

John Wesley - Part 1

by J.C. Ryle

This sermon explores the life and influence of John Wesley, highlighting his early years, education, and the formation of the Methodist movement.

Scripture: Matthew 28:19-20, Romans 1:16, 1 Corinthians 9:24, Galatians 6:9, Ephesians 2:8-9, Philippians 3:14, 2 Timothy 4:7, Hebrews 12:1-2, James 1:12, 1 Peter 5:10

Topics: "Perseverance in Faith", "Evangelism"

Description

J.C. Ryle reflects on the life and legacy of John Wesley, emphasizing his remarkable dedication to evangelism and the founding of the Methodist movement. Wesley's upbringing, influenced by his devout parents, particularly his mother, shaped his character and commitment to God. Despite facing opposition and challenges, Wesley's relentless pursuit of spreading the gospel and organizing the Methodist Church left a lasting impact on Christianity. Ryle highlights Wesley's extraordinary diligence, versatility, and unwavering focus on his mission, which ultimately led to the establishment of a significant religious denomination. Wesley's life serves as a testament to the power of faith and the importance of perseverance in the face of adversity.

Transcript

The name of this great evangelist is perhaps better known than that of any of his fellow-labourers a hundred years ago. This, however, is easily accounted for. He lived to the ripe old age of eighty-eight. For sixty-five years he was continually before the eyes of the public, and doing his Master's work in every part of England. He founded a new religious denomination, remarkable to this very day for its numbers, laboriousness, and success, and justly proud of its great founder. His life has been repeatedly written by his friends and followers, his works constantly reprinted, his precepts and maxims reverentially treasured up and embalmed, like Joseph's bones. In fact, if ever a good Protestant has been practically canonized, it has been John Wesley! It would be strange indeed if his name was not well known.

Of such a man as this I cannot pretend to give more than a brief account in the short space of a few pages. The leading facts of his long and well-spent life, and the leading features of his peculiar character, are all that I can possibly compress into the limits of this memoir. Those who want more must look elsewhere. (Footnote: The principal lives of Wesley by Methodist hands are those of Whitehead, Moore, and Watson. Southey's well-known life of Wesley is not a fair book, and the unfavourable animus of the writer throughout is painfully manifest. The best, most impartial, and most complete account of Wesley is

one published by Seeley in 1856, by an anonymous writer.)

John Wesley was born on the 17th of June 1703, at Epworth, in North Lincolnshire, of which parish his father was rector. He was the ninth of a family of at least thirteen children, comprising three sons and ten daughters. Of the daughters, those who grew up made singularly foolish and unhappy marriages. Of the Sons, the eldest, Samuel, was for some years usher of Westminster School, and an intimate friend of the famous Bishop Atterbury, and finally died head-master of Tiverton School. The second, John, was founder of the Methodist communion; and the third, Charles, was almost throughout life John's companion and fellow-labourer.

John Wesley's father was a man of considerable learning and great activity of mind. As a writer, he was always bringing out something either in prose or in verse, but nothing, unhappily for his pocket, which was ever acceptable to the reading public, or is much cared for in the present day. As a politician, he was a zealous supporter of the Revolution which brought into England the House of Orange; and it was on this account that Queen Mary presented him to the Crown living of Epworth. As a clergyman, he seems to have been a diligent pastor and preacher, of the theological school of Archbishop Tillotson. As a manager of his worldly affairs, he appears to have been most unsuccessful. Though rector of a living now valued at £1000 a-year, he was always in pecuniary difficulties, was once in prison for debt, and finally left his widow and children almost destitute. When I add to this that he was not on good terms with his parishioners, and, poor as he was, insisted on going up to London every year to attend the very unprofitable meetings of Convocation for months at a time, the reader will probably agree with me that, like too many, he was a man of more book-learning and cleverness than good sense.

The mother of John Wesley was evidently a woman of extraordinary power of mind. She was the daughter of Dr. Annesley, a man well known to readers of Puritan theology as one of the chief promoters of the Morning Exercises, and ejected from St. Giles', Cripplegate, in 1662. From him she seems to have inherited the masculine sense and strong decided judgement which distinguished her character. To the influence of his mother's early training and example, John Wesley, doubtless, was indebted for many of his peculiar habits of mind and qualifications.

