

JOHN WESLEY

The life and teachings of John Wesley, the famous founder of Methodism, have probably had a greater influence than those of any other man since the days of the apostles in deepening the spiritual life of the present time. The Introduction to the Methodist book of Discipline states that Methodism was raised up under God "for the spread of Scriptural holiness." Like a mighty conflagration it swept over the world until in less than two centuries it numbered more adherents than almost any other Protestant church. The secret of its success was partly owing to the fact that its theology presented a less fatalistic view of salvation than did that of the Old School Calvinism so common among other Protestant denominations; but it probably owed its success still more to the deep spiritual experiences of the Wesleys and the other early Methodist preachers, many of whom were so anointed with the Holy Spirit's power that multitudes were brought under conviction of sin while listening to their earnest sermons and exhortations. People often trembled and shook, and many were even stricken down in the meetings, under the overwhelming sense of their sins received under the preaching of these men of God.

Wesley's great-grandfather his grand-father, and his father were all clergymen in the Church of England, in which church Wesley was himself an ordained minister and remained such until his death, the Methodist Societies in Britain not having become an independent church until 1791, or two years after he died. Susannah Wesley, the mother of John and Charles Wesley, was the daughter of the great Dr. Annesley, the "St. Paul of Non-Conformity." Her grandfather, as well as her father, were ministers of the gospel, and she was herself famous for her piety and prudence. John Wesley was born at Epworth, in Lincolnshire, England, on June 17, 1703, and was the fifteenth in a family of nineteen children, of whom only ten survived the period of infancy. At the age of six John himself was barely rescued from the flames when his father's rectory burned down.

Wesley's mother was very careful in the training of the children, and they were all brought up "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." They also received a good secular education. John was educated at the Charter House School, in London, until he was seventeen years of age, at which time he was sent to Christ Church College, Oxford University. He was a diligent student and made great progress in his studies. At the age of twenty-three his accomplishments in the classics were so great that he was elected Fellow of Lincoln College, and was also chosen as moderator of classes, and the following year he was made a Master of Arts. Before leaving Oxford University he seems to have become proficient in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, and logic, and he afterwards obtained a knowledge of German.

Wesley followed the pious advice of his father and mother until after he was ten years of age, without consciously disobeying them in any way. "The next six or seven years were spent at school" says he, "where, outward restraints being removed, I was much more negligent than before, even to outward duties, and almost continually guilty of outward sins, which I knew to be such, though they were not scandalous in the eyes of the world. However, I still read the Scriptures, and said my prayers, morning and evening." He relied for salvation on these outward acts, and on church-going, and also on the fact that he was not as bad as others. After going to Oxford, for about five years, he constantly did things that he knew were sinful in the sight of God; but he still continued to pray, read his Bible, and go to church. At about twenty two years of age his eyes were opened to some extent by reading the works of Thomas a Kempis, and he began to see that true religion had to do with the heart, and not with outward actions only. "I was, however, angry at Kempis for being too strict," says he. But he also says, "Yet I

frequently had much sensible comfort in reading him, such as I was an utter stranger to before ; and meeting likewise with a religious friend, which I never had till now, I began to alter the whole form of my conversation, and to set in earnest upon a new life." Dr. Taylor's book, "Holy Living and Dying," made a still deeper impression upon him, and his life became a very sincere one.

Wesley's friends now urged him to be ordained, and in 1725, in his twenty-second year, after much prayer and consideration, he was ordained by Bishop Potter. In 1727 he read Mr. Law's "Christian Perfection" and "Serious Call," and these books made him resolve more than ever to be wholly the Lord's. The writings of Mr. Law seem to have influenced his life more than any other writings outside the Scriptures, just as the works of Aquinas influenced the life of Savonarola. It was probably Mr. Law's books, more than any other human cause, which led Wesley to start the Methodist Societies. In a letter to Mr Morgan, written in later years, he thus describes the founding of the first Methodist Society : " In November, 1729, at which time I came to reside at Oxford, your son, my brother, myself and one more, agreed to spend three or four evenings a week together. Our design was to read over the classics, which we had before read in private on common nights, and on Sunday some book on divinity. In the summer following Mr. M. told me he had called at a gaol, to see a man who was condemned for killing his wife; and that, from a talk he had with one of the debtors, he verily believed it would do much good, if any one would be at the pains of now and then speaking with them. This he so frequently repeated, that on the 24th of August, 1730, my brother and I walked with him to the castle. We were so well satisfied with our conversation there, that we agreed to go thither once or twice a week; which we had not done long, before he desired me to go with him to see a poor woman in the town who was sick. In this employment too, when we came to reflect upon it, we believed it would be worth while to spend an hour or two in a week, provided the minister of the parish, in which such persons were, were not against it." In this humble manner the first Methodist society was formed, and the great founder of Methodism was thus led to engage in active Christian service. The society thus formed increased in numbers, and when Whitefield joined them there were fifteen members. They soon earned the nickname of the "Holy Club," and finally of " Methodists." It is remarkable that God brought together in this little group two of the world's greatest preachers and one of the greatest hymn-writers — John Wesley, George Whitefield, and Charles Wesley. The society continued its good work until 1735, when Wesley left the University.

