

John Wesley in the Reformation Tradition

John Wesley **in the Reformation Tradition**

The Protestant and Puritan Nature of Methodism Rediscovered

Roland Burrows

'Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is Liberty'
(2 Cor. 3:17)



Tentmaker Publications
121 Hartshill Road
Stoke-on-Trent
Staffs.
ST4 7LU
Tel: 01782 746879
www.tentmaker.org.uk (UK)
www.tentmakerpublications.com (US)

ISBN: 978-1-901670-88-2

DEDICATION

To my wife and family—
Anne, Elizabeth and Wesley.

APPRECIATION

With appreciation to my wife Anne, for her help and advice in regard to the use of the computer. Also to the staff of Dudley Public Library; especially Mrs Patricia Turner for her help in locating and making available out of print books and articles. To Mrs Barbara Davies, Mrs Janet Grosvenor and Mr Martin Wells M.A.(Oxon) for their many hours spent in proof reading, and to Mr Phil Roberts of Tentmaker Publications for his invaluable help and advice.

PREFACE

Several reasons have motivated me to prepare this work. The first is that I have Methodism in my blood and that in order to understand myself I must understand the powerful influence of Methodism which had such a formative effect upon my own early years and upon the lives of many of my forebears. Secondly I have carried about these thoughts for a long time now, and I feel that it is high time that I set them down in writing. The third reason is a certain sense of irritation long felt, that John Wesley and essential Methodism has been sadly misrepresented by so-called friends and foes alike for something in the region of the last hundred years. Fourthly, I believe that the Church today, and not least the Reformed Churches of which I myself am a member, have a great deal to learn from John Wesley and those who truly followed in his steps.

I was born in 1949 into a Methodist family of several generations, the year being significant in that it was 100 years after the disruptions in Methodism which caused the formation of the United Methodist Free Church, with which my family were associated. In our own family folk-lore it is well remembered that our great-grandmother carried the water to mix the mortar, when in 1859, the congregation of Ellesmere St. United Methodist Free Church, Chapel, Runcorn, Cheshire, decided that they would themselves build their Sunday school premises. This was the chapel in which I grew up. I imbibed its culture, its atmosphere, and its ethos from my earliest years and later after my conversion and discovery of the great Reformation and Puritan writers and preachers realised that so many of the principles on which I had been brought up coincided with their attitudes and their teachings. To understand this and to see why this was so has been part of the burden of this study. Also being born at that time meant that I caught a glimpse of the way that Methodism since Victorian times had exerted such a strong moral and social influence

upon the great manufacturing towns of the North and the Midlands. I also witnessed its rapid and devastating collapse in the 1960's. Some elements of this study I hope will throw light on some of the reasons why that collapse took place. Another thing I have witnessed in my lifetime has been the way that Methodism has changed over these years, almost unrecognisably and I believe, not for the better. I have often heard Wesley and Methodism criticised and have wanted to say, 'But wait, you haven't seen the real thing.' To show something of the 'real thing' has also been the aim of this work.

One of the main areas of misunderstanding in regard to John Wesley that I have tried to correct is that he was not a true Protestant or child of the Reformation. I have sought to show that he was a true Protestant and an evangelical and that he was manifestly not in the Laudian High Church tradition as some would argue.

I note that Samuel Taylor Coleridge said that when he felt a spirit of languor and weariness come over him, he would read the life of Wesley. Wesley's close walk with God, his focus on the great work of preaching the Gospel, his urgency, his reality, his zeal, his courage, his undauntedness in the face of difficulty and his utter confidence in God is a tremendous tonic for weary and discouraged ministers and downcast and languishing Christians of all ages. I have often felt that when that most powerful hymn of Charles Wesley's, 'And can it be', often called the Methodist national anthem, is sung by a large congregation just before the preaching of the Gospel, one's spirit is lifted. Certainly in my own case I can testify that a great desire seems to be created to set before the congregation something of the unsearchable riches of Christ.

Wesley was a man altogether free from cant and hypocrisy. He was not a mere talker, or armchair theologian, but rather was a doer of the Word of God. He believed in living his faith. His religion was not a quiet corner affair; rather it embraced the whole of life, and went out to touch the whole of life. In its day Methodism changed the whole character of the nation. We need this kind of ministry today.

It was once said that, 'The Methodists were the best organised and most effective religious body in England.' It is time to look at it again in its essential nature and learn from what we see.

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FOREWORD

Great men of God have often been misunderstood and misquoted. John Wesley was no exception. To this day there is much confusion as to some of the doctrines he believed and taught. The book takes many of these cloudy issues and brings them out into the sunlight. There is a fascinating tracing of the Wesley ancestry which, in itself, is a most interesting study. God greatly favoured him with a powerful Puritan influence that came down from his illustrious forebears. Perhaps the strongest line of argument is our being shown that Wesley was a genuine friend of the reformation tradition and that he was a thoroughgoing Protestant. Many attempts have been made to show him otherwise, but the evidence from his own writings, liberally scattered throughout the book, make such a case impossible to uphold.