Her own account of the way in which she educated all her children, in one of her letters to her son John, is enough to show that she was no common woman, and that her sons were not likely to turn out common men. She says, "None of them was taught to read till five years old, except Keziah, in whose case I was over-ruled; and she was more years in learning than any of the rest had been months. The way of teaching was this: the day before a child began to learn, the house was set in order, every one's work appointed them, and a charge given that none should come into the room from nine to twelve, or from two to five, which were our school hours. One day was allowed the child wherein to learn its letters, and each of them did in that time know all its letters, great and small, except Molly and Nancy, who were a day and a half before they knew them perfectly, for which I then thought them very dull; but the reason why I thought them so was because the rest learned so readily, and your brother Samuel, who was the first child I ever taught, learnt the alphabet in a few hours. He was five years old on the 10th of February; the next day he began to learn, and as soon as he knew the letters, began at the first chapter of Genesis. He was taught to spell the first verse, then to read it over and over till he could read it off-hand without any hesitation; so on to the second, &c., till he took ten verses for a lesson, which he quickly did. Easter fell low that year, and by Whitsuntide he could read a chapter very well, for he read continually, and had such a prodigious memory that I cannot remember ever to have told him the same word twice. What was stranger, any word he had learnt in his lesson he knew wherever he saw it, either in his Bible or any other

book, by which means he learned very soon to read an English author well."

Her energetic and decided conduct, as wife of a parish clergyman, is strikingly illustrated by a correspondence still extant between herself and her husband on a curious occasion. It appears that during Mr. Wesley's long-protracted absences from home in attending Convocation, Mrs. Wesley, dissatisfied with the state of things at Epworth, began the habit of gathering a few parishioners at the rectory on Sunday evenings and reading to them. As might naturally have been expected, the attendance soon became so large that her husband took alarm at the report he heard, and made some objections to the practice. The letters of Mrs. Wesley on this occasion are a model of strong, hard-headed, Christian good sense, and deserve the perusal of many timid believers in the present day. After defending what she had done by many wise and unanswerable arguments, and beseeching her husband to consider seriously the bad consequences of stopping the meeting, she winds up all with the following remarkable paragraph :--" If you do, after all, think fit to dissolve this assembly, do not tell me that you desire me to do it, for that will not satisfy my conscience. But send me your positive command in such full and express terms as may absolve me from all guilt and punishment for neglecting the opportunity of doing good, when you and I shall appear before the great and awful tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ."

A mother of this stamp was just the person to leave deep marks and impressions on the minds of her children. Of the old rector of Epworth we can trace little in his sons John and Charles, except, perhaps, their poetical genius. But there is much in John's career and character throughout life which shows the hand of his mother.

The early years of John Wesley's life appear to have passed quietly away in his Lincolnshire home. The only remarkable event recorded by his biographers is his marvellous escape from being burnt alive, when Epworth rectory was burned down. This happened in 1709, when he was six years, and seems to have been vividly impressed on his mind. He was pulled through the bedroom window, at the last moment, by a man who, for want of a ladder, stood on another man's shoulders. Just at that moment the roof of the house fell in, but happily fell inward, and the boy and his deliverer escaped unhurt. He says himself, in his description of the event, "When they brought me to the house where my father was, he cried out, 'Come, neighbours, let us kneel down I let us give thanks to God! He has given me all my eight children; let the house go, I am rich enough.'"

In the year 1714, at the age of eleven, John Wesley was placed at the Charter-house School in London. That mighty plunge in life--a boy's first entrance at a public school--seems to have done him no harm. He had probably been well grounded at his father's house in all the rudiments of a classical education, and soon became distinguished for his diligence and progress at school. At the age of sixteen his elder brother, then an usher at Westminster, describes him as "a brave boy, learning Hebrew as fast as he can."

In the year 1720, at the age of seventeen, John Wesley went up to Oxford as an undergraduate, having been elected to Christ Church. Little is known of the first three or four years of his university life, except that he was steady, studious, and remarkable for his classical knowledge and genius for composition. It is evident, however, that he made the best use of his time at college, and picked up as much as he could in a day when honorary class-lists were unknown, and incitements to study were very few. Like most great divines, he found the advantage of university education all his life long. Men might dislike his theology, but they could never say that he was a fool, and had no right to be heard.

In the beginning of 1725, at the age of twenty-two, he seems to have gone through much exercise of mind as to the choice of a profession. Naturally enough, he thought of taking orders, but was somewhat daunted by serious reflection on the solemnity of the step. This very reflection, however, appears to have been most useful to him and to have produced in his mind deeper thoughts about God, his soul, and religion generally, than he had ever entertained before. He began to study divinity, and to go through a regular course of reading for the ministry. He had, probably, no very trustworthy guide in his choice of religious literature at this period. The books which apparently had the greatest influence on him were Jeremy Taylor's "Holy Living and Dying," and Thomas Kempis's "Imitation of Christ." Devout and well-meaning as these authors are, they certainly were not likely to give him very clear views of scriptural Christianity, or very cheerful and happy views of Christ's service. In short, though they did him good by making him feel that true religion was a serious business, and a concern of the heart, they evidently left him in much darkness and perplexity.

