John Wesley did not contend for "sinless perfection"; rather, he contended that a Christian could be made "perfect in love". This love would mean, first of all, that a believer's motives, rather than being self-centered, would be guided by the deep desire to please God. One would be able to keep from committing what Wesley called, "sin rightly so-called." By this he meant a conscious or intentional breach of God's will or laws. A person could still be able to sin, but intentional or willful sin could be avoided. For Wesley, to be made perfect in love meant that a Christian could live with a primary guiding regard for others and their welfare. He based this on Christ's quote that the second great command is "to love your neighbor as you love yourself." In his view, this orientation would cause a person to avoid any number of sins against a neighbor. This

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<sup>149</sup> Harald Lindstrom, *Wesley and Sanctification* (Nashville, TN; Abingdon Press, 1946), 83.

love, plus the love for God that could be the central focus of a person's faith, would be what Wesley referred to as "a fulfillment of the law of Christ."<sup>150</sup>

### **John Wesley's Doctrine of Christian Perfection**

This theme of being made perfect in love through the new creation can be traced through Wesley's thought. "God will thus 'renew' us 'in the spirit of our mind,' and 'create us anew' in the 'image of God, wherein we were at first created,'" says Wesley, quoting Ephesians 4:23 and Colossians 3:10. The notion of the image of God is hardly a new one. It is familiar not only from the Genesis narrative of creation but from New Testament accounts of restoration and renewal, as these have been understood and proclaimed by the church through the ages. However, Wesley had a unique way of reading the tradition and drawing out its implications. Wesley identifies the distortions and draws salient conclusions. This is what makes his approach distinctively, not only in contrast to the Reformers who preceded him but to many "Wesleyans" who have thought they were following him. John Wesley stressed that the Christian must be not only justified, but sanctified. Wesley defines salvation as the entire process which begins at conversion and is completed after death. Each of Wesley's phases of salvation in the Christian life, taking particular note of his Christian perfection.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Reginald Kissack, ed. *Spotlight on John Wesley* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, Ltd., 1962), 82.

<sup>151</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *Wesley on Salvation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Francis Asbury Press, 1989), 77.

For John Wesley, Christian perfection can accomplish by 'holy love' for God and neighbor. John Wesley stressed these two commandments. In the Bible Luke 10: 27 states that:

Jesus answered, "Love the Lord your God and with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" (NIV)

God calls His children to have clean heart and godly lives to achieve the sanctification, holiness, and ultimately the Christian perfection to achieve 'The Eternal Salvation in the Kingdom of God.'<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Kenneth C. Kinghorn, *Wesley: A Heart Transformed Can Change the World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011). 54.



## **Chapter 5**

### **John Wesley's Beloved Mother, Susanna Wesley, and The Women He Loved**

The metaphor of soup is a common one, and is invoked by some contemporary writers as a symbolic way to describe the profound energy, unity of spirit, and joint accomplishment that groups gathered in hope seek. The modern fable, "Stone Soup" is one of these. So far in this paper we have also couched Wesley's doctrine of conversion and salvation by grace through faith in cooking terms, as a pungent soup, a spiritually nutritious broth that bubbled, grew in richness, and filled ever more space with its heavenly odor. Through a closer look at the historical narratives that describe his life and doctrine, we have seen how these ingredients were added over years, came to a salvation broth boil in the Aldersgate experience, and continued to fill the historical air with fragrance.

But other ways of pressing the metaphor into service come to mind when discussing the imprint of female influence on John Wesley's life. One might say that these females "spiced up" the relationships he had with them. They touched in him a tender regard for, if not need of, companionship, direction, and perhaps in the case of his love affairs and marriage, romantic and sensual vitality. Wesley, among other religious leaders and Christian Reformers, stands out as perhaps more romantic than most. Though he was surely a holy and spiritual person, he seemed to love women and draw energy guidance from them.

From reports of his relationships with women he did not seem to be afraid to pursue them and showed sincere love and affection towards his favorite ones. Though it can be said that Wesley's mother put her indelible stamp on his character and education, in his lifetime very sadly, he did not see any happy result from romance or married life like many ordinary people might have.

John Wesley was born in 1703 and he spent his childhood in mostly female company. His father's hours were spent in study and clerical duties. The Wesley home was dominated by the serious but loving and generous presence of their mother, Susanna Wesley. The oldest daughter, Emilia, was already thirteen, Sukey was eight, and they helped to care for their little baby brother. There were also three other sisters: Mary, aged seven, Mehetabel, six, and Anne, approaching two. In addition there were two maidservants, making a total of eight women and girls whose company John shared during his early boyhood. When John was only a year old his brother Samuel Wesley Jr., now fourteen, left home to live in London. Sammy attended the celebrated St. Peter's School attached to Westminster Abbey.<sup>153</sup>

In this kind of the female dominated early childhood environment, John Wesley's shadowy figure was formed. What is more, the women Wesley related to closely seem shadowy in their own right. Even their very names are unknown to the vast majority today. Whatever may not be known about Wesley, all agree that through his life and ministry Britain underwent a spiritual revolution that had enormous social consequences. Its impact was felt in time throughout the whole world. What is not given its due is the

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<sup>153</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley: The Mother of John & Charles Wesley*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Book House, 1996), 65.

apparent fact that the women in his life were fantastically important to his character formation, education, spiritual growth, and success.

John Wesley seemed to cut a handsome figure. He is described as below medium height, well proportioned, strong, with a bright eye, a clear complexion, and a saintly, intellectual face, and a great fondness for women. He was quite attractive, well spoken, and came across as set apart from his dry and pedantic contemporaries. His fertile mind was at the disposal of any person whom he met. He spoke forcefully and his delivery was lively. One of his best qualities was that he was genuinely interested in the people he met. John was always interested in their health, but also in their occupations and interests. He was curious about them. He had a way of putting people at ease and communicating to them that they mattered.

Like the others of the Epworth family, John Wesley was a small person in stature. He stood barely five feet six and weighed only one hundred and twenty-two pounds. Yet, he was muscular and strong. Bright hazel eyes shone out from his face. His fine features, an aquiline nose, a fine forehead, and a clear complexion, combined to make his face distinctive and noticeable. People who knew him have said that his eyes retained their bright and penetrating quality even to his last years. Canon Overton remarked:

Wesley was meticulous as to personal appearance and habits. He never appeared in public except that he was neatly dressed. He wore a narrow plaited stock coat with a small upright collar, and three-cornered hat. "I dare no more write in a fine style," said he, "than wear a fine coat." "Exactly so," "but, then, he was particular about his coats. He was most careful never to be slovenly in his dress, always to be dressed in good taste....It is just the same with his style; it is never slovenly, never tawdry."<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Maldwyn Edwards, *My Dear Sister* (Manchester: Penwork (Leeds) Ltd., 1974), 13.

In his later years Wesley never allowed a misplaced book or a scrap of paper to lie about in his study. He was exact and punctual, and this made it possible for him to carry the tremendous burden of work that always followed him, and to do it with perfect poise. He carefully managed his time. He was never in a hurry, nor was his mind stressed by time pressures. John had no time to mend anything that he either wrote or did. He therefore always did everything not only with quietness, but with what might be thought slowness. More descriptions are followed:

Wesley seemed to delight in being a good companion and disliked having people around him who were out of sorts. He did his utmost to soothe ruffled tempers. "Wherever Wesley went he diffused a portion of his own felicity. Easy and affable in his demeanor, he accommodated himself to every sort of company and showed how happily the most finished courtesy may be blended with the most perfect piety. In his conversation we might be at a loss whether to admire most his fine classical taste, his extensive knowledge of men and things, or his overflowing goodness of heart. While the grave and serious were charmed with his wisdom, his sportive sallies of innocent mirth delighted even the young and thoughtless; and both saw in his uninterrupted cheerfulness the excellency of true religion. No cynical remarks on the levity of youth embittered his discourses. No applausive retrospect to past times marked his present discontent. In him even old age appeared delightful, like an evening without a cloud; and it was impossible to observe him without wishing fervently, 'May my latter end be like his!'<sup>155</sup>

It is no wonder, then, that John got a lot of female attention, and gave it back as well. Women seemed fascinated with Wesley and he wrote to them three times as much as he did to men. He was keenly susceptible to their beauty and more so if it was spiced up with wit and sparkle. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that most of all he rose instinctively to a woman of unaffected goodness. He wasn't hoodwinked by glib words, but when he

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<sup>155</sup> Thomas S. Kepler, ed., *John Wesley: Christian Perfection* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1954), 16.

saw grace in graciousness he gave in. He admired practical piety, and more so when it was softer and less brittle. To Wesley, if a woman loved God and people he thought her lovely.<sup>156</sup>

After his experience of the Conversion in Christ on May 28, 1738, 8:45pm, John became a changed man in the inward and outward aspects of his life. Especially, in relationship with his favorite, loving, chosen women his attitudes were matured and notably improved. It is very interesting to discover that, through searching John Wesley's relationship experiences especially those with his loving relationships with different women, they probably all played a role in his new and transformed life.

