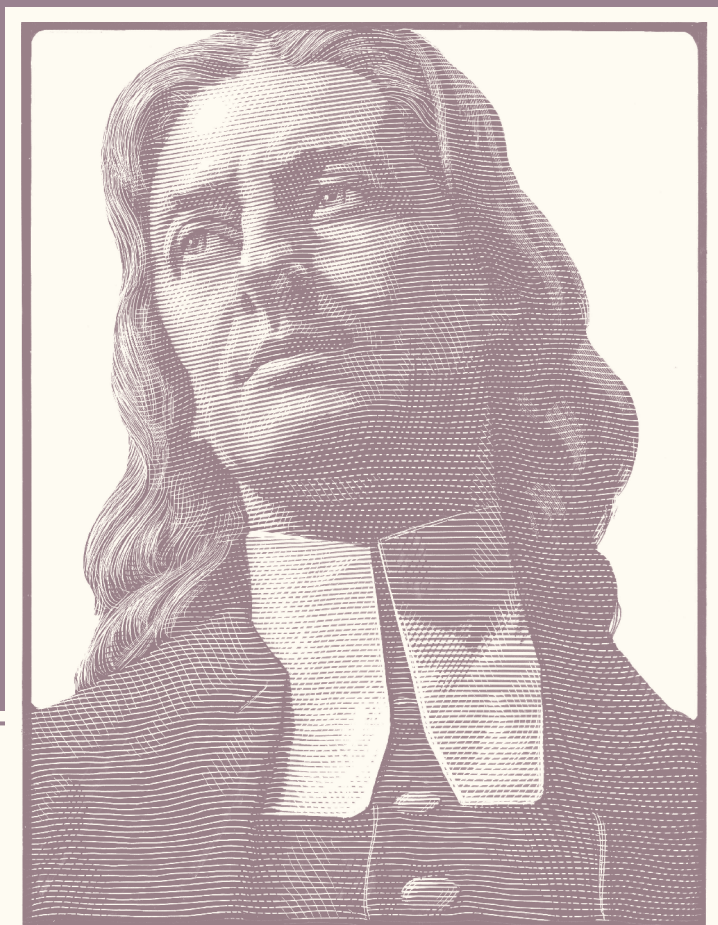


FRED SANDERS



WESLEY

on the Christian Life

THE HEART RENEWED IN LOVE

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“Whether one is an admirer or a critic, all must concede that the life and thought of John Wesley have had a decisive effect on later evangelical Protestantism. Yet few of us know much about his understanding of the Christian life beyond the rather vague terms often applied to his thought, *Arminianism* and *perfectionism*. Thus, even a hard-hearted Calvinist like myself feels a debt of gratitude to Fred Sanders for this delightful, readable, learned, accessible, and sympathetic treatment of the Methodist patriarch’s thinking on what it means to live as a Christian. A most lovely addition to a very fine series.”

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“Readers are in for a treat here. Lively and thoughtful, appreciative but not uncritical, this book shows compellingly why even those who would not call themselves Wesleyan have a great deal to benefit from John Wesley.”

Michael Reeves, author, *Delighting in the Trinity* and *The Unquenchable Flame*

Wesley on the Christian Life: The Heart Renewed in Love

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SERIES PREFACE

Some might call us spoiled. We live in an era of significant and substantial resources for Christians on living the Christian life. We have ready access to books, DVD series, online material, seminars—all in the interest of encouraging us in our daily walk with Christ. The laity, the people in the pew, have access to more information than scholars dreamed of having in previous centuries.

Yet for all our abundance of resources, we also lack something. We tend to lack the perspectives from the past, perspectives from a different time and place than our own. To put the matter differently, we have so many riches in our current horizon that we tend not to look to the horizons of the past.

That is unfortunate, especially when it comes to learning about and practicing discipleship. It's like owning a mansion and choosing to live in only one room. This series invites you to explore the other rooms.

As we go exploring, we will visit places and times different from our own. We will see different models, approaches, and emphases. This series does not intend for these models to be copied uncritically, and it certainly does not intend to put these figures from the past high upon a pedestal like some race of super-Christians. This series intends, however, to help us in the present listen to the past. We believe there is wisdom in the past twenty centuries of the church, wisdom for living the Christian life.

Stephen J. Nichols and Justin Taylor

INTRODUCTION

Who Listens to John Wesley Today?

Is anybody listening to the voice of John Wesley anymore? Of course Wesley is still famous enough, with a name widely recognized more than two centuries after his death. He has fame, fans, and followers. There are not only the United Methodist churches (I got saved in one) but a whole family of other Wesley-influenced denominations: the Wesleyan Church, the Free Methodist Church, the Church of the Nazarene, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and so on. There are Methodist youth groups (I led one), Wesleyan and Methodist seminaries (I went to one of the best), and holiness camp meetings (I attended one as a teenager). There is even a Wesleyan Theological Society (I'm a member) with its own journal (I'm a subscriber), and experts in Wesleyan studies. These self-identified fans and followers of John Wesley know his message.

But Wesley's words were once heard in every church, not just the ones directly downstream from his institutional influence. His voice was once impossible to ignore, and his influence inescapable. Today, however, outside the self-identified Wesleyverse, the Wesley Literacy Quotient among evangelicals has declined alarmingly. A generation has arisen that does not know Wesley. Names, phrases, and stories that once resonated with evangelicals everywhere now signify nothing to most: Epworth, "a brand plucked from the burning," the Holy Club, Aldersgate, "my heart was strangely warmed," "the world is my parish," "earn all you can and give all you can," "offer them Christ." Aside from a few of Charles Wesley's hymns that have become permanent parts of Christian worship ("Hark, the Herald Angels Sing," "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing," "And Can It Be That I Should Gain"), the words of the Wesleys are not being heard.

Evangelical Calvinists in particular (whether young and restless or old

and dozing) too often behave as if their Reformed credentials give them a free pass to forget there ever was a John Wesley, or that he is to be reckoned one of the good guys. It was not always so. John Newton (1725–1807) was as young, restless, and Reformed as anybody, but he could testify of John Wesley, “I know of no one to whom I owe more as an instrument of divine grace.”¹ Not to be outdone, Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892) ventured that “if there were wanted two apostles to be added to the number of the twelve, I do not believe that there could be found two men more fit to be so added than George Whitefield and John Wesley.”² Spurgeon may have been indulging in a characteristic dramatic flourish, but I don’t recall hearing that he surrendered his Calvinist card either before or after thus lumping together Whitefield and Wesley, respectively the great Calvinist and the great Arminian promoters of the eighteenth-century awakening. Witnesses like Newton and Spurgeon seem to prove that even Calvinists can learn from Wesley; in fact I hope this book makes it apparent that it is *especially* Calvinists who, while remaining as Reformed as they want to be, should labor to hear what this evangelical brother has to say to them across the centuries.

John Wesley intended his ministry to be an influence on all existing churches; he considered himself a spokesman for the evangelical message to all. As he said, “the original design” of his work was “not to be a distinct party, but to stir up all parties, Christians or heathens, to worship God in spirit and in truth.”³ (It should be obvious, by the way, that he would stir up the heathens to worship God by converting them to Christ.) When in 1742 he undertook a defense of the word *Methodist*, he began by saying, “I should rejoice (so little ambitious am I to be at the head of any sect or party) if the very name might never be mentioned more, but buried in eternal oblivion.” In that tract, *The Character of a Methodist*, he stated his principles as clearly as possible in hopes that “perhaps some of you who hate what I am called, may love what I am by the grace of God; or rather, what ‘I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.’”⁴

¹ Quoted in Iain H. Murray, *Wesley and Men Who Followed* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003), 71. Note that Murray himself (b. 1931) is a great example of a recent Calvinist who unflinchingly opposes Arminianism, but is fully aware of how much spiritual blessing he has received through Wesley and the Methodists. Other examples of current Reformed thinkers who recognize what a friend they have in Wesley include J. I. Packer (see “The Glory of God and the Reviving of Religion: A Study in the Mind of Jonathan Edwards,” in *A God-Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004]).

² C. H. Spurgeon’s *Autobiography*, vol. 1 (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1899), 176.

³ From Wesley’s journal, April 12, 1789, in *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976–), 24:128. When citing this edition, I will use the abbreviation *Works*, followed by the volume number and page number.

⁴ “The Character of a Methodist” (1742), in *Works*, 9:32–46, alluding to 1 Cor. 15:10 and quoting Phil. 3:12.

Wesley understood himself well when he said his mission was “to stir up all . . . to worship God.” He was above all a revivalist, an awakener of slumbering souls and torpid institutions. Surely there is a great need for his kind of stirring and awakening today. For one thing (inside the Wesleyverse), the very institutions started by Wesley have taken on the kind of coldness and lethargy that Wesley arose to stir up. Evangelicals inside of Methodism are well aware that “the Methodist movement has become what it was once a reaction against.”⁵ That is, believers have long since learned to look to Methodism as the mainline church, not as a movement for revival that reaches all the churches.

Second, there is a great need for Wesley’s kind of stirring in our time because his message is medicinal for much that ails us all today. He perceived the inherent unity of things that we have, to our harm, learned to think of as separate, or even as opposites. He saw that holiness of heart and life was internally and necessarily linked to the free forgiveness of sins. He saw the connection between justification and sanctification, and was able to communicate it powerfully. “He was possessed of one central truth, that man is justified by faith and perfected in love.”⁶ He did not pick and choose from among the various benefits of union with Christ, and his preaching did not leave his listeners with that option either. He had a unified understanding of grace as both unmerited mercy and the power of God the Holy Spirit who works in us.⁷ If this vast doctrine of grace could get a grip on Christians in our time, it would catalyze the same kind of awakening as when Wesley first preached it.

For these reasons, I am excited to have the opportunity to contribute a John Wesley volume to the Theologians on the Christian Life series. This book, *Wesley on the Christian Life: The Heart Renewed in Love*, undertakes two related tasks. First, it introduces John Wesley’s theology and spirituality, reporting what he said and thought. Second, it recommends (with a few caveats) a generally Wesleyan approach to living a balanced Christian life.