At this stage of John Wesley's life, his correspondence with his father and mother is peculiarly interesting, and highly creditable both to the parents and the son. He evidently opened his mind to them, and told them all his mental and spiritual difficulties. His letters and their replies are well worth reading. They all show more or less absence of spiritual light and clear views of the gospel. But a singular vein of honesty and conscientiousness runs throughout. One feels "This is just the spirit that God will bless. This is the single eye to which will be given more light."

Let us hear what his father says about the question, "Which is the best commentary on the Bible?" "I answer, the Bible itself. For the several paraphrases and translations of it in the Polyglot, compared with the original and with one another, are in my opinion, to an honest, devout, industrious, and humble man, infinitely preferable to any comment I ever saw."

Let us hear what his mother says on the point of taking holy orders:--"The alteration of your temper has occasioned me much speculation. I, who am apt to be sanguine, hope it may proceed from the operation of God's Holy Spirit, that by taking off your relish for earthly enjoyments he may prepare and dispose your mind for a more serious and close application to things of a more sublime and spiritual nature. If it be so, happy are you if you cherish those dispositions. And now in good earnest resolve to make religion the business of your life; for, after all, that is the one thing that, strictly speaking, is necessary: all things beside are comparatively little to the purposes of life. I heartily wish you would now enter upon a strict examination of yourself, that you may know whether you have a reasonable hope of salvation by Jesus Christ. If you have the satisfaction of knowing, it will abundantly reward your pains; if you have not, you will find a more reasonable occasion for tears than can be met with in a tragedy. This matter deserves great consideration by all but especially by those designed for the ministry, who ought above all things to make their own calling and election sure, lest, after they have preached to others, they themselves should be cast away."

Let us hear what his mother says about Thomas à Kempis's opinion, that all mirth or pleasure is useless, if not sinful. She observes:--"I take Kempis to have been an honest, weak man, that had more zeal than knowledge, by his condemning all mirth or pleasure as sinful or useless, in opposition to so many direct and plain texts of Scripture. Would you judge of the lawfulness or unlawfulness of pleasures? of the innocence or malignity of actions? take this rule,--whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God, or takes off the relish of spiritual things; in short, whatever increases the strength and authority of your body over your mind, that thing is sin to you, however innocent it may be in itself"

Let us hear what John Wesley himself says in a letter on the opinion of Jeremy Taylor--" Whether God has forgiven us or no, we know not; therefore let us be sorrowful for ever having sinned." He remarks--"Surely the graces of the Holy Ghost are not of so little force as that we cannot perceive whether we have them or not. If we dwell in Christ, and Christ in us, which He will not do unless we be regenerate, certainly we must be sensible of it. If we never can have any certainty of being in a state of salvation, good reason is it that every moment should be spent, not in joy, but in fear and trembling; and then, undoubtedly, in this life we are of all men most miserable. God deliver us from such a fearful expectation as this.

Correspondence of this style could hardly fail to do good to a young man in John Wesley's frame of mind. It led him no doubt to closer study of the Scriptures, deeper self-examination, and more fervent prayer. Whatever scruples he may have had were finally removed, and he was at length ordained deacon on September the 19th, 1725, by Dr. Potter, then Bishop of Oxford, and afterwards Archbishop of Canterbury.

In the year 1726 John Wesley was elected Fellow of Lincoln College, after a contest of more than ordinary severity. His recently adopted seriousness of deportment and general religiousness were used as a handle against him by his adversaries. But his high character carried him triumphantly through all opposition, to the great delight of his father. Tried as he apparently was at the time in his temporal circumstances, he wrote: "Whatever will be my own fate before the summer is over God knows; but, wherever I am, my Jack is Fellow of Lincoln."

The eight years following John Wesley's election to his fellowship of Lincoln--from 1726 to 1734--form a remarkable epoch in his life, and certainly gave a tone and colour to all his future history. During the whole of these years he was resident at Oxford, and for some time at any rate acted as tutor and lecturer in his college. Gradually, however, he seems to have laid himself out more and more to try to do good to others, and latterly was entirely taken up with it.

His mode of action was in the highest degree simple and unpretending. Assisted by his brother Charles, then a student of Christ Church, he gathered a small society of like-minded young men, in order to spend some evenings in a week together in the study of the Greek Testament. This was in November 1729. The members of this society were at first four in number; namely, John Wesley, Charles Wesley, Mr. Morgan of Christ Church, and Mr. Kirkman of Merton. At a somewhat later period they were joined by Mr. Ingham of Queen's, Mr. Broughton of Exeter, Mr. Clayton of Brazenose, the famous George Whitefield of Pembroke, and the well-known James Hervey of Lincoln.

This little band of witnesses, as might reasonably have been expected, soon began to think of doing good to others, as well as getting good themselves. In the summer of 1730 they began to visit prisoners in the castle and poor people in the town, to send neglected children to school, to give temporal aid to the sick and needy, and to distribute Bibles and Prayer-books among those who had not got them. Their first steps were taken very cautiously, and with frequent reference to John Wesley's father for advice. Acting by his advice, they laid all their operations before the Bishop of Oxford and his chaplain, and did nothing without full ecclesiastical sanction.