John Wesley failed in his love relationships with three women in his life but he had an extraordinarily successful and fruitful relationship with his mother, his own sisters, and numerous sisters in faith throughout his whole life and ministry.

Among the three lovers, the first one was Sophia Hopkey, the second one was Grace Murray, and the third was Mary Vazeille who was his the first and the last only married woman he had for 30years of on and off relationship without any children between them. They had a girl but very sadly she died she was very little.

### **John Wesley's Beloved Mother, Susanna Wesley**

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<sup>156</sup> Maldwyn Edwards, *My Dear Sister* (Manchester: Penwork (Leeds) Ltd., 1974), 13.

There was a funny question around the family of the Annesley. ‘How many children does Doctor Annesley have?’ ‘I am not sure, but it is either two or a quarter of a hundred.’ This was a conversation that took place in London in 1699, following the christening of one more child recently born into the Annesley home. The latter estimate proved correct one that the right numbers of Doctor Annesley’s children were twenty-four and the new baby was the twenty-fifth child to take its place in the doctor’s family! Surely it is an amazingly big amount of children for a family!<sup>157</sup>

This was to be no ordinary life. This little girl was to play a very important part in the history of the church. Given the name Susanna, she would grow up to marry Samuel Wesley and bear nineteen children of her own. Two of her sons would rise to great prominence in the founding the Methodist Church. They would leave their mark on history by reason of their accomplishments. The names of John and Charles Wesley would be remembered both in the field of evangelism and in the writing of hymns. Susanna possessed in strong measure many of the qualities residing in her father, besides the tendency to produce a large family.<sup>158</sup>

The Wesley sons’ father, Samuel, though little equipped to provide for the family financially, was determined to give his boys the best education that the country could

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<sup>157</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley: The Mother of John & Charles Wesley*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Book House, 1996), 11.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 12.

provide. The girls, however, and John, for a time, attended Susanna's school in the rectory.<sup>159</sup>

All the daughters of the Wesley family had only Susanna's home school education in their lives! What a pity that sexism for the girls was rampant in this old century world! Samuel's debts are more increased by his sons' tuition. Samuel fell further into debt. At one point one of his creditors, to whom he owed relatively little money, nevertheless refused to negotiate a payment plan. He had Samuel arrested and thrown into jail at Lincoln. Samuel Wesley was doubtless a dominating father, yet he was often also a jovial one. The children invariably obeyed him without question. But when he was in the mood he also seemed capable of joking with them. His spontaneous wit overcame the immense family burdens that weighed him down.<sup>160</sup>

Susanna Annesley, 19years old, married Samuel Wesley, 26years old on November 11, 1688. Susanna was a very beautiful, very clever, and very good sweet woman. The couple had 19children, but only 10 survived to adulthood. John Wesley was their 15<sup>th</sup> child. Before them, lay the years of their life together as husband and wife, they had high hills to climb as a couple, many valleys and difficult trials and triumphs to manage. They were always poor and struggled with debt all through their married life.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Maldwyn Edwards, *My Dear Sister* (Manchester: Penwork (Leeds) Ltd., 1974), 63.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 66

<sup>161</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley: The Mother of John & Charles Wesley*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1996), 57.

There was some adventure in Samuel Wesley's life. In the years of 1701-1702, before John was born, John's father, he spent five months aboard a naval vessel. The details of the story and the reason for his absence from home, were as follows:

Samuel and Susanna had been married for twelve years. Samuel took note long before his that his wife refused to say 'Amen' to the prayer for the king, which he prayed every day. Now he used it as an excuse for deserting Susanna. He had before this allowed her to have her opinion for all those years, but now he had come to such a plight that he must find some excuse for leaving. He found in the sailing venture a matter which he could make appear to tremendously important. Samuel was irked at Susanna's refusal to acknowledge William as king mainly because it put in danger his opportunity to gain favors from the crown. He had gotten in Queen Mary's good graces, but she was now dead. In fact, he had recently produced a memorial of the queen in which he had flattered her in exaggerated terms and he hoped that this would secure the gratitude of the king. But Samuel's hopes were dashed when he came to fear that his wife's stubborn refusal to 'Amen' to the prayer for the sovereign, and her refusal to swear allegiance to him, would become known. Samuel could say to his critics that had been gone for more than five months.<sup>162</sup>

But after the terrible fire at home that almost claimed the life of his son John, Samuel decided to return home, at home and rebuild it. However, the damage was done.

Samuel's weaknesses had two detrimental effects on the life of the Wesleys. For one thing, it hindered Samuel from rising to a better position in the church. He was passed over, very probably as a result of his irresponsible behavior before and after the fire. And secondly, Susanna's attitude towards him was never the same again. Trust was broken. Since he had once shown himself to be so heartless she feared he might well do

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<sup>162</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley: The Mother of John & Charles Wesley*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1996), 53.



the same again. Then, she had to deal with a devastating fire when he was away and far from home!<sup>163</sup>

The foundation of Susanna's Christian school may well have been generated from the strain in the relationship of the couple, Samuel and Susanna. When Samuel returned from his five months' absence the relationship between him and Susanna remained one of partial estrangement. From this point onwards Susanna's life was distinctly different from what it had been previously. Her life now took a different turn. She led an almost cloistered existence; she seldom left her house and she gave all her time and energy to her children. She later explained her chief purpose in doing so and how she concentrated all her efforts to achieve it, saying:

‘I have lived such a retired life for so many years.... No one can, without renouncing the world in the most literal sense, observe my method; and there are few, if any, that would entirely devote above twenty years of the prime of life in hopes to save the souls of their children.’<sup>164</sup>

After the fire, and the rift in her relationship with Samuel, Susanna set about establishing the home school. The home probably had not as yet been completely rebuilt, but she set aside space and began to plan. She may not have had the proper desks, but she apparently found table space for each child. Classes were conducted six days a week, from nine to twelve and then from two till five. “There was no such thing as loud talking or praying allowed,” stated Susanna, “but everyone was kept close to business for the six hours of school.”

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<sup>163</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley: The Mother of John & Charles Wesley*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1996), 53.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

Since the children had been disciplined from birth, they did not find the school daunting. They knew for sure their mother was in charge, and was demanding. Susanna reported that:

The children were always put into a regular method of living, in such things as they were capable of, from their birth; as in dressing and undressing, changing their linen, etc... When turned a year old (and some before) they were taught to fear the rod and to cry softly, by which means they escaped abundance of correction... and that most odious noise of the crying of children was rarely heard in the house...<sup>165</sup>

The seeming harshness of Susanna's discipline should be viewed in the light of the times in which she lived. Heartlessness was all too common. A person could be thrown into prison for owing a few pounds and might be left in loathsome and disease-ridden confinement to rot and to die. More than a hundred misdemeanors were punishable with death. Public hangings were conducted in London and many poor and marginalized people were forced to labor aboard a ship. If they made an unwitting mistake they could be tied to the mast and flogged without mercy. Beating children as a discipline and deterrent to unacceptable behavior was common. Corporal punishment as an incentive to study and behave was the norm, not the exception. In schools beating with the birch rod was considered to be as necessary as any other instruction. Many parents assumed that physically punishing their children was just as important for their character as eating was for their physical health. In contrast with such conditions Susanna's discipline was

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<sup>165</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley: The Mother of John & Charles Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1996), 58.

light and constructive. The discipline which Susanna practiced from their earliest days was continued as they began to grow.<sup>166</sup>

Religious instruction was considered a high priority in addition to academic subjects. Invariably classes opened each morning with the singing of a psalm and the reading of the Scriptures and they closed with the same exercise. Decency, politeness, and obedience were subjects of training and Susanna said that ‘Taking God’s name in vain, cursing and swearing, profanity, obscenity, rude ill-bred names, were never heard among them.’ They were given a basic knowledge of the Bible and they learned especially to “remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.”<sup>167</sup>

Susanna gave her children all kinds of good ingredients of her character. Christian education, intelligence and powers of reasoning, a broad spectrum of educational subjects, and abundant love. But she couldn’t seem to give them the most important ingredient of the soup of salvation, the true knowledge of conversion which can give the eternal life through the faith in Christ alone. At this juncture of her life there was no way Susanna could seem to get the measure of God’s grace that her son, John Wesley found through his long spiritual journey. She was still bound up with the legalistic part of her Anglican Church background. For many like Susanna there were only strict rules and religious rituals in the Church of England in the 18th Century.

