

The Conversion of the Wesleys

Aldersgate, the field preaching, the hymns, the class meetings — how two Anglican brothers in a London society sparked the Methodist revival that reshaped English and American Christianity • 1703–1791

By Shane Gunn • Following Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points*, ch. 9

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Where this fits: Lesson 21 of the Pleasant Springs *Church History* series — Noll’s ninth turning point. The Wesleys’ conversions in May 1738 happen four years after the Northampton revival of **Jonathan Edwards (Lesson 20)** and in the middle of **Whitefield’s colonial tours**. They share a spiritual atmosphere, and Whitefield himself will connect them. The Methodist movement the Wesleys produce will become one of the two great trunks of modern evangelical Christianity (Calvinist-Reformed being the other). See the full **Series Timeline**.

WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

On the evening of **24 May 1738**, a 34-year-old ordained Church of England priest who had been trying for twelve years to be a real Christian walked reluctantly into a small religious society meeting at a private house on Aldersgate Street, London. Someone was reading aloud from Martin Luther’s Preface to Romans. At about 8:45 p.m. — he noted the time exactly — John Wesley felt his heart, in his famous phrase, “strangely warmed.” He came out of that meeting with something he had never had: a settled personal assurance that Jesus Christ had saved him, that his own anxious religious striving was over. Three days earlier his younger

brother **Charles** had had a parallel experience while sick in bed. A revival movement was about to be born.

Within a year, John Wesley was preaching in open fields to crowds of 20,000 coal miners in Bristol. Within three years, he and Charles had organized their converts into disciplined “societies,” subdivided into “classes” of a dozen people each who met weekly for mutual accountability. Within a decade, the movement had lay preachers riding circuits across England. Within two generations, Methodism would become the largest Protestant denomination in America.

In the 53 years between his conversion and his death, John Wesley rode about **250,000 miles on horseback** and preached approximately **40,000 sermons**. Charles wrote about **6,500 hymns**, dozens of which — “And Can It Be,” “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing,” “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today,” “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” — are still sung in Christian congregations today. Their mother **Susanna Wesley**, bearing nineteen children in a Lincolnshire rectory, had shaped both of them. Methodism was born in 1738 on Aldersgate Street and in a sickbed nearby — but its roots run back to the Epworth rectory where those brothers were raised.

Greek NT (Rom 8:15–16): ἀλλ' ἐλάβετε πνεῦμα υιοθεσίας ἐν ᾧ κράζομεν· Ἀββα ὁ πατήρ. αὐτοῦ τὸ πνεῦμα συμμαρτυρεῖ τῷ πνεύματι ἡμῶν ὅτι ἐσμεῖν τέκνα θεοῦ.

Romans 8:15–16 (ESV): “You have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”

The doctrine of the *witness of the Spirit* — that assurance of salvation is a normal Christian experience given by the Holy Spirit to the believer’s heart — became a signature Wesleyan emphasis. Paul’s two verses here are the root.

PART 1 — THE EPWORTH RECTORY

Samuel Wesley — Rector of Epworth

RECTOR OF EPWORTH, LINCOLNSHIRE, 1697–1735 • HIGH-CHURCH TORY ANGLICAN • QUARRELSOME WITH HIS PARISHIONERS

Anglican clergy

Epworth

Samuel Wesley (1662–1735) was an able but difficult Anglican clergyman. His rural Lincolnshire parishioners were largely nonconformist Dissenters or tepid Anglicans, and Samuel's sharp high-church Tory politics and pointed sermons made him the target of steady local hostility. Twice his parishioners set fire to his rectory. The second fire, on the night of 9 February 1709, nearly killed his five-year-old son John, who was pulled from the burning house by a parishioner through an upstairs window just before the roof fell. John would remember for the rest of his life that he was “**a brand plucked from the burning**” (Zech 3:2). His mother stitched that phrase onto his childhood, and he took it to be a summons to purpose for his whole adult career.

Samuel died in 1735 with his hand on John's head. His last recorded words to his son: “*The inward witness — the inward witness — that is the proof, the strongest proof of Christianity.*” Three years before Aldersgate, Samuel Wesley had named the doctrine his son would eventually preach.

17 June 1703 • John Wesley born at Epworth, the fifteenth of Samuel and Susanna's nineteen children and their second son to survive infancy.

18 December 1707 • Charles Wesley born, the eighteenth child.

9 February 1709 • The Epworth rectory burns. John, age five, rescued at the last moment. Susanna records the event as a divine sign: this child has been saved for some purpose.

1714–1720 • John attends Charterhouse School in London.

1716–1726 • Charles attends Westminster School in London.

1720 • 1726 • John and then Charles enter Christ Church, Oxford.

