

John Wesley (June 17, 1703- March 2, 1791)

His Life and Conversion (1)

John Wesley has been called the greatest 18th century Englishman, whose ministry and teachings influenced thousands of his own day, and millions of people since. He was a man of one ambition - to know and serve God. All of his life was directed to this end. He was born in a Christian home. His grand and great-grandfather had been pastors. His father, Samuel, was the scholarly but somewhat prickly rector of the Anglican Church in Epworth, a little market town.

His mother, Suzanna, was an extraordinary woman of beauty, learning, efficiency, and piety. She could read Greek, Latin, and French. She also read the church fathers. She gave birth to nineteen children, only nine survived to adulthood. She superintended the entire education of all her children, in addition to her numerous household tasks. She taught her children to recite the catechism and the prayers of the Church of England as soon as they were able to speak. And she not only taught her children the three R's, but also Latin, Greek, history, and literature. She also set aside one evening a week for each of her children to converse about the child's educational and spiritual development.

On top of all her work, she had to deal with constant financial stress due to the low stipend her husband received from the church. She disciplined with a firm hand but was not rigorous. As a child, John Wesley nearly died in a fire that devastated the parsonage and when two men of the town saved him, his mother praised God and exclaimed, "Is this not a brand plucked out of the burning?" The phrase stayed with Wesley throughout his life.

In 1720 John went to Christ Church College, Oxford, where he continued his classical studies. He became a lecturer in Greek at the University when he was only twenty-three years old. About this time he was joined by his younger brother Charles. Their university training laid a solid base for their great ministry later on in their lives. With his brother Charles, John formed the famous "Holy Club." It consisted of a little group of students who met together for the study of the New Testament, for self-examination and prayer. Because of their strict methodical lives they were contemptuously called - "Methodists." In 1725 John was ordained as a deacon and from this time his struggles to live the life of a Christian as he saw it took more and more of his energies. He excelled in his studies and earned bachelor's and master's degrees at Oxford. In addition to his studies he read a great deal of literature and was passionately interested in Shakespearean plays. After serving two years as his father's assistant, he returned to Oxford where he was ordained as a priest by the Church of England.

In 1735 John and Charles accepted an invitation to go to Georgia as chaplains in General Oghelthorpe's new American colony. John went with the intent to convert the Indians. Charles would become the secretary of Oglethorpe.

A group of Moravians boarded the same ship, and their calm during a violent storm at sea deeply impressed John. He studied German on board ship so that he could talk to the Moravians. The more he talked with them, both on the ship and later in Georgia, the more he felt that they had a faith and a certainty that still eluded him. At this time of his life John still trusted in his own works and righteousness for salvation. In his Journal John wrote that God gave him twenty-six Moravian brethren for companions, who endeavoured to show him "a more excellent way." "But I understood it not at first," John confessed, "I was too learned and too wise. So it seemed foolishness unto me. And I continued preaching, and following after, and trusting in, that righteousness whereby no flesh can be justified."

While ministering among the colonists John's knowledge of language was a great help. He preached not only in English, but also in German, in French and Italian. He even began to study Spanish to reach Spanish Jews with the Gospel.

For both John and Charles their mission tour was disastrous. Charles did not get along with the General, and John courted a young woman who rejected his attentions. Disillusioned, the two brothers returned to England.

John renewed his acquaintance with the Moravians by attending their services in London. One of the members read Martin Luther's preface to the Romans. Wesley writes; "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ and 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." His conversion was a momentous event in his life. It happened on May 24, 1738, quarter to nine in the evening. It was not until then that John obtained full assurance of salvation, which he had so long sought. He writes that after his conversion, "I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner spitefully used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there, what I now first felt in my heart." The tri-centennial of John Wesley's birth commemorates the overpowering illumination and conviction that "salvation by grace and faith alone" was not only a vital Reformation doctrine for him, but also a personal experience. The emphasis was now on the love and sacrifice of Christ. All that a man had to do was to accept the salvation bought for him by the blood of Christ shed on Calvary's cross. This knowledge released John from his relentless attempts to win God's approval by doing good works. His conversion released a force of explosive evangelical Christianity that led to the birth of Methodism.

"It was scarcely an exaggeration to say", writes Leckey in his *History of England in the Eighteenth Century*, "that the scene which took place in that humble meeting in Aldergate Street forms an epoch in English history. The conviction which then flashed upon one of the most powerful and active intellects in England is the true source of English Methodism."
(To be continued) Johan D. Tangelder