

INTRODUCTION

John Benjamin Wesley was born June 17, 1703, fifteenth of the nineteen children of Samuel and Susannah Wesley. While at Oxford, Samuel Wesley became a High Church Tory, although both he and his wife came of dissenting stock: Their fathers and grandfathers were ejected from their livings as non-conformists in 1662. Samuel Wesley became the rector of the twin parishes of Epworth and Wroot in Lincolnshire. Sincere and concerned, although somewhat pugnacious, he saw little fruits of his labors over the many years. ¹⁾ He found a refuge from his disappointments and trials in scholarly work. His wife had retained the piety and discipline of her childhood. Coupled with a good educational background, it easily made her the stronger personality in the family, which she ruled with a firm, but loving hand. ²⁾

John Wesley was nominated for the Charterhouse school by the Duke of Buckingham, where he became a gown-boy in January, 1714. At the age of seventeen, he entered Christ Church, Oxford, with a scholarship of £ 40 a year. The lively, industrious student reached a crisis in 1725: His ordination was approaching. After being exposed to Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*, he writes to his mother, "I can't think that when God sent us into the world He had irreversibly decreed that we should be

For more detailed background information on persons, places and events, consult *Letters*, *Curnock* and *Sermons*.

¹⁾ See John Wesley's letter to his father. *Letters I*, p. 175 (*Works I*, p. 182; *Curnock I*, p. 476) and below, pp. 18-19.

²⁾ See letter from Susannah Wesley to her son John. *Curnock III*, pp. 34-39 (*Works I*, pp. 387-93), and below, pp. 1-9.

perpetually miserable in it.”¹⁾ He was ordained deacon September 19, 1725, and appointed Fellow of Lincoln College March 17, 1726. Shortly after he writes, “Leisure and I have taken leave of one another. I propose to be busy as long as I live, if my health is so long indulged me.”²⁾ The seeker after holiness had begun his journey.

A few years later, after a sojourn as his father’s curate at Epworth and Wroot, he returned to Oxford. Here he joined a small group of young men gathered around his brother Charles. Their purpose was to study the classics, the Bible, and books of divinity. John soon became the leader and other activities were taken up. Jails were visited; the sick and the poor were helped. A strict personal discipline was followed. Before long the other students endowed them with such epithets as “Sacramentarians,” “Bible-Moths,” “The Holy Club,” and “Methodists.” But through this fellowship John Wesley’s spiritual concern was slowly enlarged to also including others.

But the pilgrimage of the seeker had not yet come to an end. After years of intense labor and discipline in his quest for holiness, we find him in 1735 on his way to Georgia to convert Indians. Ironically enough, it appears that he never converted a single Indian. Instead he was saddled with the pastoral responsibilities of the town of Savannah, from which he returned February 1, 1738, dejected and restless, his mission a failure. He had, however, met a small group of Germans, coming from the Moravian community of Count Zinzendorf. While he, John Wesley, was afraid of dying, these simple people sang hymns and praised God in the midst of the storms. After his return to England,

¹⁾ *Letters I*, p. 16, also below, p. 10.

²⁾ *Letters I*, p. 34.

Wesley met another Moravian, Peter Böhler, who brought home to him the great Reformation doctrine of "Justification by faith alone." His uneasiness was intensified. Finally, on May 24th, 1738, John Wesley found what he had sought so long: ". . . 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." ¹⁾ He had been set free to free others. This pilgrimage, in terms of his preaching, he describes rather vividly. It parallels closely his inward growth,

(1) From the year 1725 to 1729 I preached much, but saw no fruit of my labour . . . (2) From the year 1729 to 1734, laying a deeper foundation of repentance, I saw a little fruit . . . (3) From 1734 to 1738, speaking more of faith in Christ, I saw more fruit of my preaching and visiting from house to house . . . (4) From 1738 to this time [1746],—speaking continually of Jesus Christ; laying Him only for the foundation of the whole building, making Him all in all, the first and the last; preaching only on this plan, 'The Kingdom of God is at hand; repent ye, and believe the gospel,'—the 'word of God ran' as fire among the stubble; it 'was glorified' more and more; multitudes crying out, 'What must we do to be saved?' and afterwards witnessing, 'By grace we are saved through faith'." ²⁾

