

28 August 2022

With the end of the Exodus series, I have decided to do a short church history series, a brief summer diversion. My thought was to take significant figures from our heritage as Christians and highlight one each week, men and women who have very much shaped our present understanding of the teachings of the Bible (both negatively and positively). My thought is to survey their lives, tell their stories, and then explain how they have shaped Christian understanding.

John Wesley
(10 June 1703- 2 March 1791)

John Benjamin Wesley II

England's great preacher-
organizer-evangelist
and founder of Methodism

John Wesley
(1703-1791)



"In his make-up, Anglican and Puritan were fused . . . the order and dignity of the one, the fearless initiative and asceticism of the other (A Skevington Wood)."

- I. The Outline of Wesley's Life
 - A. His Early Years, 1703-1791

THE LIFE OF JOHN WESLEY			
17 June 1703: <i>Born</i>	1720: <i>Entered Oxford</i>	1735: <i>Sailed for America</i>	14 June 1738: <i>Converted at a Moravian meeting on Aldersgate St.</i>
1707: <i>Charles Born</i>	1725: <i>Ordained Deacon</i>	1736: <i>Arrived in Savannah</i>	1739: <i>Preached First Open-air Sermon</i>
1709: <i>Rescued from Fire</i>	1726: <i>Elected Fellow at Oxford</i>	1737: <i>Left for England depressed by Failure with Ministry and with Sophia Hopkey</i>	1741: <i>Division with Whitefield and other Calvinists over Predestination</i>
1714: <i>Admitted to Charterhouse</i>	1728: <i>Ordained Priest</i>	1744: <i>First Methodist Conference</i>	1751: <i>Married Widow, Molly Vazeille</i>
	1729: <i>Returned to Oxford and Joined "Holy Club"</i>	1758: <i>Wife Left Him</i>	2 March 1791: <i>Died</i>
1703-1720	1720-1735	1735-1738	1738-1791
EARLY YEARS	OXFORD YEARS	GEORGIA YEARS	PRODUCTIVE YEARS

John Benjamin Wesley II was born the seventeenth child of Samuel and Susanna, into a home spiced with both Anglicanism and Puritanism. His father was an Anglican cleric at Epworth, a graduate of Oxford University, his mother a staunch Puritan.

John was named for the third son in the family who died in infancy (thus, II). At age five, a fire destroyed the parsonage at Epworth (Samuel was at time in debtor's prison) and John was secured through a second story window. His pious mother found a verse from Zechariah that she felt was a call of God to her son ("Is this not a brand plunked from the burning [3:2]). As a child Susannah read to the children of the emerging missionary movement. John was educated at home and then, as a youth, sent to Charterhouse, London, for seven years of Latin study.

A. His Oxford Years (1720-35)

Wesley then matriculated at Christ Church College, Oxford, and finished in 1725. Having decided upon the ministry, he was ordained a deacon at Christ Church Cathedral and became a priest in 1728. In addition, he was elected a "fellow" of Lincoln College, Oxford, where he taught and pursued an M.A. He taught at Lincoln until 1729 except for a brief interlude in 1728 when he left to help his aging father at Epworth. While John was

away, Charles Wesley and some friends organized the now-famous “Holy Club” and were dubbed “Methodists.”

B. His Georgia Years, 1735-38

Wesley was persuaded by John Burton of Corpus Christi College to become a chaplain in Oglethorpe’s Georgia (ironically it was founded as an attempt to relieve burgeoning prisons in England (as later Australia). His years there were marked with soul-searching, personality clashes, and moral intrigue. He left Georgia disgraced.

“My chief motive is the hope of saving my own soul, I hope to learn the true sense of the Gospel of Christ by preaching it to the heathen.”

Wesley's later commentary on his Georgia experience was this: “I continued preaching, and following after, and trusting in, that righteousness whereby no flesh can be justified. All the time I was at Savannah I was thus beating the air.”