⁵ Statements like this can be scooped up from any renewal-minded conservative Wesleyan group. This one happens to be how the editor at the website MethodistThinker.com summarized the remarks of George Hunter, “Can the Once-Great Methodist Movement Become a Movement Again?” (presented at the United Methodist Congress on Evangelism, January 2011), accessed at <http://methodistthinker.com/2011/05/26/george-hunter-can-once-great-methodist-movement-be-a-movement-again>.

⁶ William Ragsdale Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley: With Special Reference to the Doctrine of Justification* (New York: Abingdon, 1946), 7.

⁷ See sermon 12, “The Witness of Our Own Spirit,” Burwash, 114. Citations of Wesley’s *Standard Sermons* will follow the form shown here, using not the definitive scholarly edition of the *Works*, but the influential and freely available edition of *Wesley’s 52 Standard Sermons*, ed. N. Burwash (Salem, OH: Schmul, 1988). Wesley’s sermons are available online at the website of the United Methodist Church’s Global Ministries, <http://gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons>.

It has one foot in the eighteenth century, reporting on what Wesley did and said and thought. But it has the other foot in evangelical existence today, arguing that what Wesley said and did then has significance for the living of the Christian life now. So although we will spend plenty of time in eighteenth-century England and I will try to be an honest reporter, nothing will be included for merely historical interest or for the sake of completeness; everything will be directed toward the application of Wesley's thought to contemporary Christian life. What we want is to hear the words of Wesley awakening us here and now.

So Many Wesleys, So Little Time

Which John Wesley will we be hearing from? The question must be raised because there are many John Wesleys to be reckoned with. It's not that he had multiple personalities or that he was intellectually inconsistent. But he was one of those historical characters that we describe as larger than life. He was magnetic, but even in his own lifetime he attracted different people differently, and he has drawn a great variety of interpreters ever since. Surveying the range of different Wesleys presented by different readers, one recent scholar observed that "Wesley's interpreters do not agree fully on how to read him. In particular, proponents on different sides of current theological debates have often cited Wesley to support their alternative positions."⁸

Some of the confusion among his interpreters is their fault. As readers of Wesley, says one, "we ignore the parts of Wesley we don't like. We revise the parts of Wesley that challenge our positions. And we repeat *ad infinitum* the parts of Wesley that we love."⁹ But Wesley himself caused many of the problems. He had a particular genius for incorporating the diverse emphases of various systems of theology as he attempted to be a mere Christian. He possessed "a moderating sensibility, a tendency to avoid one-sided readings,"¹⁰ and an instinct for getting around the theological gridlock of

⁸ Sarah H. Lancaster, "Current Debates over Wesley's Legacy among His Progeny," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, ed. Randy L. Maddox and Jason E. Vickers (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 304.

⁹ Richard P. Heitzenrater, "Twice-Told Tales," *Circuit Rider*, May/June 2003, 17. Heitzenrater's puckish article deflates a number of urban legends and misattributed quotations. In his book *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), Heitzenrater bursts several more legends, warning that "many an account of Wesley is but an editorial gloss on the man, an attempt on the part of an author to prove some point about either Wesley's thought or, more likely and less obviously, the author's own. By careful selection and editing, an author can make Wesley appear in a number of guises" (p. 25).

¹⁰ Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 4.

competing systems. Wesley was not afraid to take definite positions on contentious, even divisive, issues. But while most leaders grow narrower as they are forced to make decision after decision, Wesley did the opposite: the result of his declaring himself on so many issues was a kind of cumulative effect by which he became more and more comprehensive. He almost seemed to be moving around intellectually just so he could be in the right places at the right times to affirm all the truths he wanted to affirm: first a Puritan background, next an Anglo-Catholic reading program, then a thunderbolt from Luther, and inundation from Pietist spiritual writers. John Wesley was hungry for truth and reality; he wanted it all, and in that pursuit he crossed lines and mixed traditions that are rarely combined.

It is a curious feature of his intellectual profile that so many kinds of Christians can find their own deepest interests represented in his legacy. As Kenneth Collins points out, “Wesley developed a theological style that not only was sophisticated in its attempt to hold a diversity of truths in tension, but also has on occasion puzzled his interpreters, both past and present, precisely because of that diversity.”¹¹ This is precisely what we will benefit from if we hear Wesley: his ability to gather together elements of the Christian life that we have come to think of as necessarily separate.

Collins goes on to catalog¹² the numerous Wesleys that have been portrayed by the interpreters: the basically Reformed Wesley, the essentially Lutheran-Pietist Wesley, the secretly Puritan Wesley, the exotically Greek Patristic Wesley. Methodists, understandably, have a tendency to describe him retroactively as a good Methodist, though like all interpreters they have to explain why he was pleased to remain Anglican all his life. Anglican he may have been, but reasonable scholars have nevertheless described him as a secret Baptist, a crypto-Catholic, and a proto-Pentecostal. These disputes over the interpretation of his theology have become the standard fare of Wesley studies. There is a grain of truth in each of them, so that whichever Wesley a scholar may argue for, the footnotes inevitably contain the admission that other interpretations are plausible.

Somebody needs to present an Unaccommodated Wesley,¹³ a vast, careful, comprehensive account that refuses on principle to align Wesley with

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See the attempt at strict historical description carried out by Richard A. Muller on behalf of reclaiming John Calvin from his interpreters in *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). The closest thing in Wesley studies is Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*.

any current systems. But in this book, I argue for a particular version of John Wesley, the one I am convinced of and whose writings have nourished me for the past twenty-five years, since the time I got saved in a Methodist youth group. The Wesley you will meet in this book is John Wesley the warmhearted evangelical Protestant. His teaching on the Christian life trades heavily on being born again, on deeply felt heart religion, on justification by faith alone, on awareness of original sin and total dependence on God's grace, on active cultivation of spiritual disciplines, and on striving for growth in knowledge and grace. His view of the Christian life is fed by the great tradition of Christian orthodoxy and is crowned by an experiential, evangelical Trinitarianism.

I am well aware of the danger of creating a John Wesley after my own image and likeness, since I hope all of those elements also characterize my own theology. I have put in place three defenses that I hope have preserved me against rendering a self-portrait and then calling it Wesley. First, the words of Wesley himself loom large in this book, enabling the reader to judge whether Wesley is saying what I claim he's saying. Second, there are several points at which I report Wesley's distinctive views even though I am conscious of disagreeing with him in the details. For example, Wesley thinks that 1 John is the most important book of the Bible (see chap. 4), but I know for certain that Ephesians holds that title. His view of the sacraments (chap. 7) is a bit too high, in my judgment; but this is his book, so he gets to have his Anglican say. I have not flagged every place where I feel myself in disagreement with Wesley, but in general the reader should assume that the views presented here are Wesley's, or at least my best effort to present them. Third, though I write as a Wesleyan theologian, I am not an especially pure example of one. For example, I'm not convinced that prevenient grace can do all the work Wesley wants it to do. I can only affirm Christian perfection in a very qualified sense. My tolerance for Calvinism is very high compared with Wesley's. Ultimately, however, I present Wesley as a warmhearted evangelical Protestant because I am persuaded by primary and secondary sources alike that the Wesley of history really was the Wesley of the evangelical Protestant faith.

Charles Wesley as Supporting Witness

A different sense in which there is a problem of "too many Wesleys" to deal with in one short book on the Christian life is that there are more Wesleys

than just John. His father Samuel and his mother Susanna are both formidable theological influences, and a complete account of John's work would have to give attention to them both.¹⁴ John's older brother, Samuel, was also a significant voice in Wesley's development. If you consider the spiritual legacy of the Wesley grandparents (all four were Puritans) and the devotional lives of the sisters in the household, the work that John Wesley did in the outer world begins to look like the most successful externalization of a family project. John Wesley was the "hit single" for the family band.

But the most important "other Wesley" is obviously his brother Charles. Four years younger than John, Charles by common consent "should be called the co-founder of the Wesleyan or Methodist tradition."¹⁵ Charles not only co-labored with John in the work of the revival, but also actually preceded him in several important ways. It was Charles who was the most important organizer in the early days of the Holy Club at Oxford; Charles experienced his own evangelical conversion three full days before John did; and Charles was instrumental in the momentous spiritual awakening of George Whitefield, without whose contribution the evangelical awakening would have been a significantly smaller event.

Charles did more than write hymns; he was recognized in his day as a powerful evangelist. His recent biographer notes that "many of his hearers preferred the preaching of the younger Wesley to that of his more famous older brother; Charles's published sermon 'Awake Thou That Sleepest' became the most purchased piece of Wesleyana during the brothers' lifetime."¹⁶ The brothers shared their work and mingled their ministries to such an extent that, to this day, scholars are uncertain about which brother wrote some of the sermons and some of the hymns. During the busiest seasons of the revival, it apparently didn't matter to the brothers; a Wesley sermon was a Wesley sermon, whether by John or Charles.