It has been claimed, even today, that the essence of Wesley's life and message was the emphasis on the "burning heart." It is true, he was the indefatigable evangelist, crisscrossing the British Isles with the gospel of salvation: Salvation by faith was a present reality, and every true believer could receive the assurance that he was in a state of salvation *now* (an assurance which must not be confused with the assurance of final perseverance³⁾), which is an

¹⁾ *Curnock I*, p. 476 (*Works I*, p. 103), and below, p. 34.

²⁾ *Letters II*, p. 264 (*Works VIII*, pp. 468-9), and below, p. 59-60.

³⁾ See p. 39 below.

entirely different matter). The importance of Wesley's evangelistic efforts can hardly be over-estimated. But still, the evangelist with the warm heart shows only one side of this remarkable man. He said of himself: "I frequently find a want of more light; but I want heat more than light." ¹⁾—or, in another letter, "I am rarely led by impressions, but generally by reason and by Scriptures. I see abundantly more than I feel. I want to feel more love and zeal for God." ²⁾ Evidently, he felt he was more a man of clarity of thought and understanding than of "the warm heart."—Others have claimed that his greatness lies in his skill as organizer and administrator. True, he organized a system of "Societies", with subdivisions, which proved their usefulness and effectivity. But Wesley never clung to any form of organizational structure without good reason: When a need arose, he met it. He never forgot that an organizational structure was acceptable only as long as it served its ultimate purpose: To be instruments in saving souls and leading them on to perfection. Wesley's mission was not to build societies, but to make Christians.

But John Wesley was more. His *Journal*, and especially his letters, reveal a warm friend and a great pastor. His responsibility as a spiritual father continued as long as he lived. He convinced, he pleaded, he led, he comforted, and he rebuked, all from a heart filled with the love of God, a love which extended to all men, even his adversaries. The same concern and compassion made him a social reformer: helping the poor, healing the sick (he was in many respects ahead of the professional physicians of the time), ³⁾ fighting

¹⁾ *Letters VI*, p. 264.

²⁾ *Letters VII*, p. 319 (*Works XIII*, p. 66), and below, p. 105.

³⁾ See bibliography.

ignorance by starting schools and spreading literature. He promoted industry and cleanliness, and waged a constant war on such social evils as smuggling, robbing of wrecked ships (often with murder of survivors!), and slavery.

Nevertheless, while one or more of these many skills and activities have been acknowledged, one thing has generally been forgotten: John Wesley was a clear-thinking, well-read theologian. True, if by "theology" we mean speculative systems elaborately spun out in learned volumes, Wesley was not a great theologian. He wrote no "*Summa*" or systematic theology. But underlying and undergirding all his preaching, writing and action was a solid theological structure which enabled the Revival to weather the many theological storms of eighteenth-century England. His theology always directed him in his one great task: To spread the Gospel and save souls.¹) As early as 1729, and perhaps earlier, his theology began to emerge in terms of its ultimate goal: Holiness, restoration of the "image that was in Christ," perfect love. His was a theology of the *ordo salutis*. But it was first after his sojourn in Georgia and his encounter with the Moravians, that the fragments of his thought began to fall into place: Confusing justification and sanctification, he had tried to reach the goal through a strict, disciplinary life of selfless service. In accepting (and experiencing) "justification by faith alone" his theological structure was basically complete, hardly undergoing any later changes and then only in terms of emphasis.

