
"I Felt My Heart Strangely Warmed"

John Wesley and the Seventh-day Adventist Heritage

Russell L. Staples

The itinerant street preacher whom mobs sought to stone became a legend in his own lifetime. John Wesley (1703-1791) was an Oxford don who reveled in Aristotelian logic, yet devoted his life to communicating the gospel to plain people in simple English. An avowed rationalist with a debt to the Enlightenment philosophers, he declared himself an unashamed intuitionist. A devoted Anglican throughout his life, he became the founder of the Methodist Church. During his life as an itinerant revivalist, he wrote and published prolifically yet called himself "the man of one Book." His life shows us the experience of a dedicated young scholar, a seeker of practical truth and a man whose spiritual insights influenced the genesis of our own Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Studies and Travels

John Wesley's father was an Anglican clergyman, his mother the daughter of a celebrated non-conformist minister. She was Wesley's first and best teacher. From her he inherited an antipathy to Calvinistic determinism and the conviction that one could not be a "halfway Christian." Rescued from a burning rectory at the age of five-and-a-half, he considered himself as "a brand plucked out of the burning" to serve God in some special cause.

At 11, he entered Charter House School in London. At 17, he became a student at Christ Church, Oxford. There he studied the classics, excelled in Latin poetry, studied and annotated the

Greek New Testament, and apparently participated in the recreational activities of the average Oxford University student. A new religious seriousness came into his life toward the end of his studies when he decided to enter the ministry of the church. At 22, he was ordained a deacon in the Anglican Church and in 1728, at the age of 25, he became a minister.

To fulfill his obligations as a fellow at Lincoln College, Oxford, John became resident tutor there in 1729. This position gave him time for study, academic fellowship, and a regular stipend. Here, he joined his brother Charles and two other students in a religious study group which they called the "Holy Club." The group was derisively referred to by some as "the Methodists" because of their emphasis on methodical study and

devotion. Although this type of club was rather unusual at the university, the religious societies after which it was modeled were a familiar feature of 18th-century English parochial life. Under John's guidance, the group studied God's Word, engaged in spiritual devotion, and made their Christianity practical by ministering to prisoners and others in need, teaching them to read, distributing food, clothing, books, and medicine, and attempting to find employment for them.

In the spring of 1735, an Oxford friend invited Wesley to evangelize the Indians and attend to the spiritual needs of the colonists in the British colony of Georgia in North America. Probably the most important outcome of this brief but difficult experience was the friendship he developed with several Moravian missionaries. Under their influence, he was led to wrestle with the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith to which he was both attracted and repelled. Its expression of the triumph of grace appealed to the young pastor, but it seemed to him to restrict salvation to too narrow an axis, concentrating on God's work to the neglect of human responsibility. He thought that it stressed forgiveness of sins to the neglect of the healing of corrupted human nature.

Wesley spent less than three years in Georgia: his mission to the Indians was unsuccessful, and he was unable to build a good rapport with his parishioners. His "naive attachment" to the niece of Savannah's chief magistrate



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caused problems which came to a head after she married another man and Wesley refused her permission to participate in Holy Communion. In December 1737, after numerous misunderstandings with the authorities and colonists, he returned hastily to England.

A Spiritual Milestone

Wesley continued to explore the idea of justification through faith. In a state of intellectual and spiritual turmoil, he rather unwillingly went to a meeting at the Fetterlane Society (a largely Moravian group) on the evening of May 24, 1738. Here, as Luther's introduction to Romans was read, Wesley underwent a spiritual/intellectual experience that marked a milestone in his life. He wrote in his journal, "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."¹

In the light of this experience, Wesley set about "more narrowly to inquire what the doctrine of the Church of England is concerning the much controverted point of justification by FAITH."² Accordingly, he studied the Edwardian Homilies, made a précis of each, and printed them "for the use of others."³ Wesley had now arrived at a settled theological position regarding the way of salvation that was to remain constant for the remainder of his life.

The central element of this theology is the doctrine of justification by faith—that is, forgiveness, solely on account of the grace of Christ, of original guilt and actual sins committed. Subsequent upon this is a process of overcoming the corruption in human nature, called sanctification. This juxtaposition of justification and sanctification is called the Wesleyan synthesis.

In Oxford, young Wesley had become acquainted with the concept of salvation as overcoming corruption—being in some sense

the inverse of the Incarnation⁴—i.e., Christ became like us, in order that we by grace might grow up to be like Him (see 2 Peter 1:4: "that . . . ye might be partakers of the divine nature"). This text is quoted in Wesley's journal entry of May 24, 1738, in precisely this sense.⁵

Wesley thus combined the Lutheran doctrine of justification and the doctrine of making righteous (sanctification) drawn from the teachings of the early Christian church. The first and primary element in this synthesis is justification, a forensic declaration of righteousness (what Christ does for us); the second element is a process of making righteous (what Christ in the Holy Spirit does in us) and involves an ontological change in human nature. Justification is the work of God alone; sanctification is a process of divine/human cooperation.