Why did John end up taking the lead in this shared ministry? Partly it was a matter of temperament. Charles Wesley was naturally retiring, and though he was personable and gregarious, he was not constitutionally a "public person." John certainly was. Charles "shunned the limelight

¹⁴ For a short account of Samuel's abiding presence in John's thought, see Gordon Rupp, "Son of Samuel: John Wesley, Church of England Man," chap. 9 in *Just Men: Historical Pieces* (London: Epworth, 1977). For Susanna's influence, it is best to consult her own words, collected in *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*, ed. Charles Wallace (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁵ John R. Tyson, *Assist Me to Proclaim: The Life and Hymns of Charles Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), viii.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

with the same vigor that his brother John seemed to crave it.”¹⁷ Charles had a very happy marriage, had three children, and enjoyed being a father over his household. John married later, notoriously unhappily, and had no children. Charles’s more fragile health required him to settle in one place as a preacher, while the cutting edge of the awakening was always itinerant preaching. But there were also philosophical differences between the brothers: Charles was a much more committed Church of England man than John and increasingly saw John’s practical decisions (class meetings, lay preachers, the ordination of American bishops) as tending to undermine Anglicanism by making a “Methodist schism” inevitable. The difference between them on this point could be subtle; a recent scholar captures it by saying that Charles “was committed to the revival of *the Church of England*, whereas John was committed to the *revival* of the Church of England.”¹⁸ The practical result was that Charles was very cautious about the qualifications of lay preachers in the Methodist movement, while John could be reckless about whom he trusted with the office. For these reasons, Charles was sometimes hitting the brakes while John was almost always stomping on the gas pedal. Even if Charles was right in his cautions, John accomplished more in his zeal. And while John was especially beloved to the most energetic leaders in the second generation of Methodists, Charles had been in fights with many of them. When leadership passed into their hands, it was inevitable that they would hold John in higher regard than Charles.

So while John and Charles were not exactly alike, their work so interpenetrated that they ought to be treated together. It might be just possible to present *Wesley on the Christian Life* by focusing solely on John, omitting all references to Charles and his hymns. But what an impoverishment this would be! And how at odds with John’s own method, as he seasoned his own sermons with apt bits of Charles’s verses, citing them as conclusive historical proof of what the Methodists had always taught. He carried out his whole ministry to the tune of Charles’s hymns, “the soundtrack for the eighteenth-century transatlantic revival.”¹⁹ Another approach would be to devote the entire book to the brothers’ shared work: *John and Charles Wesley on the Christian Life*. Indeed, one of the most useful anthologies on the spirituality of the Wesleys bundles their work together in just this way.²⁰

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, x.

¹⁸ “Introduction,” in Maddox and Vickers, *Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, 8.

¹⁹ Tyson, *Assist Me to Proclaim*, viii.

²⁰ *John and Charles Wesley: Selected Prayers, Hymns, Journal Notes, Sermons, Letters and Treatises*, ed. Frank Whaling (New York: Paulist, 1981). See also the excellent but long-out-of-print *Message of the Wesleys*:

The current book splits the difference, focusing on John Wesley but making use of Charles's work wherever he seems to have driven the point home more clearly or poetically. Charles also looms large in chapter 3, on heart religion, because of the importance of the hymns for stirring up the affections.

Wesley's Message for the Christian Life

Some theologians have written comprehensively on the full range of doctrines. But John Wesley was above all a preacher and a pastoral theologian, and almost everything he wrote was in the field of "practical divinity," or the Christian life. A book like *Aquinas on the Christian Life* or *Augustine on the Christian Life* would only deal with a subsection of each theologian's overall thought. But salvation and the Christian life are practically all that John Wesley ever wrote about; indeed, "it is sometimes said that, as a theologian, John Wesley specialized in the doctrine of the Christian life."²¹ So this book comes close to surveying his entire theology. But it is not just Wesley 101,²² and its focus on the Christian life dictates what has been put in and what has been left out.

For example, chapter 1 is a brief account of John Wesley's life and character, sketching the basic biographical facts of his long and eventful career, but dwelling longer on those aspects of his life which earn him a hearing as a spiritual advisor. The story leaps over entire decades but focuses on one event in particular, his evangelical conversion at Aldersgate, which is the point of departure for an extended analysis in chapter 2. Next, chapter 3 describes Wesley's orientation toward a Christianity focused on the heart, an emphasis he had in common with the German Pietists, the English Puritans, and American pastor-theologians such as Jonathan Edwards.

After these foundational matters are dealt with, the next five chapters (chaps. 4–8, the heart of the book) take up the major issues in Wesley's theology of the Christian life. Chapter 4 makes the most important interpretive argument: that John Wesley is best understood as a theologian who

A Reader of Instruction and Devotion, compiled and with an introduction by Philip S. Watson (New York: Macmillan, 1964).

²¹ Jason E. Vickers, *Wesley: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 94. Vickers adds that "it would be more accurate to say that he specialized in theology for the Christian life."

²² For a more comprehensive introduction to Wesley, see the work of Kenneth Collins. For a more biographical approach, see Collins, *John Wesley: A Theological Journey* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003). For a more doctrinal approach, see Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley*. A classic survey of Wesley's doctrine, largely in his own words, is Thomas Oden, *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity: A Plain Account of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

let the first epistle of John set the tone for his life and thought. Chapter 5 explains the role of justification by faith, not just for conversion but for the entire life of the believer and as the basis of sanctification. Chapter 6 surveys John Wesley's doctrine of grace, showing how it combines elements of forgiveness and empowerment, elements that are often thought of in disconnected ways. From this follows the idea of the means of grace (chap. 7), the channels that God has appointed for encountering us again and again to transform us. Chapter 8 examines John Wesley's vision of the perfected Christian life, the goal and purpose of everything that has gone before in the order of salvation.

After this survey of Wesley on the main elements of the Christian life, the final two chapters look around at the broader context of his theology. In chapter 9, we explore Wesley's lifelong conviction that the individual Christian life is embedded in the fuller story of God's dealings with his people, and that each Christian needs to live with an awareness of being connected to the work of God among all other Christians. The final chapter, chapter 10, shows the overarching pattern of Wesley's theology to be an encounter with the triune God and explains how the doctrine of the Trinity functioned for his spirituality.

This book's focus on the Christian life means that one of the things John Wesley is most famous for, his Arminianism, is not a major topic. It comes up a few times but never receives sustained or independent treatment. I trust the reasons for this will be evident quite early in the text, as the evangelical awakening of the eighteenth century took place on the common ground shared by evangelical Protestants. Briefly, the primary reason for omitting Arminianism from *Wesley on the Christian Life* is that most of what Wesley says about the Christian life belongs to the area in which Calvinists and Arminians agree. The cartoony Wesley existing in the public mind is a man of one idea: anti-Calvinistic free will; he is the evil opposite evoked by the cartoony Calvin with his own fixed idea, fatalistic predestination. Neither of these characters exists in reality. The real Calvin and the real Wesley have genuine disagreements, of course, and important ones. But the areas of disagreement (absolute predestination, explanations of human agency and choice) belong in the background of their treatment of the Christian life. Friction with Calvinists shows up in several chapters: a disagreement about imputed righteousness is prominent in chapter 5, prevenient grace in its Wesleyan form appears in chapter 6, and the di-

visive issue of perfectionism is unavoidable in chapter 8. How Calvinists and Wesleyans can cooperate in Christian work is one of the subjects of chapter 9. But the direct consideration of Calvinism and Wesleyanism as opposing systems is beyond the scope of a book on the Christian life.

Reformed people who read widely in Wesley, as opposed to reading a digest of his most biting anti-Calvinist zingers, are always surprised, and usually delighted, to find in him the same things they love in their favorite Reformed authors: a Scripture-saturated defense of original sin and justification by faith alone, a clear presentation of the gospel, a humble submission to God's sovereignty, and a radical dependence on God's grace. Scottish pastor John Duncan (1796–1870), a decided Calvinist, read the Methodist hymnal and remarked, "I wonder how Charles Wesley could write that, and be an Arminian."²³ I expect that many Reformed readers of this book will be edified and awakened by Wesley's teaching, and I hope they find themselves asking on most pages, "How could John Wesley write that and be an Arminian?" Whatever the word *Arminian* meant to most people before Wesley, there is at least the chance after John Wesley that it refers to a Christian who is doctrinally conservative and committed to the gospel.

John Wesley has a word for today. In his own time, as we will see, "parental influence, a classical education, a methodical nature and a personal crisis on the Pauline scale, all combined to make him a man with something to say."²⁴ He was a man of broad liberal learning, a fluency in Scripture, a keen spiritual insight, and a gift for communicating. Very little of what he taught was brand-new, but he recombined the themes of the Christian life into a combustible mixture. He saw the great unities and spoke the great verities. He also had a way of putting things that cut straight through his generation's defenses and reached into their hearts. So in what follows I have quoted him at length and have given footnotes to the most easily available editions of his books rather than to the best or standard scholarly sources. My goal is to let Wesley speak clearly, to send readers to where they can learn more from him, and to remove any obstacles that might keep readers from hearing the message that shook the world not long ago and not far away.

²³ John Brown, *Life of the Late John Duncan* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1872), 428. A bit more snarkily, Duncan remarked, "I have a great liking for many of Wesley's Hymns; but when I read some of them, I ask, 'What's become of your Free-will now, friend?'" (p. 401).

²⁴ George Lawton, *John Wesley's English: A Study of His Literary Style* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1962), 11.

CHAPTER I

JOHN WESLEY AS A SPIRITUAL GUIDE

John Wesley lived in a way that gave him credibility as a teacher on the Christian life. He has what students of rhetoric and public speaking call *ethos*: a power of persuasion based on his known character and his public accomplishments. When he spoke, forces were set in motion that changed the course of history. When we hear a quotation from Wesley, we are inclined to pay closer attention because of who said it. For example, consider the widely circulated “rule of Wesley”:

Do all the good you can,
by all the means you can,
in all the ways you can,
in all the places you can,
at all the times you can,
to all the people you can,
as long as you ever can.

This would be a fine anonymous exhortation, but it has more impact when attributed to John Wesley, who did so much good. Never mind that although “it sounds very Wesleyan,” expert witnesses are certain that “it is not to be found in Wesley.”¹ The fake quote gains gravitas from association with him. Why? Because Wesley has credibility to spare.

¹ Richard P. Heitzenrater, “Twice-Told Tales,” *Circuit Rider*, May/June 2003, 16–17.

This chapter is a brief sketch of the biographical foundation of John Wesley's credibility as a spiritual advisor.² It covers Wesley's long life (1703–1791) in four broad movements: his early life, starting in his father's Epworth parsonage; his evangelical conversion at Aldersgate; his role in the great revival in the 1740s; and his decades of work as the builder and organizer of the Methodist movement. Finally, it offers some insights into Wesley's personality and character.