Wesley was typically Anglican in his contradistinction

¹) *Letters V*, p. 316 (*Works XII*, p. 139).

of "opinion" and "essential doctrine": "Whatever is 'compatible with a love to Christ and a work of grace' I term an opinion." ¹⁾ "Opinions" are at best only a small part of religion. On the other hand, he strongly demanded agreement upon what he considered "essential doctrine." In a letter to "Various Clergymen" he mentions three: "(1) Original Sin. (2) Justification by faith. (3) Holiness of Heart and Life, provided their life be answerable to their doctrine." ²⁾ In another letter he is even more explicit: "Our main doctrines, *which include all the rest*, are three—that of Repentance, of Faith, and of Holiness. The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of religion; the next, the door; the third, religion itself." ³⁾ Repentance *must* come before faith. The "gate" of religion, faith (or justification ⁴⁾), "... is not only to believe that the Holy Scriptures and the Articles of our faith are true, but ... a sure trust and confidence which a man hath in God that by the merits of Christ his sins are forgiven and he reconciled to the favour of God."—"Religion itself" Wesley defines as "The loving God with all our heart and our neighbour as ourselves, and *in that love* abstaining from all evil, and doing all possible good to all men." ⁵⁾ Expressed negatively, it is being freed from "inbred" or "inherent" sin; positively, to be filled with the perfect love of God

¹⁾ *Letters IV*, p. 297 (*Curnock V*, pp. 115-8; *Works III*, pp. 211-4). Cfr. *Letters II*, p. 293 (*Works VIII*, p. 249).

²⁾ *Letters IV*, p. 237 (*Curnock V*, p. 61; *Works III*, p. 170). Cfr. *Letters IV*, p. 146 (*Works XII*, p. 264).

³⁾ *Letters II*, p. 268 (*Works VIII*, p. 472), and below, p. 63. The italics are ours.

⁴⁾ *Letters IV.*, p. 302 (*Works XII*, p. 255).

⁵⁾ *Letters II*, p. 269 (*Works VIII*, p. 474), and below, p. 66. The italics are ours.

(which is "Christian Perfection"). Undergirding this structure, as its fountain and foundation, stands the Atonement and life of Jesus Christ: "... the blood and righteousness of Christ being the sole meritorious cause of our salvation." ¹⁾ In sum: According to Wesley, repentance is given first, leading to a true faith. At the moment he receives this faith, a person is "justified" (pardoned and forgiven) and "regenerated", that is, instantaneously given a new life of faith ("New Birth"), and "sanctification" begun. The latter is a gradual "process," a "growing in grace", which may find its fulfillment in "entire sanctification" ("Christian Perfection"): In an instant, the heart is filled with the perfect love of God. Just as justification is by faith, so also is sanctification by faith through grace. Underlying and pre-supposed is God's love expressed in Christ's life and death. The believer is always in the danger, but not under the necessity, of falling away from grace, even from a state of Christian Perfection. God has ordained certain *ordinary* means by which the Christian may "Keep himself," such as Scripture, Sacraments, Prayer, and the Christian Fellowship.—The three main doctrines, for Wesley, do indeed include all the rest. Even though some aspects of his theology are only expressed *in passim*, they are still there, and find their rightful place within Wesley's theological structure.

The selections in this volume are taken from John Wesley's letters, with the exception of No. 1 (Letter to John Wesley from his mother), which describes life in the Epworth rectory and sheds light upon Wesley's childhood; and No. 6 (from Wesley's *Journal*), which gives his own

¹⁾ *Letters V*, p. 231. Cfr. *Letters III*, p. 372; *V*, p. 90 (*Works XII*, p. 246); *Letters VI*, pp. 297-8 (*Works XIII*, p. 34).

version of the happenings around what is perhaps the most important event in his life. The letters have been chosen for obvious reasons: They are immediate, personal and informal. They give intimate glimpses of the man, of his feelings, his thought and his character. They reveal his tender love for all men, but also his clear logic and sharp pen when defending himself against scurrilous attacks. The letters chosen present a fairly balanced view of the various aspects of Wesley's life, thought, and mission. Nevertheless, others might have been selected which would present an even fairer view. Be that as it may; it is hoped that the reader through this little volume may have his appetite whetted enough to pursue his Wesley studies more in depth. The bibliography, together with the notes, will aid in this endeavor.

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