
John Wesley

1703 - 1791

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One of the towering Protestant figures following Martin Luther was John Wesley, credited with founding the Methodist Church. He was educated at Oxford and became a minister in the Anglican Church. By the time of his death there were 71,668 followers in Great Britain.

Wesley's ministry began before experiencing a direct connection with God. But on May 24, 1738 he wrote in his journal about a life-changing connection:

"In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." This was life-changing and created within him the conviction that he had experienced God's love and would be saved.

Persecution of his views began the next year, 1739, and never abated the remainder of his life.

Wesley did not accept the predestination teachings of John Calvin, and was criticized and barred from preaching in his mother Anglican Church. He launched a new direction with people meeting in private homes, praying, reading scripture, discussing spiritual concerns, and collecting money for the needy. As fellow-believers grew in numbers they were dismissively labeled "Methodists"—but the term was accepted by them and in time became the accepted name of a new Christian denomination. During his lifetime, Wesley thought Methodists could in good faith remain members of the Anglican Church. Following his death the two separated.

Wesley believed in pursuing and attempting Christian perfection in which men and women could live in this world in a state where God's love "reigned supreme in their hearts" which would reflect godly holiness. Not as an imaginary concept, but as a living reality.

Like Luther before him, Wesley recognized the corruption of the professional clergy, and the failure to preach repentance to sinners. He thought himself called to revive dying Christianity with a new voice crying repentance and promising God's forgiveness to the earnest seeker. He was loyal to both the Bible and prior orthodox Christian traditions. He believed every soul could be saved by faith in Christ and rejected the idea some were elected by God to salvation while others were doomed to damnation, as Calvin had taught. Salvation by grace could be experienced and known, as he explained: "an inward impression on the soul of believers, whereby the Spirit of God directly testifies to their spirit that they are the children of God." This made salvation personal to each individual. He explained his fear: "My fear is not that our great movement, known as the Methodists, will eventually cease to exist or one day die from the earth. My fear is that our people will become content to live without the fire, the power, the excitement, the supernatural element that makes us great."

He acknowledged the decline of the Gifts of the Spirit recorded in the New Testament and noted they disappeared early in Christian history, once Constantine issued the Edict of Milan decriminalizing Christianity (313 a.d.). This led in turn to Christianity becoming the state religion of Rome in 380 a.d. In Wesley's sermon *The More Excellent Way* he explained, "The cause of this [decline of spiritual gifts following Constantine] was not, (as has been vulgarly supposed,) 'because there was no more occasion for them,' because all the world was become Christians. This is a miserable mistake; not a twentieth part of it was then nominally Christian. The real cause was, 'the love of many,' almost of all Christians, so called, was 'waxed cold.' The Christians had no more of the Spirit of Christ than the other Heathens. The Son of Man, when he came to examine his Church, could hardly 'find faith upon earth.' This was the real cause why the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Ghost were no longer to be found in the Christian Church; because the Christians were turned Heathens again, and had only a dead form left."

Wesley's teachings have influenced Christian thinking far beyond the bounds of the Methodist Church. He is a widely respected and studied

Christian thinker. He is credited with posing the question, "Though we cannot think alike may we not love alike?"

His dying words were "The best of all is, God is with us" which he repeated twice.