

CHRIST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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

Compiled by John H. Evans

Sabbath Dec. 10

PART 11: REASSESSMENT

Throughout most of the 1700's there was much economic, social and religious ferment. There were several notable evangelists and dissenting groups such as the Society of Friends (Quakers) and the Presbyterians. The Wesleys, at first and for several years, worked for reform within the established church. As we will see, the sheer dynamics of the evangelical movement forced them to break away and the Methodist church was born. It's very similar to the situation of Martin Luther.

Along with the Wesleys was George Whitefield (mentioned in Part 10.) It is appropriate to briefly outline Whitefield's work as he worked with the Wesleys for a time, broke with them over some doctrinal issues for a time, and then was reconciled. In fact, at Whitefield's request, John Wesley preached Whitefield's funeral sermon.

George Whitefield (1714-1770) was a poor boy working his way through college (I can identify with that!) when Charles Wesley met him and he soon joined their Methodist club. Whitefield should be given more recognition as one of the founders of Methodism. His life was an unbroken record of travels and labors as an evangelist. He preached Wesley's doctrines over all of England, Wales, Ireland and Scotland. He made seven trips to the American colonies and ranged from Georgia to New England. He founded an orphanage near Savannah and died on this side of the Atlantic. He is buried at Newbury Port, Massachusetts. His statue stands on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania as a founder of that institution. He had a profound effect on this country. (Keep in mind that the founding fathers would have known him and Jefferson and Franklin served in France and made trips to England and would have been very well aware of the Wesleys.)

To resume with Wesley, recall that he landed in England on February 1, 1738. He arrived in London on the evening of February 3. Wesley did considerable traveling around southern England, visiting and preaching. Inwardly he was doing much questioning following his failure in Georgia and his encounters with what we call evangelistic Christianity, mainly the Moravians. He tries to see benefits in the Georgia experience and so from his Journal entry of February 3 we read:

Hereby I trust He hath in some measure "humbled me and proved me and shown me what was in my heart" (Deut. 8:2). --- Hereby I am delivered from fear of the sea, which I had both dreaded and abhorred from my youth. Hereby God has given me to know many of His servants, particularly those of the church of Herrenhut (the Moravians). Hereby my passage is opened to the writings of holy men in the German, Spanish and Italian tongues.

Wesley also had several meetings with Oglethorpe and the Georgia trustees over several weeks. They, with some justification, were upset with him; whereas Wesley felt that he had been unfairly treated. Probably the fairest assessment is that Wesley had unrealistic expectations of a mission among the Indians and the trustees were focused on the colonists. Another source of the difficulties was Wesley's overly strict observance of church practices. (This was also a problem with his father, Samuel, too!). It should be noted that of the 44 people who sat on the grand jury in Georgia, twelve felt strongly enough to write directly to the trustees saying they felt Wesley had been "illused". Apparently Wesley polarized people.