



Rev. Mr. JOHN WESLEY'S

JOHN WESLEY

AND THE EARLY METHODIST REVIVAL



A Kingswood Course



The Revival Begins:

Whitefield, Field Preaching, and 'Submitting to Become More Vile'



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.