From Epworth

If you start John Wesley's story as far back as two generations before his birth, it looks like it will be the story of English Puritanism because all four of his grandparents were nonconformists, or Dissenters from the established Church of England. His paternal grandfather, John Westley (1636–1678), was imprisoned for refusing to use the Book of Common Prayer in worship. His maternal grandfather, Samuel Annesley (1620–1696), not only was ejected from his pastorate by the Act of Uniformity, but also later had his property confiscated when he was caught ministering in a conventicle, or unofficial small group. So when John Wesley recommended and republished select Puritan spiritual writings for a wider audience (see chap. 9), he was raiding the family bookshelf, tapping directly into a vein of his own Puritan heritage.³

But both of John Wesley's parents, Samuel Wesley (1662–1735) and Susanna Annesley (1669–1742), left their dissenting homes and converted to the Church of England, persuaded that it was the most faithful way of being Christian in England. So John Wesley grew up Anglican, under parents who were in the established church not by accident, but by conviction and by adult conversion. Samuel was an Anglican pastor, the rector of the church of St. Andrew at Epworth in Lincolnshire, and a poet whose publications included the quirkily titled *Maggots* (not a best seller) and an epic poem on the life of Christ (“I sing the God, who, though enthroned on high, / In human nature deigned to live and die”). Susanna was a full-time mother,

²The classic and comprehensive biography of John Wesley is Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A., Founder of the Methodists*, 5th ed., 3 vols. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1880). (I will be citing the 3rd edition, 1876.) Read it for a full immersion into the world of Wesley, at the hands of a passionate devotee. More recently and more critically, Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), presents Wesley in his own words. Kenneth Collins, *John Wesley: A Theological Journey* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), strikes a fine balance between life and thought, while Allan Coppedge, *John Wesley in Theological Debate* (Wilmore, KY: Wesley Heritage, 1987), traces the development of Wesley's views through various controversies.

³For a fascinating bibliographical investigation, see Robert C. Monk, *John Wesley, His Puritan Heritage: A Study of the Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966).

giving birth to nineteen children, nine of whom died in infancy. Of the ten who survived into adulthood, seven were daughters and three were sons. Susanna provided the daily discipline and home education for all the children, though the boys were sent off to boarding school as early as age ten.

Membership in the Church of England was apparently one of the few things that Samuel and Susanna agreed about. They had serious differences of opinion about everything from household management to politics, with one of their political disagreements even resulting in a brief separation. In a letter to John (or Jackey, as his family called him), Susanna admitted to her adult son that “it is an unhappiness almost peculiar to our family that your father and I seldom think alike.”⁴ Still, Samuel was head of the household, and Susanna was a submissive eighteenth-century pastor’s wife in her own peculiar way.

What was her own peculiar way? One story strikingly captures the relational dynamic of the Epworth parsonage and displays the Wesley spirit. While Samuel was away on a long business trip in 1711, Susanna began to hold Sunday afternoon devotional reading services in her home. These services started with her children and servants but grew to include over two hundred people. They were meant to supplement the Sunday morning services, and were in line with the kind of “religious societies” that Samuel had long encouraged as a member of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. Samuel’s pastoral assistant, however, felt threatened by these large audiences attending on a laywoman’s reading of printed sermons. He wrote to Samuel intimating that the Epworth parsonage was beginning to look like a conventicle, the kind of unofficial church frowned upon by Anglican church order. Samuel wrote home to Susanna, suggesting that she should probably disband the meetings (recall that Susanna’s father had been disciplined for holding an unsanctioned conventicle). Susanna replied that since the meetings were manifestly doing spiritual good to many souls in the village, and were directly edifying the church, it would be wrong to stop them. She agreed to submit to Samuel’s authority on the issue, but announced the terms of her obedience:

If after all this you think fit to dissolve this assembly, do not tell me you desire me to do it, for that will not satisfy my conscience; but send your positive command in such full and express terms as may absolve me from

⁴ Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley*, 3rd ed., 3 vols. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1876), 1:32.

all guilt and punishment for neglecting this opportunity for doing good when you and I shall appear before the great and awful tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁵

John Wesley was only eight years old at the time, but if he was paying attention to these intense debates about spiritual matters between his father and mother, he must have learned lessons that would serve him well in the evangelical awakening, when bishops suggested to him that his methods were perhaps inappropriate. The principle of “do not advise me, but command me to desist” has been called “a cornerstone of the future of Methodism.”⁶

John was fifteenth in the large family’s birth order, and the middle boy between the much older Samuel (1690–1739) and the slightly younger Charles (1707–1788). Many of the Wesley children died in infancy; in fact, John was the third child to be given that name, the previous two Johns having perished early. So he was not the first John, though nobody ever called him Third John as far as I know. The most famous event from John’s childhood at Epworth was the fire that destroyed the home when he was five years old. John was the last of the children to be rescued from the second floor, escaping just before the roof collapsed. There is no evidence that John or his family thought of this rescue as the hand of providence marking out John Wesley for a special future, though later Methodists often told the story that way. But John would later see a parallel between how he was “a brand plucked from the burning” in his childhood and how he was a spiritual fire-brand narrowly saved from perdition by God’s grace in his adulthood.

As a young boy, Wesley was one of those little household rationalists who needed to be given clear reasons for everything. Our first reported words from his lips are a sentence he uttered whenever he found himself in the difficult moral situation of being offered a snack between mealtimes: “I thank you, I will think of it.” His father once remarked to his mother, “I profess, sweetheart, I think our Jack would not attend to the most pressing necessities of nature unless he could give a reason for it.” Samuel also gave young John a warning about this unreasonable demand for reasonableness: “Child, you think to carry everything by dint of argument; but you will find how little is ever done in the world by close reasoning.”⁷ Since John Wesley

⁵The story is told in Joseph Beaumont Wakeley, *Anecdotes of the Wesleys: Illustrative of Their Character and Personal History* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1870), 66.

⁶Isaac Taylor, *Wesley and Methodism* (New York: Harper, 1852), 28.

⁷Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley*, 1:18.

would go on to be famous for a certain emotional fervency in religion, it is worth noting that his basic temperament was more coolly reflective. In fact, the course of his life shows that Wesley was preeminently a man of reason, a planner, and an implementer of carefully considered decisions. When he emerged onto the world stage as a revivalist, it was partly because he had become rationally persuaded that the emotions were not being given their due consideration in religious life. Like his contemporary Jonathan Edwards, he was a man of reason whose reason told him he needed to cultivate his heart. He was smart enough to know that it's not good enough to be smart enough.

Before he was eleven, John's parents sent him to boarding school in London, where he studied until he was sixteen. He found his place in the school, wisely avoiding the older boys while assuming a leadership role among the younger. In his later estimation, it was a time of backsliding. Though he kept up the kind of devotional regimen that marked him as the offspring of Samuel and Susanna Wesley ("I still read the Scriptures and said my prayers morning and evening"), his behavior and his sentiments were entirely shaped by his social setting. It was at school that he learned to commit socially acceptable sins; the kind of sins that he knew were wrong, but which were not considered scandalous by his peers or even his teachers. He learned to judge everything on a sliding scale, comparing himself not to any objective standard, but to the people around him. "What I now hoped to be saved by," he reflected later, "was not being so bad as other people." What would later be one of his great strengths, his profound and empathetic sensitivity to people and societies, was undoing him.

In 1720, at age seventeen, Wesley went up to Christ Church, Oxford. Within four years, and years not especially marked by devoutness, he received a baccalaureate degree. Wesley excelled academically; he stayed on at Oxford, was granted a master's degree in due course, and was elected a fellow of Lincoln College. He began moving toward ordination to the priesthood and correcting his lackadaisical attitude toward religious duties:

When I was about twenty-two, my father pressed me to enter into holy orders. At the same time, the providence of God directing me to Kempis's *Christian's Pattern*, I began to see that true religion was seated in the heart, and that God's law extended to all our thoughts as well as words and actions.⁸

⁸From Wesley's journal, 1738; reprinted in *John Wesley*, ed. Albert Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 61.

For example, Wesley had been in the habit of taking Communion only about three times a year, but he now began to seek it out weekly. In 1727 he read William Law's two recent books *Christian Perfection* and *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. These underlined what he had learned from Kempis: "I was convinced more than ever of the impossibility of being half a Christian, and determined to be all devoted to God to give Him all my soul my body and my substance." John was so earnest and public in his pursuit of the lifestyle described in the New Testament that his friends nicknamed him Primitive Christianity.

It was during this round of intense religious reading and resolution making that John, along with Charles (who had also come up to Oxford), gathered around themselves an earnest group of like-minded young men who set themselves to study the Bible, attend worship services more often and more devoutly, visit the imprisoned, and give to the poor. In the university at that time, they stuck out so much that they attracted nicknames: the Holy Club, the Sacramentarians, the Bible Moths, and the Methodists. This "Oxford Methodist" group probably included only a few dozen young men, but one of them was George Whitefield (1714–1770), whose eyes were opened when Charles Wesley gave him the book *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, by Henry Scougal. John Wesley underwent some kind of awakening between 1725 and 1729. At least his life was transformed as he came to understand the demands of God's law. "I 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," he later reminisced about the year 1729.⁹

In 1735 the Wesley brothers and a few other members of the Holy Club went to North America to minister to the colonists and the Native Americans. They seem to have chosen this missionary enterprise because it was the most demanding service opportunity, and because they became convinced they could do the most good in the new world. Mr. "Primitive Christianity" was daring himself to live out the demands of Scripture in a way that matched the spiritual reality he read about among the early Christians. "I hope to learn the true sense of the gospel of Christ by preaching it to the heathen," he explained in a letter.¹⁰

The Georgia trip was an intense time for John, another turning point

⁹From section 5 of *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*; reprinted in *John and Charles Wesley: Selected Prayers, Hymns, Journal Notes, Sermons, Letters and Treatises*, ed. Frank Whaling (New York: Paulist, 1981), 299.