Susanna’s stated intention for her educational efforts was that it result in ‘the saving their souls.’ Curiously, she failed during these years to mention the substitutionary

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<sup>166</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley: The Mother of John & Charles Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1996), 59.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 61.

nature of Christ's death and the receiving of its merits by faith. She said nothing as yet of conversion or of the assurance of salvation. But she stressed the need for regular attendance at church and at the communion. She seems to have believed that by living a fully disciplined life and refraining from open evil that her children would be saved. One cannot help but see the tie of this to what would be John's elaboration and teaching of "scriptural holiness."

Susanna's educational efforts on behalf of the children are probably the prominent reason for their later success and intellectual development. She laid a firm foundation for their living in the real world and grappling with the myriad ideas with which they would engage. Each of the three sons possessed, as we shall see and as is widely known, a rich depth of scholarship. Though they were simply not given the opportunities for education that the boys were, the girls nevertheless, would possess similarly capable minds. In that day, when even among aristocratic families many women could barely read and write, the Wesley daughters proved truly skilful in their use of the English language and one, Hetty, revealed remarkable ability as a poet. The strength of character which her children would display in later life was due in part, of course, to inherited qualities, but it also stemmed from their training in their mother, Susanna's Christian school.<sup>168</sup>

Despite the burdens of childbearing and childrearing, Susanna managed to read and meditate. She did well with few resources and had little help from Samuel, who seemed to have all he could do to keep himself going. And, when her beloved sons had left the Epworth nest and were facing the gravest personal problems at school and

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<sup>168</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley: The Mother of John & Charles Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1996), 62.

university, it was their mother rather than their father to whom they resorted for counsel-- and seldom in vain. Higher education for women was largely unknown in the era when Susanna was growing up. The Annesley girls, as other girls of those times, were forming their intellectual habits mostly at home. Yet, the substance and form of Susanna Wesley's letters to her sons at Oxford could be compared with those of university women of today. Her style of expression, dignified, clear, admirably balanced, is a model of excellence. It is mirrored in the letters and journals penned by her illustrious son. To his mother John Wesley owed that genius for order and 'method', which was basic to his success as an organizer and leader. From her he learned that dignity and courtesy which put him at ease in any company. John assimilated his mother's air of calm authority and dignity that commanded respect and influenced many followers of diverse backgrounds. He saw himself as the master of many difficult situations. From Susanna, John inherited his 'iron will.' She taught by example, and strove to instill in John a life that would be acceptable to God and useful to others.<sup>169</sup>

One of the most delightful things for Susanna Wesley was that she could spend a few years of her last life with her favorite son John (Jackie - 'a brand plucked from the fire') at his father's Epworth manse called 'The Foundry' in London. John, who in 1739 had acquired this old factory, converted it into a meeting house and living quarters and lived there with his mother. Susanna said:

Since I have been informed that Mr. Hall (one of her daughters-Martha's husband) intends to move his family to London... I must go with them.' John was now well able to provide for her life. While living with John she was undoubtedly

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<sup>169</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley: The Mother of John & Charles Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1996), 60.

as well supplied with the necessities of life as at any time since she left her father's home fifty years earlier.<sup>170</sup>

### **Susanna Wesley's Conversion and Death**

Susanna was now living with John. It was a really great God's blessing for her to spend her end of life in the place of her beloved son, moreover very special son of legendary, "Jackie, a brand plucked from the burning rectory - a child of exceptional promise". Finally John became Susanna's 'Masterpiece.' Every mother hopes that their sons and daughters become their proud 'Masterpieces' and spend their lives with their precious 'Masterpieces', especially through the last years of lives. Finally, Susanna Wesley was able to fulfill every woman's dreams in her life in many ways!

It was inevitable that Susanna would begin attending the services he held on the premises. She had occasionally attended Episcopal services in previous times mostly in her husband Samuel's ministering churches, but she had no experience with Methodist practices, which were fashioned after Episcopal services, but different, too. She was aware of the change that had come in the lives and the ministries of John and Charles following their conversions in May 1738, and she now heard them declare that salvation is not the reward of works but is the gift of God to him that believe. She noticed those around her Sunday by Sunday, a number of Methodist people who all testified with confidence of their conversion and assurance of being saved.

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<sup>170</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley: The Mother of John & Charles Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1996), 162.

In Susanna's Christian school, when her children were little, Susanna said nothing as yet of 'conversion' or of the 'assurance of salvation'. Susanna just stressed the need for regular attendance at church and at communion. She believed that by living a fully disciplined life and refraining from open evil then her children be saved. Susanna was not assured yet during those years to mention and teach the substitutionary nature of Christ's death and the receiving of its merit by faith alone.<sup>171</sup>

Westley Hall, a young man who was her one of son-in-law, now close to the family, was on the verge of renouncing all relationship with Christianity but at the point he still functioned as a Church of England clergyman. At times John invited him to supply the pulpit at the Foundry and it was after one of these occasions, apparently in January 1740, when he took part in a communion service that Susanna stated:

'While my son Hall was pronouncing these words in delivering the cup to me, "The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee," these words struck through my heart, and I knew that God for Christ's sake had forgiven me all my sins.'<sup>172</sup>

Charles Wesley observed about his mother that she was, to use his own words, in 'a legal night of seventy years'. He had a burning desire to remove any vestiges of her long belief that she was saved by her works. Charles wrote to her, apparently declaring that she had previously been lost, was in danger of hell, and generally being abusive. Susanna replied, saying:

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<sup>171</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley: The Mother of John & Charles Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1996), 61.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 163.

I thank you for kind letter. I call it so, because I verily believe it was dictated by a sincere desire of my spiritual and eternal good. There are too much truth in many of your accusations; nor do I intend to say one word in my own defense, but rather choose to refer all things to him that know all things... I am not one of those who have never been enlightened, or made partaker of the heavenly gift, or of the Holy Ghost, but have many years since been fully awakened, and am deeply sensible of sin, both original and actual. My case is trust, and have lost my first love... I do not, I will not, despair; for ever since my sad defection, when I was almost without hope, when I had forgotten God, yet I then found he had not forgotten me. Even then he did by his Spirit apply the merits of the great atonement to my soul, by telling me that Christ died for me.<sup>173</sup>

It is hard to tell the meaning of this letter. Susanna is stating that she did not become a true believer for the first time in the experience at that communion service. She had already known Christ as her Savior for many years. This may be her meaning. She honestly admits that she 'had lost her first love', but she also declares that God had brought her back to himself.

Whatever the case, there is the evidence that she had probably known the Lord for a long time and was confident in the salvation to which he manifestly came as the result of this experience late in her life.

Soon Susanna would be called upon to suffer another death in her family. She had recently buried her first-born, Samuel Wesley Jr. And now she attended the funeral of her last-born. Her youngest daughter Kezia, who had suffered heartbreak when the profession of love made to her by Westley Hall had proved to be false, passed away in

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<sup>173</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley: The Mother of John & Charles Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1996), 164.



March 1741. “Full of thankfulness, resignation and love, without pain or trouble, she commended her spirit into the hands of Jesus, and fell asleep.”<sup>174</sup>

Susanna’s was now at the end of her life. Known for her Vigor in her youth and throughout much of her life, perhaps she was not so in private reality. In these waning years she certainly was much more fragile. Her daughter Emilia spoke of her as repeatedly enduring suffering, ‘occasioned by want of clothes or convenient meat.’ And Susanna herself said;

I have many years suffered much pain and great bodily infirmities... Those very sufferings have, by the blessings of God, been of excellent use, and proved the most proper means of reclaiming me from a vain conversation; insomuch that I cannot say I had been better without this affliction, this disease, this loss, want, contempt or reproach. All my sufferings ... have concurred to promote my spiritual and eternal good.<sup>175</sup>

John’s ministry involved him in much travel and time away from home. But three of Susanna’s daughters lived in London, and kept in touch with home. He received a note from one of his sisters, telling him that his mother was near death. He rode post-haste to London and found her, he said:

... on the borders of eternity. But she had no doubt or fear; nor any desire but (as soon as God should call) “to depart and to be with Christ.”<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley: The Mother of John & Charles Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1996), 165.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 164.

