

Module 1

The Wesleys and the Methodist Movement

Introduction

In establishing its place among the many Protestant denominations, the leaders of The Wesleyan Church and its antecedent organizations have identified themselves with the teaching and practices of two brothers, John and Charles Wesley. These individuals, whose lives were marked by an evangelical experience and a spiritual passion to draw sinners to Christ have greatly shaped the theology and practices of our denomination. While their focus was on creating a movement rather than starting yet another church, the impact they have had on church history has rightly qualified them to be considered founders of The Wesleyan Church.

Background on Wesley

Toward the middle of the 18th century, a wave of evangelical fervor swept across England and North America. In the American colonies two figures rose to importance – George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards. In England, it was two brothers who sparked the renewal. One of them created an organization that channeled new converts in structures that have endured to the present time – John Wesley. Charles Wesley, his brother, made his contribution to that movement with the many hymns, out of thousands he wrote, that are still being sung in churches of almost every denomination.

The impact these two brothers had upon England, North America and global Christianity was truly world-changing. It was more than the Wesleys' organizational skills and inspiring music have left their impact upon church history. They also developed a theological understanding of the Christian faith that is unique and has established its rightful place among the major Protestant traditions.

Although a loyal adherent to the Church of England to his death, Wesley drew upon several traditions of Christianity besides the Anglican Church in which he was ordained. Historians have described Wesley's theology as "eclectic," incorporating aspects of various expressions of the Christian faith. His primary source was the teachings of the Protestant Reformers. He was deeply convinced that salvation came through faith in the work of Christ, not in human efforts to be righteous. His experience with the Holy Club had taught him the futility of earning favor with God apart from a deep trust in God's grace. Throughout his ministry his most frequently preached sermon was "Justification by Faith." While much is made of his doctrine of Christian perfection, Wesley would want to be remembered for his proclamation of the saving work of Christ that brought individuals into a new birth experience of divine grace.

Wesley also found rich insights in the Eastern Church. Readings in the early Greek Fathers introduced him to the concept of the "life of God in the soul." For these ancient fathers, faith was more than giving consent to creeds and observing certain religious practices. It was the infusion of the divine nature into the life and personality of one who believed. Wesley explored the ways that a Christian might become a "partaker of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Beyond

justification, which placed one in a right relationship with God, there was a sanctifying work that made a believer a new creation. This work of sanctification began at the moment of conversion with regeneration (a new birth) and proceeded forward in a dying to sin and growing in Grace.

Wesley did not want to place a limit on the transforming power of this sanctifying grace. Despite the serious effects of the fall, he believed that salvation was more than deliverance from hell while continuing in a sin-ridden life. His emphasis upon sanctification promised a deliverance from sin, even to the point that one might fulfill the great commandment, loving God and neighbor with heart, soul, mind and conduct.

Therefore he urged his followers to “go on to perfection,” not by human striving so much as opening one’s life to the direction and power of the Holy Spirit. One might better describe his view as Christian perfecting, and thus avoid the criticism of his view that claimed one could live continually in a sinless state. To achieve this high level of spiritual commitment, Wesley drew from the German Pietists and the English Puritans who emphasized spiritual practices that fostered a deeper walk with God.

These holy habits were never viewed as means to achieve God’s love and favor. Rather, they were faithful out-workings of the loving relationship we can have with the heavenly Father. In developing this rich understanding of the Christian life, John Wesley (like John Bunyan a century earlier) viewed salvation as a journey, a process that spanned a lifetime. Wesley defined salvation as “the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul, till it is consummated in glory.” (“The Scripture Way of Salvation” I.1)

This work of God generally followed a defined order beginning with the prevenient grace of God drawing sinners to the Gospel. As sinners opened their lives to this divine initiative, they experienced a genuine repentance that caused them to acknowledge their sins and turn toward God. Faith, a gift of God’s grace, prompted them to trust in the saving work of Christ on the cross, resulting in justification, a divine pardon of sins and a restored relationship as sons and daughters of God. In the moment of justifying grace, a new birth occurred and believers received the in-dwelling present of the Spirit, enabling them to grow in grace and knowledge.

This sanctifying grace, accompanied by faithful obedience to the word of God could culminate in a purified heart, free of sinful actions and desires. Whether this experience of sanctification occurred in this lifetime or in a glorified state was not the primary concern of Wesley. What he did believe was that Christians should put no limits on the divine work that could transpire in one’s life and that every true believer should press on to a perfection that modeled Christ to others.

The Wesleys’ theology, whether preached or sung was an optimistic perspective on the gospel message. Wesley incorporated this concept of a life-long process of salvation into the structures of his Methodist Societies. From those seeking “to flee the wrath to come” to those

who testified of an experience of Christian perfection, there was a place to gather with others for encouragement, edification and even rebuke. Although a gifted evangelist, Wesley never considered his work done once an individual had experienced new birth in Christ. He expected his followers to remain faithful in attending worship services in established congregations. However, it was the weekly meetings of class, bands, select societies and penitential groups that fostered discipleship and a continuing walk of faith and obedience. Unlike Wesley, George Whitefield had focused on field preaching, where conversion experiences were the primary objective. In later life, he acknowledged that his lack of follow-up and discipleship training had resulted in his ministry being “a rope of sand.”

With John Wesley’s insistence upon weekly classes for converts, bands for those seeking a holy life and training programs for lay leadership, the Methodist movement became grounded in the spiritual life of the British Isles and North America. In time, Wesley’s Methodism would encircle the globe and become one of the major Protestant traditions of the Christian Church.