In 1735 John and Charles Wesley sailed for America, intending to become missionaries to the American Indians. On the vessel were a number of Moravian missionaries, and their pious conduct so deeply impressed Wesley that he began to study German so that he would be able to converse with them. A great storm arose, and while the English were screaming and in great distress, and Wesley's heart failed him, the Moravians calmly and joyfully united in prayer and praise. Conversations with these godly people during the voyage, and in Georgia, led the Wesleys to doubt their own conversion to Christ.

The Wesleys seem to have accomplished very little in Georgia. They tried to bring the people to their own high standard of living, and preached against the popular sins with such directness and personality as to provoke much opposition, and they finally deemed it wise to return to England. Charles returned first and John soon followed. He says: "I shook off the dust of my feet, and left Georgia, after having preached the gospel there (not as I ought, but as I was able) one year and nearly nine months." During the voyage home, he wrote, " I went to America to convert the Indians; but oh! who shall convert me I " He reached England the day after Whitefield sailed for America. He preached in England in many places, but the results, as a rule, were not remarkable or encouraging. Much opposition was provoked and but little blessing seemed to attend his preaching. He conversed much with Peter Bohler and other Moravians, and was surprised when they proved to him that almost all the conversions to Christ mentioned in the Bible were instantaneous. He now began to see that people do not grow into salvation, but that they are justified by faith the moment they believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. It was

from the Moravians that the Methodists learned the doctrine of instantaneous conversion, regeneration, or justification by faith. At first Charles Wesley opposed what he called "the new doctrine," but he was soon convinced of his error, and in May, 1738, through simple faith in Christ, he found a joy he had never known before. The news that Charles had obtained joy and peace in believing greatly deepened John Wesley's desire for a real assurance of salvation. After a ten years' struggle to find peace and rest in Christ, the light began to dawn upon him on May 24, 1738. In the morning of that day his eyes fell upon 2 Peter 1:4, and then on the words, "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God." During the day he was on the verge of receiving rest and joy through faith in Christ. "In the evening," says he, "I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change 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."

The same year that he obtained this blessing through faith in Christ, he visited the Moravian settlement of Herrnhut, on Count Zinzendorf's estate, in Germany. This visit greatly strengthened his faith, and he returned to England to preach with a new zeal, the doctrine of instantaneous conversion and justification through faith in Christ. Many were now converted to Christ in his meetings almost everywhere that he went.

We learn from his Journal of October 15, 1738, and again from the entry made on October 3 of the same year, that Wesley had a great longing for a still deeper experience. "I was asking" he says in the latter entry, "that God would fulfill all His promises in my own soul" etc. His longings seem to have been satisfied, in a measure at least, in a memorable love feast in London, when he and Whitefield and other prominent Methodist ministers were present at a union meeting of the Methodist societies. Describing this meeting in his Journal, Wesley says, "Monday, January 1st, 1739. Mr. Hall, Kinchin, Ingham, Whitefield, Hutchins, and my brother Charles were present at our lovefeast in Fetter's Lane, with about sixty of our brethren. About three in the morning, as we were continuing instant in prayer, the power of God came mightily upon us, insomuch that many cried out for exceeding joy, and many fell to the ground. As soon as we recovered a little from the awe and amazement at the presence of His majesty, we broke out with one voice, "We praise Thee, O God, we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord."

