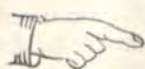


ADVANCED STUDIES ■ USE  
WITH APPROVED STUDY BOOK

## JOHN WESLEY, by Francis J. McConnell



LEADER'S SUGGESTIONS / FRANK BAKER

In this series a different book is featured each month, thus giving groups a wider selection of materials. Groups are encouraged to proceed in their study at their own pace, concentrating on the greatest challenge.

*John Wesley*, by Francis J. McConnell, is published by Abingdon Press (cloth, \$4.50; paper, \$1.75) and is available from Cokesbury.

The June study is based on *Teaching Our Faith in God*, by L. Harold DeWolf (Abingdon Press; \$3.75), which may be ordered from Cokesbury.

### ► Group Discussion

#### I. THE LIVING WESLEY (PARTS I AND II)

John Wesley lived two hundred years ago, and most of his life was spent in another land and in a greatly different cultural setting from ours. Yet most of what he said and did is relevant here and now.

Rightly we regard Wesley as the founder of Methodism. But it is a mistake to rank him with those dead heroes whose statues gather dust in places of pilgrimage. He is still a living force in our midst, one whose writings, pioneer evangelism, and social service can help us meet the challenge presented by

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the problems and opportunities of our own generation.

This timeless challenge of John Wesley is one of the main concerns of McConnell's biography, first published in 1939 and now reprinted.

The book is divided into ten parts, and we will study two each session.

#### A. Ancestry

We cannot understand Wesley's remarkable life without realizing how God was at work in his ancestry as well as in his spiritual pilgrimage.

Both Wesley's grandfathers and one of his paternal great-grandfathers were Puritan ministers who were forced to give up their connection with the church in 1662 rather than conform to what they felt was a degenerating national church. However, both his parents in their youth had transferred their allegiance back to the Church of England because of their convictions.

John Wesley was brought up to love the church, yet the nonconforming spirit was also bred in him. He would always obey God rather than man, and he upheld the right of the individual conscience to discover the will of God. After his rescue from the burning rectory, his mother instilled in him the certainty that he was saved for a special purpose. What was it?

#### B. Spiritual pilgrim

The answer came in part in 1725, when at the age of twenty-two he was ordained a deacon of the Church of England. During this year his childhood habit of obedience was transformed into an eager pursuit of inner holiness.

But the warm certainty that he was a child of God was missing. He hoped he was, but he did not know. He had the faith of a *servant*, not that of a *son*. He was working hard to *achieve* salvation instead of humbly *accepting* it in simple faith as the gift of God in Christ.

A new spiritual climax came on May 24, 1738. Along with the "warmed heart" came assurance of divine favor.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Can we see providence at work in our own lives, even in sickness, sorrow, disappointment, or tragedy?

2. Does the scientific background of our thinking really leave any legitimate place for a God who can get in touch with men and influence their lives?

3. What about our personal religion—are we *servants* or *sons* of God?

4. When Wesley summarized his life from the standpoint of Aldersgate, he claimed that being "under the law" rather than "under grace" was "the state most who

are called Christians are content to live and die in." Is this true of us?

## II. EVANGELIST-EXECUTIVE (PARTS III AND IV)

The date *April 4, 1739*, refers to an event that has been hailed as a landmark in English religious history, although it should be April 2, not April 4. On that day Wesley's *Journal* records: "At four in the afternoon I submitted to be more vile, and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation."

This demonstrated that once Wesley was convinced of a divine call nothing could hold him back, neither ridicule, ecclesiastical censure, personal danger, nor temperamental distaste for the task. His prejudices cried out that it was a crime to save a soul outside church walls, but he did it.

### A. A social religion

Wesley was convinced that the life of a religious recluse was wrong for him and for others. He believed "Christianity is essentially a social religion; and . . . to turn it into a solitary one is to destroy it."<sup>1</sup>

The *society* was the distinctive feature of Wesley's brand of Methodism. Late in life he wrote a history of Methodism in which he described three beginnings. He said that the first rise of Methodism was the formation of the little society called the Holy Club at Oxford in 1729, the second the organization of some of his Savannah parishioners into a society in 1736, and the third his collaboration with Peter Böhler in forming the Fetter Lane Society in London shortly before his Aldersgate experience.