¹⁰Letter to John Burton, October 10, 1735, quoted in William Ragsdale Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley: With Special Reference to the Doctrine of Justification* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1946), 72.

in a life that had been metaphorically stormy and now became literally stormy. The trans-Atlantic voyage was turbulent enough to make him think death was near, and he was ashamed to realize that he—the pastor—was truly afraid to die, while some of the other Christian passengers on board were calm and composed through the storm. He was especially struck by the calm, confident faith of a group of Pietists from the German church community of Moravia. Once he arrived at the colony in Savannah, his ministry had mixed results, but was widely considered a failure. On the one hand, he saw it as a chance to exercise greater pastoral authority than he had at Oxford or as his father's assistant in Lincolnshire. He put into practice some patterns of religious life that were similar to the Holy Club's regimen, but adapted now to a whole parish. He made some decisions here that would soon bear fruit in Methodist structures:

I now advised the serious part of the congregation to form themselves into a sort of little society, and to meet once or twice a week in order to instruct, exhort, and reprove one another. And out of these I selected a smaller number for a more intimate union with each other: in order to which I met them together at my house every Sunday in the afternoon.¹¹

On the other hand, his ideas were not popular with the colonists, who thought this Oxford fellow with high church ideas (he seemed Roman Catholic) and an obsession with German Pietists (he seemed Lutheran) was out of place in the colony. He had romantic notions about witnessing to Indians. "They are as little children," he wrote before the trip, "humble, willing to learn, and eager to do the will of God."¹² These notions were, predictably, crushed upon his actually meeting the human beings themselves: "They show no inclination to learn anything, least of all Christianity," he complained in 1737. But most of all, he behaved foolishly and ran afoul of the gossips in a small colony. The colony's official log book says enough to show that something went very wrong:

Minister at Savannah
embark'd 14 Oct 1735
arrived Feb 1735–6
run away 3 Dec 1737¹³

¹¹ Wesley, "A Short History of the People Called Methodists" (1781), in *The Works of the Reverend John Wesley*, ed. John Emory, 7 vols. (New York: Emory and Waugh, 1831), 7:347.

¹² Quoted in Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 72.

¹³ Quoted in Whaling, *John and Charles Wesley*, 16.

What caused the minister to “run away”? John had announced often enough to the Holy Club that he intended to remain unmarried, but in Georgia he became foolishly entangled in a romance, proposing marriage so ineptly that nobody, including the young woman he proposed to, was quite sure what had happened. When she eventually married instead a Mr. Williamson (“a person not remarkable for handsomeness, neither for greatness, neither for wit, or knowledge, or sense, and least of all for religion,” remarked Wesley pertly),¹⁴ Wesley was angry. A few months later, he decided she was in rebellion and should be barred from taking the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Was this an act of ministerial spite, a reprisal, an abuse of power? There is no direct evidence that Wesley’s motives were that low. But they might have been, and Wesley left himself dangerously defenseless. The town was prepared to believe the worst.

The details are complex and sad. The result is that Wesley returned to England with a sense that though he had done some good (and had learned German, Spanish, and Italian!) the trip was, personally and pastorally considered, an utter failure. On the voyage home, he wrote out a confession of his pride, unbelief, and forgetfulness, exclaiming, “I went to America to convert the Indians; but oh, who shall convert me? I can talk well; but let death look me in the face, and my spirit is troubled.”¹⁵ Back in England, he wrote yet another self-recrimination, saying, “Alienated as I am from the life of God, I am a child of wrath, an heir of hell.” Years later he would look back over these notes and decide they could not be true; he wrote in the margins, “I am not sure of this,” “I believe not,” and “I had even then the faith of a servant, though not of a son.”¹⁶ Still, the original entries show what his mental and emotional condition was in 1738, and how he thought of his spiritual state.

To Aldersgate and the Revival

We have just surveyed—under one heading—everything from Wesley’s childhood to his Georgia trip, including his education, his founding of the Holy Club, and his ordination. Now we turn to what happened to Wesley on May 24, 1738, the date of his evangelical conversion. It truly stands out in the middle of his life (he was thirty-five years old) as a dividing line. Ev-

¹⁴ Quoted in William Henry Fitchett, *Wesley and His Century: A Study in Spiritual Forces* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1908), 108.

¹⁵ Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley*, 1:166.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:167.

everything changed at Aldersgate. "John Wesley, on the eve of the year 1738, was the spiritual prisoner of his age. . . . John Wesley, at the close of the year 1738, was spiritually free."¹⁷ We will spend much of the next chapter exploring what happened to Wesley on this momentous day, theologically speaking. Here we need only note the outward events and the results.

Upon arriving back in England, Wesley pursued spiritual matters intensely, preaching wherever he could, seeking spiritual advice from William Law and from the Moravian Christians who had ministered so much to him during his trip, and drawing together religious societies. In late May, on Pentecost Sunday, his brother Charles experienced an evangelical conversion. George Whitefield had already had a similar experience. With all this pressure mounting, finally in his journal for May 24, Wesley recorded these famous words:

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 the leader 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 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.

Indeed, it was as if a dam had broken in Wesley's soul, and all the spiritual forces of his upbringing, all his passion for Christ, and all his powers of communication came rushing out. From his conversion at Aldersgate, he went on to do all the things we know him for today. All the elements of his personal and religious striving that had been scattered and working against each other so far in his life now came together and worked toward one end.

The change in his outward behavior was not immediate or total. When he and a friend visited the Moravians to tell them what had happened, they let the friend take the Lord's Supper, but refused to administer it to John because he still seemed to them to be *homo perturbatus*, a disturbed or agitated man.¹⁸ But where Wesley's life before 1738 gave the impression of a man searching desperately for something he had not found and perhaps wasn't sure existed, his life after 1738 had the character of a man who was tirelessly at work applying what he had learned to every corner of his life.

¹⁷ Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 65.

¹⁸ Gordon Rupp, *Religion in England 1688–1791* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 358.

Meanwhile, the rest of the world was not waiting on John Wesley; other forces were moving forward that would converge in the vast evangelical revival of the eighteenth century. In particular, George Whitefield had been applying the lessons of the Holy Club in his own way in England. He had even taken the great step of preaching to crowds outdoors, and not during appointed service times. Wesley was soon to out-perform and out-organize his friend, but Whitefield took the lead in many important ways in the early stages of the revival. As one historian says, "He was the first who ever burst into that silent sea, and was converted while the two Wesleys were still fast bound in sin and nature's night, and he was the one great evangelist to share in the Revival as it embraced America, Wales, Scotland, and England."¹⁹ Whitefield decided it was time for him to visit America and asked Wesley to pick up the British work where he was leaving off.

John Wesley does not often appear snobbish or aloof, but he was astonished when Whitefield explained to him the simple expedient of field preaching. Once he understood what was involved, he embraced it, but the action was like hugging a filthy stranger. He recorded in his journal, "at four in the afternoon I submitted to be more vile and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation."²⁰ Field preaching turned out to be exactly the method required to awaken the people of England. Apparently the idea that the message of the Christian faith was something you could hear in any setting was a kind of shock to the people. Wesley said of the idea that he took it up "having been all my life (till very lately) 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."²¹

Along with field preaching, the other great method of the revival was itinerancy: not staying in one place, but moving from town to town, or from one part of the city to another, with a series of sermons. These two methods combined to make Wesley's preaching a major event wherever it happened. Huge crowds turned out to hear the message of salvation. The gatherings were usually peaceful, but the fact that they occasionally turned into riots is a good sign of how emotionally charged these events could be. Wesley's best report of a revival riot is from October 1743 in the town of Wednesbury. He was by this time well practiced in how to handle a crowd

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 339.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 362.

²¹ From Wesley's journal, cited in William Edward Hartpole Lecky, *A History of England During the Eighteenth Century (1878-1890)*, 8 vols. (New York: Appleton, 1888), 2:612.

and make himself heard. As the group around him swelled and became unruly, Wesley says:

To attempt speaking was vain; for the noise on every side was like the roaring of the sea. So they dragged me along till we came to the town; where seeing the door of a large house open, I attempted to go in; but a man, catching me by the hair, pulled me back into the middle of the mob. They made no more stop till they had carried me through the main street, from one end of the town to the other.

In situations like this, as Wesley was jostled from place to place, he kept a cool head and looked for opportunities to get a word in. He would keep silent sometimes, speak to those immediately around him at other times, and then seize the opportunity to address the larger group.

I continued speaking all the time to those within hearing, feeling no pain or weariness. At the west end of the town, seeing a door half open, I made toward it and would have gone in; but a gentleman in the shop would not suffer [permit] me, saying they would pull the house down to the ground. However, I stood at the door, and asked, "Are you willing to hear me speak?" Many cried out, "No, no! knock his brains out; down with him; kill him at once." Others said, "Nay, but we will hear him first." I began asking, "What evil have I done? Which of you all have I wronged in word or deed?" And continued speaking for above a quarter of an hour, till my voice suddenly failed: then the floods began to lift up their voice again; many crying out, "Bring him away! bring him away!" In the meantime my strength and my voice returned, and I broke out aloud in prayer. And now the man who just before headed the mob turned and said, "Sir, I will spend my life for you: follow me, and not one soul here shall touch a hair of your head."²²

Such disturbances were not daily events. But excitement broke out wherever the first Methodist preachers went, as fierce opposition and deep revival swirled around each other. And the disturbances persisted for years. In October 1749, Wesley faced a particularly dangerous crowd in Bolton. As usual, he watched for the right moment and turned the tide of the crowd.