Cautious, and almost childish, however, as the proceedings of these young men may appear to us in the present day, they were too far in advance of the times to escape notice, hatred, and opposition. A kind of persecution and clamour was raised against Wesley and his companions as enthusiasts, fanatics, and troublers of Israel. They were nicknamed the "Methodists" or Holy Club," and assailed with a storm of ridicule and abuse. Through this, however, they manfully persevered, and held on their way, being greatly

encouraged by the letters of the old Rector of Epworth. In one of them he says, "I hear my son John has the honour of being styled the Father of the Holy Club. If it be so, I am sure I must be the grandfather of it, and I need not say that I had rather any of my sons should be so dignified and distinguished than have the title His Holiness."

The real amount of spiritual good that John Wesley did during these eight years of residence at Oxford is a point that cannot easily be ascertained. With all his devotedness, asceticism, and self-denial, it must be remembered that at this time he knew very little of the pure gospel of Christ. His views of religious truth, to say the least, were very dim, misty, defective, and indistinct. No one was more sensible of this than he afterwards was himself, and no one could be more ready and willing to confess it. Such books as "Law's Serious Call," "Law's Christian Perfection," "Theologia Germanica;" and mystical writers, were about the highest pitch of divinity that he had yet attained. But we need not doubt that he learned experience at this period which he found useful in afterlife. At any rate he became thoroughly trained in habits of laboriousness, time-redemption, and self-mortification, which he carried with him to the day of his death. God has his own way of tempering and preparing instruments for his work, and, whatever we may think, we may be sure his way is best.

In the year 1734 John Wesley's father died, and the family home was broken up. Just at this time the providence of God opened up to him a new sphere of duty, the acceptance of which had a most important effect on his whole spiritual history. This sphere was the colony of Georgia, in North America. The trustees of that infant settlement were greatly in want of proper clergymen to send out, both to preach the gospel to the Indians and to provide means of grace for the colonists. At this juncture John Wesley and his friends were suggested to their notice, as the most suitable persons they could find, on account of their high character for regular behaviour, attention to religious duties, and readiness to endure hardships. The upshot of the matter was, that an offer was made to John Wesley, and, after conferring with Mr. Law, his mother, his elder brother, and other friends, he accepted the proposal of the trustees, and, in company with his brother Charles and their common friend Mr. Ingham, set sail for Georgia.

Wesley landed in Georgia on the 6th of February 1736, after a long stormy voyage of four months, and remained in the colony two years. I shall not take up the reader's time by any detailed account of his proceedings there. It may suffice to say, that, for any good he seems to have done, his mission was almost useless. Partly from the inherent difficulties of an English clergyman's position in a colony--partly from the confused and disorderly condition of the infant settlement where he was stationed--partly from a singular want of tact and discretion in dealing with men and things--partly, above all, from his own very imperfect views of the gospel, Wesley's expedition to Georgia appears to have been a great failure, and he was evidently glad to get away.

The ways of God, however, are not as man's ways. There was a "need be" for the two years' absence in America, just as there was for Philip's journey down the desert road to Gaza, and Paul's sojourn in prison at Caesarea. If Wesley did nothing in Georgia, he certainly gained a great deal. If he taught little to others, he undoubtedly learned much. On the outward voyage he became acquainted with some Moravians on board, and was deeply struck by their deliverance from "the fear of death." in a storm. After landing in Georgia he continued his intercourse with them, and discovered to his astonishment that there was such a thing as personal assurance of forgiveness. These things, combined with the peculiar trials, difficulties, and disappointments of his colonial ministry, worked mightily on his mind, and showed him more of himself and the gospel than he had ever learned before. The result was that he landed at Deal on the 1st of February 1738, a very much humbler, but a much wiser man than he had ever been before. In plain words,

he had become the subject of a real inward work of the Holy Ghost.

Wesley's own accounts of his spiritual experience during these two years of his life are deeply interesting. I will transcribe one or two of them.

On February the 7th, 1736, he records:--" On landing in Georgia I asked the advice of Mr. Spangenberg, one of the German pastors, with regard to my own conduct. He said in reply, 'My brother, I must first ask you one or two questions. Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?'--I was surprised, and knew not what to answer. He observed it, and asked, 'Do you know Jesus Christ?'--I paused, and said, 'I know he is the Saviour of the world.'--'True,' replied he; 'but do you know he has saved you?'--I answered, 'I hope he has died to save me.' --He only added, 'Do you know yourself?' --I said, 'I do.' But I fear they were vain words."