The family gathered at John's apartment the following day. Susanna's Daughters Emilia, Hetty, Anne, and Martha all came to John's apartment and gathered in prayerful solemnity around her bed. John's *Journal* continues;

I sat down on the bedside. She was in her last conflict; unable to speak, but, I believe, quite sensible. Her look was calm and serene, and her eyes fixed upward, while we commended her soul to God. From three to four the silver cord was loosing and the wheel breaking at the cistern; and then, without any struggle, or sigh or groan, her soul was set at liberty. We stood around the bed, and fulfilled her last request, uttered a little before she lost her speech, "Children, as soon as I am released, sing a psalm of praise to God."<sup>177</sup>

John's *Journal* continues that they don't know what they sang as a hymn. But one very appropriate hymn might have been on that Charles wrote. It begins:

Happy soul, thy days are ended,  
All thy mourning days below;  
Go, by angel bands attended,  
To the sight of Jesus go!  
Waiting to receive thy spirit,  
Lo, the Savior stands above;  
Shows the purchase of his merit,  
Reaches out the crown of love.

John also reports in his *Journal* on the funeral service of his mother. He says:

August 1, Sunday, almost an innumerable company of people being gathered together, about five in the afternoon I committed to the earth the body of my mother, to sleep with her fathers. The portion of Scripture from which I afterwards spoke was, 'I saw a great white throne, and him that sat upon it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God, and the books were opened; and the dead were judged out of those things which were

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<sup>177</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley: The Mother of John & Charles Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1996), 165.

written, in the books, according to their works.' It was one of the most solemn assemblies I ever saw, or expect to see on this side of eternity.<sup>178</sup>

Susanna was laid to rest at Bunhill Fields cemetery, where such eminent Christians as John Owen and Isaac Watts are also buried. The stone placed over the grave bore the inscription:

Here lies the body  
Of  
MRS SUSANNA WESLEY  
The youngest and last surviving daughter of  
Dr. Samuel Annesley

In sure and steadfast hope to rise  
And claim her mansion in the skies,  
A Cristian here her flesh laid down,  
The cross exchanging for a crown.  
True daughter of affliction, she,  
Inured to pain and misery,  
Mourned a long night of grieves and fears,  
A legal night of seventy years.  
The father then revealed his Son,  
Him in the broken bread made known;  
She knew and felt her sins forgiven  
And found the earnest of her heaven.  
Meet for the fellowship above,  
She heard the call, 'Arise my love!'  
'I come,' her dying looks replied,  
And lamb-like as her Lord she died.

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<sup>178</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley: The Mother of John & Chares Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1996), 165

Susanna Annesley Wesley died on 23 July 1742. She was in her seventy-fourth year.<sup>179</sup>

In these days, Susanna Wesley has taken a rightful place in the great window in Liverpool Cathedral, which was designed to honor the saintliest women of the Christian ages. John's career achievements and prominence may have played a part in her selection. It didn't matter. John Wesley was her masterpiece and her diploma in the art of Christian motherhood!<sup>180</sup>

For Susanna Wesley there was no fear, no mystery, no darkness. Death was a welcome release, a being set free from earthly cares, from pain and trial. The bonds were finally broken that bound her to time and sense. She was content to meet her redeeming Lord and be at peace. Though Susanna had nothing of earth's goods to leave to her children, she possessed many qualities of character that she passed on to each of them, in varying measure.<sup>181</sup>

Susanna had set apart an hour each day, apparently from six to seven in the evening, to be alone with God. During that time she read the Scriptures, meditated and prayed, and she allowed virtually nothing to prevent her from fulfilling this practice. In doing so, she set an example that her children could never forget.

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<sup>179</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley: The Mother of John & Charles Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Baker Book House, 1996), 166.

<sup>180</sup> James Richard Joy, *John Wesley's Awakening* (New York, New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937), 29.

<sup>181</sup> Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley: The Mother of John & Charles Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Baker Book House, 1996), 167.

The trials that followed her to the end of her life never subdued her. She was unusually patient with her dominating and incompetent husband, the poverty the family endured, several devastating disappointments, and of course the loss of loved ones. Her perseverance was a remarkable feature of her character and she passed this on in turn to each of the girls. The same quality was manifest in the ministries of John and Charles, as they repeatedly faced the violence of outraged mobs. Yet they found the strength and patience to preach the gospel to these same people the next day, and won many of them to Christ.

Susanna had none of the wit that was frequently displayed by her husband, but she had about her a sincerity that governed all her actions and gave a definite purpose to her life. Similarly, although we are not given any information as to what education she received as a girl, we have seen that by the time she reached maturity she possessed a wide vocabulary, used the English language with precision and had knowledge of theology superior to that of many ministers.<sup>182</sup>

The above qualities of mother Susanna Wesley lived on in her children in varying degrees. But the world can be especially thankful that her sons Charles and John possessed them. Charles lifted the joy of the church with his Christian songs. The masterly evangelistic career of John, culminating in his organizing of the Methodist Church, was a lasting blessing to the church. Of course their father, Samuel must not be forgotten as an influence, but it was especially from their mother, Susanna that they inherited the qualities which enabled them to achieve so much.

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<sup>182</sup> James Richard Joy, *John Wesley's Awakening*, (New York, NY: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937), 168

All who knew her and all of us that remember her legacy, will carry a deep sense of Susanna's wealth of knowledge, her rare patience and self-sacrificing goodness. Many now and then can readily obey the scriptural injunction to 'rise up and call her blessed'!<sup>183</sup>

### Sophia Hopkey

John Wesley's first love was Sophia Hopkey. He met Sophia in America, in the colony of Georgia. James Richard Joy describes in a very detailed way in his book, *John Wesley's Awakening*, how John engaged in a passionate, if short-lived romance with Sophia Hopkey and chronicles their good times and bad ones.<sup>184</sup>

The emotional life of John Wesley was under no such rigid discipline as his body and his intellect. Possibly his restricted social contacts in youth, when he had few associates except his sisters, and his intense devotion to his mother, had something to do with this. His cloistered schooldays at the Charterhouse and at Oxford may further help to explain his deficiencies at this point. In the presence of attractive young women he was highly 'susceptible.' Betty Kirkham, the sister of his college friend, was the first. The glamorous 'Aspasia,' Mrs. Pendarves, to whom he addressed such romantic and florid epistles, was another. On the shipboard he met married women, whose counterfeit response to his sincere interest in their souls' welfare he took for genuine. But it was in Savannah that his usefulness was wrecked by an unfortunate, and to him most painful, romance.<sup>185</sup>

Sophia Hopkey, the niece of Mr. Causton, the keeper of the colony stores and chief magistrate, was comely, gentle, teachable, and just turned eighteen. And there was

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<sup>183</sup> James Richard Joy, *John Wesley's Awakening* (New York, NY: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937), 169.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-52.

<sup>185</sup> James Richard Joy, *John Wesley's Awakening* (New York, NY: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937), 47.

the young bachelor preacher, well-bred, charming in conversation, singularly handsome in his delicate way, and as innocent as a babe. Wesley's personality must have stood out among Sophia's possible suitors. Naturally, Sophia attended church, and enrolled in his classes. He even accepted her as a private pupil in French. People gossiped about them when Wesley had her take breakfast at the parsonage so as to improve her accent over the muffins! His affections probably took him over before he realized what was happening to him. He was now thirty-three, very sure of himself in most respects, but not in the affairs of love. John he favored celibacy for clergymen, but when he met Miss Hopkey his resolve went out the window! She bewitched him, and did not turn away his attentions. Sophia's Uncle Causton may have realized that an alliance between his niece and the rector might help him with the Georgia trustees in London in case certain irregularities in his accounts should ever come to their faraway eyes. Wesley did question his own judgment. He did not want to listen only to his heart. Wise elders whom he might have consulted, but at that time Oglethorpe, Charles and Spangenberg were all out of the place of the colony. He talked the matter over dubiously with the German pastor. Finally, he decided against pursuing the relationship. Though heartbroken, he was determined to move on. A whole year later he wrote;

She was such a companion as I never expected to find again, should I live a thousand years twice - told...The desire of my eyes, the joy of my heart, the one thing upon earth which I longed for.

