

Church History II

(Pre-Reformation to Modern Day)

Week 6 – Wesley’s and the Great Awakening

- I. The Wesley’s and Methodism
 1. John and Charles Wesley grew up in a curious way.
 - A. The Wesley’s upbringing
 - i. Their father was an Anglican minister, and their mother was a daughter of a nonconformist Pietist pastor.
 - ii. This odd combination brought about a great Spiritual change in the world with the Wesley Brothers.
 - iii. However in order to get to that point there were some less than desirable points. **PTQ**
 - 1) Susanna Wesley had born 19 children, with only nine surviving past two years old.
 - 2) She taught them “to fear the rod and cry softly.”¹
 - 3) She made time to teach all of her children bible lessons individually.
 - 4) She was also well known for throwing her apron over her head to pray, read, or even just have some form of quiet time with the Lord.²
 - 5) Disgruntled parishioners and community men would terrorize the family and even set fire to their belongings, with John even still being inside the house. John was saved from a second-story window by 2 neighbors who stood on each other's shoulders to reach him.
 - a) Hence his nickname, a brand pulled from the burning
 - 6) Her husband became an Anglican priest in a congregation that refused to pay his salary, then sent him to debtor’s prison... When her husband died after serving the church for thirty-nine years, the church evicted her from the parsonage.³
 - B. Their formal training
 - i. “At seventeen he {John} was off to Oxford University, where he studied first at Christ Church and later at Lincoln College. He found little at Oxford to stimulate his mind or his soul, but he read widely and was especially impressed by the early church fathers and the great devotional classics. The early Greek fathers taught him that the goal of the Christian life is perfection, a process of disciplined love rather than a religious state.”⁴

¹ Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, ed. Marshall Shelley, 5th Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 389.

² Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress Publishing Group, 2014), 241.

³ Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 390.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 389–390.

- 1) In his reading Wesley learned that the “Christian life is the consecration of the whole person in love to God and neighbor” and “the absolute impossibility of being half a Christian. I determined, through His grace, to be all devoted to God.”⁵
 - 2) “In 1726, Wesley was elected a fellow of Lincoln College. This not only gave him academic standing at the university but assured him a steady income. Two years later, he was ordained to the Anglican ministry and returned to Epworth for a time to serve as his father’s assistant.”⁶ **PTQ**
 - 3) “When he resumed his duties at Oxford, he found that his brother Charles, alarmed at the spread of deism at the university, had assembled a little band of students determined to take their religion seriously. John proved to be just the leader they needed. Under his direction they drew up a plan of study and rule of life that stressed prayer, Bible reading, and frequent attendance at Holy Communion.”⁷ **PTQ**
 - The term Methodists actually came similarly to the designation of Christians back at Antioch his contemporaries at Oxford, describing the club in a derogatory manner. **PTQ**
 - 4) “Then came the invitation to Georgia. A friend, Dr. John Burton, suggested that both John and Charles could serve God in the new colony led by General James Oglethorpe. Charles could be the general’s secretary and John a chaplain to the colony. John welcomed a chance to preach to the Native Americans, so the brothers boarded the *Simmonds* in October with idealism and missionary zeal, unaware of the storms at sea and in the soul just ahead...On his way home he had a chance to ponder the whole experience. “I went to America,” he wrote, “to convert the Indians, but, oh, who shall convert me?”⁸ **PTQ**
- C. The Wesley’s Salvation and Ministry
- i. John, who had then been challenged and encouraged by his interactions with the Moravians, took the opportunity to learn from them, now being back in Europe. In doing so, he came to know Justification by faith not just as a doctrine but as a true and personal experience of God’s grace.
 - ii. John got saved by listening to Luther’s preface of Romans on May 24th, 1738.
 - iii. Charles Wesley, who had experienced God’s forgiving grace three days before John, wrote more than seven thousand hymns and gospel songs for these Methodist meetings. Perhaps his best loved were “Jesus, Lover of My Soul” and “How Can It Be?” These were sung in societies all over Britain and

⁵ Shelley, [*Church History in Plain Language*](#), 391.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 391-392.

