

Rev. Mr. JOHN WESLEY'S

JOHN WESLEY

AND THE EARLY METHODIST REVIVAL



A Kingswood Course

Rev. George Whitefield (1714 – 1770)



Portrait by Joseph Badger (1745)



Portrait by John Russell (1770)

The Life of George Whitefield

- Born in December 1714 in Gloucester, England. Whitefield's family operated an inn in Bristol, so he came from a very working class background.
- Admitted to Pembroke College at the University of Oxford as a servitor.
- Had a conversion experience as an undergraduate at Oxford and came to believe that he was meant to be used by God to be a great force for renewal in the church.
- Ordained just before his 22nd birthday and began preaching in churches in Oxford, Gloucester, and London.

The Life of George Whitefield

“Whitefield preached as though there might be no tomorrow ... Instead of doctrine, he explored the feelings of New Birth and through his exploration invited hearers to experience it for themselves. Imagination was central to his presentation ... Repeatedly he asked his listeners to imagine a different state of being, to imagine being birthed into a new creature. What would happen, he asked, if one were consciously to live through ‘a thorough, real, inward change of heart’?”

– Harry Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*

John Wesley's Journal for March – April 1739

Saturday, March 31. In the evening I reached Bristol and met Mr. Whitefield there. I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this *strange way* of preaching in the fields, of which he 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*.

John Wesley's Journal for March – April 1739

Sunday, April 1. In the evening (Mr. Whitefield being gone) I begun expounding our Lord's Sermon on the Mount (one pretty remarkable precedent of *field preaching*, though I suppose *there were churches* at that time also) to a little society which was accustomed to meet once or twice a week in Nicholas Street.

John Wesley's Journal for March – April 1739

Monday, April 2. At four in the afternoon I submitted to 'be more vile', and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining to the city, to about three thousand people. The Scripture on which I spoke was this (is it possible anyone should be ignorant that it is fulfilled in every true minister of Christ?): 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor...'”

John Wesley's Journal for March – April 1739

Thursday, April 26. While I was preaching at Newgate on these words, 'He that believeth hath everlasting life,' I was sensibly led, without any previous design, to declare strongly and explicitly that God 'willeth all men to be *thus* saved' and to pray that if this were not the truth of God, he would not suffer the blind to go out of the way; but if it were, he would bear witness to his Word. Immediately one and another and another sunk to the earth; they dropped on every side as thunderstruck. One of them cried aloud. We besought God in her behalf, and he turned her heaviness into joy...

John Wesley's Journal for March – April 1739

... A second being int he same agony, we called upon God for her also, and he spoke peace unto her soul. In the evening I was again pressed in spirit to declare that Christ 'gave himself a ransom for all'. And almost before we called upon him to set his seal, he answered. One was so wounded by the sword of the Spirit that you would have imagined she could not live a moment. But immediately his abundant kindness was showed, and she loudly sang of his righteousness.

Jacob Young's experience at a Methodist preaching service
in 1797 in Kentucky:

“At one gathering ‘the congregation was melted into tears; I could compare it to nothing but a storm of wind ... the congregation nearly all rose from their seats, and began to fall upon the floor like trees thrown down by a whirlwind.’ Young looked on with amazement: ‘my tears flowed freely, my knees became feeble, and I trembled like Belshazzar; my strength failed and I fell upon the floor.’”

From John Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*

About Methodist preacher Benjamin Abbott:

“Benjamin Abbott once preached a funeral sermon to the accompaniment of a violent thunderstorm: ‘I lost no time, but set before them the awful coming of Christ, in all his splendour, with all the armies of heaven, to judge the world and take vengeance on the ungodly! It may be, cried I, that he will descend in the next clap of thunder! The people screamed, screeched, and fell all through the house.’”

From John Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*

Around 1812, the Methodist preacher Richard Nolley “followed fresh wagon tracks to the camp of a family newly arrived in the area. ‘What!’ exclaimed the father when he discovered Nolley’s identity, ‘have you found me already? Another Methodist preacher!’ ... Nolley offered him small comfort, telling the man that not only were the Methodists everywhere in this world but that there would undoubtedly be Methodist preachers both in heaven and in hell.”

From John Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*

How to Read John Wesley's Sermons

- Note that most of the sermons are more like doctrinal essays than they are sermons you would actually preach. Many of them were published in successive volumes of Wesley's collection, *Sermons on Several Occasions*.
- Sermon topics cover a lot of different areas: the nature of God, the character of human reason, how to understand the moral law, the use of the means of grace, proper Christian stewardship, various aspects of the Methodist revival, etc. However, a large percentage of the sermons are concerned with the doctrine of salvation: prevenient grace, justification by faith, the new birth, sanctification, and perfection. Wesley's abiding desire throughout his leadership of the revival was to help people receive salvation in Jesus Christ, so he wrote and published a great deal on themes related to that.