Wesley must have received a powerful anointing of the Spirit at the time mentioned above, as after the experience described he seems to have preached with greater unction and power. The Methodist societies now began to multiply rapidly, many souls being converted to God. The State Churches were closing rapidly against the Methodists, when Whitefield began to preach to gigantic audiences in the open air at Bristol. He had returned from America in 1739, and was now working in harmony with the Wesleys. After continuing in Bristol for some time, he desired John Wesley to come and take the work there off his hands so that he could go elsewhere. After seeking to know the Lord's will in the matter, Wesley complied with his request. Staid Churchman that he was, he had many misgivings about the propriety of preaching in the open air; but when he saw Whitefield preaching to the great multitudes in the open air at Bristol, his prejudices gradually melted away. He says, "I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he (Whitefield) set me an example on Sunday; 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."

It was only after witnessing the marvelous results attending Whitefield's preaching in the open air that Wesley began to speak in open-air meetings, but he soon became famous as an open-air preacher. Until the day of his death he exercised the greatest care to have everything "done decently and in order," and

to avoid all fleshly excitements, hallucinations, and delusions; but on the other hand he was careful to encourage every genuine work of the Holy Spirit. " Quench not the Spirit" was to him a solemn warning which he scrupulously and conscientiously tried to follow.

Wesley preached for some time in Bristol, to immense audiences sometimes numbering many thousands of people. His open-air meetings were as large, if not larger, than those of Whitefield. Powerful conviction of sin rested upon the people, and multitudes turned to Christ. Three weeks after the remarkable love-feast experience in London, while Wesley was preaching in Bristol, "a well-dressed, middle-aged woman suddenly cried out, as in the agonies of death. She continued to do so for some time says Wesley, "with all the signs of the sharpest anguish of spirit." She was finally able to "rejoice in the Lord, and joy in the God of her salvation." On April 17, 1739 there was another remarkable case of conviction of sin, in Bristol. Wesley had just expounded Acts 4, on the power of the Holy Spirit. "We then called upon God to confirm His Word" says he. "Immediately one that stood by (to our no small surprise) cried out aloud, with the utmost vehemence, even as the agonies of death. But we continued in prayer, till "a new song was put in her mouth, a thanksgiving unto our God." Soon after, two other persons (well known in this place, as laboring to live in all good conscience towards all men) were seized with strong pain, and constrained to roar for the disquietness of their heart." These also found peace. Many other wonderful cases of conviction of sin attended Wesley's preaching. It was a frequent occurrence for people to cry aloud or fall down as if dead in the meetings, so great was their anguish of heart, caused, no doubt, by the Holy Spirit convicting them of sin. It is a well known fact that great and sudden emotion of any kind will often cause people to faint away. This fact doubtless accounts for people dropping down as if dead in revival and other meetings. The sudden realization of the enormity of their sins and of the doom of the impenitent, when the Spirit of God convicts them of sin, is so great that it absorbs all their mental faculties and they lose control of themselves and faint away. Instances of this kind were frequently recorded by Wesley. On April 21, 1739, at Weavers Hall, Bristol, "a young man was suddenly seized with a violent trembling all over, and, in a few minutes, the sorrows of his heart being enlarged, sunk down to the ground." He also found peace. On the 25th day of the same months while Wesley was preaching, "Immediately one, and another, and another sunk to the earth ; they dropped on every side as if thunderstruck."

Day after day Wesley preached to immense audiences in Bristol and Bath and suburbs of those cities. He then went to other places, preaching with the same unction and power, and many Methodist societies sprang up as a result of his and Whitefield's preaching. Many found fault with the outcries of those brought under conviction of sin. Describing one meeting, Wesley says : " My voice could scarce be heard amidst the groanings of some, and the cries of others, calling aloud to ' Him that is mighty to save.' "He says, "A Quaker who stood by, was not a little displeased at the dissimulation of these creatures, and was biting his lips and knitting his brows, when he dropped down as thunder-struck." Next day, in a little prayer-meeting, "Just as we rose from giving thanks," says Wesley, "another person reeled four or five steps, and then dropped down." A certain J H, a zealous Episcopalian, opposed the Methodists in every way possible, and went to his acquaintances persuading them that people falling in the meetings and crying out in agony was " a delusion of the Devil." While sitting at the table one day, "he changed color, fell off his chair, and began screaming terribly, and beating himself against the ground."