C. His Productive Years, 1738-91

Wesley was absolved of all guilt from the Georgia episode but was charged with indiscretion. Aldersgate took place on 24 May, 1738, and Wesley’s life was dramatically changed.

“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 that I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

After a brief trip to the Moravian headquarters in Germany, he was introduced to field preaching by George Whitefield and, thus, began over a half-century of incessant travel and preaching. From 1739 to 1749 he organized societies throughout England establishing the first annual conference in 1744. He preached on the average of fifteen times weekly

and traveled 5,000 miles annually by horseback. In addition to 42,000 sermons, he wrote over fifty books and organized complex circuits all over England and Ireland with societies, classes, and bands.

II. The Psychological Profile of Wesley

Wesley appears to have been the type that desired the privilege of marriage, but without a willingness to accept the responsibility, the restrictions that accompanies it. In 1751 he married Molly Vazielle, a wealthy widow with three children. He was demanding and absentee; she was jealous and fearful; and romance seemed non-existent. She opened his correspondence to read letters from female admirers and he could be demanding ("Know me and know yourself. Suspect me no more, asperse me no more, provoke me no more: do not any longer contend for mastery...be content to be a private insignificant person, known and loved by God and me"). After years of conflict, the marriage dissolved in 1771.

- John was a workaholic with enormous abilities, but, like Calvin, he undermined his health (tuberculosis, frequently bouts of illness).
- Though never lacking in moral integrity, he did not avoid the appearance of questionable contact with women.
- He had an over-possessive, dominate mother (a passive father) that shaped his need for female companionship. When he later was conveyed by carriage, it was often with a female not his wife.

III. The Contribution of Calvin to Protestant Understanding

A. Areas of recognized contribution

1. Clearly, Wesley subscribed to the Thirty-nine Articles, the creed of the Church of England so that he embraced the orthodoxy of the Faith.
2. He had an enormous giftedness for organization as evidenced by the creation of the circuit-rider system as well as the structure of the Methodist Church.
3. He had the ability to inspire layman, with little formal training, to be leaders, both on the circuits and elders in the churches. He unleashed a massive lay movement!
4. Wesley's wonderful contribution was not so much in theology as in the practice and mobilization of Christian Faith, though he published widely, founded a circuit-riders school (a brush-arbor college), and a magazine (*The Arminian Magazine*).

5. His passion was to make the gospel and the Christian life understandable, practical, and simple at the grass roots.
- B. Areas of debated contribution. His was a people's movement!
 1. The context of Wesley's ministry.
 - Scholars have described the eighteenth century in England as the "sick century." While morals sank to a low among the populace, the pulpit offered only a litany of "a colorless essay on moral virtues." Law enforcement was brutal, and illiteracy was rampant. Wesley encountered a society devoid of the hearing of the gospel. Reaching the people, where they were, became the passion of Wesley.
 - Orthodox Faith was under attack with the rise of rationalism that dominated the universities educationally as well as the churches that catered to the upper classes. The major issue of that day make traditional Christian faith suspect was the issue of freedom of choice and the ancient doctrine of human inability (inability and responsibility). How could a gracious God condemn people who have no ability to change their ways before a holy God?

Ability versus inability
Responsibility without ability
Inability but condemnation

(For Wesley the issue was not the great "Solas." It was about anthropology and a defense of Christian Faith. He wanted to defend the Faith and make sense of it for the common person. He sought to defend both inability, the absolute necessity of divine grace, and, at the same time, human sovereignty. He did so in a novel fashion)

2. The formulation of an answer to defend the Faith.
 - a. Wesley clearly and strenuously advocated that all are born spiritual blighted and corrupted beyond any hope of reclamation from Adam's inherited, fallen estate.

Is man by nature filled with all manner of evil? Is he void of all good? Is he wholly fallen? Is his soul totally corrupted? Or to come back to the text, is "every imagination of the thoughts of his heart only evil continually"? Allow this, and you are so far a Christian. Deny it, and you are but an Heathen still."