Susanna Annesley Wesley

BORN 20 JANUARY 1669, LONDON • TWENTY-FIFTH AND YOUNGEST CHILD OF THE PURITAN MINISTER DR. SAMUEL ANNESLEY • WIFE OF SAMUEL WESLEY FROM 1688 • MOTHER OF NINETEEN, TEN SURVIVING • DIED 23 JULY 1742, LONDON

Mother of Methodism

Theologian

Lay preacher

No serious historian of Methodism doubts that Susanna Wesley is as much the founder of the movement as either of her sons. She did not preach at open-air crusades; she did not write the hymns; she did not organize the Conference. But the disciplined personal rule of life, the weekly self-examination, the small-group accountability, the careful Scripture memory, the lay-led house meetings, the relentless child-formation rooted in doctrinal clarity — the entire *shape* of what the world would call Methodism — grew out of the rectory school she ran and the Sunday evenings she led in her kitchen. John Wesley did not invent the class meeting from nothing. He had been in one his whole life, with his mother running it.

Her father's house. Susanna Annesley was the twenty-fifth and youngest child of **Dr. Samuel Annesley** (1620–1696), one of the most respected Puritan nonconformist ministers in England. Annesley had been the rector of St. Giles Cripplegate in London until he was ejected with two thousand other Puritan clergy in the **Great Ejection of 24 August 1662**, when the Act of Uniformity required every minister to swear allegiance to the newly restored Anglican Prayer Book. Annesley refused and lost his parish; he spent the rest of his life pastoring a Dissenting congregation in Spitalfields. His home was a gathering place for the leading Puritan theologians of the Restoration period. The great Nonconformist preacher John Howe was a family friend; Richard Baxter corresponded with the household; Daniel Defoe (of *Robinson Crusoe*) married one of Susanna's older sisters.

An education almost no woman of her age received. Dr. Annesley gave his youngest daughter an education worthy of a Puritan son headed to the ministry. She read fluent Latin, Greek, and French by her mid-teens. She studied logic and rhetoric. She read systematic theology at a professional level and formed her own opinions on every major religious question.

Decades later, her own children would receive essentially the same curriculum, with the same rigor.

Choosing the Church of England at thirteen. Around 1682, at age thirteen, Susanna sat down and methodically worked through the controversies between her father's nonconformist world and the established Church of England. She read both sides. She wrote out her reasoning. And she decided, against her entire upbringing, to conform to the Church of England — the church that had expelled her father. It was a self-reasoned teenage conscience of a kind almost unimaginable for the period. She told her father her decision; he respected it and did not try to change her mind. The moment is a clue to her character: a woman who, once she had worked something through, could not be moved off it.

Marriage to Samuel Wesley, 1688. She met Samuel Wesley, a young divinity student who had made the same conversion from Annesley's nonconformity to Anglicanism. They married in 1688; she was nineteen, he twenty-six. They were both children of the Puritan world who had chosen a different path, and both were shaped by that choice for the rest of their lives.

Nineteen children, ten survived. Over the next twenty-one years Susanna bore nineteen children. Ten survived infancy: *Samuel Jr.*, *Emilia*, *Susanna* (“*Sukey*”), *Mary* (“*Molly*”), *Mehetabel* (“*Hetty*”), *Anne* (“*Nancy*”), *John* (“*Jacky*”), *Benjamin*, *Charles*, and *Kezia* (“*Kezzy*”). Nine — named or unnamed, several of them twins — she buried before their second birthdays. Her letters mention the dead children matter-of-factly, which is how any mother of her century had to survive. Every one of her surviving ten she deliberately, relentlessly, prayerfully formed.

The rectory school (from c. 1697). Beginning when the family moved to Epworth in 1697, Susanna ran a six-hour school in her rectory six days a week for every one of her children, beginning on their fifth birthday:

- **Day one** was the alphabet. **Day two** each child began reading the first chapter of Genesis aloud, a verse at a time. The method was non-negotiable. Every Wesley child learned to read by beginning with “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

- **Girls were taught to read before they were allowed to learn household work.** This was a pointed departure from her culture's assumption that a girl needed domestic skill before literacy.

- **Every child memorized** the Lord's Prayer, the creeds, extensive Scripture, and Susanna's own written catechism, which she composed for them.

- **No child spoke in the presence of adults** until spoken to — a discipline Susanna defended as teaching the child to master self-will before the world could do it by punishment.

- **Each child received a private weekly interview** with their mother about the state of their soul. The schedule, preserved in her papers:

Monday Molly • Tuesday Hetty • Wednesday Nancy • Thursday Jacky (John) • Friday Patty • Saturday Charles • Sunday Emily and Sukey together. This schedule was kept, most weeks, for about twenty years. John Wesley received a weekly one-on-one pastoral conversation with the most disciplined Christian he would ever meet, every Thursday evening, from the age of five.