All this he had surrendered to his sense of duty to God.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> James Richard Joy, *John Wesley's Awakening* (New York, NY: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937), 49.

Sophia Hopkey soon comforted herself by marrying a man named Williamson English, who according to Wesley was “not remarkable, for handsomeness, neither for greatness, neither for wit, or knowledge or sense, and least of all for religion.” It was a bad situation, but Wesley made it worse by writing her a letter in which he charged her with “deliberate dissimulation” before her marriage and neglect of her religious duties after. Shortly afterward he notified her that he would not admit her to communion unless she made public repentance of her fault.

By this time Wesley had been in Georgia seventeen months. Despite all of his best efforts and unceasing labor, and his devotion to the sick and unfortunate, he was not at all understood and was unpopular with the rank and file of the little community. His obstinate resistance to the repeal of the anti-liquor law, and protest against attempts of the planters to introduce slave labor made him unpopular. In the Hopkey incident Mr. Causton the magistrate saw an opportunity to blacken the reputation of the upright and inflexible little minister, destroy his influence and perhaps rid the colony of his presence, which was a rebuke to all misdoers high and low.<sup>187</sup>

Mr. Williamson sued Wesley for defaming his wife by refusing her the sacrament. At a packed grand jury convened, some of whom could not speak English, the group indicted him on ten counts, on nine of which, being offenses against canon law, the civil tribunal had no jurisdiction. The political forces lined up against Wesley, blocking a fair hearing and keeping the proceedings going month after month. The result was disastrous for Wesley’s reputation. Even when the court did have jurisdiction, they denied him a

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<sup>187</sup> James Richard Joy, *John Wesley’s Awakening* (New York, NY: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937), 50.



trial. On six subsequent occasions he appeared in court and asked for a hearing, but in vain. Evidently, it was a ploy to ruin Wesley by legal means. They succeeded. His work was seriously impaired, and eventually Mr. Wesley, despairing of justice, notified Mr. Causton of his intention to return to England, and posted this notice in the public square:

Whereas John Wesley is design shortly to set out for England. This is desire those who have borrowed any books of him to return them as soon as they conveniently can to John Wesley.<sup>188</sup>

On November 27 John Wesley departed Savannah and Georgia, and never returned. After a sixteen day journey in an open boat, travelling through wilderness, he arrived in Charleston. On December 22 he sailed for England, and arrived there on February 1, 1738. Incidentally, that was the very day that George Whitefield had sailed for Georgia.<sup>189</sup>

Wesley could look back at his time in the New World with regret but not disgrace. He had fulfilled his prescribed duties conscientiously and with high standards, suffered due to hardships, even if he came up short on handling his relationships maturely. Perhaps his father and mother would have been proud of his service. Whitefield, who came on the Georgia scene shortly after Wesley's exit, testifies:

The good Mr. Wesley has done in America is inexpressible. His name is very precious among the people; and he has laid a foundation that I hope that neither men nor devils will be able to shake. Oh, that I may follow him as he has followed Christ!" Wesley himself declares: "Many reason I have to America. Hereby I trust He hath in some measure humbled me and proved me and shown

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<sup>188</sup> James Richard Joy, *John Wesley's Awakening* (New York, NY: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937), 50.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 51.

me what was in my heart. Hereby I have been taught to beware of men. Hereby God has given me to know many of His servants, particularly those of the church at Herrnhut. Hereby my passage is open to the writings of holy men in the German, Spanish and Italian tongues. All in Georgia have heard the word of God and some have believed and have heard the word of God and some have believed and have begun to run well. A few steps have been taken toward publishing the glad tidings both to the African and American heathens. Many children have learned how to serve God and to be useful to their neighbor.<sup>190</sup>

Doubtless he was led to this by observing the value of congregational singing to the Germans on shipboard and in Georgia. He had, in fact, borrowed their tune-book, of which only two precious copies are known to exist. It contains many of Watts' hymns, several by George Herbert, three of Addison's from *The Spectator*, of which two are still in the Methodist Hymnal, numerous translations, and pieces by his father and elder brother.<sup>191</sup>

As Wesley travelled eastward, he was quite reflective on his experience in Georgia, eager to learn from it and grow spiritually. He wrote:

I went to America to convert Indians, but oh, who shall convert me? Who, what, is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of unbelief? I have a fair summer religion. I can talk well, nay, and believe myself when no danger is near. But let death look me in the face and my spirit is troubled. Nor can I say 'to die is gain.' The faith I want is a sure trust and confidence in God that through the merits of Christ my sins are forgiven, and I reconciled to the favor of Christ. . . . I want that faith which none can have without knowing that he hath it!<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Garth Lean, *Strangely Warmed: The Amazing Life of John Wesley* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1979), 50.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 52.

Perhaps the love affair with Sophia Hopkey, and the aftermath of tangled, damaged relationships that followed, instructed John's heart in not only the ways of love, but of the world; not only about doing things, even ministry correctly, but doing them with heart, sensitivity, and emotional intelligence. Indeed, he may also have learned the first lesson of faith, that saving grace and the companionship of the Holy Spirit comes only to those who abandon pretense, pride, and place, and open their whole mind and heart to the power of the living God. These trying years in the New World at last convinced Wesley that what he needed most was to become a New Creature.<sup>193</sup>

### Grace Murray

At least from this historical distance, John Wesley's thinking about marriage seems somewhat rigid. It would not be strange that he might carry memories within his heart of the strained and troublesome relationship of Susanna and Samuel, his parents. If he was wary of romantic entanglements that would lead to similar misery, it is forgivable that he might wish to avoid them. But avoid them he did not! Whatever conscious reserve he had about love relationships, he threw to the wind with the coming of Grace Murray into his life. John was shocked by brother, Charles' impending marriage. His brother had, six years earlier, written *Thoughts on Marriage and Celibacy*. A sample of his discussion is as follows:

It was a pamphlet in which allowed as how the lawful right of the Christian servant was to marry, even though some might respond to an even higher calling to remain celibate so as to be available for the arduous tasks and demands of

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<sup>193</sup> Garth Lean, *Strangely Warmed: The Amazing Life of John Wesley* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1979), 53.

ministry, and not be limited by the claims of marriage and household. Charles had especially cautioned against entering into relationship with one love who would be above all others, and demand the expenditure of time, money, energy, and commitment that could be given instead to God. “We may safely say,” John concluded, “blessed are they who abstain from things lawful in themselves, in order to be more devoted to God.”<sup>194</sup>

In June 1749, this pamphlet had come up for review before the Conference, and John noted in his *Journal*, as quoted by Lean:

“In a full and friendly debate my brethren convinced me that a believer might marry without suffering loss to his soul.” John officiated at Charles’ wedding to Sally following April. Charles entered in his diary: “We were cheerful without mirth, serious without sadness; and my brother seemed the happiest person amongst us.”<sup>195</sup>

In the tumultuous decade after 1739, John and Charles alternated in their travels Bristol and London. Each pursued the other in their strenuous, dangerous journeys through Cornwall, Ireland, and the North. In 1744, Charles spent the year in London, Bristol, Cornwall, Staffordshire, Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, Newcastle, Nottingham, and intervening places. In 1746 he was four months in London, six in Bristol, and the West Country, and the rest in the North. In 1748, the year before his marriage, he spent six months in Ireland.<sup>196</sup>

Unlike John, Charles did not read on his journey—in fact, as the years went on he read less and less, though he continued his passion for writing hymns. Even after his fall

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<sup>194</sup> Garth Lean, *Strangely Warmed: The Amazing Life of John Wesley* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1979), 102.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>196</sup> *ibid.*, 101.

from a horse near Ripley in 1743, he was able to report that it “spoiled my making hymns till the next day.” He shared John’s burning love of the poor and suffering, and his courage, though Charles was perhaps of a more pugnacious variety, derived like much of his character from his father. He was better known in his day for his preaching than his hymn writing, and he had the same winning personality as his brother. Riding into Bristol in a September 1740, he encountered a large group of surly colliers, considered to be wild, desperate men, murderers, heathen brutes, beyond the touch of church, charity, or instruction. They were on the way to the city to start a riot. Yet such was the force of Charles’ presence and such was the affection in which he held, the many turned back with him to Kingswood, while the rest conducted an orderly protest to the city fathers. “Like a flaming seraph,” Charles glowed with sacred love and music; and no toil, no danger or persecution was too great to be encountered.”<sup>197</sup>

By 1757, however, Charles had almost ceased to travel and he had happy marriage in 1749 to Sally Gwynne, the pretty daughter of a Welsh landowner and the possessor of a lovely voice. Matrimony has quite maimed Charles and might have John and George Whitefield. Certainly, Charles became more stable and reliable after marriage. Sally had promised to allow him to continue traveling and had dissuaded her mother from exacting a promise, before marriage, that he would no more go to Ireland. Yet he never did set foot in Ireland again.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Garth Lean, *Strangely Warmed: The Amazing Life of John Wesley* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1979, 102.