Almost everywhere that Wesley went people were stricken down in his meetings in the manner already described, but these cases were the exception, and they usually found peace in Christ when prayed for. Most of the people had never heard such pointed and powerful preaching as Wesley's and the suddenness with which they were brought face to face with their sinful and lost condition probably had much to do with the fact that many of them swooned away or cried out in agony. People who had entertained false hopes of salvation had the masks torn away by the plain preaching of Wesley, and

were stricken with great agony until they found peace with God. In one place where he was preaching, the Lord began to make bare His arm, and, "One and another, and another was struck to the earth; exceedingly trembling at the presence of His power. Others cried with a loud and bitter cry, ' What must we do to be saved?' "The same evening, while Wesley was preaching, a man cried out in agony of soul. Soon after, "Another person dropped down close to one who was a strong asserter of the contrary doctrine. While he stood astonished at the sight, a little boy near him was seized in the same manner. A young man, who stood up behind, fixed his eyes on him, and sunk down himself as one dead."

The plain and fearless preaching of Wesley caused much opposition, and he was often mobbed and came near to losing his life. But in the meetings, "The power of God came with His word; so that none scoffed, or interrupted, or opened his mouth." The scoffing and persecution came from those who had never been in the meetings or heard Wesley preach.

On his return to London, Wesley preached at Wapping, and twenty-six people were stricken down under conviction of sin. "Some sunk down and there remained no strength in them," says he, "others exceedingly trembled and quaked; some were torn with a kind of convulsive motion in every part of their bodies." Wesley had seen many hysterical and many epileptic fits, "but none of them were like these in many respects," says he. "I immediately prayed, ' That God would not suffer those who were weak to be offended.' But one woman was offended greatly; being sure, 'they might help it if they would; no one should persuade her to the contrary ; ' and was got three or four yards, when she also dropped down, in as violent an agony as the rest".

In London Wesley preached in the open air to vast audiences of many thousands of people, as Whitefield and he had done in Bristol; and he afterwards held similar great out-door meetings all over Britain. Even when rain was falling or biting frost was on the ground, he sometimes preached to many thousands in the open air, and sometimes the sermons were two or three hours long. When the doors of his home church at Epworth were closed against him, he preached standing on his father's tombstone in the church-yard with an immense crowd around him. He often spoke with great liberty and power when preaching in these open-air meetings. On December 23, 1744, while preaching at Snow-Fields, "I found," says he, "Such light and strength as I never remember to have had before. I had often wondered at myself (and sometimes mentioned it to others), that ten thousand cares of various kinds were no more weight to my mind than ten thousand hairs were to my head." When worn out with overwork he often found new strength in answer to prayer. Writing concerning one of these occasions he says, " I then thought, ' Cannot God heal either man or beast by any means, or without any.' Immediately my weariness and head-ache ceased, and my horses' lameness in the same instant "(Journal, March 17, 1740).

Wesley was a great organizer and a strict disciplinarian. He expelled from the Methodist Societies everyone who was frivolous or trifling. He expelled them by the scores. He insisted upon modesty in dress, in abstinence from worldly amusements, and on daily holy living. It was his desire to have no one in the Methodist Societies except such as would adorn them by holy and consistent living. Concerning the Society at Epworth he wrote, "The Society here is not large, but God has wrought upon the whole place; sabbath-breaking and drunkenness are no more seen in the streets; cursing and swearing are rarely heard."

Both John and Charles Wesley, as well as the other early Methodist preachers, were strong advocates of the doctrine of entire and instantaneous sanctification through faith. In his Works, Volume VII., Wesley says; "Many years since, I saw that without holiness no man shall see the Lord. I began by following after it and inciting all with whom I had any intercourse to do the same. Ten years after, God gave me a

clearer view than I had before of the way how to attain it, namely, by faith in the Son of God. And immediately I declared to all, 'We are saved from sin; we are made holy by faith. This I testified in private, in public, in print, and God confirmed it by 21 thousand witnesses'.

In his Journal, September 28, 1762, Wesley says: " Many years ago my brother frequently said, "Your day of Pentecost is not fully come ; but I doubt not it will ; and you will then hear of persons sanctified, as frequently as you do now of persons justified.' Any unprejudiced reader may observe, that it was now fully come. And accordingly we did hear of persons sanctified in London, and most other parts of England; and in Dublin, and in many other parts of Ireland as frequently as of persons justified, although instances of the latter were far more frequent than they had been for twenty years before."