On January 24th, 1738, on board ship on his homeward voyage, he makes the following record:--'I went to America to convert the Indians; but oh, who shall convert me? Who, what is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of unbelief? I have a fair summer religion; I can talk well; nay, and believe myself while no danger is near. But let death look me in the face, and my spirit is troubled, nor can I say to die is gain."

On February the 1st, 1738, the day that he landed in England, he says: "It is now two years and almost four months since I left my native country in order to teach the Georgian Indians the nature of Christianity; but what have I learned of myself in the meantime? Why, what I least suspected, that I, who went to America to convert others, was myself never converted to God! I am not mad, though I thus speak; but I speak the words of truth and soberness."

"If it be said that I have faith--for many such things have I heard from miserable comforters--I answer, so have the devils a sort of faith; but still they are strangers to the covenant of promise. ... The faith I want is a sure trust and confidence in God that through the merits of Christ my sins are forgiven, and I reconciled to the favour of God. I want that faith which St. Paul recommends to all the world, especially in his Epistle to the Romans; that faith which makes every one that hath it to cry, 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.' I want that faith which none can have without knowing that he hath it."

Records like these are deeply instructive. They teach that important lesson which man is so slow to learn--that we may have a great deal of earnestness and religiousness without any true soul-saving and soul-comforting religion--that we may be diligent in the use of fasting, prayers, forms, ordinances, and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, without knowing anything of inward joy, peace, or communion with God--and above all, that we may be moral in life, and laborious in good works, without being true believers in Christ, or fit to die and meet God. Well would it be for the churches if truths like these were proclaimed from every pulpit, and pressed on every congregation! Thousands, for lack of such truths, are walking in a vain shadow, and totally ignorant that they are yet dead in sins. If any one wants to know how far a man may go in outward goodness, and yet not be a true Christian, let him carefully study the experience of John Wesley. I am bold to say that it is eminently truth for the times.

A man hungering and thirsting after righteousness, as Wesley was now, was not left long without more light. The good work which the Holy Ghost had begun within him was carried on rapidly after he landed in England, until the sun rose on his mind, and the shadows passed away. Partly by conference with Peter Bohler, a Moravian, and other Moravians in London, partly by study of the Scriptures, partly by special prayer for living, saving, justifying faith as the gift of God, he was brought to a clear view of the gospel, and

found out the meaning of joy and peace in simply believing. Let me add--as an act of justice to one of whom the world was not worthy--that at this period he was, by his own confession, much helped by Martin Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans.

This year, 1738, was beyond doubt the turning-point in Wesley's spiritual history, and gave a direction to all his subsequent life. It was in the spring of this year that he began a religious society at the Moravian Chapel in Fetter Lane, London, which was the rough type and pattern of all Methodist societies formed afterwards. The rules of this little society are extant still, and with some additions, modifications, and improvements, contain the inward organisation of Methodism in the present day. It was at this period also that he began preaching the new truths he had learned, in many of the pulpits in London, and soon found, like Whitefield, that the proclamation of salvation by grace, and justification by faith, was seldom allowed a second time. It was in the winter of this year, after returning from a visit to the Moravian settlement in Germany, that he began aggressive measures on home heathenism, and in the neighbourhood of Bristol followed Whitefield's example by preaching in the open air, in rooms, or wherever men could be brought together.

We have now reached a point at which John Wesley's history, like that of his great contemporary Whitefield, becomes one undeviating uniform narrative up to the time of his death. It would be useless to dwell on one year more than another. He was always occupied in one and the same business, always going up and down the land preaching, and always conducting evangelistic measures of some kind and description. For fifty-three years--from 1738 to 1791--he held on his course, always busy, and always busy about one thing--attacking sin and ignorance everywhere, preaching repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ everywhere--awakening open sinners, leading on inquirers, building up saints--never wearied, never swerving from the path he had marked out, and never doubting of success. Those only who read the Journals he kept for fifty years can have any idea of the immense amount of work that he got through. Never perhaps did any man have so many irons in the fire at one time, and yet succeed in keeping so many hot.

Like Whitefield, he justly regarded preaching as God's chosen instrument for doing good to souls, and hence, wherever he went, his first step was to preach. Like him, too, he was ready to preach anywhere or at any hour--early in the morning or late at night, in church, in chapel, or in room--in streets, in fields, or on commons and greens. Like him, too, he was always preaching more or less the same great truths--sin, Christ, and holiness--ruin, redemption, and regeneration--the blood of Christ and the work of the Spirit--faith, repentance, and conversion--from one end of the year to the other.