<sup>198</sup> Maldwyn Edwards, *My Dear Sister* (Manchester: Penwork (Leeds) Ltd., 1974), 37.

All this is prelude to saying that Charles seemed to have had a change of heart when it came to love and marriage. This must have raised confusion in John's mind, to say the least. Still, John himself had been contemplating matrimony, even before his brother's pamphlet stirred up debate about it in his mind.

In August 1748, he was ill with a fever in Newcastle. He had been nursed by Grace Murray, who was a fascinating widow of thirty-two. Grace went through a stormy youth, got married, was converted to Christianity and suffered widowhood. She was playing a prominent part in the Methodist headquarters there. After recovering somewhat John proposed to her. She replied: "This is too great a blessing for me; I cannot tell how to believe it. This is all I could have wished under heaven!" From that time Wesley regarded her as his fiancée. When he left Newcastle, she traveled with him into Derbyshire, where Wesley left her with another of her former patients, John Bennett, one of the few scholars among his itinerants. John was chagrined and astonished to receive a letter a few days later from Grace and Bennett, who asked for his permission to be married. What a trembling sad news for John Wesley!<sup>199</sup>

From what ensued, it can be determined that all parties were in misery about the love entanglement. Whenever Grace was near Wesley she pledged him her undying love. Whenever she was with Bennett she loved only him. Once Grace traveled to Ireland with Wesley and he noted:

She was to me, both servant and friend, as well as fellow laborer in the Gospel; she provided everything I wanted and told me with all faithfulness and freedom, if

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<sup>199</sup> Garth Lean, *Strangely Warmed: The Amazing Life of John Wesley* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1979), 102.

she thought anything amiss in my behavior. The more we conversed together, the more I loved her.<sup>200</sup>

Grace seemed was flattered and bewildered to have two forceful and talented men vying for her affections.<sup>201</sup>

Charles in due course found out about this love triangle and determined to put a stop to it. He carried Bennett and Grace off to Newcastle, reconciled them, and discredited his brother by a mixture of deception, fury, and common sense. He did not leave Grace and Bennett until he had seen them married.<sup>202</sup>

Charles Wesley was a “sincere, but irritated, impetuous and official friend.” Cownley, a friend of all and Bennett’s confidant in the affair, said: “If Grace consulted her ambition she will marry Mr. Wesley; if she consulted her love she will marry Bennett”” This may not have been far from the truth.<sup>203</sup>

By intervening, Charles was surely well meaning, but was also displaying some complicated motives. He believed that Grace was first promised to Bennett and that John’s good name would not survive his ‘stealing’ her. However, when he told the Newcastle society that “if John is not damned there is no God” he was convinced that John would break up the societies if he married so much beneath him socially and believed, somewhat ironically that marriage would curtail John’s usefulness. There were

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<sup>200</sup> Garth Lean, *Strangely Warmed: The Amazing Life of John Wesley* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1979), 102.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 105.

also personal motives. Charles was irritated that John had not told him of the affair and he seems also to have feared that a wife might knock him out of first place in his brother's affection. It may be that Charles was a 'chip off the old block', in an insensitivity reminiscent of old Samuel. He seemed quite unaware that he had bitterly hurt John. He sensed that, thereafter, his brother had less affection for him, even after Whitefield brought them together in a touching scene. John was indeed a little wary, but the evidence is that any coldness through the years was rather on Charles' side and was caused by unrecognized forces within himself.<sup>204</sup>

John's character shines clearly through the whole affair. Offering three times to give up Grace to Bennett, he was only deterred when Grace pleaded: "I am determined by my conscience as well as by inclination to live and die with you." John was terribly disappointed. Despite this, within a day of his hearing of the Bennett's marriage he was preaching at Leeds. He went to Newcastle and faced down the rumors Charles had spread about him, and within a week to the next two weeks he even went to help John Bennett in his work in Rochdale.<sup>205</sup>

John only once commented on the affair to anyone. In this letter to a friend he wrote:

Since I was six years old, I never met with such a severe trial as for some days fast. For ten years God had been preparing a fellow laborer for me by a wonderful train of providences. Last year I was convinced of it; therefore I delayed not, but as I thought, made all sure beyond a danger of disappointment. But we were soon after torn asunder by a whirlwind. In a few months, the storm was over; I then used more precaution than before and finally told myself that the day of evil

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<sup>204</sup> Garth Lean, *Strangely Warmed: The Amazing Life of John Wesley* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1979), 105.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.



would return no more. But it too soon returned, the waves rose again since I came out of London. The whole world fought against me; but above all, my own familiar friends. Then was the word fulfilled, 'Son of man, behold, I take away from thee the desire of thine eyes with a stroke.' The fatal irrevocable stroke was struck on Tuesday last.<sup>206</sup>

To relieve his mind, John wrote a poem of lament while riding between Leeds and Newcastle. He called it, *A Short Account of the Whole*. The manuscript, in his exquisite writing with its many abbreviations and the distortions from the horse's trot, still exists. He does not reproach or scold his brother in it, though it is evident that his pain is great.<sup>207</sup>

Oh Lord, I bow my sinful Head!  
 Righteous are all Thy ways with Man.  
 Let suffer me with Thee to plead,  
 With lowly Reverence to complain:  
 With deep, unutter'd Grief to groan  
 O what is this that Thou hast done?  
 But he turns to face the future:  
 Teach me from every pleasing snare  
 To keep the Issues of my hear;  
 Be thou my Love, my Joy, my Fear!  
 Thou my eternal Portion art,  
 Be Thou my never-failing Friend,  
 And love, O love me, to be End!<sup>208</sup>

No matter who Wesley would eventually marry, he would not permit the marriage to dampen his zeal to love and serve God. He yearned for a wife who could love him and make a serene and contented home for the two of them. It is true that for a time Societies would have been divided in their view of the marriage. Yet, as people got to know of

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<sup>206</sup> Garth Lean, *Strangely Warmed: The Amazing Life of John Wesley* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1979), 105.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 107.

Grace's qualities, criticism would have quickly died and she would have been accepted as his true helpmeet. In the whole of the story, Charles must bear a heavy blame. His insecurities, probably fueled by John's public adulation, got the better of him. He blundered, even though his intentions were noble.

John Wesley and Grace Murray were to see each other again, only when they were in their advancing old age. That was a brief, perfunctory encounter. After John Bennett's death, Grace led an exemplary life. She conducted weekly meetings for prayer and fellowship and gave herself to the upbringing of her five boys. Later she moved to Derbyshire and was known for her saintliness and good works. She died 1803 in her eighty-fifth year. In a lonely churchyard near Chapel-en-le-Firth, There is a tombstone on which her name and dates of birth and death are inscribed, and underneath the memorable words: "His faithfulness is not mine".<sup>209</sup>

What can be said of the impact John's love affair with Grace had on him, his thought, and the religious practice? It is clear that John faced a test of whether he would allow his affections to override his good sense in order to have a life of contented love. He probably matured in his understanding of grace, seeing that human volition places one in a position of moving towards or away from God. Wesley never allowed his painful human experiences to cloud his vision of a steady and reliable God, whose generative power goes out before the believer, and whose capacity to constantly remake new life from the ashes of the old, remained enduring.

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<sup>209</sup> Maldwyn Edwards, *My Dear Sister* (Manchester: Penwork (Leeds) Ltd., 1974), 37.

### Mary Vazeille

John Wesley entered what would eventually prove to be a very unhappy marital bond at the age of forty-eight. His bride was a rich widow, Mary Vazeille. Mary left him 15 years later, of which Wesley reported in his journal, "I did not forsake her, I did not dismiss her, I will not recall her."

Many of Christian followers of John Wesley might have some questions of why and how the ending came for the marriage. Wesley was initially hopeful about his union with Mary, who was his only wife in the whole of his eighty-nine year life time. Mary was a rich merchant's widow and had four children. She inherited all of the money and properties of her dead husband.