Wesley thus joins divine sovereignty and human responsibility in his understanding of the Scripture way of salvation. Justification (forgiveness) ". . . is necessary to *entitle* us to heaven; the latter (sanctification), to *qualify* us for it. Without the righteousness of Christ we could have no *claim* to glory; without holiness we could have no *fitness* for it."⁶

This understanding of salvation is the centerpiece of a system of

theology with an elevated doctrine of God, which emphasizes Christ's divinity and an objective atonement, and a nuanced doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Wesley's understanding of grace is one which sees in it the role of preventing, justifying, regenerating, and sanctifying. The important element of personal experience was added to the Anglican base of revelation, tradition, and reason.

The Methodist-Adventist Connection

The Methodist Church in the U.S.A. was organized in 1784 in Baltimore. American Methodists set out to "spread scriptural holiness over the land." In the United States, Methodism reached its greatest development and influence. So vigorous was the young Methodist Church that it had become the largest denomination in North America by 1840. More than that, its optimistic anthropology (Arminian theology) and understanding of salvation contributed to a cultural change in the new nation. Historians write of the Arminianizing of American theology and the Americanizing of Wesleyan theology during "the Methodist Age (1825-1914) in America."⁷

During this period, the Millerite movement arose, and subsequently the Seventh-day Adventist



John Wesley speaking to his Oxford classmates.

Church. Many Millerite preachers were Methodists, and so also had been many early Seventh-day Adventists. Ellen White grew up in the Methodist Church and gave her heart to the Lord during a holiness revival at a Methodist campmeeting. Her mature writings reveal both the breadth and balance of the Methodist environment in which her religious consciousness was formed. She appealed to Scripture, reason, experience, and the tradition of the early church, as did Wesley. Books like *The Desire of Ages*, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, and especially *Steps to Christ* give expression to a Wesley's understanding of salvation encompassing both justification and sanctification.

Wesleyan influence on the developing Seventh-day Adventist Church may be seen in other aspects, such as the organization of early groups of Adventists after the model for Methodist "social meetings." When our church was formally organized, it adopted a conference system similar to that of the Methodists.

An Assessment

The 250th anniversary of John Wesley's "strangely warmed heart" experience at the Fetterlane Society on May 24, 1738, was celebrated internationally three years ago. Again a few months ago, countless Methodist communities around the world recalled the occasion of Wesley's death (on March 2, 1791) and sang Isaac Watt's hymn, "I'll Praise My Maker While I've Breath." This seemed doubly appropriate, because Wesley recited phrases from this hymn on his deathbed, and it epitomizes the great mission of his life.

What is the significance of Wesley's work for us today? First, the Wesleyan theological tradition, with its Arminian base and twofold understanding of salvation, forms the backdrop of Seventh-day Adventist religious

thought. It is a theological tradition that makes sense in the contemporary world on several counts. The breadth of its sources—Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience—provides a broad basis upon which to respond to the challenges introduced by the secular world. Revelation and reason provide scope for both the divine source and the human quest for understanding. Wesley's combination of reason and experience (intuition) provides a way of thinking about tensions be-



John Wesley in action

tween mind and heart all too common in our own religious life. Respect for tradition provides a check for newer ideas. Perhaps, above all, it is the optimism of what can be achieved by God's grace that is so encouraging and appealing about this theology. And in the final analysis, it is an optimism of salvation derived, at least in part, from the Wesleyan tradition that informs Adventist thought and practice regarding education, recreation, and healthful living—in fact, for almost every

dimension of our common discipleship.

NOTES

1. *Journal*, May 24, par. 14, in W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds., *Journal and Diaries I (1735-1738)*, vol. 18 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, Richard P. Heitzenrater and Frank Baker, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), p. 250.

2. *Journal*, November 12, in W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds., *Journal and Diaries II (1738-1743)*, vol. 19 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, Richard P. Heitzenrater and Frank Baker, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), p. 21.

3. *Ibid.*

4. See Randy Maddox, "John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy: Influences, Convergences and Differences," *The Asbury Theological Journal*, 45:2 (Fall 1990), pp. 29-54.

5. Ward and Heitzenrater, vol. 18, p. 249.

6. Sermon 127, "On the Wedding Garment," par. 10, in Albert C. Outler, ed., *Sermons IV, 115-151*, vol. 4 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, Frank Baker, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 1987.

7. Winthrop S. Hudson, "The Methodist Age in America," *Methodist History*, 10:3 (April 1974), p. 3.

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