Believing the time was now come, I walked down into the thickest of them. They had now filled all the rooms below. I called for a chair. The

²² From Wesley's journal, October 1743, in *Works*, 20:99.

winds were hushed, and all was calm and still. My heart was filled with love, my eyes with tears, and my mouth with arguments. They were amazed; they were ashamed; they were melted down; they devoured every word. What a turn was this!²³

One of Wesley's secrets of success was that he thrived on the crowd, apparently drawing energy from opposition. He would say that God met him in his need and filled his heart with love, his eyes with tears, and his mouth with arguments on one occasion after another for decades.

Builder and Organizer

The term *Methodist preachers* now conjures up images of circuit riders on the American frontier, planting churches for their fast-growing denomination. But in the eighteenth-century revival, *Methodist* was a loose term for whoever preached in this new, earnest, Whitefield-and-Wesley way. Their *message* was salvation by grace through faith, as a reality that could be experienced here and now. Their *medium* was preaching, especially preaching outside of churches, whether in fields or meeting houses. When the message and the medium met, the international *movement* called Methodism happened, and it happened explosively. People demanded to hear this new thing; they demanded Methodist preachers.

Once the revival picked up momentum, Wesley and Whitefield and their coworkers were no longer promoting it so much as they were running to keep up with it. Nobody could control or manage it. But it was at this point that John Wesley stepped into a new kind of leadership role. He had natural talents as a networker and organizer, and he had learned all the right lessons from his prior successes and failures. He was the one who knew how to channel the revival into systems and patterns that would endure. Wesley had another fifty years of active life ahead of him when the revival broke out, and they were to be years full of preaching, writing, editing, and traveling. But his tasks were constantly dictated to him by the needs of the movement. As quickly as the needs arose, Wesley improvised solutions: lay preachers, class meetings, general rules, conferences, and connections. Implementing these systems and leading them by his own example would be Wesley's lifework from 1741 until his death in 1791.

²³ From Wesley's journal, October 1749, in Emory, *The Works of the Reverend John Wesley*, 3:469. For a fuller account of Wesley and crowd violence, see John Telford, "Encounters with the Mob," chap. 12 in *The Life of John Wesley* (New York: Eaton and Maine, 1898).

The popular demand for more evangelical preaching so far outstripped the supply of awakened Anglican ministers that Wesley took a drastic measure to fill the gap. Beginning in 1741, he appointed unordained men to preach. These lay preachers were drawn from all classes of society, and Wesley gave them authority to preach as soon as he discerned any potential in them. Thus, while the machinery of the Anglican church kept grinding along as it had been doing, an alternative delivery system emerged. Lay preachers began ministering in alternative venues. Wesley was very strict about ensuring that the lay preachers never placed themselves in direct competition with the official parish priests, and especially that they never held services at the same time as regular church. He intended for his evangelical lay ministers to awaken the people and feed them on pure doctrine, with the hope that they would be better churchmen thereafter. But Anglican leaders were understandably alarmed.

In 1747, Bishop Gibson of London wrote a circular letter to all the ministers in his diocese, warning against the Methodists. The letter made the accusation that “they persuade the people that the established worship, with a regular attendance upon it, is not sufficient to answer the ends of devotion.” Bishop Gibson’s letter ended with the rhetorical flourish, “Reverend Brothers, I charge you all, lift up your voice like a trumpet! And warn and arm and fortify all mankind—against a People called Methodists.” John Wesley responded with an “Open Letter to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of London,” asking first of all whether Methodists were really so dangerous as to deserve to be singled out in this way. “Could your lordship discern no other enemies of the gospel of Christ? . . . Are there no Papists, no Deists left in the land? . . . Have the Methodists (so called) monopolized all the sins, as well as all the errors of the nation?”²⁴

But Wesley’s main business was to respond to the charge that Methodists acted as if attending “the established worship” was not “sufficient to answer the ends of devotion.” On the one hand, Wesley did not intend to set up a different church from the established church, and in that sense the normal, institutional worship services of Anglicanism were the main event. On the other hand, everybody knew (and Bishop Gibson had himself admitted in previous pastoral letters!) that the church was not getting the job done. Wesley pressed this point:

²⁴Quoted in Rupp, *Religion in England 1688–1791*, 381.

Here are, in and near Moorfields, ten thousand poor souls for whom Christ died, rushing head-long into hell. Is Dr. Bulkeley, the parochial minister, both willing and able to help them? If so let it be done, and I have no place in these parts. . . . But if after all he has done and all he can do, they are still in the broad way to destruction, let me see if God will put a word even in my mouth.²⁵

The Anglican church of the 1740s simply did not have a plan in place for meeting the spiritual needs of the people of England. It had been a long time since it even pretended to have such a plan. Wesley was completely in favor of the national church; he just intended, as a duly ordained priest of that church, to see it take up its responsibility to shepherd the souls of the nation. Speaking of the range of his own preaching ministry, Wesley had said, "I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far, I mean, that, in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meete [fitting], right, and my bounden duty, to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation." The lay preachers and helpers were an extension of his ministry. The same impetus that drove him to field preaching drove him to appoint lay preachers to extend the gospel ministry to places the church was not even trying to reach.

Wesley provided some rudimentary training and oversight for these lay preachers, mostly in the form of exhortations and guidelines. The best are his "Twelve Rules for Helpers," sent out in 1744. These rules show Wesley as a spiritual guide extending his ministry by equipping others to join him.

1. Be diligent. Never be unemployed for a moment; never be triflingly employed. Never while away time; neither spend any more time at any place than is strictly necessary.
2. Be serious. Let your motto be, Holiness to the Lord. Avoid all lightness, jesting and foolish talking.
3. Converse sparingly and cautiously with women, particularly with young women in private.
4. Take no step towards marriage without first acquainting me with your design.
5. Believe evil of no one; unless you see it done, take heed how you credit it. Put the best construction on everything; you know the judge is always supposed to be on the prisoner's side.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 381. Rupp calls this passage from Wesley "some of the most moving paragraphs he ever penned."

6. Speak evil of no one; else your words especially would eat as doth a canker. Keep your thoughts within your own breast til you come to the person concerned.
7. Tell every one what you think wrong in him, and that plainly, and as soon as may be, else it will fester in your heart. Make all haste to cast the fire out of your bosom.
8. Do not affect the gentleman. You have no more to do with this character than with that of a dancing-master. A preacher of the gospel is the servant of all.
9. Be ashamed of nothing but sin; not of fetching wood (if time permit), or of drawing water; not of cleaning your own shoes, or your neighbor's.
10. Be punctual. Do everything exactly at the time; and, in general, do not mend our rules, but keep them; not for wrath but for conscience's sake.
11. You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work. And go always not to those who want you, but to those who want you most.
12. Act in all things not according to your own will but as a son in the gospel. As such, it is your part to employ your time in the manner which we direct, partly in preaching and visiting the flock from house to house; partly in reading, meditation and prayer. Above all, if you labour with us in the Lord's vineyard, it is needful that you should do that part of the work which we advise, at those times and places which we judge most for His glory.²⁶

Wesley trusted his lay preachers. He put basic guidelines in place for them and let them know that their ministry was in some way annexed to, and subordinate to, the ordained ministry of the official church. He expected these helpers to do the right thing. They did not always do so. Minor problems arose in various places from the beginning, but the worst examples of out-of-control lay preachers did not occur until the 1760s.

A preacher named George Bell began teaching that it was possible for his flock to be perfectly holy from then until the return of Christ. The return of Christ, he further stipulated, would be on February 28, 1762. Wesley publicly rebuked Bell, warned the Methodists in Bell's area that they had fallen into error, and did his best to pick up the pieces after the inevitable disappointment when the sun rose on March 1, 1762. A similarly divisive lay preacher was the talented Thomas Maxfield, whose "doctrines

²⁶ Outler, *John Wesley*, 145–46.

became extreme, as though he would out-Wesley Wesley.”²⁷ In general, the pattern seemed to be that the more bright, charismatic, and powerful a lay preacher was, the more dangerous he was, and the more likely to cause trouble among the Methodists. Most lay preachers were content to be ordinary Christians exercising the priesthood of all believers, though in an especially strategic way. That was the whole point of lay preachers, a point that ambitious cranks like Bell and Maxfield missed.

Wherever the revival spread, people awoke from their spiritual slumber, and Wesley organized these awakened souls into well-ordered groups of various kinds. In doing this, he was using techniques he had been practicing since the Holy Club at Oxford. Viewing the rise of Methodism organizationally, Wesley would look back in 1781 and say that the movement had not one but three rises: first, in a very small group “when four of us met together at Oxford”; second, during the disastrous American mission trip “at Savannah, in April, 1736, when twenty or thirty persons met”; and, third, in May 1738 in London, when Wesley and Moravian leader Peter Boehler founded the Fetter Lane Society.²⁸ The revival gave Wesley the opportunity to use these same spiritual disciplines and community commitments in a context supercharged with spiritual renewal. It also required him to devise new systems and to experiment with new kinds of groups.

The fundamental organizational unit (beginning in 1742) was the “class meeting,” an intense small group (about ten or twelve people) that met weekly and emphasized mutual accountability for spiritual growth. Into these groups Wesley directed all who “earnestly desired to flee the wrath that is to come,” with the result that these groups might include seekers and recent converts, as well as more mature Christians. Each member received personal attention from a leader within the small group, rather than from an ordained minister overseeing a large number of groups. “There was no room here for lecturing or preaching; the emphasis was clearly on present and personal growth, presided over, not by a professional trainer, but by a fellow seeker.”²⁹

Wesley’s wisdom and ingenuity in the creation of the class meeting system have been widely praised. “The greatest thing John Wesley ever gave to the world is the Methodist class-meeting,” wrote Henry Ward Beecher.

²⁷ Rupp, *Religion in England 1688–1791*, 403.

²⁸ This is from Wesley’s 1781 “Short History of the People Called Methodists,” in *Works*, 9:425–50.

²⁹ D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel, 1997), 96.