Decades later, in a letter (24 July 1732) responding to John's request for an account of her method, Susanna wrote out the principles at length. The letter is one of the most-studied documents in the history of Christian parenting. Its core maxim: *"The first thing to be done is to conquer their will, and bring them to an obedient temper. To inform the understanding is a work of time... but the subjecting the will is a thing which must be done at once; and the sooner the better."* Modern ears flinch at the language; her method in practice was consistent, explicable, and intensely loving, and the children it produced — especially John and Charles — remembered her as their closest friend rather than their warden.

The marital separation (1701–1702). Susanna and Samuel were not an easy couple. The famous quarrel of 1701 has entered Methodist folklore: during family prayers Samuel prayed "for his Majesty King William" — William III, who had taken the throne in 1688 by displacing James II. Susanna, a Jacobite who still considered James the rightful king, refused to say "Amen." Samuel demanded to know why. She explained. He walked out. He did not return home for almost a year. Only the death of William III in March 1702 and the accession of Queen Anne — whose legitimacy both could recognize — brought Samuel back. Fifteen months after his return, on 17 June 1703, **John Wesley was born.** He was, in a sense, a child of conscience and a child of reconciliation.

The kitchen services (1711–1712). In the late autumn of 1711, while Samuel was in London for many months at a Convocation meeting, Susanna began holding *Sunday evening family*

devotions in the rectory kitchen. She read a published sermon (most often from Samuel's own library); she led prayers; she catechised the children. The servants attended. Gradually word spread across the Epworth parish. Within weeks neighbors began asking to attend. Within months, **nearly 200 Epworth villagers** were crowding into the rectory kitchen on Sunday evenings — *twice the congregation Samuel typically preached to on Sunday mornings at the parish church.*

The assistant curate at Epworth, a Mr. Inman, wrote to Samuel in London complaining. Samuel wrote to Susanna asking her to stop. Her reply — preserved verbatim by her sons — is one of the great pieces of lay theological correspondence in English Christian history:

“As to its looking particular, I grant it does. And so does almost everything that is serious, or that may any way advance the glory of God or the salvation of souls... As to its being proper for a woman to do, I think the matter had better be left for the final judgement, which shall decide between you and me whether your prohibition is agreeable to the will of God...

If you do, after all, think fit to dissolve this assembly, do not tell me that you desire me to do it, for that will not satisfy my conscience; but send me your positive command, in such full and express terms as may absolve me from all guilt and punishment for neglecting this opportunity of doing good to souls, when you and I shall appear before the great and awful tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

— **Susanna Wesley to Samuel Wesley, 6 February 1712**

Samuel Wesley did not issue the positive command. The kitchen services continued. A rural Lincolnshire parish had its first lay, female-led Sunday evening congregation — drawing twice the numbers of the regular parish service — *in 1711, two generations before Methodism was even named.* The woman running it was the rector's wife. When John Wesley later commissioned lay preachers of both sexes in the teeth of Anglican disapproval, he was doing nothing his mother had not already done when he was eight years old.

Her rule for sin. Later in life, in a letter to John during his Oxford years (1 June 1725), Susanna gave him what is still one of the best one-sentence tests any Protestant mother has ever written for her son:

“Take this rule: whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God, or takes off the relish of spiritual things; in

short, whatever increases the strength and authority of your body over your mind — that thing is sin to you, however innocent it may be in itself.”

— **Susanna Wesley to John Wesley, 8 June 1725**

Her writings. Beyond her vast correspondence (several hundred letters survive), Susanna wrote three major works, all intended for her own household:

- **A commentary on the Apostles’ Creed**, written for her children, exposition by article.

- **A commentary on the Ten Commandments**, similarly arranged.

- **A long meditation on the Lord’s Prayer**, her most developed devotional work.

None was published in her lifetime. All three eventually appeared after her death. Modern critical editions (Charles Wallace Jr., *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*, 1997) have made her full corpus available for the first time.

Her own “strangely warmed” moment. In 1739, one year after John’s Aldersgate, the seventy-year-old Susanna was living with her son in London at the Foundery and receiving communion from her son-in-law Westley Hall. Hall spoke the words of administration — *“the body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee”* — and Susanna experienced the direct witness of the Spirit John had been preaching as a normal Christian experience. She told her son afterward: *“Till a very few days ago I never heard that any person could know his sins were forgiven. I know now that they have been forgiven, for Christ’s sake.”* After seventy years of devout Christian life, she had received the Wesleyan assurance she had been preparing him for. In the end, she received it *from* him.

Her death. Susanna died on 23 July 1742 at the Foundery, London, age 73. Her last words to her children gathered at her bedside: *“Children, as soon as I am released, sing a psalm of praise to God.”* They did. She is buried in **Bunhill Fields**, the London Nonconformist burial ground — her father’s world after all — directly across City Road from the Foundery, and a stone’s throw from the grave of John Bunyan. John preached at her burial on 1 August 1742 before an immense crowd. A witness recorded: *“It was one of the most solemn assemblies I ever saw or expect to see on this side of eternity.”*

Why she is the mother of Methodism. It is not a sentimental title. Every distinctive of the movement her sons would lead was already present in Susanna's rectory:

- **A daily methodical rule of life** — hence the name “Methodists.”
- **Weekly one-on-one pastoral interviews** — the ancestor of the class meeting.
- **Lay-led, un-ordained devotional gatherings** in houses, outside the formal liturgy — the ancestor of the Methodist society.
- **A theologically rigorous domestic catechesis** — the ancestor of every Methodist Sunday School and every modern evangelical children's ministry.
- **A woman's conscience authoritative on matters of doctrine and practice** — the ancestor of the lay preaching (male and female) that would characterize the movement.

John Wesley's own assessment, in a letter of 1779: “*I should be glad to have as clear an idea of her as I have of [any theologian]... for whom she held such a masculine understanding in disguise.*” It was the best compliment an 18th-century son could pay; modern readers will want to revise the gendered language while keeping the substance. Susanna Wesley was one of the great lay theologians of the Anglican Church. She never preached in a pulpit. She did not need to.

PART 3 — THE HOLY CLUB AT OXFORD (1726–1735)

John Wesley was ordained deacon in 1725, elected Fellow of Lincoln College (Oxford) in 1726, and ordained priest in 1728. Through his twenties he grew more and more anxious about the state of his own soul. He read William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1729) and Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* and was moved by both toward rigorous personal discipline but not toward peace.

1729 — The Holy Club. At Oxford, Charles (now at Christ Church) gathered a small group of serious students who met several evenings a week for prayer, Bible study, and fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays. When John returned to Oxford in November 1729 he assumed leadership of the group. Its members regularly visited Oxford’s prisons and workhouses. Other students mocked them — “the Holy Club,” “the Bible Moths,” “the Sacramentarians,” “the Methodists” — the last because of the methodical way they organized their spiritual practices. The nickname stuck. The name of the eventual movement was coined as an Oxford insult.

Holy Club members included **George Whitefield** (arriving 1732), Benjamin Ingham, John Clayton, John Gambold, and James Hervey. Whitefield was converted in 1735 in Oxford (by Charles Wesley’s lending him Scougal’s *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*), three years before John’s Aldersgate experience. Several of Whitefield’s later American crowds (**Lesson 20 Part 5**) had been shaped in that small circle.

PART 4 — THE GEORGIA DISASTER (1735–1738)

In 1735, General James Oglethorpe, founder of the new American colony of Georgia, needed a chaplain for the English settlers and a missionary to the Native American Creek and Yamacraw peoples. The Wesleys signed on. John, age 32, and Charles, age 28, sailed from Gravesend in October 1735 on the *Simmonds*.

October 1735 — the storm. During an Atlantic storm that seemed likely to sink the ship, John Wesley watched a group of **Moravian Brethren** passengers quietly continue their singing service while waves broke over the deck and the English passengers screamed in panic. When the storm subsided, he asked a Moravian: “*Were you not afraid?*” The reply: “*I thank God, no. My women and children are not afraid to die.*” John Wesley, a priest of the Church of England, knew at that moment he himself was afraid. It was the beginning of his sense that something was missing in his faith.

1736–1737 • Savannah. John’s tenure as the rector of Savannah was a disaster. He was too severe on his parishioners (refusing communion to a young woman, Sophia Hopkey, after she married another man when he himself had failed to propose to her; being prosecuted for defamation by her uncle the magistrate). Charles was rector of Frederica; his congregation, stirred against him by his enemies, refused him even the basics of

subsistence. Both brothers returned home broken. John wrote in his Journal on arriving back in England (1 February 1738): *“I went to America to convert the Indians; but oh! who shall convert me?”*

PART 5 – PETER BÖHLER & THE MORAVIANS

Back in London in February 1738, devastated and searching, John Wesley met a young Moravian missionary named **Peter Böhler** (1712–1775). Böhler, on his way to the American colony of Georgia himself, was waiting in London for his ship. The two men spent many evenings together in conversation.

Böhler pressed Wesley on two points that the Moravian movement (the community gathered at Herrnhut by Count **Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf** from 1722) had made central:

1. Justification by faith in Christ is received in an instant by every true Christian.

It is not the result of gradual moral improvement.

2. The believer has an assured consciousness of that justification — a direct, settled confidence that their sins are forgiven and they are adopted as children of God.

John objected that he had seen no proof of such instantaneous experiences of assurance. Böhler produced English Moravian witnesses. John, a trained logician, found he could not refute them.

“Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith.”

— **Peter Böhler to John Wesley, London, March 1738**

Wesley followed the advice. He began preaching justification by faith in Anglican churches across London even while personally still seeking it. The effect was immediate: he was banned from pulpit after pulpit for the radical message.