The part played by the Moravians in Wesley's conversion is well known. But the way the book opens up the history of these good people, showing their rich heritage and Reformation theology, and then how it came to bear on Wesley's spiritual pilgrimage, is extremely helpful. The Moravians, in the genuine Protestant tradition, suffered greatly, but pressed on not only to influence the future founder of Methodism, but many others who were to walk in the same Christ-like way.

An excellent case is made for Wesley's deviation from the false Calvinism of his day. This hyper-Calvinism was widespread, unbiblical and anti-evangelistic. His views on the necessity of a sovereign work of God in a man before he could be converted are made clear by many helpful quotations from Wesley's own writings. On the other hand a good case is made in showing that his Arminianism was a far cry from much of the Arminianism of his day, and certainly from that of our day.

The many present day Arminians who see John Wesley as their champion, will do well to give this book a fair reading. It will dispel

many of the popular beliefs that have long surrounded the good man, and will surely cause many to think again. Those who hold that Wesley's Arminianism led him a thousand miles from the doctrines of the Reformers and the Puritans, will be surprised to learn that his own words to describe his position were that he was 'within a hair's breadth of Calvinism'.

For those Methodists who have lost sight of their roots, here is a clear and precise account of true Methodism which they would do well to read. For those Methodists who have remained true to the faith of their forebears, this will help to strengthen their resolve whilst they wait and work and pray for a recovery of these old gospel truths. All Christians cannot but profit from this account, which deals so clearly with the efforts of one man to strive for the glory of God in preaching the gospel of saving grace, and, at the same time, doing all he could to maintain those truths that set that gospel in its true biblical setting.

Alun McNabb
Great Bridgeford
Staffordshire

CHAPTER ONE

WESLEY'S PURITAN PEDIGREE

Ancestry has its effect on personality, and we cannot easily set aside Wesley's family tree. This preparation for the work of evangelism, to which God had destined him, began long before he came into the world. Like the prophet Jeremiah, he was aware that the divine purpose stretched back to influence his antecedents. 'Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou came forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee to be a prophet unto the nations' (Jeremiah 1:5).¹

For more than 50 years Methodism was dominated by the personality of its founder, the Rev. John Wesley A.M., sometime fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford. It has been observed that the substance of the Epistles of Paul consists of the outworking and fruition of the Apostle's Damascus Road experience, so Methodism, we may argue, was the outworking and fruition of John Wesley's Aldersgate Street experience. In the same way as the Apostle Paul was prepared by his previous experience, parentage and background for his great life's work, so also was John Wesley, to such an extent that we cannot understand the man or Methodism without a thorough tracing out of these influences. Wesley himself was very much aware of this, remarking on one occasion to Adam Clarke, the great Bible commentator, *'If I were to write my own life I should begin it before I was born.'* It is also, I believe, true to say, and this is part of the thesis of this study, that these same background influences, which can be traced out in the character of this complex man, also find their fruition and are partly an explanation for the various divisions that occurred within Methodism in the 19th century.

Referring to Wesley's untiring ministry throughout the land, Dr Maldwyn Edwards asks,

What thrust him out upon these ceaseless journeyings?—In a strict sense one could say, it was in his blood.

Wesley's pedigree is a fascinating one from a spiritual viewpoint. He himself had no interest in his genealogy for the usual reasons, since he was singularly free from any pride of class or descent. But after his evangelical conversion and when he had embarked on the mission God had given to him, he realised how providentially he had been prepared for it by his family background. For, as Canon Leatham reminds us, 'If we were to trace the goodly heritage of Wesley's ancestry it would be to discover Puritanism at its intellectual, cultural and religious best.'²

Wesley's parents, Samuel and Susanna Wesley, were high church Anglicans and here clearly was the source of one side of his nature. Wesley was by nature an aristocrat, a lover of order and a conservative. At the same time however we need to keep in view the fact that Wesley's grandfather and great-grandfather were staunchly committed to the Puritan position. Wesley's paternal grandfather, Bartholomew Westley³, was a Puritan and Rector of the Parish of Allington near Bridport and it was from this living that he was ejected in 1662. After his ejection he identified with the persecuted Non-conformists and preached in their assemblies. Martin Schmidt gives the following account of him:

Bartholomew Westley, who was born about 1600, although whether in Bridport, where he spent his youth, we do not know. Bartholomew's father, Sir Henry Westley, belonged to the lesser nobility, and his mother, Elisabeth de Wellesley, was Irish. Bartholomew studied medicine and theology concurrently, probably at Oxford.⁴

Bartholomew Westley's son John was described by Nehemiah Curnock as "the brave, witty, scholarly, simple-minded itinerant evangelist".⁵ Schmidt says that "in many respects he was prophetic of his famous grandson".⁶

Though of course they never met, Wesley's grandfather clearly had a most striking influence upon him. A. Skevington-Wood brings this out most clearly:

A portrait of him which has survived reveals his character. Although he wears clerical dress, he looks more like a soldier than