And Dwight Moody would testify that “the Methodist class-meetings are the best institutions for training converts the world ever saw.”³⁰ There were also “select bands” for the more spiritually mature. The main goal of the class meetings was to spur believers on to good works, at whatever level was appropriate to them. All the classes and bands together in a region made up the “Methodist Society” for that area. As soon as 1743, Wesley published “General Rules for the Methodist Societies,” and by 1744 delegates from many of the societies gathered for the first Methodist Conference (though the conference was not legally incorporated until 1784). All the evangelical ministers of the mid-eighteenth century stood in awe of the revival that was breaking out wherever the gospel was preached. John Wesley, almost alone among these laborers, knew exactly what to do with a revival: put it into small groups.

The Methodist movement spread rapidly and had a great impact. Judging from these results, we have to say that Wesley was highly successful as an organizer and planner. If there is anything that characterizes his work as a leader, it is his many-sidedness. He never made the mistake of thinking there was any single solution to every problem. He knew that people were complex and needed to be supported in complex ways. His comprehensiveness is summed up in a quotation that may be apocryphal, but nicely encapsulates his wisdom:

Preach our doctrine, inculcate experience, urge practice, enforce discipline. If you preach doctrine alone, the people will be antinomians; if you preach experience only, they will become enthusiasts; if you preach practice only, they will become Pharisees; and if you preach all of these and do not enforce discipline, Methodism will be like a highly cultivated garden without a fence, exposed to the ravages of the wild boar of the forest.³¹

In all of his organizing, Wesley constantly endeavored to keep the Methodist revival within the bounds of the Anglican Church. He was always a Church of England man, and although he knew and respected several Dissenters and Baptists, he was not interested in leading people out of the established church into a dissenting movement. His brother Charles

³⁰ Both of these quotations are from *ibid.* Henderson's book is the best discussion of John Wesley's strategy and how it applies to ministry through small groups in the contemporary church.

³¹ This is a caption under a picture in Nicolson Square Church, Edinburgh. Franz Hildebrandt cites the caption in *Christianity according to the Wesleys* (London: Epworth, 1956), 11–12, noting that there is no other record indicating that Wesley actually said these words. Nevertheless, they epitomize Wesley.

constantly warned him that authorizing lay preachers and organizing Methodist Societies was bound to lead to a breakaway group sooner or later. Several histories of Anglicanism refer to the events of the late 1700s as “the Methodist Schism.” Americans might be more inclined to think of it as the birth of a new denomination. In fact, the American situation played an important role in making a new denomination possible and even necessary.

The evangelical awakening happened in England and America beginning around 1740, just as the American colonies were transforming themselves into a nation. Historians even argue that the awakening itself played a role in the formation of a unified American outlook; a revival in 1740 followed by national independence in 1776 was probably not a coincidence. The celebrity status of George Whitefield as an itinerant preacher canvassing up and down the entire colonial seaboard was also likely a unifying factor. But there were many other causes that also fed into the American Revolution, and once the revolution happened, evangelical Anglicans in the United States found themselves in a difficult situation amid conflicting loyalties. Some early Americans found a way to remain loyal to the established Church of England while declaring political independence from her king. But colonial diversity and the absence of a federally established church in the new nation also opened up a new possibility: a non-Anglican church carrying out the ministry of the awakening; Methodism as a denomination, in other words, rather than as a renewal movement within a national church.

What Wesley rejected in the old world he endorsed in the new. In 1784 Wesley ordained preachers for the United States, and even bishops (Coke and Asbury), which led to the formation of the Methodist Episcopal Church within the year. Methodism as a church distinct from Anglicanism grew rapidly in America, sent out missionaries around the world, and soon even counter-colonized England, planting Methodist churches on Anglican soil. But these events occurred after Wesley’s lifetime.

John Wesley died in 1791 in London at the age of 87. His death was peaceful, a model of the way a man should pass out of this world if he knows his accounts with God are already settled. If my short telling of Wesley’s life has been something of a hagiography, the reader may be thinking, “Of course he died like a saint.” But Wesley’s serene and resigned death should not be taken for granted. Recall that he was terrified of the storm on the Atlantic in 1738 precisely because he was afraid to die, and he was

afraid to die precisely because he was afraid to face God. What John Wesley learned, and taught others, was to face God right now on the basis of the grace of Jesus Christ. The old evening prayer of Bishop Thomas Ken says,

Teach me to live, that I may dread
the grave as little as my bed.

That was how John Wesley came at last to die. Wesley thought that a movement could be judged by how well it did at preparing its people for this final trial. On this count we have to judge both his movement and his personal life favorably. "The world may not like our Methodists and Evangelical people, but the world cannot deny that they die well."³²

Character of the First Methodist

We have had to omit much from this brief account of John Wesley's busy life, but what we have seen ought to be enough to show that he is worth listening to as a teacher on the Christian life. Before we turn to his teaching on the subject, it will be helpful to give a summary of his status as a theologian, his personality, and his character.

First, his status as a theologian. John Wesley was a theologian, but he was by temperament an especially unsystematic theologian. For some time, it was fashionable for commentators to deny that Wesley was a theologian at all. Then came a wave of defenders saying that he was a "folk theologian," a "pastoral theologian," or an "intuitive theologian." These defenses are on the right track. I think it is best to say that Wesley was a theologian who intended to be consistent, but who preferred to express himself in a series of occasional pieces rather than in a comprehensive statement of beliefs. He was more like Luther, who produced a brilliant series of theses, sermons, tracts, pamphlets, attacks, defenses, and occasional treatises, than like Calvin, who drafted an impressively comprehensive introduction to theology at age twenty-six and then commented on nearly every book of the Bible. It will not do to say that Wesley was so busy that he never had a chance to compose a more systematic statement. When he threw himself into a lifestyle of traveling, preaching, and organizing, his life and his literary legacy both took on the same shape. That shape was a focused response to a given situation in a series of brilliant

³² Quoted in Lecky, *A History of England During the Eighteenth Century*, 2:695.

improvisations making use of available material. His life and his theology were isomorphic in this way.

As a result, if you want to read Wesley at his best, you do not consult a systematic theology—you read a lot of sermons. In fact, Wesley’s sermons, along with his Bible notes, even became an actual doctrinal norm for later Methodists. In 1763, Wesley and his co-laborers framed a “Model Deed” to ensure that the content of Methodist preaching would remain somewhat standardized. One of the provisions was that ministers should “preach no other doctrine than is contained in Mr. Wesley’s Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament and four volumes of sermons.”³³

If Marshall McLuhan was right when he quipped that “the medium is the message,” then you can tell a lot about any movement by the form of its main documents. Ignore the actual theology for a moment and just look at the medium that conveys it: Calvinists excel at making confessions and catechisms; Catholics have papal encyclicals and canon law; Anglicans have a Book of Common Prayer and the Thirty-Nine Articles; dispensationalists have study Bibles and time-line diagrams. In each case, there is a fit between the genius of the group and the document or deposit that enshrines that genius. Methodists have a hymnal, the *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, and a set of *Standard Sermons*, all from the Wesleys; these are the carriers of their theology.

It is tempting to think that Wesley’s followers, lacking a real systematic theology, are trying to force a heap of songs, notes, and sermons to do the work of doctrine. But that misses the point that the songs, notes, and sermons are direct expressions and carriers of spiritual life. Systematic theology is a service discipline; it helps the worship, Bible reading, and preaching of the church stay faithful and consistent. When he left notes, songs, and sermons to his followers, Wesley was not leaving something sub-theological, but something more immediate than a systematic theology. In some denominations, the standard approach is to get hold of the theology and then ask, “Will it preach?” Wesleyans, by contrast, seem to have got hold of the sermon and then asked, “Will it theologize?”

Following out the guidelines of the notes, the hymnal, and the *Standard Sermons*, it is easy enough to sketch a Wesleyan systematic theology; though the Wesleyan movement has never been as theologically prolific as the Reformed or Lutheran traditions, several good Wesleyan systematic

³³ Outler, *John Wesley*, 87.

theologies do exist.³⁴ But the best of them take note that Wesley got them started on the path to right theology by providing them with right worship, right Bible reading, and right preaching. Someone has said of Protestantism that it is inherently wordy: conceived in an argument, born in theses, and weaned on a catechism. The part of Protestantism under Wesley's influence is different. It is also proud to be wordy ("my mouth was filled with arguments"), but the words rhyme. The movement seems to have been conceived in a revival, born at a hymn-sing, and weaned on Bible notes.

When it comes to John Wesley's personality and character, two closely related elements need to be noted: he was a hard worker, and he had tremendous confidence. At age twenty-three, he wrote to Charles, "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."³⁵ He carried out that resolution. Bishop J. C. Ryle (1816–1900) noted Wesley's "extraordinary diligence, self-denial, and economy of time," remarking that "it puts one almost out of breath to read the good man's Journals, and to mark the quantity of work that he crowded into one year."³⁶ And his health was indeed "long indulged" him, so he remained physically vigorous for decades of productive work. One historian notes that Wesley

was gifted with a frame of iron and with spirits that never flagged. . . . During the greater part of his career he was accustomed to preach about 800 sermons a year, and it was computed that in the fifty years of his itinerant life he travelled a quarter of a million of miles, and preached more than 40,000 sermons.³⁷

Other scholars have computed Wesley's miles-and-sermons statistics somewhat differently, but everybody agrees the number is staggering.

Was Wesley too busy, and did he work too hard? "Nobody would have been more scornful of the idea that he needed what would now be called a 'sabbatical,'" wrote Gordon Rupp, yet in his judgment, "nobody needed one

³⁴ For a survey, see Thomas Langford, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998). In my opinion, the greatest theologian in the Wesleyan tradition was William Burt Pope. For a short sketch, see his essay on "Methodist Doctrine," in *The Wesley Memorial Volume: Or, Wesley and the Methodist Movement, Judged by Nearly One Hundred and Fifty Writers, Living or Dead*, ed. J. O. A. Clark (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1881), 168–90. More comprehensively, see Pope's three-volume *Compendium of Christian Theology*.

³⁵ Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley*, 1:46.

