

CHRIST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

History Series: The History of John Wesley and the Methodist Church

Compiled by John H. Evans

Sabbath Oct.1, 2006

PART 1: SETTING THE STAGE – EIGHTEENTH CENTURY EUROPE

We begin this Sabbath with a series of notes on Methodist history and doctrines. A new paper will be presented each Sabbath for the next several weeks, each addressing a specific aspect of the history of John Wesley and the Methodist Church. Collecting these papers will provide a condensed version of background material to help you become a more informed and effective Methodist and Christian in the time and culture that we are given.

This first paper will try to briefly characterize the 18th century, since Wesley lived through most of it. It was a time of great social and economic upheaval, in many ways similar to our time. We will begin next week with a description of John Wesley and his life. For now, it is useful to know and keep in mind that John Wesley lived from 1703-1791.

Looking back from the mid 1800's historians were astonished at the rapid changes that began about 1750 and they introduced the term "Industrial Revolution." Actually it was an acceleration of changes that had been under way for some time and so was more of an evolution than a revolution, but the term is too firmly entrenched and so is retained. The technological changes were many and fundamental. They brought about dramatic social change and transformed how people viewed the world.

The grounds for the great changes began with Copernicus (1473-1543) and the publication of his work in 1543 arguing for a sun-centered universe instead of one centered on the earth. (Now we would argue there is no center.) Copernicus was followed by Kepler (1571-1630) who discovered the laws of planetary motion. Contemporary with Kepler was Galileo (1564-1642) who began to seek general principles of all motion. This was all brought to fruition by Isaac Newton (1642-1727). In 1687 Newton published his three laws of motion and the law of universal gravitation. Note that Newton was living in London at that the same time as young John Wesley. His work was a central topic of discussion among educated people.

Meantime in Germany a contemporary of Copernicus, Martin Luther (1483-1546) had publicly challenged the Roman church in 1517 by nailing his objections, especially the selling of indulgences, to the door of All Saints church in Wittenberg. This set off a series of religious wars across Europe. (Sound familiar?!) Actually, of course, this was often a cover for other motives such as seeking territory or power. There had been a great tension for some time between the power in Rome and the nobles of the countries of Europe.

Ever since the voyage of Columbus the nations of Europe had been racing to discover new lands and materials of possible commercial use besides gold and silver. As a result such things as spices, cotton, tea, coffee, tobacco, etc. entered the market. From these enterprises a few became very rich. Thus, there was a coming together of money (we'd call it venture capital), new mechanical knowledge, and desire for new goods. (Like our cell phones today!) The inventors who had been making mechanical toys and novelties for royalty and the rich turned their efforts more and more to developing machines and engines to drive the new machines (i.e., like our search for new energy

CHRIST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

History Series: The History of John Wesley and the Methodist Church

Compiled by John H. Evans

sources today). In 1705-1711 Thomas Newcomen introduced the first practical steam engine. A much-improved version was brought out by James Watt in 1769. By 1785 Watt's engines were being used in cotton factories, rolling mills and pottery works. Whereas a spinning wheel could spin one thread at a time the spinning jenny, invented by James Hargreaves in 1764-1767, could spin many threads at one time.

The steam engine, of course, went on to be improved and applied to transportation in ships and locomotives. New processes were also developed, notably in the production of iron. The social effect was a massive shift from agriculture to industry. In 1740 the population of England was about 6,000,000, not even that of London today. Nearly everybody lived in the country or in a small village and they were mostly self-sufficient. They used wooden dishes and clay cooking pots and many lived in wattle houses made of vertical sticks sealed with mud and thatched roofs. As new products arrived and some got an iron skillet, a cotton dress, or in some cases, a brick house, everyone wanted one. The opportunities to acquire these desirable goods were in the new factories in towns. Hence, there was a massive migration from rural to urban, from space and privacy to crowded tenements and slums, from fresh air to a smoky and sooty environment. (We see this process occurring in developing countries today.) Into this turmoil came John and Charles Wesley.

Further trouble originated in France where followers of Martin Luther were known as Huguenots (i.e. Protestants). Animosity between the Huguenots and the Roman Catholics came to a head on St. Bartholomew's Day, Aug. 24, 1572. Prince Henry of Navarre, a leader of the Protestants, had married Margaret of Valois, the Catholic sister of King Charles the IX. This was an attempt at reconciliation. However, under the instigation of his mother, Catherine de Medici, King Charles the IX signed a death warrant for supposed traitors. Under this warrant about 10,000 Huguenots were massacred in Paris on August 24 and thousands more throughout France were put to death in the following six weeks. Finally Henry of Navarre converted to Roman Catholicism and was proclaimed King Henry the IV in 1594. Remembering his past associations, in 1598 he issued a declaration of religious freedom. In practice however the persecution of the Huguenots continued, and gradually became more severe. Things got much worse, not only for the Huguenots, but for all Frenchmen under King Louis the XIV who reigned almost 70 years from 1643 – 1715. Louis greatly impoverished his country by his many military adventures and all of Europe was relieved when he died in 1715. Wesley was then 12 years old. During much of this time, many Huguenots fled to England. They were a very industrious, inventive and enterprising people. Relief in France was temporary and conditions worsened, culminating in the French Revolution 1789- 1799 when Wesley was in his later years. Recall also that the American colonies broke away from England in the 1780's.

A strong case can be made that part of the reason England avoided the bloody revolution that shook France was due to the work of Wesley and his followers. In England, as well as in France, the lower classes were like a boiling pot ready to explode. Wesley was an organizational genius who organized his converts into groups of 12 for mutual support. He set up schools, produced materials to teach reading, basic figuring, home remedies, nutrition, money management, and many other ways they could help

CHRIST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

History Series: The History of John Wesley and the Methodist Church

Compiled by John H. Evans

themselves. Wesley's followers saw how they themselves could make their lives better and how their children could have better lives because of it.

Thomas Carlisle describes the 18th century in the brief caustic phrase, "soul extinct, stomach alive". There was no plan to organize a new church on the part of the Wesleys, but a great revival of religion swept across England among the common people and made the organization of a new church necessary. The Methodist church was the result. There was a Second Great Revival in this country in the decades just before the Civil War. Some think we may be having a third revival now.