

CHRIST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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

Compiled by John H. Evans

Sabbath Oct. 22, 2006

PART 4: JOHN WESLEY (1703-1791), THE EARLY YEARS

We begin this Sabbath with a summary of John Wesley's life. Since he had a long life and was very active and involved in many things, we can only note some of the more significant highlights and turning points. I encourage you to read one or more biographies that will present the many influences, controversies and the thought processes that led to his stance on the basic doctrines that define Methodism to this day.

Let me provide a few side notes before we begin. The village of Epworth is about 100 miles almost straight north of London. Oxford is about 40 miles mainly west and a bit north of London. A University, such as Oxford consists of colleges, each of which has its specialty of study. Wesley was associated with Lincoln College.

John was born June 17, 1703 in the Epworth Rectory. As anyone who has been around children can observe, each has their own distinct personality and character. From an early age it was remarked that John was noted for "his firmness of character and reflective turn of mind". His father noted that, "our Jack would do nothing unless he could give a reason for it".

In 1708 when John was five there was a terrible fire in the rectory and John was the last to be rescued. This was fixed in his mind throughout his life as an act of divine providence. The cause of the fire was never determined but there is a suspicion that it was set by some villagers whom John's father, Samuel, had angered by his uncompromising stance. Later when John was at Oxford in 1716-1717 there were a series of mysterious disturbances at the Epworth Rectory. There are detailed accounts of these in letters to John from his family. He and the family were convinced of the supernatural origin of these, though more likely it was disgruntled villagers trying to do what the fire of 1708 had failed to do; i.e., force Samuel out of the parish.

As mentioned previously Susanna began home schooling each child when they reached the age of five. In 1713 under the sponsorship of John Sheffield, Duke of Buckingham and Normandy, John was admitted to the Charterhouse School, London. Note that he was only ten years old and 100 miles from home! Under the system of the day the older boys bullied the younger ones, taking their rations (among other things) and leaving them to live on bread for the most part. By his father's admonition, John ran around the Charter House Common three times every day for exercise. It was a very rough several years, and not unlike what one would read in a Dickens novel.

John was admitted to Oxford in 1720 at age 16. He was a "diligent and sprightly" student though much pinched for money. He read an essay in 1724 by George Cheyne on "Health and Long Life" about which he wrote to his mother (1 Nov. 1724) and which fixed his lifelong principle of spare and temperate diet to the improving of his health. John graduated B.A. in 1724. He tells us in his journal that his father was pressing him to "take orders" i.e. go in to the priesthood, but he did not consider this for about a year. When he did decide to make this his vocation his mother warmly approved as she wrote, "though your father and I seldom think alike". She advised him to apply himself to "practical divinity". He was much influenced by writers of "religion of the heart" he

CHRIST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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

Compiled by John H. Evans

tells us; but he read them critically and with discrimination. For example, he read Thomas Kempis' *Imitatio Christi* and was quite angry with Kempis for being too strict. He later published a revised edition of this classic work. He thought Taylor's *Holy Living and Holy Dying* inculcated a false sense of humility. He found difficulty in the Anglican article on predestination and in the excluding clauses of the Athanasian Creed. John had extensive correspondence with his mother, Susanna, on these and other issues. From these letters it is apparent that Susanna had an abhorrence of rigid Calvinism.

On September 19, 1725 John Wesley was ordained as deacon by John Potter, bishop of Oxford. His first sermon was preached on Oct. 16, 1725 at South Leigh, Oxfordshire. (A shire is the English equivalent of our county.) John Morley, rector of Lincoln College, used his influence to have Wesley elected fellow of Lincoln on March 17, 1726. Wesley's father writes with pride, "my Jack is fellow of Lincoln". It was a tribute to John Wesley's high character, his facility in argument, and his classical taste. John Wesley graduated M.A. on Feb. 6, 1726, and on November 7, 1726 he was chosen as Greek lecturer and moderator of the classes. In August 1727 John became his father's curate, living and officiating mainly at Wroot and paying visits to Oxford where he was ordained as priest by Bishop Potter on Sept. 22, 1728. He was examined by Thomas Haywood, who much impressed John with a remark that "entering the priesthood was bidding defiance to all mankind".

REFERENCES

- Outler, Albert C., *John Wesley* (2nd ed.) 1970
Schmidt, Martin, *John Wesley: A theological Biography* (2 vols. English translation) 1962-1971
Simon, J.S., *Life of Wesley* (5 vols.) 1921-1934
Vullian, C.E., *John Wesley* (3rd ed.) 1954