³⁶ J. C. Ryle, *Christian Leaders of the Last Century; or, England a Hundred Years Ago* (London: T. Nelson, 1869), 83.

³⁷ Lecky, *A History of England During the Eighteenth Century*, 2:682.

more” than Wesley.³⁸ Dr. Samuel Johnson relished any opportunity to visit with Wesley, but complained that it was impossible to have a leisurely visit with such a dynamo: “He is never at leisure. He is always obliged to go at a certain hour. This is very disagreeable to a man who likes to fold his legs and have out his talk, as I do.”³⁹

From Wesley’s point of view, though, he was maintaining a reasonable schedule and was very careful not to let himself become overburdened or harried. In a 1777 letter, he said, “Though I am always in haste, I am never in a hurry; because I never undertake any more work than I can go through with perfect calmness of spirit.”⁴⁰ The difference he drew between haste and hurry is the difference between a sinful attitude of harried workaholicism and the serenity of obedient service. It is also the key to thinking of Wesley as a role model or guide in the area of productivity. We should never try to match his productivity! Gifted with an unusual amount of natural energy and drive, Wesley set an impossibly high standard of getting things done. He was in an elite class of healthy, hardworking, high-capacity productive people. What we should imitate, however, are his principles and his attitude toward work, devoting all our time and energy to serving God and man. But we should not try to match his productivity. As the also-industrious Charles Wesley wrote, in a hymn intended to form the outlooks of the young orphans in Georgia, since Christ himself worked,

Then let us in His footsteps tread,
And gladly act our part;
On earth employ our hands and head.
But give Him all our heart.

Indeed, having said goodbye to leisure as a young man, John Wesley was simply carrying out the first of his rules for assistants: “Be diligent. Never be unemployed for a moment; never be triflingly employed. Never while away time; neither spend any more time at any place than is strictly necessary.” We should only add to that his own description, “always in haste . . . never in a hurry,” and “with perfect calmness of spirit.”

³⁸ Rupp, *Religion in England 1688–1791*, 428.

³⁹ James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, new ed., with notes and appendices by Alexander Napier, vol. 3 (London: George Bell, 1889), 247.

⁴⁰ Letter to “a member of the society,” December 10, 1777, in Emory, *The Works of the Reverend John Wesley*, 6:784.

Closely related to his productivity was his self-confidence, what one biographer called “his usual imperturbable confidence.”⁴¹ Though Wesley was capable of self-doubt and could receive correction and criticism from others, his approach was to charge ahead over the top of naysayers and discouragement. A good example of Wesley’s unflappability is from a journal entry on April 22, 1779. That day, he read a passage in Tobias Smollett’s *History of England* that attacked, derided, and dismissed the revival work that he and Whitefield had spent their lives on:

Imposture and fanaticism still hang upon the skirts of religion. Weak minds were seduced by the delusions of a superstition, styled Methodism, raised upon the affectation of superior sanctity, and pretensions to divine illumination. Many thousands were infected with this enthusiasm by the endeavours of a few obscure preachers, such as Whitefield, and the two Wesleys, who found means to lay the whole kingdom under contribution.

Imagine reading a history book that treated your life’s work in this way. Rather than being discouraged, Wesley was certain that by writing in this way, Dr. Smollett had undermined his own credibility, not Wesley’s: “Poor Dr. Smollett! Thus to transmit to all succeeding generations a whole heap of notorious falsehoods! Meantime, what faith can be given to his History? What credit can any man of reason give to any fact upon his authority?”⁴²

In this brief review of Wesley’s life and character, I have emphasized the things that make Wesley a credible theological guide on the subject of the Christian life. But even in a sympathetic report like this, there is no reason to idolize him. He did have some character flaws, and his life was marred by unfortunate lapses of judgment. The phrase that I often heard about him when studying in a Wesleyan seminary was, “He was a man of God, but he had feet of clay.” Perhaps nowhere are his characteristic weaknesses so evident as in his disastrous marriage.

John Wesley as Husband

In 1751, John Wesley slipped on the ice on London Bridge, hurting his ankle so badly that his next few sermons had to be delivered sitting down or kneeling. He chose to convalesce at the home of a widow, Mary (or Molly,

⁴¹ Lecky, *A History of England During the Eighteenth Century*, 2:606.

⁴² The Smollett quotation and Wesley’s response are both from an April 1779 journal entry, in *Works*, 4:34.

as she was called) Vazeille. In just over a week, they were married. What led to this precipitous wedding?

John Wesley had spiritual oversight over many preachers, and he gave them all good advice about marriage: it had to be subordinate to ministry, it probably wasn't the best option for serious preachers, and at any rate, any preacher considering marriage should seek discernment and accountability from his closest friends in ministry. For Wesley himself, following this advice would have meant conferring with his brother Charles at least, and with many other leaders and friends in the movement he was spearheading. But once before, Charles had intervened decisively to keep John from getting married, and John evidently knew that he would have to get married quickly and without giving Charles a chance to prevent it.

So Wesley broke his own rules when he married Molly, and got what he deserved. Early Methodist historians painted Molly as an unstable woman of sour disposition and a flaring temper, and posed questions like, "How did so wise and great a man come to make so unhappy a choice?" She does seem a bit crazed with jealousy, but then again, when Molly opened the mail, she found letters from Wesley's many—female—admirers. And she found in his coat pocket a letter of spiritual advice to a woman that included the warm words: "The conversing with you, either by speaking or writing, is an unspeakable blessing to me. I cannot think of you without thinking of God. Others often lead me to Him; but it is, as it were, going round about: you bring me straight into His presence." That's enough to get some dishes flying around anybody's house. How did so wise and great a man manage to be so foolish?

John Wesley's marriage really was the great tragedy of his life, a dark cloud with no silver lining. Gordon Rupp says, "The marriage was a disaster. One must grieve for John Wesley and pity his wife."⁴³ Molly stormed out of the marriage several times, and eventually she stayed gone. Wesley's diary entry for June 23, 1771, is famously cold: "For what cause I know not, my wife set out for Newcastle, purposing 'never to return.' *Non eam reliqui; non dimisi; non revocabo*"—that is, "I did not forsake her; I did not dismiss her; I will not recall her." Ten years later, in October 1781, Wesley arrived in London and was notified that his wife had died, more than thirty years after that fateful slip on London Bridge. The couple had no children. They had endured two decades of conflict and one of total separation.

⁴³ Rupp, *Religion in England 1688–1791*, 401.

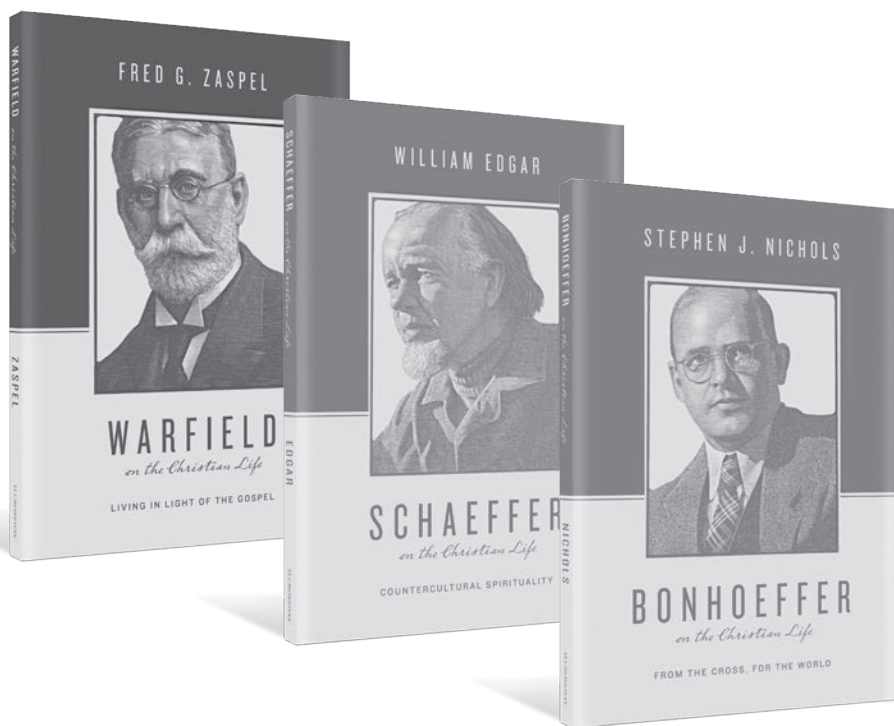
All of John Wesley's friends knew that by temperament, by calling, and by position, he was equipped to be one of the great examples of consecrated singleness in the history of the church. It was obvious to all that he had an apostolic gift of spiritual fatherhood over souls. It was equally clear that his single-minded focus on ministry made the Methodist revival the place where he channeled his affections and energy, with an exclusivity that both imitated monogamy and excluded it. But while all of Wesley's advisors recognized this, Wesley himself seemed willfully blind to it. He insisted on marrying, against the definite counsel of his spiritual advisors. So instead of an example of wise celibacy, we have in John Wesley a cautionary tale about a terrible husband, terribly mismatched to a terrible wife. Wesley was protected from great transgressions and (despite scurrilous slanders spread against his name) was not guilty of any real scandal. Nevertheless, he was a man of God with feet of clay. He had other personal failings, but none were so protracted and compromising as his failed marriage. He also had his own share of idiosyncrasies of temperament and character. When we learn from Wesley's example and from his teaching on the Christian life, we are learning not from a flawless role model, but from a man whose errors and transgressions are painfully obvious.

"There are few greater Englishmen than John Wesley," wrote the literary historian A. R. Humphreys, "and to compress his achievement into a paragraph is like trying to see the world in a grain of sand and eternity in an hour."⁴⁴ We have compressed his life and character into one short chapter, and are now ready to hear what he has to say about his grandest subject, the Christian life.

⁴⁴ A. R. Humphreys, *The Augustan World: Society, Thought, and Letters in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 145.

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