

This article is also available in PowerPoint [here](http://www.slideshare.net/frontfel/john-and-charles-wesley).

The Wesley brothers were central figures in the 18th century Evangelical Revival in Great Britain. Theirs was one of the most effective partnerships between brothers in ministry.

The Industrial Revolution

The Wesleys grew up during the Industrial Revolution. Their lifetimes and ministries spanned a time of rapid change. Revolutions in smelting, spinning and distilling created whole industries. The 18th century saw some of the first experiments in electricity, photography and the steam engine.

A Desperate Situation

When the Wesleys began their itinerant preaching, there were no railroads and no restaurants. Only five, or six members of parliament even went to church. Infant mortality was extremely high. Life expectancy was in the early 40s.

Unhygienic Conditions

Most dwellings had no running water and few homes used any soap. The plague, smallpox, cholera and a host of other parasitic and water-borne diseases were common. Rodent and insect control was minimal. It was a world without streetlights, and no numbers on the doors of homes. Most bedding was full of lice.

A Harsh Justice System

Corporal punishment was public with the stocks, the whip and the cutting of ears and noses as part of the criminal justice system. No man was safe in the cities, on the highways, or even on the high seas. Forcible recruitment into the army and navy was common and those who fell foul of the law could either be hanged, even for very petty offences, or be transported across the seas to convict colonies. Execution of criminals was public.

Immoral Slums

Promiscuity and public drunkenness were common, as was cruelty to animals in bear baitings. Most of the newly urbanised poor, who had crammed into unsanitary slums in the cities, lived in warehouse-like buildings with no plumbing and no privacy.

Reaching the Poor

For the average working man, there was no variety, no vacations, no advancement, and very little wages. It was on this world of little hope and few options that the Wesley brothers' evangelistic ministry had the greatest impact, literally transforming society.

Early Childhood

John Wesley was born on the 17 June 1703, the 15th of 19 children (8 of whom died in infancy). His father, Samuel Wesley, was a stern Anglican minister. His mother, Susanna, was a pious and dedicated disciplinarian. Both of his grandparents were non-conformist Puritan clergy who had been expelled from the Church of England in 1662. Although his parents worked and worshipped within the established church, their Puritan and non-conformist heritage did affect the upbringing of their children.

Home Schooled

From the age of 5, the Wesley children were home schooled and were expected to become proficient in Latin and Greek and to have memorise major portions of the Scriptures. Susanna Wesley interviewed each one of her children on their own, once a week, in order to evaluate their spiritual progress.

A Brand Plucked From the Flames

A disastrous fire which destroyed their Rectory on 9 February 1709, made an indelible impression upon young John Wesley. At about 11pm the Rectory roof caught fire and the Wesleys managed to shepherd all of their children out of the house, except for 5-year-old John who was left stranded on the second floor. With the stairs

aflame and the roof about to collapse, a parishioner stood on another man's shoulders to lift young John Wesley out of the second floor window. Throughout his life, John thought of himself as *"a brand plucked from the fire"* Zechariah 3:2 and Amos 4:11.

Saved For a Purpose

Charles Wesley, as the youngest child, was the first to be rescued from the Epworth Rectory fire. His life had almost been snuffed out when he had been born prematurely: After being left for dead, he revived. Both brothers were made aware by their mother that they had been spared for a purpose.

Oxford

John Wesley's formal education began in 1714, when at age 10, he was sent to Charterhouse school in London. By 1720, at the age of 16, he had matriculated at Christ Church, Oxford, where, except for a two year curate ship, when he served in the pastorate under the direction of his father, John, remained for the next 16 years. He achieved his Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts, was ordained in 1727, and became a Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford, where he taught Greek and lectured on the New Testament.

The Holy Club

At Christ Church, Oxford University, Charles Wesley founded the Holy Club, which met for Bible study, prayer and self-examination. When his elder brother John returned from serving as a parish curate, he took over the leadership of the Holy Club. The group met daily from 6pm until 9pm for prayer, Psalms and reading of the Greek New Testament. They fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays until 3pm. In 1730 the group began the practice of visiting prisoners in jail where they preached, educated and cared for the sick.

Opposition

As spiritual life was at a very low ebb in Oxford at that time, the Holy Club was derided as *"enthusiasts"* - religious fanatics. This opposition exploded into scandal when one of the group, William Morgan, suffered a mental breakdown and died. It was at this time that the critics began to term the Wesleys and the members of their Holy Club as *"Methodists."*

Georgia Colony

In 1733, James Oglethorpe, a renowned soldier and Member of Parliament, led a commission which exposed the horrors of debtors' prisons. He motivated the founding of the colony of Georgia in North America as a haven for imprisoned debtors, needy families and persecuted Protestants from the continent. Oglethorpe proposed settling them in Georgia as a bulwark against Spanish expansion and to help reach Indians for Christ.

Missionaries to America

The Wesley brothers were recruited to be chaplains for the colony. John wrote that his chief motive for becoming a missionary was: *"the hope of saving my own soul."* He also hoped to *"learn the true sense of the Gospel of Christ, by preaching it to the heathen."* On board ship en-route to America, John and Charles and two other members of the Holy Club continued their Methodist practices, beginning private prayers at 4am. Their frequent services, readings and exhortations were resented by the other passengers.

Moravian Faith

The Wesleys were impressed with the 26 Moravians, by their *"great seriousness"* and by their exemplary behaviour and *"fearlessness."* During a ferocious storm which disrupted a service, Wesley reported that *"a terrible screaming began among the English, while the Germans calmly sung on."* Wesley could not help but notice the difference between *"those that feared God and those that did not."*

Challenged

Later, John was challenged by the Moravian pastor, Augustus Spangenberg, who questioned his salvation: *"Do you know Jesus Christ"*

John replied: *"I know He is the Saviour of the world."*

Spangenberg responded: *"True but do you know He has saved you?"*

Wesley answered: *"I*

hope He has died to save me."</i></p> <p style="text-align: justify;">Spangenberg continued to question John closely and Wesley confessed in his diary that he offered <i>"only vain words"</i> in reply.</p> <h3>Alienating Americans</h3> <p style="text-align: justify;">In Georgia, John laboured strenuously, but unsuccessfully. His lack of tact alienated the colonists. He insisted upon the total immersion of infants at Baptism and had the only doctor in the colony locked up for violating the Sabbath. When one of the doctor's patients suffered a miscarriage while the physician was detained, John came under even further criticism. At Frederica, a hundred miles inland, conflict arose between Charles and the governor. Charles fell into a nervous breakdown, fever and dysentery. He was shipped back to England in 1736.</p> <h3>Failed Romance</h3> <p style="text-align: justify;">John developed a romantic relationship with Sophy Hopekey, who although she was 15 years younger, returned his affections. There was much affection and discussion of marriage, but then John prepared 3 lots: <i>"Marry", "Think not of it this year" </i>and<i> "think of it no more."</i> When he drew the third, he abruptly dropped the relationship with Sophy. When Sophy married another suitor, John had her barred from communion, asserting that she had failed to attend some of the 5am prayers!</p> <h3>Legal Problems</h3> <p style="text-align: justify;">As a result, the Chief Magistrate had Wesley arrested for defamation of character. A Grand Jury returned ten indictments against John Wesley and as the case dragged on, John fled the colony and set sail for England, never to return.</p> <h3>A Crisis of Faith</h3> <p style="text-align: justify;">While sailing for England, Wesley wrote in his Journal: <i>"I went to America to convert the Indians! But Oh! Who shall convert me?" </i>In England a young Moravian pastor, Peter Bohler, challenged John as to whether he possessed saving faith. John responded that he only had a <i>"fair, summer religion",</i> not true faith. Wesley asked whether he should not abandon preaching altogether.</p> <h3>"Preach Faith!"</h3> <p style="text-align: justify;">Boehler responded: <i>"By no means. Preach faith until you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith."</i> John took Peter Bohler's advice to heart and began energetically to preach the Doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone. However, by May 1738, his enthusiastic preaching had alienated the establishment and he was banned from 9 churches.</p> <h3>Listening to Luther</h3> <p style="text-align: justify;">On 24 May 1738, Wesley went <i>"very unwillingly"</i> to a Moravian meeting in Aldersgate. There, as he heard Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans read, <i>"I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for Salvation, and assurance was given me that He had taken away my sin, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."</i></p> <h3>Peace with God</h3> <p style="text-align: justify;">Three days earlier, on Pentecost Sunday, 21 May 1738, Charles Wesley had been reading Luther's Commentary on Galatians. <i>"I now found myself at peace with God, and rejoiced in hope of loving Christ♦ I saw that by Faith I stood; by the continual support of Faith."</i> John Wesley wrote that he now had the faith of a son, rather than that of only a servant. He jubilantly announced to his brother Charles: <i>"I believe!" </i>John later wrote that before his conversion experience he was <i>"not a Christian".</i> He had been a minister and a missionary before he had even been saved.</p> <h3>Whitefield Shows the Way</h3> <p style="text-align: justify;">Even before the Wesleys found peace with God, the young George Whitefield, the last person to become a member of the Holy Club, had been flooded with the joy of Salvation. In March 1735, after months of desperately striving, he cast himself on the mercy of God, trusted Christ and received the forgiveness he had so earnestly sought. In 1736, as he was ordained to the ministry of the Church of England, he preached his first sermon and soon crowds overflowed the buildings where he proclaimed