Wesley, however, was very unlike Whitefield in one important respect. He did not forget to organise as well as to preach. He was not content with reaping the fields which he found ripe for the harvest. He took care to bind up his sheaves and gather them into the barn. He was as far superior to Whitefield as an administrator and man of method, as he was inferior to him as a mere preacher. (Footnote: A writer in the North British Review has well and forcibly described the difference between the two great English evangelists of the last century. "Whitefield was soul, and Wesley was system. Whitefield was the summer cloud which burst at morning or noon a fragrant exhalation over an ample track, and took the rest of the day to gather again; Wesley was the polished conduit in the midst of the garden, through which the living water glided in pearly brightness and perennial music, the same vivid stream from day to day. All force and impetus, Whitefield was the powder-blast in the quarry, and by one explosive sermon would shake a district, and detach materials for other men's long work; deft, neat, and painstaking, Wesley loved to split and trim each fragment into uniform plinths and polished stones. Whitefield was the bargeman or the

waggoner who brought the timber of the house, and Wesley was the architect who set it up. Whitefield had no patience for ecclesiastical polity, no aptitude for pastoral details, Wesley, with a leader-like propensity for building, was always constructing societies, and with a king-like craft of ruling, was most at home when presiding over a class or a conference. It was their infelicity that they did not always work together; it was the happiness of the age, and the furtherance of the gospel, that they lived alongside of one another.") Shut out from the Church of England by the folly of its rulers, he laid the foundation of a new denomination with matchless skill, and with a rare discernment of the wants of human nature. To unite his people as one body--to give every one something to do--to make each one consider his neighbour and seek his edification--to call forth latent talent and utilise it in some direction--to keep "all at it and always at it"(to adopt his quaint saying),--these were his aims and objects. The machinery he called into existence was admirably well adapted to carry out his purposes. His preachers, lay-preachers, class-leaders, band-leaders, circuits, classes, bands, love-feasts, and watch-nights, made up a spiritual engine which stands to this day, and in its own way can hardly be improved. If one thing more than another has given permanence and solidity to Methodism, it was its founder's masterly talent for organisation.

It is needless to tell a Christian reader that Wesley had constantly to fight with opposition. The prince of this world will never allow his captives to be rescued from him without a struggle. Sometimes he was in danger of losing his life by the assaults of violent, ignorant, and semi-heathen mobs, as at Wednesbury, Walsall, Colne, Shoreham, and Devizes. Sometimes he was denounced by bishops as an enthusiast, a fanatic, and a sower of dissent. Often--far too often--he was preached against and held up to scorn by the parochial clergy, as a heretic, a mischief maker, and a meddling troubler of Israel. But none of these things moved the good man. Calmly, resolutely, and undauntedly he held on his course, and in scores of cases lived down all opposition. His letters in reply to the attacks made upon him are always dignified and sensible, and do equal honour to his heart and head.

I have now probably told the reader enough to give him a general idea of John Wesley's life and history. I dare not go further. Indeed, the last fifty years of his life were so entirely of one complexion, that I know not where I should stop if I went further. When I have said that they were years of constant travelling, preaching, organising, conferring, writing, arguing, reasoning, counselling, and warring against sin, the world, and the devil, I have just said all that I dare enter upon.

He died at length in 1791, in the eighty-eighth year of his life and the sixty-fifth of his ministry, full of honour and respect, and in the "perfect peace" of the gospel. He had always enjoyed wonderful health, and never hardly knew what it was to feel weariness or pain till he was eighty-two. The weary wheels of life at length stood still, and he died of no disease but sheer old age.

The manner of his dying was in beautiful harmony with his life. He preached within a very few days of his death, and the texts of his two last sermons were curiously characteristic of the man. The last but one was at Chelsea, on February the 18th, on the words, "The king's business requireth haste" (1 Sam. xxi. 8). The last of all was at Leatherhead, on Wednesday the 23rd, on the words, "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found" (Isa. lv. 6). After this he gradually sunk, and died on Tuesday the 29th. He retained his senses to the end, and showed clearly where his heart and thoughts were to the very last.

The day but one before he died he slept much and spoke little. Once he said in a low but distinct manner, "There is no way into the holiest but by the blood of Jesus." He afterwards inquired what the words were from which he had preached a little before at Hampstead. Being told they were these, "Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his

poverty might be rich" (2 Cor. viii. 8); he replied, "That is the foundation, the only foundation; there is no other."

The day before he died, he said suddenly, "I will get up." While they were preparing his clothes, he broke out in a manner which, considering his weakness, astonished all present, in singing,--

"I'll praise my Maker while I've breath,

And when my voice is lost in death,

Praise shall employ my noblest powers:

My days of praise shall ne'er be past,

While life, and thought, and being last,

Or immortality endures."