(How, then, is mankind delivered from such a hopeless State? Wesley has a five-step process, through a succession of increased abilities.)

“[We] deny natural freewill. We...assert that the will of man is by nature free only to evil. Yet we... believe that every man has a measure of freewill restored to him by grace.”

b. The five-steps to spiritual victory.

1. Step One: Prevenient or Preparatory Grace

Wesley begins by appealing to the fact that the fall did not obliterate the conscience; all people have an intuitive, untaught sense of the shadows of right and wrong. It is simply too weak to create self-change. In the hearing of the gospel, he argues, God extends grace to hearers that does not save them but points them to an awareness of need (greater perception of their state). Without that grace no one can move, but grace strengthens our limited freedom; it allows us to see larger horizons.

“... we may say to every human creature, ‘He,’ not nature, ‘hath showed thee, O man, what is good.’ And it is his Spirit who giveth thee an inward check, who causes thee to feel uneasy, when thou walk in any instance contrary to the light which he hath given thee.”

2. Step Two: Repentance (Convincing Grace)

With enlarged perception because of initial grace, a person can now exercise their ability to repent of their sins.

Repentance is more than a change of mind; it is a change in demonstrable behavior. Without immediate moral change repentance is empty and ineffectual (unless you are like the thief on the cross).

“God does undoubtedly command us both to repent, and to bring forth fruits meet for repentance, which if we willingly neglect, we cannot reasonably expect to be justified at all: therefore, *both repentance, and fruits meet for repentance, are, in some sense, necessary to justification*. But they are not necessary in the same sense with faith, nor in the same degree. Not in the same degree, for those fruits are only necessary

conditionally; if there be time and opportunity for them.”

“We must repent before we can believe the gospel. We must be cut off from dependence upon ourselves, before we can truly depend on Christ. We must cast away all confidence in our own righteousness, or we cannot have a true confidence in His. Till we are delivered from trusting in anything we do, we cannot thoroughly trust in what He has done and suffered. First, we receive the sentence of death in ourselves; then, we trust in Him who died for us.”

(Are these linear or sequential events? In a miracle you can have multiplicity simultaneously!)

3. Step Three: Divine Acquittal (justification)

Wesley is wonderfully clear that we are saved by the actions of God, a divine declaration that our guilt has been resolved through the accomplishments of Christ upon the cross.

“[Faith] is the gift of God.” No man is able to work it in himself. It is a work of omnipotence. It requires no less power thus to quicken a dead soul, than to raise a body that lies in the grave. It is a new creation. . . .”

4. Step Four: Sanctification (Victory over sin)

Wesley taught that “entire sanctification” is obtainable in this life. He referred to it by several terms: “Perfection,” “Second Blessing,” “Entire Sanctification,” “Holiness,” and “Perfect Love.” It is a state obtained after some gradual progress. As one says, “The gradual process is interrupted, that is, by the direct intervention of God, which in a single instant raises a man to a higher plane.” Wesley described it this way in 1764:

- a. It is not before justification, for justified persons are to go on to it (Heb. 4:1).
- b. It is not as late as death because living people are denominated as “perfect” (Phil. 3:15).
- c. It makes a person neither infallible nor sinless.
- d. It is an improvable state.

e. It can be lost, even to lostness of salvation.

(How could Wesley arrive at these conclusions? He defined sin as only commission, not omission. "I believe, a person filled with the love of God is still liable to these involuntary transgressions. Such transgressions you may call sin, if you please: I do not," stated Wesley.)

Failure to reach this plateau or stage can lead to the forfeiture of justifying grace. Says Wesley, "Evil desire begins and spreads in his soul, till faith and love vanish away: he is then capable of committing outward sin, the power of the Lord being departed from him."