When John married Mary, John agreed that the fortune in Mary's possession be wholly secured for her and her four children. It was kind of contemporary prenuptial contract of marriage. By John's own express desire he never touched a penny of it. In general, when someone married to a rich spouse, there will be a certain desire to have some kind of benefits from the spouse. John Wesley's case was truly exceptional!<sup>210</sup>

The marriage was doomed to conflict from the very start. Mary was a middle-aged widow with a grown-up family who lived in great comfort, and now was asked to be a companion a religious man who was incessantly on the move and whose constant preoccupation was the welfare of the Methodist Societies. She did make an attempt to enter John's whirling world of ministry. A few weeks after their marriage she made a

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<sup>210</sup> Maldwyn Edwards, *My Dear Sister* (Manchester: Penwork (Leeds) Ltd., 1974), 39.

journey North with him and later in the summer, she accompanied him to Cornwall. In the following March she and one of her daughters endured the rigors and hardships of a further three months journey to north of England. But it was probably unrealistic to expect that Mary, at her age and with a background of ease and plenty, would be able to withstand the privation of an itinerant life that John Wesley would never expect would happen in his married life.<sup>211</sup>

It is natural to be curious as to why John Wesley married Mary Vazeille. One answer is that he was a jilted lover on the rebound. He was doubly shaken because in addition to his brother's impetuosity he had lived with the disillusionment of a Grace Murray's had retracted her oath, which he considered a fatal blow to a sealed and sacred bond. Although he forgave Charles, Grace, and even John Bennett, who cuts a somewhat sorry figure, he was not about to revisit such social disfavor or emotional pain.

John may also have envied his brother's happy marriage to Sally Gwyne, daughter of a Welsh squire, on April 8<sup>th</sup> 1749. He wanted such happiness for himself, and thought he would have it with Grace Murray. In a poem written at that promising time in his life, he dwells on her graces:

In early dawn of life, serene,  
Mild, sweet, and tender was her mood;  
Her pleasing form spoke all within  
Soft compassionately good;  
Listening to every wretch's care,  
Mingling with each her friendly tear,  
I saw her run, with winged speed,  
In works of faith and laboring love;

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<sup>211</sup> Maldwyn Edwards, *My Dear Sister* (Manchester: Penwork (Leeds) Ltd., 1974), 41.

I saw her glorious toil succeed,  
 And showers of blessing from above  
 Crowning her warm effectual prayer,  
 And glorified my God in her”<sup>212</sup>

So, when John’s own plans were disrupted he was resolved that Charles should never again be free to interfere.

Mary did attempt the long ministerial trips on and off for the first four years, but then stopped. She had experienced both the discomforts of travel and was given a cool reception by people who revered and were overawed by John. One would think she may have feared the mobs that they encountered as they travelled. She didn’t fit in, coming as she did from a different socio-economic background and religious affiliation. She was a person who needed John’s whole attention, and did not get it. She had an almost ungovernable temper, and a lively jealousy of Wesley’s friendship with other women, even coworkers. Within a year of the marriage, a friend of John, Vincent Perronet was expressing doubts about the marriage to Charles Wesley, who needed no convincing. He and his wife Sally were guests of Mrs. Vazeille for some days in 1750 and he found her to be “a woman of mournful spirit”. When Charles had been told about the nuptials without being previously consulted, he “retired to mourn” with his wife. His groaning continued for several days, he had no appetite, and could not bring himself to preach.”<sup>213</sup>

If we go back to the uncertainties left over from his love affair with Grace, John had continued his vigorous ministry. But perhaps his loneliness and vulnerability made

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<sup>212</sup> Maldwyn Edwards, *My Dear Sister* (Manchester: Penwork (Leeds) Ltd., 1974), 41.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

him more susceptible to a new romance before he was ready. In any case, he was soon involved with Mary Vazeille. Before travelling north, he had an accident on London Bridge. As he was rushing from the Foundry to Snowfields to meet his congregation he slipped on the ice and badly sprained his ankle. The northern tour had to be delayed. As would fate would have it, he took up his quarters in Mary Vazeille's house in Threadneedle Street where he engaged for some days in 'prayer, reading, and in Lessons for children'.<sup>214</sup>

John was always susceptible to Mary's kindness as he was to that of other women. Mary Vazeille proved a most capable nurse. Here is some of simultaneous connection that Grace Murray was also a nurse for him. At forty- eight, John felt time would not wait indefinitely for him to make up his mind. He rushed into the marriage, thinking the clock was ticking. Within the week he had not only proposed but had married. He was still hobbled by his injury and had a struggle to feel at ease preaching the following Sunday, having to kneel rather than stand. One can only assume that, once tension over his ministry began, John's doubts about the haste of the marriage surfaced.

By this time in life John acknowledged that he was not only completely settled in his habits and style of life, but that he was nevertheless prepared to make some concessions because of his married state.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Maldwyn Edwards, *My Dear Sister* (Manchester: Penwork (Leeds) Ltd., 1974), 42.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid*, 43.

John must have been exasperating to a woman who seemed somewhat self-centered and wanted the constant companionship of her husband, but Wesley was not prepared to give her this. Tensions mounted, and one would surmise, marital fighting. John stayed in His touch with his female workers and Mary became suspicious and jealous. She eventually published letters and even concocted some stories to try to ruin his reputation. Even this did not ruffle him. Through it all John treated Mary with gentleness and stayed in good humor with her, even when, in a bout of fury, she dragged him across the room by his hair! If it were not so sad and horrible, one might find humor in this incident. Whatever their emotions and grievances, sometimes it is hard to fathom the unhappy and frustrated spouse. I am sure John Wesley found it so!

We can very clearly evaluate the two minister's wives -- Rev. Samuel Wesley's wife Susanna and Rev. John Wesley's wife, Mary-- and compare their points. The result of evaluation is that, so far as character goes, Susanna far outshines Mary. At least it seems so from the record.

Sadly, on the 27<sup>th</sup> January, 1758 Wesley wrote to Sally (Charles' wife) that his wife, after many harsh, unkind words, had left him. Mary had vowed to see him no more. Yet, Mary seemed to come and go, apparently oblivious to the hurt she was causing John. Often she went off only to return again. At last, on January 23<sup>rd</sup> 1771, John wrote the famous words "For what purpose I knew not, my wife set out for Newcastle, purposing never to return. I have not left her; I have not sent her away; I will not recall her." But Mary did return, only temporarily. On October 2<sup>nd</sup> 1778 John penned and sent to Mary perhaps the most trenchant letter of rebuke ever written by a famous man to his wife, as follow:

“You have laid innumerable stumbling blocks in the way both of the wise and unwise. You have served the cause and increased the number of rebels, deists, and atheists; and weakened the hands of those that love and fear God. If you were to live a thousand years twice told, you could not undo the mischief which you have done. And till you have done all you can towards it, I bid you Farewell”.<sup>216</sup>

Mary died in 1781 as Wesley was in the West of England. He was not even informed. On October 12<sup>th</sup> 1781 he recorded in the *Journal*:

I came to London and was informed that my wife died on Monday”. The thirty-year martyrdom had come to an end. Mary left her estate to her son, and only a ring to Wesley. She had the last word after all!<sup>217</sup>

As far as the troubled marriage went, John was as calm as his brother was agitated. Sally related years after:

‘I shall never forget the manner in which my father accosted my mother on his return after that talk. “My brother” he said, “He is indeed an extraordinary man. I placed before him the importance of the character of a minister and the evil relative and public motive to answer for time, my life, did I except my reputation? No, tell Sally I shall take her to Canterbury tomorrow.”’<sup>218</sup>

Indeed, John seems at a point in his life wherein he was philosophical about the struggles of wedded life as well as settled into a well-earned wisdom about the flaws in human nature. He had been hammered on the anvil of a faith formation that gave a back seat to the temporal emotions and petty conflicts of people trying to get along. Instead, his vision of the work ahead God blocked out for him so clearly called on him to transcend these in favor of a relationship with the divine that would be pure and noble.

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<sup>216</sup> Maldwyn Edwards, *My Dear Sister* (Manchester: Penwork (Leeds) Ltd., 1974), 43.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>218</sup> Garth Lean, *Strangely Warmed: The Amazing Life of John Wesley* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1979), 106.



Would a happier marriage have dulled John's commitment to God and ministry? An unhappy one certainly did not.