Not long after, a person coming in, he tried to speak, but could not. Finding they could not understand him, he paused a little, and then with all his remaining strength cried out, "The best of all is, God is with us;" and soon after, lifting up his dying voice in token of victory, and raising his feeble arm with a holy triumph, he again repeated the heart-reviving words, "The best of all is, God is with us." The night following he often attempted to repeat the hymn before mentioned, but could only utter the opening words, "I'll praise; I'll praise." About ten o'clock next morning he was heard to articulate the word "Farewell," and then without a groan fell asleep in Christ and rested from his labours. Truly this was a glorious sunset! "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his. "

Wesley was once married. At the age of forty-eight he married a widow lady of the name of Vizelle, of a suitable age, and of some independent property, which she took care to have settled upon herself. The union was a most unhappy one. Whatever good qualities Mrs. Wesley may have had, they were buried and swallowed up in the fiercest and most absurd passion of jealousy. One of his biographers remarks, "Had he searched the whole kingdom, he could hardly have found a woman more unsuitable to him in all important respects." After making her husband as uncomfortable as possible for twenty years, by opening his letters, putting his papers in the hands of his enemies in the vain hope of blasting his character, and even sometimes laying violent hands on him, Mrs. Wesley at length left her home, leaving word that she never intended to return. Wesley simply states the fact in his journal, saying that he knew not the cause, and briefly adding, "I did not forsake her, I did not dismiss her, I will not recall her."

Like Whitefield, John Wesley left no children. But he left behind him a large and influential communion, which he not only saw spring up, but lived to see it attain a vigorous and healthy maturity. The number of Methodist preachers at the time of his death amounted in the British dominions to 313, and in the United States of America to 198. The number of Methodist members in the British dominions was 76,968, and in the United States 57,621. Facts like these need no comment; they speak for themselves. Few labourers for Christ have ever been so successful as Wesley, and to none certainly was it ever given to see so much with his own eyes.

In taking a general view of this great spiritual hero of the last century, it may be useful to point out some salient points of his character which demand particular attention. When God puts special honour on any of his servants, it is well to analyse their gifts, and to observe carefully what they were. What, then, were the

peculiar qualifications which marked John Wesley?

The first thing which I ask the reader to notice is his extraordinary singleness of eye and tenacity of purpose. Once embarked on his evangelistic voyage, he pressed forward, and never flinched for a day. "One thing I do," seemed to be his motto and constraining motive. To preach the gospel, to labour to do good, to endeavour to save souls,--these seemed to become his only objects, and the ruling passion of his life. In pursuit of them he compassed sea and land, putting aside all considerations of ease and rest, and forgetting all earthly feelings. Few men but himself could have gone to Epworth, stood upon their father's tombstone, and preached to an open-air congregation, "Thy kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost." Few, but himself could have seen fellow-labourers, one after another, carried to their graves, till he stood almost alone in his generation, and yet preached on, as he did, with unabated spirit, as if the ranks around him were still full. But his marvellous singleness of eye carried him through all. "Beware of the man of one book," was the advice of an old philosopher to his pupils. The man of "one thing" is the man who in the long run does great things, and shakes the world.

The second thing I ask the reader to notice is his extraordinary diligence, self-denial, and economy of time. 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. He was to all appearance always working, and never at rest. "Leisure and I," he said, "have taken leave of one another. I propose to be busy as long as I live, if my health is so long indulged to me." This resolution was made in the prime of life; and never was resolution more punctually observed.

"Lord, let me not live to be useless," was the prayer which he uttered after seeing one, whom he once knew as an active and useful man, reduced by age to be a picture of human nature in disgrace, feeble in body and mind, slow of speech and understanding. Even the time which he spent in travelling was not lost. "History, poetry, and philosophy," said he, "I commonly read on horseback, having other employment at other times." When you met him in the street of a crowded city, he attracted notice not only by his bands and cassock, and his long silvery hair, but by his pace and manner; both indicating that all his minutes were numbered, and that not one was to be lost. "But though I am always in haste," he said, "I am never in a hurry, because I never undertake any more work than I can go through with perfect calmness of spirit." Here, again, is one secret of great usefulness. We must abhor idleness; we must redeem time. No man knows how much can be done in twelve hours until he tries. It is precisely those who do most work who find that they can do most.

The last thing which I ask the reader to notice is his marvellous versatility of mind and capacity for a variety of things. No one perhaps can fully realise this who does not read the large biographies which record all his doings, or study his wonderful Journals. Things the most opposite and unlike --things the most petty and trifling--things the most thoroughly secular--things most thoroughly spiritual, --all are alike mastered by his omnivorous mind. He finds time for all, and gives directions about all. One day we find him condensing old divinity, and publishing fifty volumes of theology, called the "Christian Library;"--another day we find him writing a complete commentary on the whole Bible; --another day we find him composing hymns, which live to this day in the praises of many a congregation; --another day we find him drawing up minute directions for his preachers, forbidding them to shout and scream and preach too long, insisting on their reading regularly lest their sermons became threadbare, requiring them not to drink spirits, and charging them to get up early in the morning; --another day we find him calmly reviewing the current literature of the day, and criticising all the new books with cool and shrewd remarks, as if he had nothing else to do. Like Napoleon, nothing seems too small or too great for his mind to attend to; like

Calvin, he writes as if he had nothing to do but write, preaches as if he had nothing to do but preach, and administers as if he had nothing to do but administer. A versatility like this is one mighty secret of power, and is a striking characteristic of most men who leave their mark on the world. To be a steam-engine and a penknife, a telescope and a microscope, at the same time, is probably one of the highest attainments of the human mind.

I should think my sketch of Wesley incomplete if I did not notice the objection continually made against him--that he was an Arminian in doctrine. I fully admit the seriousness of the objection. I do not pretend either to explain the charge away, or to defend his objectionable opinions. Personally, I feel unable to account for any well-instructed Christian holding such doctrines as perfection and the defectibility of grace, or denying such as election and the imputed righteousness of Christ.

But, after all, we must beware that we do not condemn men too strongly for not seeing all things in our point of view, or excommunicate and anathematise them because they do not pronounce our shibboleth. It is written in God's Word, "Why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother?" We must think and let think. We must learn to distinguish between things that are of the essence of the gospel and things which are of the perfection of gospel. We may think that a man preaches an imperfect gospel who denies election, considers justification to be nothing more than forgiveness, and tells believers in one sermon that they may attain perfection in this life, and in another sermon that they may entirely fall away from grace. But if the same man strongly and boldly exposes and denounces sin, clearly and fully lifts up Christ, distinctly and openly invites men to believe and repent, shall we dare to say that the man does not preach the gospel at all? Shall we dare to say that he will do no good? I, for one, cannot say so, at any rate. If I am asked whether I prefer Whitefield's gospel or Wesley's, I answer at once that I prefer Whitefield's I am a Calvinist, and not an Arminian. But if I am asked to go further, and to say that Wesley preached no gospel at all, and did no real good, I answer at once that I cannot do so. That Wesley would have done better if he could have thrown off his Arminianism, I have not the least doubt; but that he preached the gospel, honoured Christ, and did extensive good, I no more doubt than I doubt my own existence.

Let those who depreciate Wesley as an Arminian, read his own words in the funeral sermon which he preached on the occasion of Whitefield's death. He says of his great fellow-labourer and brother:-

"His fundamental point was to give God all the glory of whatever is good in man. In the business of salvation he set Christ as high and man as low as possible. With this point he and his friends at Oxford --the original Methodists so-called-- set out. Their grand principle was, there is no power by nature, and no merit in man. They insisted, 'all grace to speak, think, or act right, is in and from the Spirit of Christ; and all merit is not in man, how high soever in grace, but merely in the blood of Christ.' So he and they taught. There is no power in man, till it is given him from above, to do one good work, to speak one good word, or to form one good desire. For it is not enough to say all men are sick of sin: no, we are all dead in trespasses and sins.

"And we are all helpless, both with regard to the power and the guilt of sin. For who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? None less than the Almighty. Who can raise those that are dead, spiritually dead, in sin? None but he who raised us from the dust of the earth. But on what consideration will he do this? Not for works of righteousness that we have done. The dead cannot praise thee, O Lord, nor can they do anything for which they should be raised to life. Whatever, therefore, God does; he does it merely for the sake of his well-beloved Son. 'He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities.

He himself bore all our sins in his own body on the tree. He was delivered for our offences, and rose again for our justification.' Here, then, is the sole meritorious cause of every blessing we can or do enjoy, and, in particular, of our pardon and acceptance with God, of our full and free justification. But by what means do we become interested in what Christ has done and suffered? 'Not by works, lest any man should boast, but by faith alone.' 'We conclude,' says the apostle, 'that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.' And 'to as many as receive Christ he gives power to become sons of God; even to them which believe in his name, who are born not of the will of man but of God.'

"Except a man be thus born again he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. But all who are thus born of the Spirit have the kingdom of God within them. Christ sets up his kingdom in their hearts--righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. That mind is in them which was in Christ Jesus, enabling them to walk as Christ walked. His indwelling Spirit makes them holy in mind, and holy in all manner of conversation. But still, seeing all this is a free gift through the blood and righteousness of Christ, there is eternally the same reason to remember--he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.

"You are not ignorant that these are the fundamental doctrines which Mr. Whitefield everywhere insisted on; and may they not be summed up, as it were, in two words--' the new birth, and justification by faith?' These let us insist upon with all boldness, and at all times, in all places, in public and in private. Let us keep close to these good old unfashionable doctrines, how many soever contradict and blaspheme."

Such were the words of the Arminian, John Wesley. I make no comment on them. I only say, before any one despises this great man because he was an Arminian, let him take care that he really knows what Wesley's opinions were. Above all, let him take care that he thoroughly understands what kind of doctrines he used to preach in England a hundred years ago.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/jc-ryle/john-wesley-part-1/>

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