



## John Wesley

1703 – 1791

He had been ordained for more than a decade when it happened. Sitting in an evening service one Sunday, following his return to England after a disastrous spell as a missionary in Georgia, he listened to someone reading from the preface to Luther's commentary on Romans. The most notable event in eighteenth-century English history was only seconds away: "About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, 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." It was May 24, 1738.

Immediately the dominant theme in the thirty-five year old's ministry became justification by faith: sinners are justified or set right with God as in faith they trust the pardoning mercy God graciously presses upon them. Gone were his preoccupations with moralism (the notion that we can put ourselves right with God through moral achievement) and mysticism (the notion that we have a natural capacity to ascend to a God who remains forever vague). He would know for the rest of his life that the God who is apprehended in the face of Jesus Christ had condescended to him and done for him precisely what he could never have done for himself. His earlier zeal for holy living he retained; only now the motive for it was gratitude for mercy given instead of recognition for superiority attained.

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The results among the people who heard him were electrifying. Thousands who had swung between self-exalting pride and self-rejecting despair now had assurance of their new life as children of God. However, those who objected to the manner in which Wesley held up the need for Spirit-wrought birth made no secret of their derision. The Duchess of Buckingham complained that Methodist doctrines (they were really Anglican!) were "most repulsive." "It is monstrous," she continued, "to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth."

Ecclesiastical officialdom, as nasty as it was spiritually inert, lost no time harassing Wesley. Pulpits were closed to him. Driven out-of-doors, he decided to become "the more vile" (as he had always considered what he was about to do) and began "field-preaching." Together with his friend George Whitefield, a fellow Oxford graduate, Wesley was soon "declaring the glad tidings of salvation" and "spreading scriptural holiness" to throngs numbering in the thousands, people who had never been found in church.

Again the bureaucracy moved to stop him. Magistrates were instructed to hound him even as mobs were incited to beat him. Yet the physically diminutive man stood his ground. "Always look a mob in the face," he instructed his growing band of preachers. Usually the mobs dispersed; the scars on Wesley's face were reminders of the ones that hadn't.

Always an evangelist first of all, Wesley nevertheless attended to the sick, the dying, the imprisoned, the forgotten. He managed to author and edit hundreds of books, write hymns, collect and publish those of his brother Charles, and translate from the German those of Paul Gerhardt. He also wrote grammar textbooks for English, French, Greek, Hebrew and Latin, plus a history of the world.

Faced with the ravages of eighteenth-century poverty (worsened by the Industrial Revolution just under way) he spent himself tirelessly on behalf of the socially submerged. In 1746 he established the first free pharmacy in London. Haunted especially by the plight of widows, he reconditioned two small homes for them. Outraged that his people were denied access to banks, he scraped together fifty pounds and began assisting those who needed small amounts of investment capital. (One fellow established a bookselling business which eventually became the largest in England.)

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It is impossible to exaggerate the hardships Wesley sustained: 250,000 miles on horseback, 40,000 sermons preached without amplification, 22 crossings of the Irish Sea, exposure to inclement weather, hostility from those with vested interests, life-long conflict from those who disdained his vehement rejection of predestination and his equally vehement insistence on godliness.

Wesley persisted in telling his people that God could do something with sin beyond forgiving it: they could know *victory*. As his people stepped forward out of filth, hopelessness, self-contempt, alcoholic delirium, debt and disgrace he insisted that there was no limit to the work of grace which God longed to effect in them. When the established church accused him of fanaticism he met them head-on: since they prayed the line from the prayerbook every day, “. . . that we may *perfectly* love thee. . .” they must believe it themselves or else be manifestly insincere. There were no grounds for pronouncing his people fanatics.

But no grounds were needed. When a bishop slandered those whose temporal fortunes and eternal destiny had been transformed, Wesley replied with an irony both trenchant and tragic: “But all is fair toward a Methodist.” Yet he harboured no ill-will. Discovering that the cowardly bishop who had refused to name himself was from Exeter Cathedral, Wesley worshipped there in 1762, commenting, “I was well-pleased to partake of the Lord’s Supper with my old opponent, Bishop Lavington. O may we sit down together in the Kingdom of our Father.” Fifteen days later Lavington was dead.

Wesley was to live another thirty-one years. When an old man, he spent four consecutive winter days begging, ankle-deep in slush, to raise two hundred pounds for his beloved poor.

In 1789, aged eighty-six, he returned to Falmouth, Cornwall. The streets were lined. Forty years earlier mobs there had abused him. Now he was overwhelmed at the affection that greeted him. “High and low now lined the street,” he wrote, “from one end of the town to the other, out of stark love and kindness, gaping and staring as if the king were going by.”

He was not the king. He was a very great ambassador.