Charles first. Charles Wesley experienced his own conversion first. Bedridden with pleurisy, he was visited on Pentecost Sunday, 21 May 1738, by a Moravian named John Bray. Charles wrote that Bray’s words led him into a deep struggle, and that he finally, in the evening of that day, found peace through trust in the merits of Christ. His entry reads simply: *“I now found myself at peace with God, and rejoiced in hope of loving Christ.”*

John, three days later. On Wednesday evening 24 May 1738, John went — reluctantly, by his own admission — to the weekly meeting of the religious society at the house of one James Hutton, on **Aldersgate Street**, near the London city wall. Someone was reading aloud from the preface Luther had written to his commentary on Romans. Wesley’s Journal entry for the night is one of the most quoted paragraphs in English Christian history:

JOHN WESLEY’S JOURNAL, WEDNESDAY 24 MAY 1738

“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.”

A qualification. Some Wesley historians — including, eventually, Wesley himself — would debate whether Aldersgate was the moment of John’s actual conversion to saving faith, or the moment when his already-present faith received the assurance that had been lacking. The 34-year-old Wesley in 1738 thought he had not been a Christian before. The elderly Wesley of the 1770s quietly removed from the Journal some of his harsher retrospective claims about his pre-Aldersgate state. The simplest account is Wesley’s own: a decisive, dateable moment of Spirit-given assurance reached through Romans read in Luther’s translation in a Moravian-influenced religious society. It was the turning point.

Later that same evening John walked to Charles’s sickbed. They sang a hymn Charles had already written for his own conversion. The Wesley brothers, conjoined in spirit and hymnody,

were ready for what God would do next.

PART 7 – FIELD PREACHING & THE REVIVAL (1739)

The year after Aldersgate is the year Methodism was born as a movement. Three things happened:

Summer 1738 • John visits **Herrnhut**, Zinzendorf's Moravian community in Saxony, for three months. He is deeply impressed with the Moravians' piety and community but concludes they are theologically and ecclesially too individualist for his taste. He returns to England a committed Anglican but carrying the Moravians' heart-religion.

Early 1739 • George Whitefield, recently returned from his first American tour, has begun preaching in the open air at Kingswood near Bristol (see **Lesson 20 Part 5**) to crowds of 10,000–20,000 coal miners whose parish Anglican churches had closed their pulpits to revival preaching. On 2 April 1739, Whitefield left Bristol to sail back to America and handed his open-air congregation to the reluctant John Wesley.

JOHN WESLEY'S JOURNAL, SATURDAY 31 MARCH 1739, BRISTOL

“In the evening I reached Bristol, and met Mr. Whitefield there. I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he set me an example on Sunday; having been all my life (till 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.”

On the afternoon of Monday 2 April 1739, about 4 p.m., Wesley overcame his Anglican propriety and preached his first open-air sermon, from a small rise at the brickyard in Bristol, to a crowd of about 3,000. His text was Luke 4:18, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” By the end of summer he was regularly preaching to crowds of 10,000–20,000.

November 1739 • Wesley purchases a disused cannon foundry in London and converts it into the first Methodist chapel — the **Foundery** in Moorfields, which will serve as Methodism’s London headquarters for the next 40 years.

1740–1791 • For the next fifty-one years Wesley travels perpetually, mostly on horseback, preaching daily in open fields, in Methodist meeting-houses, in private homes. He averages about 4,500 miles and 800 sermons per year. He does this into his late eighties.

PART 8 — METHODIST STRUCTURE

Wesley’s organizational genius matched his evangelical energy. Methodism’s disciplined structure is what made it the most effective Protestant discipleship movement of the modern world.

- **The Society.** Methodists were not a separate church in Wesley’s lifetime; they remained (he insisted) members of the Church of England. Each Methodist town had a “society” — a local Methodist congregation meeting for preaching, prayer, and the Lord’s Supper (taken from an Anglican priest, ideally Wesley himself). Membership required a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and was tested by the General Rules.

- **The Class Meeting.** Each society was divided into *classes* of about twelve members who met weekly — men and women together, in the same class — under a lay class leader. The format was simple: each member in turn answered the question, “How does your soul prosper?” and received counsel, correction, and prayer from the group. **The class meeting is the single institutional innovation most responsible for Methodism’s success.** It was a place of radical accountability — Christianity lived in the open before a small regular community. The average American evangelical small group today is a late, weakened echo.

- **The Band.** For members who wanted more intensive growth, Wesley offered the band — four to six people of the same sex who met weekly for the confession of sin and pursuit of entire sanctification. The band was explicitly modeled on Moravian practice and had its own more rigorous rules.

- **The Circuit and the Itinerant.** Methodist lay preachers traveled fixed circuits of towns, each preacher cycling through every society on his route (a quarter-round in 6 weeks, a full round in 6 months). The itinerant system was modeled loosely on the practice of bishops visiting their dioceses but operated much faster and on a peasant budget.

- **The Annual Conference (from 1744).** Each summer Wesley gathered his lay preachers and assistants at a single location — usually London, later increasingly elsewhere — for a week of doctrinal discussion, discipline, and circuit assignments. The Methodist Annual Conference remains, today, the basic legislative body of every Methodist denomination in the world.

- **Lay Preachers.** Wesley's single most controversial innovation was the commissioning of *unordained lay men* to preach. In 1739 a Bristol schoolmaster named Thomas Maxfield began preaching in Wesley's absence; Wesley, returning, intended to stop him. Susanna Wesley, visiting her son, told him to sit down and *hear* Maxfield first. After listening, John acknowledged that the young man preached the gospel with evident power, and lay preaching became officially Methodist practice. Without it, Methodism could never have spread at the rate it did.

- **The General Rules (1743).** Wesley published three simple rules required of every Methodist society member: (1) do no harm, (2) do all the good you can, (3) attend upon all the ordinances of God. Each was expanded with specific applications: avoid drunkenness, slaveholding (an early Methodist position abandoned in 1784 in America), needless lawsuits; give to the poor, visit the sick, speak evangelistically; participate in public worship, family and private prayer, the Lord's Supper, fasting, and Scripture.

The friendship that launched the Methodist revival nearly destroyed it. In April 1739, John Wesley preached a sermon called “**Free Grace**” at Bristol — an uncompromising attack on Calvinist predestination. Charles Wesley published a hymn (“Universal Redemption”) defending universal atonement against limited atonement. George Whitefield, traveling in America, read the news and was horrified.

The resulting dispute split the revival into two branches that have persisted to this day:

WESLEYAN METHODISM

Arminian. God’s prevenient grace enables all humans to respond freely; Christ died for all; election is conditional on God’s foreknowledge of faith; a believer can, theoretically, fall from grace. Strong emphasis on *Christian perfection* — entire sanctification possible in this life. Descends through John Wesley to American Methodism, the Holiness movement, and classical Pentecostalism.

CALVINIST METHODISM

Reformed. God’s sovereign grace unconditionally elects; Christ died particularly for the elect; irresistible grace brings them to faith; the elect persevere. Descends through Whitefield, the Countess of Huntingdon’s Connexion in England, and the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Church. Largely absorbed into the broader Reformed and evangelical streams after Whitefield’s death.

Personal reconciliation, doctrinal disagreement. In public the two parties quarreled hard and long. In private, Wesley and Whitefield reconciled by 1742. Whitefield deliberately subordinated his theological disagreement to his deep personal love for Wesley. He once said of Wesley, in response to someone asking whether they would see him in heaven: “No, we shall not. He will be so near the throne of Christ and I so far off that I shall hardly be able to see him.” When Whitefield died at Newburyport in 1770, he had specifically asked Wesley to preach his funeral sermon. Wesley did so.

The legacy today. Modern American evangelical Christianity is a fusion of both streams. The Wesleyan inheritance predominates in Methodist, Nazarene, Salvation Army, holiness, and Pentecostal denominations. The Calvinist inheritance

predominates in Presbyterian, Reformed, Baptist, and “Reformed evangelical” circles. Most American evangelicals are shaped by both without always knowing which is which.

PART 10 — CHARLES WESLEY AND METHODIST HYMNODY

Charles Wesley (1707–1788) — the sweet singer of Methodism

OXFORD HOLY CLUB CO-FOUNDER • METHODIST PRIEST • AUTHOR OF APPROXIMATELY 6,500 HYMNS

Hymnody

Methodist

John Wesley organized the movement; Charles gave it its voice. Methodism was “born in song” (John Wesley’s own claim), and the songs were Charles’s. He wrote on average about two hymns a week for fifty years, covering every theme of Christian life — Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Passion, Easter, Pentecost, Trinity, conversion, sanctification, prayer, dying, heaven. The Methodist hymnbook John edited in 1780, *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, is arguably the greatest hymnbook ever produced by a Protestant tradition.

The core Charles Wesley hymns still sung today:

AND CAN IT BE THAT I SHOULD GAIN (1738)

Written shortly after Charles’s own conversion, 21 May 1738.

“Long my imprisoned spirit lay, / Fast bound in sin and nature’s night; / Thine eye diffused a quickening ray, / I woke, the dungeon flamed with light; / My chains fell off, my heart was free, / I rose, went forth, and followed thee.”

O FOR A THOUSAND TONGUES TO SING (1739)

Written on the first anniversary of Charles's conversion. The first line is a Peter Böhler quotation: "Had I a thousand tongues, I would praise him with them all."

"My gracious Master and my God, / Assist me to proclaim, / To spread through all the earth abroad / The honors of thy name."

HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING (1739)

Charles's most-sung hymn; the Christmas original began "Hark how all the welkin rings" – George Whitefield, editing for a 1753 hymnal, changed the opening to the line we know.

"Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; / Hail th'incarnate Deity, / Pleased as man with men to dwell, / Jesus, our Emmanuel."

CHRIST THE LORD IS RISEN TODAY (1739)

"Love's redeeming work is done, Alleluia! / Fought the fight, the battle won, Alleluia!"

LOVE DIVINE, ALL LOVES EXCELLING (1747)

"Finish, then, thy new creation; / Pure and spotless let us be. / Let us see thy great salvation / Perfectly restored in thee."

Charles's death. Charles married Sarah ("Sally") Gwynne in 1749; their marriage, unlike John's, was happy. He increasingly parted ways with John over lay preaching and the eventual separation of Methodism from the Church of England. Charles died on 29 March 1788, having asked to be buried in the Anglican churchyard at Marylebone, not in John's Methodist burial ground. The brothers' personal love was undiminished by their disagreements about ecclesial order.

Methodism crossed the Atlantic in the hands of lay immigrants, not ordained priests. By 1770 there were small Methodist societies in New York, Philadelphia, and Maryland. John Wesley sent **Francis Asbury** (1745–1816) to America in 1771 — at 26, a gifted preacher-administrator who would remain in America for the rest of his life and become, with Thomas Coke, the founder of American Methodism.

1771–1783 • Asbury rides American Methodist circuits on horseback, surviving the Revolutionary War as an English-born missionary refusing to return home.

1784 • The Christmas Conference. John Wesley, frustrated by the Bishop of London’s refusal to ordain Methodist ministers for America after independence, broke with 1,500 years of Anglican precedent and *ordained ministers himself* in September 1784. On 24 December 1784 at the Lovely Lane Chapel in Baltimore, Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury were consecrated as the first “superintendents” (soon called bishops) of the new **Methodist Episcopal Church** in America. This was the decisive moment American Methodism became a separate denomination. Wesley was 81 years old. He had, effectively, ended his own Anglican status to found a worldwide Methodist Church.

1784–1850 • American Methodism explodes. By 1820 it is the largest Protestant denomination in the country. Circuit riders like **Peter Cartwright** (1785–1872) travel frontier territories wider than most European kingdoms. By 1850, Methodists are roughly one third of all American Protestants.

1844 • The Methodist Episcopal Church splits over slavery into the Methodist Episcopal Church (North) and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The sections reunite in 1939; a final reunification with the United Brethren in 1968 produces the **United Methodist Church**. Further splits are ongoing.

1860s onward • Methodism’s emphasis on entire sanctification produces the **Holiness movement** — Free Methodists, Wesleyans, Nazarenes, the Salvation Army (founded 1865 by Methodist preacher William Booth).

1906 • Azusa Street. William J. Seymour, a Black Holiness preacher in Los Angeles, leads the revival that births modern **Pentecostalism** — a movement that, theologically and in its narrative of a “second blessing,” descends directly from Wesley. (A future lesson in this series.)

WESLEY’S DEATH & LEGACY

John Wesley died on **2 March 1791** at his house on City Road, London, age 87. He had preached his last sermon six days earlier. Friends and family gathered in his bedroom sang hymns with him as he died. His last words: “*The best of all is, God is with us.*” He repeated the phrase twice, feebly, and then again: “The best of all is, God is with us.”

At his death the Methodist societies in England numbered about 72,000 members; in America, about 57,000. Twenty-five years later, American Methodism had grown to nearly 250,000. A century after his death, about 30 million people were directly Methodist; today the worldwide Methodist and Wesleyan-Holiness family numbers approximately 80 million — over 12 million in the United Methodist Church alone, with vast populations in the Global South.

If Calvin and Luther founded denominations, the Wesleys founded a *movement*. Its influence on American Protestantism — in revivalism, discipleship structure, global missions, hymnody, the Holiness and Pentecostal traditions, and the social-reform instincts of British and American evangelicalism — has been, by any measure, one of the most consequential stories of the modern church.

WHY NOLL CALLS THIS A TURNING POINT

Noll titles his chapter on the Wesleys *A New Piety: The Conversion of the Wesleys (1738)*. He identifies three reasons this is a turning point:

- **Doctrinally.** The Methodist synthesis — Reformation theology of justification by faith, with an Arminian gracious universality, an emphasis on sanctification’s fullness, and an

insistence on assurance — became one of the two great theological frameworks for modern evangelicalism.

- **Pastorally.** The Methodist structure — society, class meeting, band, circuit, conference, lay preaching — produced the most effective ordinary-Christian discipleship apparatus Protestantism had yet seen. Every modern small-group ministry, accountability group, and denominational polity that blends order with lay initiative descends in part from Wesley.