How to Read John Wesley's Sermons

- Each sermon will be headed by a Scripture passage.
- Wesley would typically number the paragraphs of his sermons using a combination of Roman numerals (I, II, III, etc) and Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3, etc) to make the different sections of the sermon easily identifiable.
- The usual numbering pattern involved an introductory section that sets up the argument of the sermon, numbered in Arabic numerals. Following that, there would be three to four sections set off by Roman numerals as the main parts of the sermon. Within each of those sections, individual paragraphs were numbered with Arabic numerals. With the start of each new section, the numbering of paragraphs within that section would start over. Once a student learns how the numbering system works, the sermons become much easier to read.

How to Read John Wesley's Sermons

- Oftentimes, the final paragraph in the introductory section will tell you how the following main sections of the sermon will be arranged. For example, introductory par.5 of “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount (Discourse IV)” from 1748 reads:

“In order to fully explain and enforce these important words I shall endeavour to show, first, that Christianity is essentially a social religion, and that to turn it into a solitary one is to destroy it; secondly, that to conceal this religion is impossible, as well as utterly contrary to the design of its author. I shall, thirdly, answer some objections; and conclude the whole with a practical application.”

Wesley is telling his reader here that there will be four main sections to the sermon.

Example of a Wesley Sermon's Organization

1.

2.

3.

I. 1.

2.

3.

II. 1.

2.

3.

III. 1.

2.

3.

Anatomy of a Wesley Sermon:

“Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount” (Discourse IV)

- Written as one of 13 sermons on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount from Matthew chapters 5-7 for inclusion in the second volume of Wesley’s *Sermons on Several Occasions* in 1748.
- The *Sermons on Several Occasions* ended up in nine volumes which covered a wide range of topics including the nature of God, salvation, the life of devotion, and practical Christian living.
- The subject of this particular sermon consists of an argument that Christianity is an inherently social religion (rather than solitary). Looming in the background is Wesley’s almost decade-old disagreement with the Moravians and mystics (like William Law) about the value of the means of grace and the nature of practical Christian living.

“Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount” (Discourse IV)

- The Scripture passage is Matthew 5:13-16 from the Sermon on the Mount (“Ye are the salt of the earth...”)
- Wesley begins by noting the “beauty of holiness,” which he describes as “that inward man of the heart which is renewed after the image of God.” This is in keeping with Wesley’s lifelong belief in the benefit of salvation as experienced in this present life, which he characterizes here as consisting of “a meek, humble, loving spirit” (§1).
- If this is true religion, Wesley asks, why would we ever burden it with “doing” and “suffering” in this life? (§2). He goes on to note that “many eminent men have spoken thus: have advised us ‘to cease from all outward actions’ (§3). He is referring to the Moravian stillness doctrine at this point – what is sometimes referred to as “Quietism.”

“Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount” (Discourse IV)

- Wesley counters this opinion with the teaching of Jesus, for which he cites Matthew 5:13-16, which is the passage the sermon is based on. If Jesus tells us to be the salt of the earth, then he wants our religion to have a social character (¶5).
- It’s at this point that he gives his summary of the sermon to follow:
“In order to fully explain and enforce these important words I shall endeavour to show, first, that Christianity is essentially a social religion, and that to turn it into a solitary one is to destroy it; secondly, that to conceal this religion is impossible, as well as utterly contrary to the design of its author. I shall, thirdly, answer some objections; and conclude the whole with a practical application.”

“Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount” (Discourse IV)

- **First Main Section: Christianity is a social religion.** Wesley’s primary aim is to combat what he would consider to be mysticism, or solitary religion. He says, “I shall endeavour to show that Christianity is essentially a social religion, and that to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it ... When I say this is essentially a social religion, I mean not only that it cannot subsist so well, but that it cannot subsist at all without society, without living and conversing with other men” (§§1.1).
- There are essential Christian virtues such as meekness and peacemaking (mentioned in the beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount) that are impossible to either gain or practice without being in society with other people (§§1.3-4). And this is the case not only with other Christians, but with nonbelievers as well.

“Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount” (Discourse IV)

- The holy influence of the believer on those around him is a central feature of the Christian faith. As Wesley writes, “‘Ye are the salt of the earth.’ It is your very nature to season whatever is round about you. It is the nature of the divine savour which is in you to spread to whatsoever you touch; to diffuse itself on every side, to all those among whom you are. This is the great reason why the providence of God has so mingled you together with other men, that whatever grace you have received of God may through you be communicated to others; that every holy temper and word, and work of yours, may have an influence on them also” (¶1.7).

“Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount” (Discourse IV)

- **Second Main Section: So long as we have true religion, we can never conceal it (and to try to do so would be contrary to God’s design).** Jesus says, ‘Ye are the light of the world. A city set upon a hill cannot be hid’ (¶¶II.1).
- It is the character of the Christian that makes their outward lives so conspicuous to others: “Your holiness makes you as conspicuous as the sun in the midst of heaven. As ye cannot go out of the world, so neither can ye stay in it without appearing to all mankind ... Love cannot be hid any more than light; and least of all when it shines forth in action, when ye exercise yourselves in the labour of love, in beneficence of every kind” (¶¶II.2).

“Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount” (Discourse IV)

- “[It] is the design of God that every Christian should be in an open point of view, that he may give light to all around; that he may visibly express the religion of Jesus Christ” (¶II.5).
- **Third Main Section: Answering Objections.** To the objection that religion does not lie in outward things but rather in the heart or “the inmost soul,” we answer that if the root really be in the heart, then it cannot help but also put forth branches. The branches are the outward obedience to God whether through worship or good works, and they are “substantial parts of religion” (¶III.1).
- To the objection that “love is all in all,” we answer that love fulfilling the law means that we follow it (rather than being freed from it). Therefore we pursue faith and good works. Wesley also connects this with the practice of spiritual gifts within the church (¶III.2-3).

“Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount” (Discourse IV)

- To the objection that “God is a Spirit” and that all we need do is “worship him in spirit and in truth,” we answer that worshiping him in this way means loving him fully—and part of that is in keeping the outward commandments (¶III.4). Wesley says, “To glorify him therefore with our bodies as well as with our spirits, to go through outward work with hearts lifted up to him, to make our daily employment a sacrifice to God, to buy and sell, to eat and drink to his glory: this is worshiping God in spirit and truth as much as the praying to him in a wilderness.”
- To the “grand objection” that our *experience* shows us that the outward things we did for so many years (“attending on all the ordinances”) did nothing for us, we answer that just because “you and ten thousand more have thus abused the ordinances of God, mistaking the means for the end,” this does not mean the problem is with *God’s commands*.

“Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount” (Discourse IV)

- **Fourth Main Section: The Practical Application.** Wesley wants his readers to embrace the counsel of Jesus: “Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (¶IV.1). For Wesley, this is about both character and actions.
- Hide nothing about your faith. Let your love be out in the open. Wesley says, “Be ye artless and simple to all mankind, that all may see the grace of God which is in you. And although some will harden their hearts, yet others will take knowledge that ye have been with Jesus, and by returning themselves ‘to the great Bishop of their souls’, ‘glorify your Father which is in heaven’” (¶IV.3).

“Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount” (Discourse IV)

- Elsewhere Wesley treats the means of grace as ways we receive the nourishment of God’s grace in our lives, but here he speaks of them as a form of evangelistic practice which is meant to have an influence on other people: “With this one design, that men may ‘glorify God in you’, go on in his name and in the power of his might ... Let the light which is in your heart shine in all good works, both **works of piety and works of mercy** ... Be a good steward of every gift of God ... In a word, be thou full of faith and love; do good; suffer evil. And herein be thou ‘steadfast, unmovable’; yea, ‘always abounding in the work of the Lord; forasmuch as thou knowest that they labour is not in vain in the Lord’” (¶IV.4).

So What Is This Sermon About?

- One of a series of 13 discourses on the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).
- Part of a number of sermons in the 1748 second volume of *Sermons on Several Occasions* that dealt with the means of grace.
- For Wesley, the contemporary context is the aftermath of having to do battle with the Moravians over whether the means of grace have a meaningful role to play in the way that God's grace comes to us, prepares us for salvation, helps us to receive the new birth, and sanctifies us.
- Wesley's argument is about the nature of "salt" and "light" in Matthew 5, that there is a specifically social character to Jesus' teaching and that the bearing of light to others can have an evangelistic effect upon them.
- Is there contemporary relevance in this sermon for us? Are there ways to translate what Wesley is saying into our own context?

Auxiliary Components of the Methodist Revival

- Medical dispensary in London (from 1746) and the publication of Primitive Physick (1st ed.1747)
- Lending Stock (from 1746)
- Kingswood School (from 1739; reopened with new bldg in 1748)
- Watch-night Services (from 1742)
- Covenant Renewal Services (from the late 1740s onward)
- Love Feasts (from the late 1730s)

The First Annual Conference – June 1744

Three Guiding Questions:

- What to teach?
- How to teach?
- What to do?

... that is, how to regulate *doctrine, discipline, and practice.*

Leadership Positions within the Methodist Revival

- Class leaders
- Stewards
- Trustees
- Visitors of the Sick
- Helpers (Junior Preachers)
- Assistants (Preachers)

John Wesley's Essential Pragmatism

- Wesley rarely invented practices or aspects of organization from scratch. He more often encountered existing practices or was presented with the ideas of others that he then adapted to Methodist use.
- Examples: religious societies, bands, classes, covenant renewal service, field preaching, lay preaching, the means of grace

John Wesley's Evangelistic Vision

“I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty, to declare unto all that are willing to hear the glad tidings of salvation. This is the work which I know God has called me to. And sure I am that his blessing attends it.”

– Wesley, Journal for June 11, 1739

John Wesley's Evangelistic Vision

“Your lordship knows, being ordained a priest, by the commission then received I am a priest of the Church Universal. And being ordained as Fellow of a College, I was not limited to any particular cure, but have an indeterminate commission to preach the Word of God to any part of the Church of England.”

– Interview with Bishop Joseph Butler, August 16, 1739