

## CHRIST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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

Compiled by John H. Evans

Sabbath March 11, 2007

### PART 22: A BUSY LIFE

Before attempting a condensed summary of Methodist theology and doctrine, Wesley is described as “labouring to bring all the world to solid, inward, vital religion.” He found “more profit in sermons on either good tempers, or good works, than what are vulgarly called gospel sermons.” He was an educator and a social reformer as well as an evangelist. His brother, Charles, described John Wesley as “naturally and habitually a tutor.”

As mentioned previously, John Wesley was concerned with the whole person. To instruct and help his people Wesley published works on history, physics and medicine. He also published a dictionary, an abridged version of Milton and other classics, and even a novel. Wesley’s *Primitive Physic*, first published in 1747, reached its thirty-sixth edition in 1840. It gives the symptoms of diseases and prescriptions for their treatment. As he said latter in life, through the sale of cheap books, “I unawares became rich.” -- all of which he gave away. His goal was that he would leave behind him, “not more than ten pounds” after his debts were paid. In 1785 he wrote: “I am become I know not how, an honorable man.”

It is estimated that Wesley preached 40,000 sermons, of which only 141 are published for the instruction of his people. He traveled nearly 250,000 miles, crossing the Irish Sea 42 times. The descriptions of his travels, as written in his journal, provide a good travel guide to the British Isles.

Although Wesley was near-sighted, he read while riding, holding the book near to his eyes. He read widely, not just theology and religion. His journal entry of January 17, 1770 comments on the book *Theory of the Earth* by a Dr. Burnet -- volume three of a set that Wesley found he could agree with. On Saturday, February 3, 1770, “having some leisure,” Wesley read Rousseau on education and comments, “But how I was disappointed! Sure a more consummate coxcomb never saw the sun! How amazingly full of himself! Whenever he speaks, he pronounces as an oracle. But many of his oracles are palpably false.” Wesley regarded Swenborg, a prominent mystic of the time, “as a madman.” Boswell and Johnson, leading intellectuals of the day, were friends of Wesley’s. Sir Walter Scott heard Wesley preach in 1782 and says of his sermon, “vastly too colloquial” but with “many excellent stories.”

At age 71 Wesley thought preaching at five in the morning to be “one of the most healthy exercises in the world.” At 77 years of age he recommends fasting on Fridays to diminish nervous disorders. At age 80 he took a holiday trip to Holland.

Wesley favored the cause of American independence in its early stages but then came to oppose it. (This caused some difficulty with the later work of Methodists in the new United States.) Samuel Johnson published a tract opposing American colonies independence and included a paper of Wesley’s titled “A Calm Address to Our American Colonies.” Wesley also wrote a paper titled “A Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England.” As one of the first to come out in vigorous opposition to slavery Wesley worked with Wilberforce to abolish it. Wesley and Wilberforce also worked together for prison reform and Wesley denounced the Irish penal laws against Roman Catholics.

In spite of his rigor, Wesley did have some physical infirmities. As mentioned earlier, he was near-sighted. He also had hereditary gout, the same of which caused the death of his mother. He had some surgery in 1774 and developed diabetes in 1789.

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The last entry in his account book was on July 16, 1790, his last sermon was preached February 23, 1791 and his last letter (to Wilberforce) was written the following day. John Whitehead attended him from February 25 until Wesley's death on March 2, 1791. Vast crowds visited his body before he was buried on March 9 at the rear of the chapel. There are many monuments and memorials to John Wesley; perhaps the most notable is a tablet with the likenesses of John and Charles Wesley in Westminster Abbey.