The purpose of the society was to join men and women together in small or large groups for Christian fellowship.

### B. Organizer

Organization was indeed a "peculiar talent" with Wesley. He dedicated himself to developing a closely knit fellowship, both within and between the Methodist societies, by means of lay leaders and lay itinerant preachers.

Wesley's spiritually inspired executive ability channeled his evangelism into the growth of an influential Christian community.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do we not preach in the open air today? Is it because we think that the usefulness of this method is over?

2. Why do we not speak more with our friends about our personal religious faith? Is it because we are really afraid that it may do more harm than good? Or is it because, like Wesley, we shrink from it?

3. Was Wesley right in thinking that the solitary religious life was a danger to Christianity?

4. Would he see today's danger as too much *togetherness* without enough *inwardness*?

## III. DEFENDER OF THE FAITH (PARTS V AND VI)

Through his transformed faith Wesley entered into an experience of God that dwarfed all he had previously known. As a way of offering this faith to others, he organized a network of societies which conserved and spread the new life of the spirit. The orthodox felt that his teaching placed undue emphasis upon personal experience, and his unconventional methods aroused the enmity of Church of England leaders.

In Part V McConnell shows how Wesley defended his own interpretation of saving faith against enemy attack, and in Part VI how church opposition drove Methodism to become a new denomination.

### A. Faith and works

Wesley strongly believed in the sovereignty of God, and thus he came "within a hair's breadth" of Calvinism.<sup>2</sup> But he set his face resolutely against two perversions of extreme Calvinism—antinomianism and double predestination.

He described antinomianism as "the doctrine which makes void the law through faith," by claiming "that Christ abolished the moral law" and "that Christians therefore are not obliged to ob-

serve it."<sup>3</sup> Faith was everything; good works were nothing.

Against this Wesley urged the Christian's need for both faith and good works.

One of his chief fears about the rigid doctrine of predestination was that it cut away the need for Christian conduct. If God had already decided that you were to be saved or damned your behavior didn't matter.

In his stand against the "horrible decree" of reprobation, he emphasized that it was God's purpose, and a genuine possibility, that all men should be saved.

### B. A new church

At Oxford and in Georgia Wesley could be called a High-churchman. He held almost superstitious views about the mechanical efficacy of baptism and the Lord's Supper, about the unique authority of ordained ministers to perform priestly acts, and about the supreme spiritual authority of the Church of England. The influence of these views remained to the end of his life, and he continued to proclaim himself a loyal member and priest of that church.

Step by step Wesley undertook practices that altered Methodism from an evangelistic society within the Church of England to a new Methodist Church—services, buildings, lay leaders, and preachers were under his oversight alone, not that of church and bishops.

The culminating act was that of ordaining some of his preachers, in the first instance for service in America. We should note that even here he sought to maintain high ecclesiastical standards. This ordination seemed to him a far lesser evil than neglect of the sacraments or their administration by laymen.

All this was because Wesley believed that the call of God and the spiritual needs of men were of far greater importance than any "establishment," however venerable.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Would you agree with Wesley on the importance of getting our thinking straightened out? Does thought really influence action? Does this mean that all

<sup>1</sup> *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. V, p. 296. Out of print.

<sup>2</sup> *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. VIII, p. 284.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.

Christians should be theologians?

2. What essential purposes does Methodism stand for?

3. Do these make us any different from other churches? Is there any further need for Methodism as a separate denomination?

#### IV. PERFECTIONIST (PARTS VII AND VIII)

Complacency is one of the chief enemies of the Christian. It is so natural to contemplate a beautiful church, an overflowing congregation, a deep religious experience, our own conversion, perhaps, and to exclaim "I thank thee, God!" in smug, self-satisfied tones.

This ever-present danger was largely the reason for Wesley's insistence on the need for spiritual growth. Constantly in his letters and sermons comes the call, "Press on to perfection." His view of the main purpose of Methodism was "to spread Scriptural holiness through the land."<sup>4</sup> This reminds us that Christian perfection was a biblical challenge as well as a pressing social and spiritual need.