Salvation through Christ alone. Then Whitefield sailed to America to continue the work which had been begun by the Wesleys in Georgia. Even on board ship, he brought many to saving faith. Whitefield's preaching in Georgia was crowned with many turning to Christ. His ministry is counted as the beginning of the Great Awakening in America and the Evangelical Revival in England.

The Bristol Revival

As Whitefield returned to England, he found himself barred from London pulpits and began preaching in the open to coal miners near Bristol. George Whitefield begged the Wesleys to come to Bristol and continue and organise the campaign that he had begun. After casting lots, John decided it was God's will to accept this invitation. After arriving in Bristol, 31 March 1739, Wesley witnessed Whitefield's preaching. He wrote in his Journal: *"I could scarce reconcile myself to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he set me an example on Sunday; having been all my life, until very lately, so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church."*

Open Air Preaching

The next day Wesley found himself preaching to 3,000 people in the open air. This experience at Bristol transformed John Wesley into an Evangelist who would now focus on proclaiming Salvation and Holiness to the lower classes and to the un-churched. Now 36 years old, John Wesley had found his life's calling. For the next 50 years he energetically preached throughout the length and breadth of the British Isles. Travelling on horseback, Wesley covered over 250,000 miles (400,000km), preaching an average of three times a day, beginning at 5am each morning. It is calculated that he preached over 40,000 sermons in his life. With pulpits increasingly closed to the unfashionable message of the Wesleys, they turned to the open air, preaching in fields, market places, in parks and at mines. Not since Professor John Wycliffe had mobilised the Lollards, the field workers of the Reformation, had England seen such extensive and effective open air evangelism.

"The World is my Parish!"

From the beginning, John Wesley was seen as a controversial figure and widespread opposition was mobilized against him, frequently with mob violence. When Bishop Joseph Butler of Bristol confronted John and told him that he had *"no business here"* and that he was *"not commissioned to preach in this Diocese"*, John famously replied: *"The world is my parish!"* John Wesley maintained that he had been ordained as a priest of the Church of England, and as a Fellow of Lincoln College he was *"not limited to any particular"* diocese, but had a *"commission to preach the Word of God to any part of the Church of England."*

Organising the Methodist Societies

From the time of the Bristol Revival, the two great gifts of John Wesley became evident: Preaching and Organising. John founded religious societies, similar to the Holy Club, to disciple the converts who responded to his public preaching. As early as 1739, Wesley required subscriptions for membership in the newly created societies. This simultaneously provided funding for the ministry, particularly for publications, and provided a mechanism for discipline of unworthy members who could have their subscriptions suspended or denied. Membership in the societies was open to all who were *"sincere seekers after Salvation."*

Evangelising England

From 1740, Wesley commissioned lay preachers, and by 1744, there were 77 lay preachers in the field. Also in 1744, Wesley convened the first conference, which consisted of six Anglican ministers and four lay preachers. This conference would become the movement's ruling body. By 1746, Wesley had organised geographic circuits for itinerant preachers, organising Societies in Circuits which in turn were organised in Districts with quarterly meetings, annual conferences, classes, bands

and select societies. In addition to classes of a dozen or so society members meeting weekly for spiritual fellowship and guidance, there was also a category of penitents for backsliders.

Women in Ministry

From the beginning the Methodist movement offered opportunities for women to minister. Wesley appointed women as lay preachers.

A New Denomination

John Wesley insisted that the societies remain within the Church of England and he attempted to maintain an inter-denominational identity. Although it had never been his intention to develop a separate denomination, when he began to ordain ministers and missionaries, this inevitably led to separation from the Church of England.

Violent Opposition

The establishment regarded the Wesleys as traitors to their class. Yet Methodist meetings were frequently disrupted by mobs of the poorer classes, the very ones whom the Wesleys were trying their best to help. Methodist buildings were ransacked and their lay preachers harassed, beaten and frequently dragged before the local Magistrate. Methodist-baiters frequently drove oxen into the congregations assembled for field preaching. In Epworth, as John was barred from speaking in the church, he addressed the large crowd standing on his father's tombstone.

Fearless

John Wesley proved fearless in confronting hostile mobs. He even converted some of the most vocal ringleaders. Hecklers were shocked when they found Wesley to be educated, articulate and a gentleman.

Relentless

Sometimes John covered 60 miles a day on horseback. He would adhere to his schedule regardless of weather conditions. In rain, sleet, or snow John relentlessly travelled and preached across the country, from coast to coast. He first ministered in Wales, 1741, then Ireland in 1747 and Scotland in 1751. In all, he conducted 42 separate ministry tours of Ireland and 22 to Scotland.

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral

John Wesley preached the Law of God, cleanliness, honesty, thrift, good family relations and above all saving faith in Christ. Although he was well-read, John Wesley saw himself as pre-eminently a man of one book - The Bible. John Wesley was far too energetic an evangelist to become anything like a Systematic Theologian, however he developed his theology by using the Wesleyan quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience. Scripture was foundational. The Doctrine had to be in keeping with "orthodox Christian tradition", that had to be logical and the truth had to be applied in the personal experience of the Christian.

Sin and Salvation

Wesley affirmed God's Sovereignty and human free agency. He taught that God's loving and merciful interaction with free and responsible human beings does not detract from His glory. He believed that all human nature had been corrupted by original sin, and all human beings are personally guilty because of our violation of God's Law.

Prevenient Grace

Wesley also taught prevenient grace that was free and not meritorious at all, which provided human beings with the power to respond to, or resist, the work of God. Wesley's description of justifying faith as preconditioned by Repentance and the fruits, or works of Repentance, differed from what the Protestant Reformers taught. Whereas Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin taught that justifying faith includes both Repentance from sin and trust in Christ, Wesley had a narrower view of justifying faith separating Repentance from it.

Christian Perfection

Wesley also argued for the possibility of "entire Sanctification", that is "Christian perfection", where we can be "perfect as our Father in Heaven is perfect." He taught that this Christian perfection frees people from "voluntary transgressions", but not necessarily from "sinful

inclinations." He also maintained that individuals could have a "second blessing", akin to a second conversion, experiencing "instantaneous sanctification."

Free Grace

In 1740, John Wesley preached a sermon on "Free Grace" in which he condemned the doctrine of predestination. John claimed that the doctrine of predestination undermines morality and dishonours God by presenting "God as worse than the devil, as both, more false, more cruel and more unjust."

The Arminian Controversy

George Whitefield urged John never to repeat or publish this sermon. When Wesley published it, it led to the controversy between Whitefield and Wesley. Wesley inclined strongly towards Arminianism and in 1778 began the publication of the "The Arminian Magazine." He taught that God wills all people to be saved and that he believed in "conditional predestination", which depended upon human response. He believed that God's grace could be resisted and that a true Believer could fall from grace, even finally "so as to perish forever."

Holiness and Revivalism

John Wesley was a pioneer of modern Revivalism and a spiritual father of the Holiness movement, Charismatic renewal and Pentecostalism. His emphasis on Free Grace, Entire Sanctification and Perfection led to the development of denominations such as the Church of the Nazarene.

Social Justice

Methodists became leaders in many social justice issues of the day, particularly Prison Reform, Abolition and Temperance. Wesley had a profound concern for people's physical, as well as spiritual welfare. Holiness had to be lived out and seen in works of mercy. He taught that charities imitate Christ's earthly ministry of healing and helping the needy. Almost all that he received from his publications, at least 20,000 Pounds, were invested in charities. He made provision for the care of the sick and pioneered the use of electric shock for the treatment for illness. He superintended schools and orphanages. He ensured that collections for the poor were regularly taken up in Methodist services. The 'Stranger's Friend' societies provided relief for the poor.

Transformation

The effects of Wesley's preaching were dramatic. Swearing stopped in factories. Drunkards became sober. Thieves performed restitution. Neighbours gave one another mutual help through the societies. Wesley's preaching had the greatest impact amongst the poorest classes.

Charles Wesley

Charles Wesley, (1707-1788), John's younger brother, gave music, heart and soul to the Methodist movement. Although overshadowed by his elder brother, Charles directly influenced John throughout his ministry. It was Charles who began what became the Holy Club at Oxford. Charles went with John to Georgia in the Americas and was with him from the beginning of the work of open air preaching in Bristol.

