

Lessons for Today from the Methodist Movement

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Ephesians 2:8-10

So – The church is declining, and largely ignored by society all around it. There is an increase in substance abuse, gambling, broken families, and widespread social unrest. Churches sit empty, a generation is growing up knowing nothing about Christ or spiritual things.

That description sounds familiar doesn’t it?

But it may have been worse in England 250 years ago, than it is in our current situation.

THAT society was ripe for a major crash, or upheaval... a violent revolution. In fact, 35 miles across the English Channel, a revolution DID occur as French rioters threw out the government and sent their cake eating leaders to the guillotine.

Britain was spared, WHY? Historians suggest it was in part, because of a spiritual awakening that took place over several decades, which was sparked by a group of Christians called Methodists, who were led by an Anglican priest named John Wesley.

I’m inspired by Wesley and the Methodist movement. God worked through them and changed the course of history, so I suspect if we are curious, we can learn from our Christian ancestors.

I want to say ‘*Hurray for John Wesley*’, but that’s about all. John’s younger brother Charles said onetime, “God buries His workmen, but God carries on His work”. So Wesley is long gone. I don’t want to worship him; And yet... is there anything we can discern that might allow God to use us, here and now?

I have numerous ‘learnings’ I would highlight. I’ll start with two theological and biblical truths that impacted on John Wesley personally.

Firstly, the spiritual awakening was based on a fresh discovery of acceptance & salvation ‘justification’ by faith.

We cannot ‘earn’ God’s love, OR forgiveness, it is all grace, available to be accepted. Friends if you are anything like me, this is THE most valuable doctrine any Christian can have.

You see, like a lot of you, I’ve been in the church all my life; it is my career; it is the family business (literally – my father, 2 brothers, daughter, 3 uncles, great aunts where all preachers, evangelists, or clergy) . So there is a great danger that my church work becomes my connection to God; Wesley made the same mistake, as the child of an Anglican priest.

It spiritually handcuffed him, until he rediscovered justification by faith.

Do you ever memorize scripture? Here’s one you should keep inside you.

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Ephesians 2:8-10

That was the stunning discovery that freed Wesley from an anxious, ‘paint by numbers’ religion. How incredibly liberating it was – God’s love, FREE, Grace.

So that is the first learning we need to be reminded of. The second follows immediately...

Christians are NOT so much those who have faith IN God; Rather, they are those who have love FOR God.

The difference is vital. From a religion that is centered in ritual and discipline, and driven by fear, we are transformed to a friendship with God fuelled by grateful love and joy.

Many people today, just like many in Wesley's day, believed in God, but they were not so sure of God's love for them. Their fear of hell was stronger than their faith in a loving God.

I'll tell you a story about that...

On the outskirts of a small southern town, there was a big old pecan tree just inside the cemetery fence. One day, two boys filled up a bucketful of nuts and sat down behind the tree, out of sight, and began dividing the nuts.

"One for you, one for me, one for you, one for me," said one boy. Several dropped and rolled down toward the fence.

As they were doing this **inside** the cemetery, another boy came riding along on his bicycle. As he passed, he thought he heard voices from the other side of the fence and hedge. He slowed down to investigate. Sure enough, he heard, "one for me, one for you, one for me, one for you.."

He knew just what it was. He jumped back on his bike and rode off. Just around the bend he met an old man with a cane, hobbling along.

"Come here quick," said the boy, "you won't believe what I heard! Satan and the Lord are down at the cemetery dividing up the souls!"

The man said, "Beat it kid, can't you see it's hard for me to walk." When the boy insisted though, the old man hobbled slowly over to the cemetery.

Standing by the fence they heard, "One for me, one for you, one for me, one for you."

The old man whispered, "Boy, you've been tellin' me the truth. Let's look if we can see the Lord." Shaking with fear, they peered through the fence, but because of the hedge and the big tree, they were still unable to see anything. The old man and the boy gripped the wrought iron bars of the fence tighter as they tried to get a glimpse of the Lord.

At last they heard, "One for me, one for you. That's all. Now let's get those nuts by the fence and we'll be done."

They say the old man had the lead for a good half mile, before the kid on the bike passed him!!

Many people believe in God, but it is fear based ;

their fear of hell is stronger than their faith in a Loving God.

But the Bible talks about 'a love that casts out fear' and that is what John Wesley FINALLY discovered at the age of 35.

Wesley's upbringing had been deeply religious and as a teenage student, he still read his Bible and said his prayers every day. But he was not satisfied with his religious life. There was nothing joyful about it.

There are numerous accounts of Wesley being impacted by the joy and cheerful faith of others.

Until it happened, after some 20 years of struggle. The day was Wednesday, the 24th of May, 1738. Most of you remember how he described it in his journal:

"In the evening I went, very unwillingly, to a society in Aldersgate Street, where someone was reading from Martin Luther's commentary on the Letter to the Romans.

(was it about the 8th chapter, which we read earlier? "If God be for us who can be against us?.... Nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus")

“... About a quarter before nine... 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.”

John Wesley's search was over. Love and joy flowed from him... love for God, and then love for people. For the rest of his life Wesley declared that Christians are people not so much with faith **IN** God, as those with a wonderful love FOR God.

It still happens. I know of a woman named Eileen whose teenage daughter came home one day and told her mother that someone had been talking to her about God. Although she was disappointed with her life- trapped in her own suburban island- Eileen wanted nothing to do with God. That night Eileen couldn't sleep. At midnight she went downstairs and picked up a Bible. She couldn't remember the last time she had been to a church; nor had she ever opened a Bible on her own. When she opened it now, she noticed it was divided into an “old “ part and a “new” part. She decided to start with the “new” part, figuring the book may have been updated. So in the still of the night she sat on her living room floor and began to read the gospel of Matthew. By 3am she was in the middle of Johns gospel and found, as she puts it, that she had fallen in love with the person of Jesus. “ I don't know what I'm doing,” she prayed to God, “but I know you are what I want.”

So, there are two theological principles that ignited the Methodist movement: **Justification by faith** (we are freely loved and forgiven by God- His grace truly is amazing, and we need only open our hearts and receive and accept it). Then secondly, we **love God** back- live at peace, with joy, and trust, and generosity to the world around us.

John Wesley, his brother Charles and a group of friends transformed Christianity within their lifetimes, as they spread a joyous love for God, and compassion for people throughout the British isles, and then the colonies- some **225 yrs ago Methodist circuit riders came**. And here we are.

Let me shift gears now and quickly click off some key learnings from their experience, that we might consider for the renewal of Christianity in our times.

Renewal usually happens person to person, one life at a time. In the spring of 1738 Kezia Wesley (a younger sister) had spoken to her brother Charles about a spiritual experience of grace and joy she had received through simple accepting faith. Charles received the same liberating experience and told his brother John. Three days later, John felt his heart “strangely warmed”. It is this **‘one to one’ sharing of faith** that transfers spiritual vitality. Never underestimate the impact one person can have!

Spiritual renewal is often the result of a process. John Wesley's spiritual awakening was not a sudden isolated event. He had been an Anglican priest for twelve years. He struggled continually with doubts, self-loathing, and a paralyzing fear of death. The failure of a missionary trip to America, and the positive influence of Moravian Christians from Germany, led to his spiritual quest for more. Scripture study, prayer meetings, Martin Luther's writings, and the quiet zeal of other Christians, all fed Wesley's heart until a spiritual breakthrough washed over him. His faith awakening was the product of a process, not a sudden isolated incident.

Renewal still requires courage and innovation.

In the early years of the Methodist movement, John Wesley and others met with fierce opposition. They were sometimes in physical danger of violence, they were frequently barred from ministering in established churches. The joy and love within them drove them on.

They began to try unheard of tactics like preaching outdoors. Some people were shocked and thought it vulgar and dangerous. But many, especially the poorer classes, who never went inside a church, flocked to hear. The miners of Bristol, were rough, uneducated men, but they listened eagerly to the passionate preacher. The idea that God loved them as much as the wealthy and the respectable, made the tears run down coal blackened cheeks.

Courage and innovation.

What might that look like today?

Should we start Sat Night Alive at the Food Court in the local mall?

Should there be a 'Dinner Church' in VANCOUVER

Lastly, Never be discouraged, because spiritual renewal can rescue any situation.

In John Wesley's day organized religion was stale and largely ignored by the masses. Illiteracy, alcoholism, poverty was rampant. But Wesley's passion and grit ignited both a spiritual awakening and also an expansion of social justice. *"Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but God...such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven on earth."*

With a balanced ministry that fought against poverty and slavery, while also championing personal morality and holiness the Methodist movement transformed social structures and revitalized the Christian church.

So hurray for John Wesley and his team, but more to the point today....May God raise up a new generation of Christians like those Methodists... spirit filled, grace proclaiming, passionate for the reign of Christ in every heart, and all of society. AMEN.