

CHRIST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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

Compiled by John H. Evans

Sabbath November 5, 2006

PART 6: TRANSITION AND THE MORAVIANS

Before giving an account of Wesley's trip and mission to Georgia, it will be useful to present a brief description of his relation to some women, because that played an important part in the Georgia experience. (Don't deny that you're curious about this!)

Recall that, on returning to Oxford in 1729, John joined with his brother Charles along with William Morgan, Benjamin Ingham and Robert Kirkham in the Methodist club. Sometime in either 1727 or 1728 John had visited Kirkham's sister, Betty and from 1730 to 1734 he corresponded with her and a friend of hers named Mary Pendarvis. There is friendliness and warmth in the letters that are exchanged between them all; but if there was any serious pursuit of a relationship between John and either of the two friends it seems to have been lost in subsequent events. In Georgia there was a serious relationship between John Wesley and Sophia Christiana Hopkey (more on this in Part 10). In 1743 John proposed marriage to Grace Murray, but it did not work out. In 1757 he married a Mrs. Mary Vazeille, seven years his junior and the widow of Anthony Vazeille. (More on these in Part 20).

From 1730 to 1734 John's father (Samuel, Sr.) and John's brother, (Samuel, Jr.), were urging John to apply for his father's position at Epworth. John argued that he could do more good at Oxford. However, from November 1734 - February 1735 the letters became very strongly worded, his brother becoming almost angry with John. Sometime after February 1735 John did apply to fill the position at Epworth but Edmund Burton, bishop of London, blocked it. (This may have been because of the "vulgar" work of the Methodist club in Oxford.) On April 15, 1735 Samuel, Sr. died.

We do not know what altered his view of the field to apply his powers, but in the summer of 1735 John was probably in considerable uncertainty and turmoil. At this time, for some unknown reason, John and Charles were visiting John Burton, a trustee and promoter of the Georgia colony. Through Burton the two Wesley brothers were introduced to James Edward Oglethorpe, the founder of the Georgia colony and by September 18, 1735 they had agreed to undertake the Georgia mission. Strangely, most of the Georgia trustees were dissenters, whereas at this time John was very "high church", i.e. he believed in a very set and formal ritual.

The two Wesleys and their friends, Benjamin Ingham and Charles Demotte, boarded the ship *Simmonds* at Gravesend on October 14, but the ship did not sail until December 10, 1735. On board were 80 other Englishmen and 26 Moravians, including women and children. John immediately began to learn German so that he could converse with the Moravians. (He already knew French, Latin, Greek and Hebrew. In 1737 John learned Spanish in order to converse with some of the Jews in Georgia.) They landed at Savanna, Georgia on February 6, 1736.

John was much impressed by the Moravians. They were first organized in 1457 in Bohemia. (Recall that Luther made his challenge in 1517.) They are based on the views of John Hus and were much persecuted and almost wiped out in the thirty years war (1618-1648). A devout carpenter, Christian David and a deeply Christian nobleman, Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf, revived them. Wesley was present at the

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installation of a Moravian Bishop and was greatly impressed by its “simplicity as well as solemnity”.

During the two months voyage there was a violent storm that tossed the small ship about, but the Moravians showed no fear. Their faith allowed them to remain calm. (Does this remind you Paul’s voyage to Rome?) A new kind of Christian experience was opening up in John’s mind. He continued relations with the Moravians for some years, especially through a Peter Bohler. Later, John even went to Germany to visit Count Zinzendorf, who put him to work digging his garden!

The point of this apparent digression is that John Wesley was always seeking to understand other ways and reaching out to different groups. In the case of the Moravians, a new kind of Christian experience was opening to him.

In Methodist history much is made of the date of May 24, 1738, which is famously referred to as Wesley’s “heart-warming experience” and which will be considered further in the following papers. But to be properly understood, this pivotal moment must be viewed in the context of many personal events experienced by Wesley over several years before and after this historic date.