5. Step Five: Final Salvation (Glorification)

Final Salvation or Glorification is the final stage which is beyond the grave but is conditional upon completing the stained path. All the stages are for all Christians.



Holiness Theology: John Wesley and Sanctification

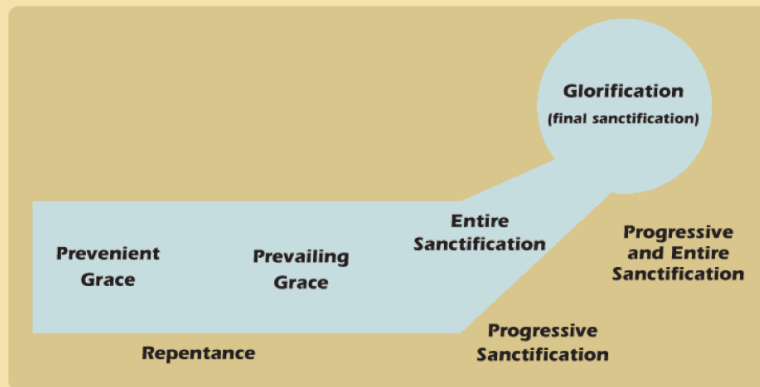


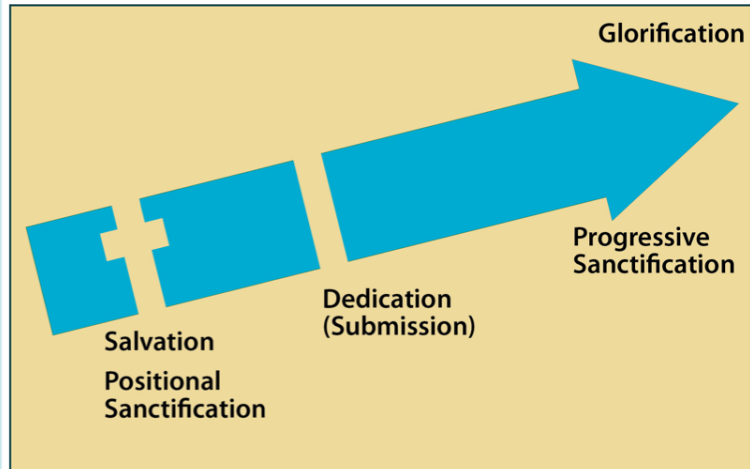
Chart 108

Applications:

1. I think all Christians have areas in the lives where the light of the gospel shines far less brightly than in other areas of their lives. We are all a bundle of contrasts, yet we cling in faith to the person and accomplishments of Jesus. Further, because others do not struggle with the weaknesses we have, we can find help and strength in the family of God.
2. We may criticize Wesley for his view of the Christian life but should emulate his zeal to carry the gospel to people, his passion to explain it in such a way that Jesus is understandable. His accomplishments and legacy are truly remarkable. His man understood how to inspire people to follow him.
3. There is a very grave danger in being too pessimistic about progress in our sanctification as well as being too optimistic of the progress we can make in this life. If you understate the case, you can rob yourself of the expectation that we can progress to a mature faith. If we overstate the case, it can lead to overconfidence and blindness, if not arrogance. Apathy and discouragement are detrimental as are overconfidence and delusion.
4. Cultural issues, particularly those that are destructive of the Christian Faith demand our attention. However, there is an inherit danger for all of us. We may shape our responses to answer our critic than to explain what the Bible teaches. When we do this, we distort our own message.

Some final thoughts: A pattern for the Christian experience illustrated.

An Evangelical View of Sanctification



Mr. Legalist

- Performance
- *“Do like Jesus” — my example.*
- External works

Mr. Higher Experience

- Radiance
- *“Be like Jesus” — my motto.*
- Internal holiness

Mr. Faithful

- Mercy
- *“Behold Christ Jesus” — my substitute.*
- Contemplation of Jesus’ works and His holiness



