JOHN WESLEY’S HEART-WARMING
ALDERSGATE EXPERIENCE (1738)

Study 8  
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INTRODUCTION

This major Turning Point is directly connected with our previous major turning point—Luther’s Biblical Protest, over 200 years earlier.

In 1735 John Wesley, an ordained clergyman in the Church of England responded to an invitation to serve God in the new colony in Savannah, Georgia, in America. After two years there, his ministry was virtually fruitless. His integrity seemed compromised by a romantic relationship—with Sophy Hopkey, an eighteen-year-old niece of Savannah’s chief magistrate—that ended badly. John left for England in 1737 disillusioned about many things. He felt the noble American savages were gluttons, thieves, liars and murderers. His white colonists resented his rigid high churchmanship, his refusal to conduct the funeral of a non-conformist, and his prohibition of the ladies from wearing fancy clothing and gold jewellery to church.¹ One positive contact in America, was his contact with the theologically astute and joyful Moravians. They had spiritual power!

Luther had written a Preface to the Romans. A public reading of it took place in England on 24th May 1738 at Aldersgate, London. John Wesley (1703—1791) was in attendance and he describes in his Journal how these words affected him:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a Society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. 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.

I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more special manner spitefully used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all the what I now felt in my heart….

After my return home I was much buffeted with temptations; but cried out, and they fled away. They returned again and again. I as often lifted up my eyes, and He “sent me help from His holy place.” And herein I found the difference between this and my former state chiefly consisted. I was striving, yea, fighting with all my might under the law, as well as under grace. But then I was sometimes, if not often conquered; now I was always conqueror.²

¹ Bruce L. Shelley, Church History in Plain Language, (Updated 2nd Ed.), Word, Texas, 1995, p. 335
See Also: Journal 1:475-6
John’s experience affected him deeply, and his ministry, and story has undoubtedly been recounted to millions of people. It is highly significant in the whole movement of Christian history, theological discussion, the relationship between doctrine and experience, the missionary movement of Christians in world history, the Pentecostal movement, the teaching of holiness (not always for the best) and not least of all, in the worship life of the church—through evangelical, singing of quality theological hymns, loud and ‘lustily’ during the past 270 years. Jesus has used John Wesley mightily.

England received the benefits of Christian Revival, and is in large part, due to the life and ministry of John Wesley, and his brother Charles Wesley (1707—1788). Such matters continue to attract reflection and research. It is John, the organisational genius and energetic, mobile preacher whom we will focus on.

A BRAND PLUCKED FROM THE BURNING

John Wesley—‘a brand plucked from the burning’—was rescued by a neighbour, as a 6 year old, from the second story of his father’s Epworth manse, as it burned to the ground. John is best known for his preaching; Charles is well known for his thousands of hymns (he wrote at least 8,990 poems) and incidentally he was also a fine preacher. One can only really speculate concerning the significance of Charles Wesley’s own experience—which occurred three days before his brother John’s more famous moment.

Briefly, John Wesley ministered tirelessly for 66 years. He often travelled on horseback, and covered some 5,000 miles per year; he averaged 3 sermons per day, published a 4 volume commentary on all of Scripture, a dictionary in 5 languages, a 5 volume work on natural philosophy, grammars on the Hebrew, Latin, French and English languages; he wrote 3 books on medicine, 6 on church music, 7 volumes of sermons, edited The Arminian Magazine and a library of fifty volumes of the classics, call The Christian Library. He rose at 4am, and worked until 10pm. In his 86th year he still rode 30-50 miles per day. He said: The world is my parish.

Wesley’s Methodists have been renowned for preaching and church planting. In particular, our own state of South Australia has been strongly influenced by the Christian faith as taught by the Methodists, since European settlement. (In 1977 they joined with Presbyterians and Congregationalists to form The Uniting Church in Australia).

THE GREAT EVANGELICAL AWAKENING

The dramatic renewals, or revivals, known as the Evangelical Awakenings are for many people a deeply loved and admired era in Christian history. Very significant awakenings

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3 Zechariah 3:2; Jude 23
4 Arnold Dallimore, A Heart Set Free: The Life of Charles Wesley, Evangelical Press, Welwyn, p. 212
took place in Germany under the Pietists [stressed personal faith, and intimate fellowships rather than state churches], in particular Philip Spener (1635—1705), Count von Zinzendorf (1700—1760) and the Moravians; in the British Isles under John Wesley and the Methodists, as well as George Whitfield and others; and in the North American colonies under the Great Awakening, which was influenced firstly by the young orator George Whitfield and then later by the intellectual giant—theologian and preacher, Jonathan Edwards. Revival also swept through Scotland, Wales, parts of Ireland, Holland, and France. These commenced in the late 1730s, early ’40s, and burned with vigour, for almost nearly fifty years. It was a movement, which profoundly touched the lives of all classes of people.

As a theologian, John Wesley had his deficiencies. In particular his teaching concerning Christian Perfection, and some of his arguments with Whitfield, on election, are perhaps open to criticism. His home life as father, and husband probably lacked significantly. His effort to serve Jesus Christ by preaching him, eagerly to others, is probably second to none. As he wrote after visiting a township to preach: I gave them Christ. That, he did.

It is a point of contention among historians, but it may well be true, that the Great Awakening, and the social reform which accompanied it, under Wesley’s influence, averted a potential bloodbath like that which occurred in the French Revolution at the close of this era in 1789.