America. Some historians believe Charles's hymns are the revival's greatest legacy.⁹ **PTQ**

- iv. Wesley, although now spiritually charged in a magnificent way, found little success until being encouraged to do open-air preaching as his younger friend and compatriot had, George Whitefield.
 - "He (George) began in February 1739 to preach in the open fields near Bristol to coal miners who seldom dared or cared to enter a church. His voice was clear and strong, and his fervent oratory so moved these hardened and weary men that he could see "the white gutters made by their tears" streaming down their black cheeks as they listened near the coal pits. Whitefield's preaching was unforgettable. Using startling images, he could make his listeners feel the pain of sin and the terror of hell. Then with tears in his voice, he could describe the love of Christ until his audience cried with him for forgiveness."¹⁰
- v. "In Wesley's early years of itinerating, the crowds were not always friendly. Rocks and stones or other missiles would come flying at him. Sometimes he was mobbed and beaten by gangs incited by a hostile squire or parson. But Wesley feared no one."¹¹ **PTQ**
- vi. John Wesley was will to preach anywhere and everywhere that people were once he saw the fruit it could produce. Once, he even preached on his father's gravestone after being refused permission to enter the church for the sermon.
- vii. "In his tireless preaching, Wesley stressed what we now call Arminian beliefs; he was the only prominent leader of the Great Awakening who did. The name came from Jacob Arminius (1560–1609), a Dutch professor who tried to modify the Calvinism of his time. Wesley felt no special debt to Arminius, but he did staunchly oppose Calvin's doctrine of predestination. He thought the belief made God seem arbitrary and partial to certain people and neglectful of others. He insisted that God willed the salvation of all and that people had enough freedom of will to choose or refuse divine grace."¹² **PTQ**
 - 1) John Wesley and George's surprising friendship is best seen in George's response to a question about the eternal destiny of John.
 - 2) Whitefield was asked: "Do you expect to see John Wesley in heaven?" Whitefield reportedly replied: "No." The questioner was surprised (given their theological disagreements), but Whitefield continued: "I fear not, for he will be so near the throne, and we shall be at such a distance, that we shall hardly get a sight of him."

⁹ Shelley, [*Church History in Plain Language*](#), 396

¹⁰ Ibid., 393.

¹¹ Ibid., 395.

¹² Ibid.

- viii. Methodism, which ended up having two branches, one through Whitefield and another through Wesley, was an interesting attempt to be faithful to God and the preaching of his message while formulating and circulating preachers to effectively reach people. It was not meant to break off from the Anglican church. This actually happened semi-naturally because the Methodists in America needed leadership, and the Anglican church was too slow to provide it efficiently. **PTQ**
- ix. “Wesley decided to appoint two of his lay preachers, Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey, for the American ministry and to commission Dr. Thomas Coke as superintendent of the American Methodists. This was an important breach in Anglican policy. The Methodist Church in America became a new, distinct denomination when the Christmas Conference meeting at Baltimore in 1784 selected Coke and Francis Asbury as superintendents.”¹³
2. John Newton, who lived at the same time as the Wesleys, 1725 to 1807, also forever changed the world. “Formerly involved in the slave trade, he had been wonderfully converted and after deep heart searching had become an Anglican minister, one of a small minority of evangelicals. In the church Newton has long been known for his hymns, most notably Amazing Grace...But in his own time, he was known less for his poetry and more for his unusual wisdom. This was in fact better expressed than the letters he wrote, than in the sermons he preached. Volumes of them were published, and they continued to be among the treasures of Christian literature.”¹⁴
3. Here are the Lyrics to the incredible Hymn I asked the Lord that I might grow.
- I asked the Lord that I might grow
In faith, and love, and every grace;
Might more of His salvation know,
And seek more earnestly His face.
'Twas He who taught me thus to pray,
And He, I trust, has answered prayer;
But it has been in such a way
As almost drove me to despair.
I hoped that in some favored hour,
At once He'd answer my request;
And by His love's constraining power
Subdue my sins, and give me rest.
Instead of this, He made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart;
And let the angry powers of hell
Assault my soul in every part.

¹³ Shelley, [*Church History in Plain Language*](#), 397–398.

¹⁴ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *In the Year of Our Lord: Reflections on Twenty Centuries of Church History* (Orlando, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2018) 189-190.

Yea more, with His own hand He seemed
 Intent to aggravate my woe;
 Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
 Blasted my gourds, and laid me low.
 “Lord, why is this?” I trembling cried,
 “Wilt Thou pursue Thy worm to death?”
 “’Tis in this way,” the Lord replied,
 “I answer prayer for grace and faith.
 “These inward trials I employ,
 From self and pride to set thee free;
 And break thy schemes of earthly joy,
 That thou may’st seek thy all in Me.”¹⁵

II. The Great Awakening

1. Christendom Destroyed

- A. Christendom had been destroyed when the Reformation broke with the Catholic church, and division ensued.
- B. After the infighting and difficulties caused a ruckus throughout Europe, some semblances of peace were found in Treaties like the Peace of Augsburg and the Treaty of Westphalia.
- C. The way to the future became not one spear-headed and primarily nominal church but denominations of churches filled with people convinced of Christ, and its particular flavors of doctrines.
 - i. “The churches were forced to shoulder the burden alone for evangelizing the unconverted and nurturing the believers—no state support, no state protection. Each church was on its own.
 - ii. We call this condition voluntarism because the churches, deprived of state support, were compelled to maintain their mission of preaching and teaching on a voluntary basis. Anyone could accept or reject the gospel as they pleased. The state had nothing to do with it. The denominations had to win converts and raise funds without state aid.”¹⁶ **PTQ**

2. Personal Faith became the focus

A. The Stalwart Puritan Resistance

- i. Even amongst the Puritans who served as one of the single greatest oppositions in the New World to this free Worship theory, they insisted that the first generation have conversion precede church membership. **PTQ**
- ii. The problems ultimately came in subsequent generations.
- iii. “Puritans were in a position to say which laws were for the public good because they had secured the charter granting them the right to settle in New England. Thus in their colony in Massachusetts they had the authority to permit only freemen to vote for the governor and magistrates and to insist that all freemen

¹⁵ Ferguson, *In the Year of Our Lord*, 191.

¹⁶ Shelley, [Church History in Plain Language](#), 400.

be church members. So the vote and public morality were controlled by the churches. This attempt to legislate morality is one reason later Americans came to hate the Puritans. Most later Americans prized their personal freedoms above the character of the society in which they lived. Civil liberties became more important than community character”¹⁷

- iv. “As the zeal of the New England founders cooled, fewer men and women could bear public witness to grace in their souls. To keep membership from shrinking drastically, many churches in 1662 had to settle for the Half-Way Covenant. Under this policy the “unawakened” could enjoy a kind of partial membership, baptizing their children and joining in congregational activities, but not taking full Communion. This was enough church affiliation for most political and social purposes, so that gradually the saints, those professing a personal encounter with Christ, sank to a tiny minority.”¹⁸ **PTQ**
- B. The Spiritual Children of the Puritans**
- i. “The spiritual heritage fell to the children of the Great Awakening. The call for personal conversion as the basis of church membership soon echoed throughout the Connecticut River Valley through the preaching of Jonathan Edwards.”¹⁹
 - ii. “In a short time a controversy arose over the question of educated versus converted ministers, and the whole Presbyterian Church divided into New Side (favoring the revival) and Old Side (opposing it).”²⁰ **PTQ**
 - iii. “Under the leadership of the Reverend Samuel Davies, revivalistic Presbyterian congregations took root in Virginia. And not to be outdone, Baptists began multiplying in Virginia and the Carolinas under uneducated but zealous preachers led by Shubal Stearns.”²¹
 - iv. “In 1739 the Wesleys’ friend brought his powerful voice and magnetic style to the colonies and preached his way through Georgia, the Carolinas, Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and New York.”²² Whitefield had left New England after a month and saw an immense change in the response of the people. **PTQ**
 - v. Other Preachers like Jonathon Edwards made an immeasurable difference by preaching sermons like “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Which was by no means the extent of its work, but has been remembered in the public arena up till recent days.

¹⁷ Shelley, [*Church History in Plain Language*](#), 402.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 403.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 404.

- vi. Isaac Backus joined their ranks later, seeing the need for reformation in New England, needing spiritual life in some of the deadness of Puritan nominalism. Baucus eventually became a Baptist and formed the first Baptist church in Massachusetts.
3. The Call for Liberty tied with the call for religious freedom
- A. Backus, in his desire for freedom of worship in the heavily Puritan Massachusetts, came to the common Baptist beliefs “all direct connections between the state and institutionalized religion must be broken in order that America might become a truly Christian country.” Backus, like Jefferson and Madison, believed that “truth is great and will prevail.” Furthermore, legislative power is inappropriate for faith. “Religion is a voluntary obedience unto God which force cannot promote.”²³ **PTQ**
 - B. By concentrating on the individual’s need for salvation, the Awakeners tended to neglect the Puritan concern for the political and social implications of the gospel. With the covenant of grace limited to individuals, twice-born men and women, the “covenant people” idea shifted easily from the church to the American people in general. As a result, the mission of the elect people shifted subtly from a Puritan holy commonwealth to the American people’s struggle for liberty.²⁴ **PTQ**
 - C. The close connection with Enlightenment leaders and deistic powerhouses converged on the idea and necessity of freedom and liberty to believe what one earnestly holds. “Coercion of opinion by the state in the interest of uniformity, Jefferson thought, had served only “to make one half the world fools, and the other half hypocrites.”²⁵

Conclusion: The insistence of personal faith as the renewed basis of Christian life and living caused great changes and revivals in England and the Americas. The great revivalists saw thousands come to faith and go from nominal Christians to church-attending believers. Although the Great Awakening was met with much skepticism at times, it was a net good for society and helped break the final vestiges of state churches in America, priming the way for the American Revolution and the Bill of Rights.

²³ Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 406.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 407.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 408.

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