

CHRIST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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

Compiled by John H. Evans

Sabbath December 17, 2006

PART 12: SPIRITUAL DISTRESS

It is early February in 1738 and the Wesleys are back in England. (Charles had returned earlier.) The Georgia experience and the contact with the Moravians had the effect of making Christianity a more personal question for both of the Wesleys. But for John in particular, his confidence in his determination and ability to live a life pleasing to God was seriously shaken. The way was prepared for the next stage in his understanding, experience and practice of the Christian faith. John Wesley was deeply and seriously spiritually distressed and searching for a faith that completely trusted God. Wesley had no parish of his own, but he traveled and preached around southern England for several months leading up to his decisive moment on May 24, 1738. We need not follow his travels in detail, but will try to highlight particular moments as recorded in his journal. Throughout this time a Moravian by the name of Peter Bohler played a crucial role.

Tuesday, February 7 - Wesley met Peter Bohler and two other Moravians who had just arrived from Germany. He helped them find lodging “and from this time I did not willingly lose any opportunity of conversing with them while I was in London.”

Friday and Saturday, February 17 & 18 - Wesley preached at Oxford. “All this time I conversed with Peter Bohler but I understood him not; and least of all when he said, ‘My brother, my brother, that philosophy of yours must be purged away.’”

Tuesday, February 28 – “I saw my mother once more.”

Thursday, March 2 - Wesley was preparing to go to Triverton to visit his brother, Samuel (an Anglican priest) when “a message arrived that my brother Charles was dying at Oxford caused me to set out for that place immediately.”

Saturday, March 4 – “I found my brother at Oxford recovering from his pleurisy; and with him Peter Bohler; by whom, in the hand of the great God, I was on Sunday the 5th clearly convinced of unbelief, of the want of faith whereby alone we are saved. Immediately it struck in my mind, leave off preaching. How can you preach to others who have not faith yourself? I asked Bohler whether he thought I should leave it off or not. He answered ‘By no means.’ I asked ‘But what can I preach?’ He said, ‘Preach faith till you have it; then, because you have it, you will preach faith.’”

Monday, March 5 – “I began preaching the new doctrine though my soul started back from the work. The first person to whom I offered salvation by faith alone was a prisoner under sentence of death. His name was Clifford. Peter Bohler many times had desired me to speak with him before. But I could not prevail on myself so to do; being as I had been many years, a zealous asserter of the impossibility of a death bed repentance.”

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Wesley travels to many places, mostly with a companion Mr. Kinchin. He frequently seeks to probe the hearts of people they meet on the roads and at inns. By **Thursday, March 23** Wesley is back in London. "I met Peter Bohler again, who now amazed me more and more by the account he gave of the fruits of the living faith - the holiness and happiness which he affirmed to attend it."

Monday, March 27 - Wesley and Mr. Kinchin visit a condemned man in prison. They read prayers and expound on "It is given unto men once to die" and prayed some more in several forms of prayer and then "in such words as were given to us in that hour." Here is what Wesley wrote about the experience:

He kneeled down in much heaviness and confusion, having "no rest in his bones by reason of his sins." After a space he rose up and eagerly said, "I am now ready to die. I know Christ has taken away my sins; and there is no more condemnation for me." The same composed cheerfulness he showed when he was carried to execution; and in the last moments, he was the same, enjoying a perfect peace, in confidence that he was "accepted in the beloved."

Sunday, April 2 was Easter in 1738 and Wesley preached three times, at Lincoln College in the morning and at the Castle (a prison) and at Carfax in the afternoon.

Thursday, April 18 - Wesley is back in London and asks Peter Bohler "whether I ought to refrain from teaching others." He said, "No; do not hide in the earth the talent God has given you." He had more conversations with Bohler and spoke more and more in terms of salvation by faith. "My brother was very angry with me and told me I did not know what mischief I had done by talking thus." Wesley goes to Oxford again.

Monday, May 1 - "The return of my brother's illness obliged me again to hasten to London. In the evening I found him better as to health than I expected but strongly averse to what he called the new faith."

Wednesday, May 3 - "My brother had a long and particular conversation with Peter Bohler. And it pleased God to open his eyes so that he also saw clearly what was the nature of that one true living faith, whereby alone, 'through grace are we saved.'"

There will be no writings available for December 24 and 31. We will resume on January 7.