The Hymn Writer

As energetic as John was in keeping his Journals, Charles composed over 6,500 Hymns, many of which are still sung today, such as "Jesu, Lover of My Soul, Love Divine, All Loves Excelling, Hark the Herald Angels Sing" and "Christ the Lord Has Risen Today". There was scarcely a day in the 50 years following his conversion in which he did not set down some lines in verse. Along with Isaac Watts, he was a major pioneer in Hymn writing.

Dedicated Service

Charles exercised a distinctive ministry as an Evangelist, a counsellor and a shepherd of souls. For almost 20 years Charles covered the country in his travels and then settled in Bristol, later in London, to support and supplement the dynamic ministry that John so relentlessly advanced.

Defeating the Revolution

The French historian, Elie Halevy (1870-1937), in his "A History of the English

People in the 19th Century (published in 1912), maintained that the Evangelical Revival in 18th century England enabled the British Isles to avoid the political Revolutions that tore France and much of the European continent apart between 1789 and 1848. *"Methodism was the antidote to Jacobinism"* Wesley and his fellow labourers provided hope and encouraged discipline amongst Britain's newly urbanised and industrialised working class. Holiness defeated Humanism.

Church Buildings

John Wesley instructed that churches should be built in the octagonal form (with eight sides), and that the interior should have a rail in the middle *"to divide the men from the women"*. There were also to be no backs for the seats.

The American Question

John Wesley so disapproved of the American colonists' rebellion against the Crown that he wrote a stinging rebuke urging them to submit, and when the Americans broke from Great Britain he ordered superintendent Francis Asbury (1745-1816) to return to England.

Francis Asbury

This Asbury refused to do. Asbury seized the reins of Methodism in the United States and shaped what would become the Methodist Episcopal Church. Although he clashed with Wesley, Asbury was so like him in energy and organisational ability that he has been called the Wesley of America. Francis Asbury rode over 5,000 miles each year on horseback, often in bad health, linking up the congregations from Georgia to Maine.

George Bell

George Bell was a convert to Methodism who turned into an opponent. Bell made extravagant claims for himself and his followers that they had attained *"absolute perfection"*. Wesley had to exclude Bell and his extreme followers. George Bell went on to predict the end of the world on 28 February 1763. Bell did severe damage to the Methodist cause in London.

Social Reformer

John Wesley has been recognised as one of the foremost Social Reformers of the 18th century. On his death the Gentleman's Magazine commended the *"infinite good to the lower classes of the people"* By the humane endeavours of him and his brother Charles, a sense of decency and morals and religion was introduced to the lowest classes of mankind; the ignorant were instructed, the wretched relieved and the abandoned reclaimed.

Rule for Christian Living

John Wesley's rule for Christian living was summarised as: *"Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can!"*

Legacy

Through faith, endurance and perseverance, John Wesley transformed 18th century British society and left a legacy far greater than the Methodist church. By 1790, a year before his death, the number of members stood at almost 60,000. Today, Methodists number in the tens of millions.

God With Us

In Westminster Abbey, close to the memorial to Bible translator William Tyndale, is a sculptured medallion showing the profiles of the two Wesley brothers. Below it are inscribed John's last words: *"The best of all is God with us"* and another of his well-known sayings: *"I look upon all the world as my parish."* A quote from Charles Wesley is also on the memorial: *"God buries His workmen, but carries on His work."*

John Wesley's summary of his life's work was: *"I offered them Christ!"*

Dr. Peter Hammond

The Reformation Society

P.O. Box 74 Newlands 7725

Cape Town South Africa

Tel: 021-689-4480

Fax: 021-685-5884

Email: <mailto:mission@frontline.org>

za="">mission@frontline.org.zamission@frontline.org.za</p> <p style="text-align: justify;">Website: www.ReformationSA.org</p> <p style="text-align: justify;"></p> <p>This character study is one of 32 in Peter Hammond's book<i> Victorious Christians ♦ Who Changed the World. </i>It is our prayer that it<i> </i>will inspire a new generation of dedicated Christians with the incredible examples of excellence provided by many of the most courageous and effective Christians in history.</p> <p> </p> <p>To order <i>Victorious Christians ♦ Who Changed the World </i>E-Book click <i>here</i>.</p> <p>Hard copies of <i>Victorious Christians ♦ Who Changed the World </i>are available from: </p> <p></p> <p>Christian Liberty Books</p> <p>Tel/Fax: 021-689-7478</p> <p>Email: admin@christianlibertybooks.co.za</p> <p style="margin: 0cm 0cm 0.0001pt;">Website: www.christianlibertybooks.co.za</p>