##### A. *Spiritual pitfalls*

If complacency brings religious decay, an overconfident pursuit of perfection can lead to pharisaism. Surely this was one reason why Wesley constantly urged others to seek perfection and therefore was presumably engaged in the same quest himself, yet never joined the ranks of those who claimed to have reached this goal.

Wesley frequently defined what he meant by Christian perfection by first explaining what he did *not* mean. Perfection was not "absolute" or "sinless," nor did it carry any guarantee of permanence. It was a matter of your motives of the moment, best expressed by the phrase *perfect love*, both to God and to man.

Wesley believed that this teaching on perfection was the chief spiritual deposit entrusted to the Methodists. While he urged it as a spiritual ideal, he also embodied it in the searching General Rules for Methodist conduct and in the wide-ranging philanthropic activities of the Methodist societies.

##### B. *Wesley and women*

In Part VIII McConnell deals with John Wesley's relationships with women.

Wesley's overidealistic view of women, based upon qualities of his mother, gave him a bad start for the realities of courtship and marriage, though it did not hinder his great usefulness as a father confessor. An even greater hindrance was his prior marriage to his spiritual vocation. Any woman, even the ideal woman whom he never found, would have had to take a low second place in his life.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Is it true that modern Methodists have deserted Wesley's position on Christian perfection? Why?

2. Are we afraid, as he was, of imperfect claimants to perfection? Or is what he taught irrelevant in our society?

3. Would it be possible to practice perfection in our conduct and our social witness without emphasizing it as part of our theology?

4. Another question that relates to Part VIII is this: In view of Wesley's own experience, do you think it is possible for a person to love both God's work and his/her own wife/husband *perfectly*?

#### V. PHILANTHROPIST (PARTS IX AND X)

In Part IX McConnell stresses the social significance of Wesley's evangelical concern with the masses rather than the aristocracy. Wesley constantly met people in such desperate material need that they could hardly be expected to pay serious attention to any preacher who neglected that need.

Wesley's attempts to improve social conditions add up to an impressive total. He was a pioneer in popular education; he founded orphanages and homes for widows; and he began a lending fund to put people on their feet financially.

##### A. *Reformer*

Wesley urged high standards of citizenship upon his followers. His attack on smuggling almost stamped it out in some areas. He pleaded for the conscientious exercise of the vote uninfluenced by pressure or bribery. He fought

against gin-drinking and drunkenness. He was a vigorous opponent of slavery.

Early Methodism was not a democracy, but a paternal autocracy with a widespread *delegation* of authority from Wesley.

##### B. *To the glory of God*

The more one studies Wesley's use of power, however, the more convinced one becomes that he always used it to the glory of God. He never used it to the glory of John Wesley, not even in the few cases where we believe his judgment to have been wrong.

Although he defended the authority of king and bishop, he would never give them blind obedience. He always defended the right of conscientious objection.

##### C. *A spiritual revolution*

Part X forms both a miscellany and a summary of Wesley's influence. Here McConnell's greatest service is perhaps to stress that in an age of revolutions Wesley brought about a spiritual revolution. Throughout his life he continued to proclaim the truth uttered with his dying breath, "The best of all is, God is with us" (p. 316).

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What do you think were the most important aspects of Wesley's life and work for his own day?

2. What are of most value as examples or as inspiration for us?

3. Is there some personal resolve to which you have been led through this study?

#### ► *Additional Resources* \*

*Our Methodist Heritage*, by Mack Stokes; Graded Press, 1963; \$1.

*The Beginnings of American Methodism*, by John O. Gross; Abingdon Press; \$2.50.

*A Short History of Methodism*, by Umphrey Lee and William Warren Sweet; Abingdon Press; \$2.

*Church Membership in the Methodist Tradition*, by Frederick A. Norwood; Abingdon Press; \$2.75.

*The Story of Methodism*, by Luccock, Hutchinson, and Goodloe; Abingdon Press; \$5. ●

\* May be ordered from Cokesbury.

<sup>4</sup> *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. VIII, p. 299.