- **Culturally.** Methodism's reach into the working classes of Georgian England and the frontier populations of the American West meant that evangelical Christianity, from the 1740s forward, was no longer the religion of a settled middle class alone. The church had become a mass movement. This reshaping of Protestantism's social base is one of the most important transformations of modern Christian history.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR US

- **Assurance is a gift worth asking for.** Wesley's decades of anxious religious striving followed by one evening of Spirit-given peace is a familiar story to many Christians. "I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation" is not a feeling we can manufacture, but it is a gift the Spirit gives — and often through very ordinary means: someone reading aloud, Scripture attended to carefully, a community of prayer.

- **Small disciplined groups change lives.** A Sunday service with 200 people does one thing. A weekly class meeting of 12 people, in which I must answer honestly how my soul is prospering, does something else. Modern evangelicals are often very good at the first and very weak at the second. Wesley's class meeting is a forgotten technology. Recovering it would probably transform a congregation.

• **Lay ministry is a gift from God.** Wesley did not want lay preachers. Susanna Wesley told him to sit down and listen. God used unordained men (and, later, women) to preach his gospel more effectively than ordained men could. The modern evangelical's suspicion of lay initiative — “they're not trained, they shouldn't teach” — would have earned a very sharp look from the mother of Methodism.

• **Sing the faith.** The Wesleys understood that Christian doctrine lives longer in hymns than in systematic theologies. When a congregation sings “And Can It Be” or “O For a Thousand Tongues” or “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” it is receiving discipleship older than their grandparents. A church that sings thin songs disciples thin Christians.

Greek NT (Matt 22:37): ἀγαπήσεις κύριον τὸ ἄθεόν σου ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ καρδίᾳ σου καὶ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ ψυχῇ σου καὶ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ διανοίᾳ σου.

Matthew 22:37 (ESV): “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Wesley's “heart strangely warmed” was an emotional moment. Edwards's *Religious Affections* (**Lesson 20 Part 9**) warned that emotion alone is not proof of conversion. How do we honor both?

2. The Moravian asked Wesley, “Are you afraid to die?” and he could not truthfully say no. Would you? What would be different in your life if you could?

3. Peter Böhler told Wesley: “Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith.” Is that faithful spiritual direction or dangerous self-deception?

4. The class meeting asked every member weekly, “How does your soul prosper?” Try it in your small group this week. What would change if you did it every week?

5. Wesley and Whitefield disagreed fundamentally on predestination and nearly split the revival — yet reconciled personally and loved each other to Whitefield’s death. How do we do the same today across our deep theological disagreements?

6. Charles Wesley wrote 6,500 hymns; dozens are still sung. What single hymn most shapes your faith? If you had to teach a child one hymn for the rest of their life, what would it be?

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, we thank you for Susanna Wesley in her Epworth kitchen, for the “brand plucked from the burning,” for the Moravians singing as the waves broke over the *Simmonds*, for Peter Böhler pressing John to believe, for an Aldersgate Street meeting where someone was reading Luther’s preface aloud. Thank you for Charles’s sickbed conversion and the 6,500 hymns that followed. Thank you for Whitefield handing his Bristol field to John even as the theology that would divide them was already being spoken. Give us the class meeting’s honesty, the band’s love, the circuit rider’s stamina, and Charles’s song. Strangely warm our hearts tonight. We ask it in the name of Jesus Christ, of whom our tongues, had we a thousand, would never be enough. Amen.

FURTHER READING

Primary sources:

- John Wesley, *Journal* (complete, 1735–1790) — 26-volume Bicentennial edition (Abingdon); the 4-volume “standard” edition (Nehemiah Curnock, 1909) is still widely read.
- John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions* — 44 standard sermons published in his lifetime plus others; 4-volume Bicentennial edition.
- John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1766) — his fullest statement of the distinctive Wesleyan doctrine.
- John Wesley, *Letters* (8 vols., ed. John Telford, 1931) — over 2,500 surviving letters.
- Charles Wesley, *Hymns on the Trinity* (1767); *Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scripture* (1762); the complete hymns in the Frank Baker critical edition.
- The 1780 *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* — Wesley’s own curated hymnbook.
- Susanna Wesley, *The Complete Writings* (ed. Charles Wallace, 1997).
- The General Rules (1743); the Minutes of the Annual Conference (from 1744).

Modern studies:

- **Mark A. Noll**, *Turning Points* (3rd ed., 2012), ch. 9: “A New Piety: The Conversion of the Wesleys (1738).”
- Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (3rd ed., 2002) — the definitive modern scholarly biography.
- Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (2nd ed., 2013) — the standard academic textbook.
- Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience* (2014) — warm modern retrieval.
- John R. Tyson, *Assist Me to Proclaim: The Life and Hymns of Charles Wesley* (2007).
- John Kent, *Wesley and the Wesleyans* (2002).
- Christopher Dandeker, *Francis Asbury: The Methodist Saint of the American Frontier* (2009).

- Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (2003).

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