GEORGE WHITFIELD

George Whitfield (1714-1770) has been described by Martyn Lloyd-Jones as ‘the greatest preacher England ever produced’; He crossed the Atlantic 13 times to preach in America. John Dunn has written an excellent biography—George Whitfield: Man Of Grace, published by New Creation Teaching Ministry. In this work, he describes, how because of the rivalry between the two camps of Wesley and Whitfield, it was Whitfield who took the truly humble approach, and declined to engage in further conflict, when others hoped he would continue to stand for what they saw as right doctrine. Dunn writes:

…the Calvinistic Methodist Association eventually died away and the revival was saved from further discord and strife. Dallimore notes that because of Whitefield’s action, ‘John Wesley, not George Whitefield, is known today as the leader and founder of Methodism’. 7

THE FRIENDSHIP OF WHITFIELD AND WESLEY

John Wesley would not accept some of the Calvinist doctrines, as they were preached in his day. In particular, a fatalistic predestination to damnation for some, was opposed by Wesley as ‘the horrible decree’. He often debated vehemently and publicly with his good friend, Calvinist, and exceptionally gifted preacher, George Whitfield. Whitfield was responsible for inviting Wesley to preach in the open air at Bristol, a method (I consented to become more vile - Wesley) that proved extremely successful in bringing the gospel to

7 John Dunn, George Whitfield: Man Of Grace, NCTM Blackwood, Pastors School, 1992, p. 17
the poor, and the masses. It is a nice touch in history, that Wesley was requested to preach for Whitfield’s funeral. As an organiser, John Wesley had extraordinary flair, and methodical abilities, and he gathered people into lay-led, midweek classes for further instruction, study and prayer.

**JONATHAN EDWARDS:**
**THEOLOGY AMIDST REVIVAL**

Another very important figure, in the Great Awakenings, is Jonathan Edwards (1703—1758). His ministry saw extraordinary revivals in Northampton, in America. In the spring of 1735, Edwards preached a series of sermons on “Justification by Faith”, and there came a moving of the Spirit, stirring up the believers and bringing he unconverted to Christ. ‘There was scarcely was a single person in the town, young or old, left unconverted about the great things of the eternal world.’

Robert W. Jenson has written a very fine book on Edwards: In it, he says that his work has been obscured and his thought has been robbed of its potentially recreative power. Edwards has become for educated Americans the horrid old fanatic who frightened ‘Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God’ - the title of a famous sermon he once preached. Jenson calls us to look again at Edwards, for it is he, who has done a great service in his thinking through the issues of justification and sanctification, faith and the use of the will, rationalism and enthusiasm, neonomianism and antinomianism.

Edwards grasped that Puritanism, when only inward spirituality, fails the Christian task. While the enlightenment thinking, where reason always takes prime place—but without a true view of God’s certain plan and goal (teleology) for the Bride and the Lamb, also fails. Edwards had a gift to penetrate this ancient dualism. Head and Heart—thinking, reasoning—and inward loving assurance, are both Christ’s gifts.

It is by the mixture of counterfeit religion with true, not discerned and distinguished, that the devil has had his greatest advantage against the cause and kingdom of Christ all along hitherto. It is by this means, principally, that he has prevailed against all revivings of religion that ever have been since the first founding of the Christian church. By this, he hurt the cause of Christianity in and after the apostolic age, much more than by all the persecutions of both Jews and heathens. The apostles, in all their epistles show themselves much more concerned at the former mischief than the latter.

the devil scatters the flock of Christ, and sets them one against another, and that with great heat of spirit..... under the notion of zeal for God.....Satan leads both parties far out of the right way, driving each to great extremes, one on the right hand and the other on the left...till the right path in the middle is almost wholly neglected. And in the midst of the confusion, the devil has great opportunity to advance his own interest...and work his own will.

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TIMELINE OF—‘THE AGE OF REASON AND REVIVAL’

1648  *The Peace of Westphalia* recognises Calvinism, Lutheranism and Catholicism.
1649-60  England becomes a Commonwealth with Puritanism dominant in the church.
1652  Nikon becomes Patriarch of Moscow and begins controversial reforms
1667  Ukraine is divided between Poland and Russia, bringing the Catholic Enlightenment to Russia
1672  Thousands of Huguenots are killed in the Bartholomew’s Day massacre in France
1673  Test Act in England bans non-Anglicans from all establishment posts
1674  Catholic hierarchy officially established in New France
1678  John Bunyan writes *The Pilgrim’s Progress*
1682  The French clergy issue a Declaration of Gallicanism
1685  King Louis XIV of France revokes the Edict of Nantes
1688  King James II, England, deposed partly due to growing support of Roman Catholicism
1707  Charles Wesley born
1721  Tsar Peter the Great of Russia replaces the patriarchate of Moscow with a Holy Synod
1724  Emperor Yongzeng of China bans Christianity
1728  William Law publishes *A serious call to a devout and holy life*
1730  Matthew Tindal publishes *Christianity as old as creation*
1739  John Wesley breaks with the Moravians in Britain; founds what becomes *Methodist*
1740  George Whitfield arrives in America and preaches the new revivals
1742  Pope Benedict XIV confirms the banning of the Chinese rites
1750  Jesuits expelled from Paraguay
1754  Methodist missionaries arrive in Antigua and begin the first systematic preaching to West Indian slaves
1755  The Lisbon earthquake causes many to question the goodness of God
1764  Voltaire publishes the *Philosophical dictionary*
1773  Pope Clement XIV suppresses the Jesuits
1774-77  Gotthold Lessing publishes fragments by Hermann Reimarus casting doubt on the authenticity of the New Testament
1786  Virginia passes Thomas Jefferson’s bill guaranteeing complete religious liberty
1788  Charles Wesley dies
1789  The Storming of the Bastille – the beginning of the *French Revolution*
1790’s  Persecutions against Christians begin in Korea

Most details of the Timetable taken from: