

## **John Wesley (June 17, 1703 - March 2, 1791.**

### **His Theology and Ministry (2)**

In Wesley's time the Church of England was in a deplorable spiritual state. Few had his spiritual zeal. Religion had become conventional and humdrum. Liberalism began to make its devastating inroads. Many of the educated in society questioned the authority of Scripture and the truth of the Christian faith itself. Sir William Blackstone (1723-1780), the celebrated jurist and influential expositor of British law, went to hear out of curiosity, every noteworthy clergyman in the city of London. His reaction to all these sermons was that he "did not hear a single discourse, which had more Christianity in it than the writings of Cicero. It would have been impossible for him to discover from what he heard whether its preacher were a follower of Confucius, of Mohammed, or of Christ." Blackstone's judgment may be harsh, but if his verdict referred to preachers favoured by the social circles in which he moved, his verdict was accurate because the cleansing of the church did not come from the upper classes of British society but from the middle and lower classes. In fact, revival of the church was bitterly opposed by the ruling hierarchy.

After his dramatic conversion, John Wesley brought the Gospel to regions where it was previously unknown. Amid markets, fairgrounds and coal-pits he boldly proclaimed the message of salvation. The reaction was fierce. Wesley and followers were persecuted and scorned by the Church, press and mob, by magistrates and "elite." Although Wesley was an ordained clergyman of the Church of England, he was prevented from preaching in his own denomination. Many of his erstwhile colleagues regularly used to shower their anathema over his head. What many people found disturbing was the Methodist "lay" preachers. They seemed at once to be a challenge to the established church and a challenge to society.

The 18th century was an age of satire. In plays and novels Wesley and the Methodist preachers were shown as religious fanatics or whining hypocrites, in popular prints, as the deceivers and exploiters of their flocks. Because he was shut out almost entirely from the pulpits of his church, Wesley organized societies to provide training for converts. Each society was composed of classes of twelve members. In 1746 he divided the societies in circuits and appointed preachers to make the rounds of the circuits. A superintendent directed the affairs of each circuit. Wesley kept tight control of all parts of the organization. He framed the *General Rules of the United Societies*, which have become a part of the constitution of the Methodist churches throughout the world. The records indicate that he frowned on preachers who use humour in their sermons. "Beware of clownishness," he warned his Methodist preachers. "Let your deportment before the congregation be serious, weighty and solemn."

The Methodist movement gradually drifted away from Anglicanism. By 1759 many people spoke of the movement as the Methodist Church, much to Wesley's dismay. He never intended to establish a new denomination. Leaving the Church of England did not enter his mind. But developments eventually did lead to the forming of a new denomination. After the American Revolution, Methodists were embarrassed by their association with the Church of England. Therefore, Wesley ordained Thomas Cooke as the first Methodist bishop in the United States and authorized the organization of the Methodist denomination in America. To the day of his death Wesley thought of himself as a loyal member of the Church of England. In 1775 he described himself as "a High Churchman, the son of a High Churchman," and in this opinion he never faltered. He thought of the Methodist movement as a movement within the Church and not against it. When he died on 2 March 1791, it was as a loyal son of the Church of England. In 1795, only four years after his death, the Methodist church officially withdrew from the Church of England.

The theology of Wesley was evangelical. He believed in the ultimate authority of Scripture over tradition, experience and reason. He wrote: "In the year 1729, I began not only to read, but to study the Bible as the one, and the only standard of truth, and the only model of pure religion." At the same time he greatly appreciated tradition and evidenced very high regard for the Thirty-nine Articles of the Anglican Church. The most prominent and consequent feature in his theology was his Arminianism. In January 1778 he began publishing *The Arminian Magazine*, which included new sermons and more general reading. It clearly showed the direction he wanted to take. It featured a hymn with the title "Salvation does not depend on Absolute Decrees," and one on universal redemption. Wesley's mother contributed an article entitled: "That the Happiness or Misery of All Men depends on themselves, and not on any Absolute Decree." Wesley's publication helped knit together the widely scattered Methodist societies and gave them a unity of outlook and experience.

Wesley was a one-sided Arminian, who always stood with his whip in his hand while reminding his followers of the well-known text (Phil. 2: 12,13), "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling." But he only quoted the first part. He left out the second part of the text, "for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good works." Wesley's Arminianism contributed to the parting of company with his co-revivalist George Whitefield (1714-1770), who was a Calvinist. Because they disagreed in theology they could no longer work together. In July 1739 George Whitefield wrote a letter to Wesley in which he stated his disapproval that someone was banned from the Methodist fellowship because he believed in predestination. After their split, there were two kinds of Methodists: Arminian Methodists who followed John Wesley and Calvinist Methodists who agreed with Whitefield.

Wesley longed to lead a truly godly life. He even taught the notion that a Christian should have an awareness of "growing on to perfection." Although in

every period of his life Wesley talked about the possibility of attaining perfection in this life, he expressly stated that he himself had never reached sinless perfection. The Methodist clergyman, a close associate of Wesley, John William Fletcher (1729-1785), was the first to use the term "baptism of the Holy Spirit" to describe the process of sanctification. It was this emphasis on sinless perfection that gave birth to holiness movements in Europe and America. Wesleyan/ Holiness denominations began to develop in the 1840s and now number in the hundreds.

Wesley's longing for sinless perfection led to moralism and legalism in Methodism. To aid his followers in their Christian life he drew up a set of rules, which covered every aspect of life, even the smallest details. He taught they were not only to seek godliness by doing no harm to anyone, but also to abstain from a host of sins such as from "buying or selling of spiritous liquors, or drinking them" to "using many words in buying or selling," and many other do's and don'ts. Paradoxically, Wesley's enthusiastic emphasis on works and rule upon rule for daily living endangered the doctrine of salvation by grace, a doctrine, which he treasured.

(To be continued)

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