

Church History, Lesson #25

(This lesson is based on The Story of Christianity by Justo Gonzalez.)

John and Charles Wesley and the Methodist movement...

- John Wesley (1703 – 1791) was born June 17, 1703 to Samuel and Susanna Wesley.
 - Samuel Wesley was an Anglican priest.
 - Susanna's father was an Anglican priest.
 - 19 children... 10 survived...
 - Funny story – They were both Tories, but Samuel acknowledged William of Orange as king, and Susanna did not. At one point, after Samuel prayed for God's blessing on the King, she refused to say amen. He promptly left for 1 year on church business (1701). When he returned in 1702 Queen Anne whom they both acknowledged as legitimate, was on the throne. John was born in 1703, in some sense, a product of their reconciliation.
 - Because of Samuel's frequent travels on church business, Susanna was left with the care and raising of the children. She was known as a very devout woman. She would sometimes cover her face with her apron to pray in the midst of the busy household.
- When John was 5 the family home burned and he was miraculously saved. From that point on, his mother considered him special and gave special attention to his spiritual upbringing. He considered himself a "brand plucked from the fire".
- As a student at Oxford John distinguished himself as both a scholar and a man of devout commitments.
- After graduation, he served in parish ministry alongside his father for a short time.
- He then returned to Oxford and joined the religious society started by his brother Charles. They became known as "The Holy Club" or "Methodists" because of their serious demeanor and commitment to serious spirituality. They committed themselves to personal examination and holiness, visiting prisons for ministry, receiving communion at least once a week, openness to critique from others in the society, and group Bible studies for 3 hours every afternoon. Because of his unique giftedness, John soon became the natural leader of this group.

Conversion –

- In late 1735, John Wesley sailed to Georgia to pastor Indians at the invitation of Governor Oglethorpe.
- A storm caused him to fear for his life.
- The calm reassurance of the Moravians on board caused him to ask questions and to even doubt his own faith.
- Once he reached Savannah, Wesley asked a Moravian leader, Gottlieb Spangenberg for advice on working as a pastor and missionary to the Indians. Spangenberg started by asking him about his own salvation! Here is John's journal entry:
He said, "My brother, I must first ask you one or two questions. Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit, that you are a child of God?" I was surprised, and knew not what to answer. He observed it, and asked, "Do you know Jesus Christ?" I paused and said, "I know he is the Saviour of the world." "True", replied he; "but do you know he has

saved you?" I answered, "I hope he has died to save me." He only added, "Do you know yourself?" I said "I do"... But I fear they were vain words.

- John failed miserably as a pastor to the Indians. He expected them to act like members of the "Holy Club" and they expected him to be satisfied if they just showed up for church.
- Eventually he left Georgia and returned home to England.
- Wesley didn't really know what to do, so he asked for spiritual advice from a Moravian, Peter Boehler. Boehler's advice was to "preach faith until he had it, and then preach it because he had it."
- Finally, on May 24, 1738, Wesley experienced the change of his life. Again... from his journal: *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."*

The beginnings of the Methodist Movement...

- After that experience, John no longer doubted his salvation and focused on the salvation of others.
- Meanwhile, George Whitfield, another member of the Holy Club had become famous for preaching outdoors to huge crowds of people, especially in Bristol, England.
- Because Whitfield needed to return to Georgia, he asked Wesley to come take over the work in Bristol. These meetings were fairly raucous with people moaning and crying out, and then expressing great joy when they felt delivered from evil. All of this show of emotion bothered Wesley, but he was eventually reconciled to it.
- Because the Anglican Church was so dead and because the converts needed spiritual feeding, Wesley organized his followers into "societies".
And because he didn't require wealth or education to lead one of these societies, there was a place in the movement for those who felt left out of the official structures of the Church of England.
- Of course, there was opposition. When the bishop of Bristol accused Wesley of disturbing the order of the parish ministry by traveling around and preaching, he said, "The world is my parish".
- Soon the movement even allowed for lay preachers. A preacher would be given a "circuit" and these circuits would be overseen by a "superintendent". Eventually, there was an "Annual Conference" where the lay preachers for the various "circuits" would be appointed, usually to a 3 year term.
- This simply organizational structure, plus the involvement of the laity, including women, made the movement adaptable and able to grow.

The success of Methodism:

- During the 1700's, especially the latter half, England was experiencing the Industrial Revolution, which prompted mass urbanization. The Church of England parish system couldn't adapt to the masses flooding to the urban centers. But the loosely organized, lay led Methodist societies quickly assimilated to transplanted population into their "small group" like ministry.
- In North America, the western frontier wasn't attractive to church leaders, but the Methodists, under the leadership of Francis Asbury, made sure that ministry moved west with the population under the leadership of circuit riding preachers.