Wesley's famous sermon on "Christian Perfection" was first published in 1733, and was often reprinted by him, without alteration, in later years. Deeming it complete, he simply reprinted it. Some have thought that he changed his mind with regard to the doctrine of " Christian Perfection," but in his Journal, in 1778, he wrote, " Forty years ago I knew and preached every Christian doctrine which I preach now." In his Journal, of June 19 and 26, July 3, and August 4, 1762, and in numerous other places, he tells of persons being sanctified. In his Journal of December 29, 1766, he says: "At five in the morning I again began a course of sermons on 'Christian Perfection,' if haply that thirst after it might return, which was so general a few years ago. Since that time how deeply have we grieved the Spirit of God! Yet two or three have lately received His pure love and a few more are brought to the birth." In his Journal, June 2y, 1769, he defines what he means by "Christian Perfection;" and in his Works, Volume IX., he explains his ideas concerning "Inbred," or "Original," Sin, and its eradication. In his Journal, November 1, 1762, he wrote concerning the views of a certain individual, " I like your doctrine of perfection, or pure love; love excluding sin. Your insisting that it is merely by faith; that consequently it is instantaneous, (though preceded and followed by a gradual work), and that it may be now, at this instant, but I dislike your supposing man may be as perfect as an angel; that he can be absolutely perfect; that he can be infallible or above being tempted; or, that the moment he is pure in heart he cannot fall from it." I dislike the saying. This was not known or taught among us till within two or three years. I grant you did not know it. You have over and over denied instantaneous sanctification to me; but I have known and taught it (and so has my brother, as our writings show) above these twenty years".

In his Journal, May 14, 1765, Wesley explains how he came to believe in the doctrine of "Christian Perfection" and what he believed the experience to be. He says: "But how came this opinion into my mind? I will tell you with all simplicity. In 1725 I met with Bishop Taylor's ' Rules of Holy Living and Dying.' I was struck particularly with the chapter on intention, and felt a fixed intention to give myself up to God. In this I was much confirmed soon after by the Christian Pattern, and longed to give God all my heart. This is just what I mean by Perfection now. I sought after it from that hour. "In 1727 I read Mr. Law's " Christian Perfection " and ' Serious Call,' and more explicitly resolved to be all devoted to God, in body, soul, and spirit. In 1730, I began to be homo unius libri; to study (comparatively) no book but the Bible. I then saw in a stronger light than ever before, that only one thing is needful, even faith that worketh by the love of God and man, all inward and outward holiness, and I groaned to love God with all my heart, and to serve Him with all my strength. "January 1, 1733, I preached the sermon on the circumcision of the heart; which contains all that I now teach concerning salvation from all sin, and loving God with an undivided heart. In the same year I printed, (the first time I ventured to print anything), for the use of my pupils, ' A Collection of Forms of Prayer; ' and in this I spoke explicitly of giving 'the whole heart and the whole life to God.' This was then as it is now, my idea of Perfection, though I should have started at the word. "In 1735, I preached my Farewell Sermon, at Epworth, in Lincolnshire. In this likewise I spoke with the utmost clearness of having one design, one desire, one

love, and of pursuing the one end of our life in all our words and actions. "In January, 1738, I expressed my desires in these words:

O grant that nothing in my soul
May dwell but Thy pure love alone;
O may Thy love possess me whole,
My joy, my treasure and my crown.
Strange flames far from my heart remove ;
My every act, word, thought be love.

"I am still persuaded that this is what the Lord Jesus hath bought me with His blood."

Wesley was almost constantly traveling and preaching. "The world is my parish " was his famous motto. In 1774 he wrote that he never travelled less than 4,500 miles a year. For many a year his annual record was 8,000 miles, and during this period he seldom preached less than 5,000 times a year. He traveled as an itinerant preacher, after he was 36 years of age, 225,000 miles, and preached more than 40,000 sermons, some of them to congregations of above 20,000 people. He rose at four o'clock in the morning and preached at five nearly every day. In 1789 Wesley's sight and strength were pretty well exhausted and he felt that he was "an old man;" but he continued to preach and write until within a few days of his death. With the power of God manifestly present, he expired triumphantly on March 2, 1791, his dying testimony being: " Best of all, God is with us."