It is difficult to deny that Charles' inaction and becoming sedentary was tied up with his own marriage. All his life, he had sought dependence on others--the first on his brother Samuel, then on John, and for his last forty years upon his much loved wife, Sally. In comparison to his famous brother, in temperament and character, Charles was the more problematic one. He retained what seemed like ambivalence towards John's success and contentment, and remained insensitive and avoided responsibility towards the troubles his behavior inflicted on others, including John. That said, Charles continued, through his hymns especially, to make a great contribution to the awakening that cannot be denied. He was, perhaps, the greatest hymn-writer of all time, and no one without a deep and continuing Christian experience could have written as he did, even if as a marriage broker and manager of John's romantic life, he was a bust.

## CONCLUSION

When we stand at the intersection of powerful narratives that surround the life, times, loves, and spiritual development of John Wesley, we are blessed with insight and privileged to see the power of almighty grace at work. If we continue the metaphor of the “soup of salvation”, there were many ingredients that not only disposed Wesley to be present to God’s transforming action at Aldersgate, but which also poured into his theology and spiritual practices. As we have seen, John Wesley’s narratives combine in a tasty brew. But there were times he had to pause, savor the soup, and make decisions about how to combine or add to his life ingredients and flavor it into a whole and wholesome dish.

The story of John Wesley’s childhood is inspiring and at times heart-wrenching. Traces of divine intervention are distinctly clear in the nurturance of John Wesley’s early home. His mother, Susanna, was a remarkable woman, intellectually astute, solid of character, disciplined in her management of children and household, and assertive before her time. While she had many children to care for, her love and attention was lavished on John, and she saw his promise, and perhaps his future calling. His emotional responsiveness may have come primarily from his mother, but his father Samuel may have modeled it somewhat as well. In any case, John’s capacity to allow his heart to sway him in faith at his conversion experience is notable, since up to that point he relied so much on scholarship and order to carry his spirituality. Nevertheless, it is not a big leap from noticing the formal order strictly imposed by Susanna (but laced with love) to the

full development of Methodist practice, discipline, and ecclesiology that characterized the man John Wesley. Nor is it a stretch to trace the currents of divine presence at the biblical lessons Susanna so faithfully included in the Wesley home regimen, and the later scriptural holiness that Wesley would recommend to those whose sanctification and formation in faith was in progress. The fire in the parsonage home, his amazing rescue (which he assisted mightily by standing on a table to be seen through window) seemed to solidify for him as well as his parents that he was “a brand plucked from the fire” for a special and holy purpose. This phrase itself refers to the practice of harvesting glowing bits of misspent materials from a fireplace or stove, which could then be carried by utensils for that purpose to warming beds, or to other fireplaces in the house to kindle new fires. If one exercises imagination, a transfer of this image to a discussion of Wesleyan evangelism can certainly prove interesting. If, indeed, the preventing Spirit of God was complicit in John’s rescue, then we might also speculate that God had a special task for a special disciple. It seems from his own writings that John envisioned that he was spared death at an early age because the living God wanted him to burn so brightly in faith as to touch millions from every walk of life, moral character, nationality, race, gender, and socio-economic circumstance. If this was the case, then Wesley, whose own burnished soul was revived at Aldersgate, shone forth in the world like few others, and ignited faith near at hand and indeed throughout the earth. It is no accident that even today Methodism has devised a logo that incorporates a flame wrapped around a cross, and it is not mistakenly a symbol of the way the Holy Spirit, the comforter, continues the work of Christ. John Wesley lived and breathed the conviction that his primary mission

in life was to join and give his all to this converting and transformative work of the burning Spirit.

Another profound narrative surrounding the life of Wesley was that of his formal education. That learning equipped him to keep a realistic perspective on human nature and the capacity of people to do evil. He, himself had such evil directed at him in the form of the degradations he witnessed of his father, experience of poverty and want, taunts of skeptics and unbelievers, betrayals by loved ones, and so on. The record seems to show that he never waived in his conviction that, though the world and the people around him were on a collision course with error and cruelty, God's steady grace was plentiful enough to see him through.

The well-known story of Wesley's Aldersgate experience brings together some important elements of his life development and character. Perhaps he had grown tired of the legalism and tedium of an intellectualized and regimented faith, and imaginatively saw new possibilities in "enthusiastic", or charismatic religion. His love affairs, first with Sophia Hopkey, then Grace

Murray, had only ended in hurt, disappointment and sadness. If we were to raise questions about the conditioning Wesley had in his birth home about gender, romance, marriage commitment, and parenting, we would be hard pressed to find it spelled out well in print. What we can say is that he was raised by a powerful and determined mother, Susanna, among a brood of children, some females, of whom, like the times, only half survived. Wesley first learned not only of the puzzlement of feminine sexual power and beauty, but also of the fragility and temporality of human existence, not from books and

sermons, but from real life at home. He learned to share, save, sacrifice, and think of others first. These became the hallmarks of the Sanctified life for him, and of later Methodist praxis.

Of the female sex John Wesley must also have had a lasting impression of a mother who was pregnant a good bit of her early adult life, and whose intellect and ambition were largely sacrificed to finding ways to rear, educate, protect, and feed her children. He may also have internalized Susanna's reservations about marriage and cynicism towards broken marriage covenants. That wound, and the lingering scars from his failed romances seems to have been healed at Aldersgate, perhaps fostering a condition of receptiveness to divine leading and rebirth as a person. If he could not give his full heart and attention in trust to another person, perhaps he could give these to God. One of the facts that stand out about Wesley's development is that even fairly early on in his life he strongly identified himself as an ascetic. A reserve he had about marriage and home life, reinforced and then rejected by Charles, was that one had always to be ready to pick up and go minister to the downtrodden, sick, troubled, and soul-thirsty multitude. One could not do this without setting priorities and sticking with them. One could not endure such a life without sacrifices, even in personal relationships. And one could not sustain the energy and will that it takes to face the hostile world of faithlessness without strong disciplines of the spirit, including prayer and fasting. It is not a far leap from *Lectio Divina* (Latin for divine reading, meditation and prayer intended to increase the knowledge of God's Word.) to Scriptural Holiness. It is not a great distance from the vow of poverty to the pecuniary practices of giving away most of one's wealth. And it is not

too much to say that the vow of chastity can also snare the moral conscience of one who sees that the demands of God's ministry supersede even the comforts of the marriage bed.

Wesley taught that there is a cadence in God's salvific action. It progresses from awareness of original sin and its consequences; to prevenient grace that goes out and paves the way to belief; to redemption, wherein God's intervention turns the person's life around so that the believer walks toward and not away from God; then to justification, which treats the believing heart as perfect before God, even while still struggling with earthly temptation; to sanctification, under which the believer is hammered and shaped into the image of God by spiritual practices centered on prayer and engagement with the Word of God. There was a hopefulness in this outlook that said that none were hopelessly lost, that all were the same before God, and that people have a choice and decision to make in the drama of divine transformative action.

C.S. Lewis, in his book, *Mere Christianity*, spends a good bit of his discussion upon a rational defense of Christianity against its naysayers and determined foes. But he allows a peek into his heart in this instructive passage:

The perfect surrender and humiliation were undergone by Christ: perfect because He was God, surrender and humiliation because He was man. Now the Christian belief is that if we somehow share the humility and suffering of Christ we shall also share in His conquest for death and find a new life after we have died and in it have become perfect, and perfectly happy, creatures....In Christ a new kind of man appeared: and the new kind of life which began in Him is to be put in us.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952). 47.

One cannot help but think that John Wesley believed this with all his heart. He was convinced that he was, after Aldersgate, unalterably, and completely, a new creature who would journey the rest of his life with the living Christ.

Faith was thus a lifelong adventure for John Wesley, with new vistas of engagement with the hovering presence of a caring God ever possible. One can only bring to mind the adventuresome spirit and assertive intention of Susanna in shaping this outlook.

Once Wesley had quaffed down this soup of salvation, he seemed always energized, never surprised by new and bold challenges, not thrown by events, and steady and sweet in his relationships with all around him. Even the souring of his only marriage did not finally discourage him or dissuade him for a moment from the path of obedience to the call to serve Jesus Christ and to be more like him. The aroma of the theological soup and tasty practice of his Christian stance in faith would waft across mountains, oceans, and national boundaries. He seemed to live gratefully, joyful that the mighty and divine God had fed him the bread of life and the soup of salvation, and he was full enough and energized enough to take anything and meet every new challenge.

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