

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
ALDRSGATE WEEKEND
SUNDAY 26 MAY 2013
Rev. Deacon Jenny Preston

“John Wesley’s Legacy”

Firstly some home-grown facts about John Wesley. Do you know that John Wesley often picked up hitch-hikers! Airdrie Farrar can tell a story about her great-many times grand-mother who was walking along one of the tracks leading to a favourite Wesley out-door preaching place, and the great man, on his great horse, offered this little girl to ride behind him to the next village. And David Rush has reminded me that an elderly aunt told him that his gggg/father had closed John Wesley’s eyes when he died at age 88.

“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.” It sounds Wesleyan, but it is not found in Wesley. I’ve had a fascinating time trying to be exact about Wesleyan theology.

John Wesley grew up in the large family of Rev Samuel and Mrs Susanna Wesley, Mrs Wesley had 19 pregnancies; 9 children did not survive; their house burned down twice; and while their house at Epworth was being rebuilt, the children lived with other families and learned habits Susannah was at pains to change.

John was given a place at Charterhouse, a prominent public school, through the good offices of his father’s friend the Duke of Buckingham; then he won an exhibition, or scholarship to Christ College at 17; he studied for ordination, and then was made a Fellow of Lincoln College; there he taught New Testament Greek, had a good social life, and gradually began to think more deeply about his personal spirituality. He spent hours in the Bodleian Library mulling over his understanding of following Jesus, and discovering new strands of Christian thought. With others, he and Charles began a group called the Holy Club. They read scripture, and underwent rigorous self-examination of their lives, along with taking part in works of charity, particularly by preaching to prisoners in the city. That’s when the term Method-ists was first coined.

It was during their years in Oxford that the Wesleys met George Whitefield, a young man who was working his way through Oxford by waiting on others. Samuel Wesley was rather perturbed about John’s yearning for Christian perfection -- which I liken to the Tinker Tailor movement which began in Sydney in the 1940’s. (And hints, too, of the struggles that Martin Luther put himself through before he, too had an epiphany, a dramatic moment, a realisation that God is love, God is grace.

John went to Georgia in the US, to serve the colonists and indigenous people for a few years; he came back to England, with a sense of personal failure, still feeling he had to earn God’s love. John was definitely in a low period when he unwillingly went to the Moravian study group in Aldersgate Street in London, and had that moment of grace, in such intensity, when he realised the sufficiency of God’s grace, like the intense love of a dear father.

The Celts would say, as I do, that this was a moment when the other world, the spiritual domain, broke clearly into his experience – a thin place as Marcus Borg describes it in his book *The Heart of Christianity*, p. 149 an opening of John’s anxious, perfectionist heart and soul. To use sacramental language, a thin place is a sacrament of the sacred, a mediator of the sacred, a means whereby the sacred becomes present to us. A means of grace. A similar experience of God’s grace and love for all people was granted to Thomas Merton, the 20th. century Trappist monk, a favourite of our Moderator Dan Wootton, around Bristol, to the street poor in London, and the tin miners in Cornwall. There was a divergence in theology between Wesley and Whitefield, yet in 1739, as vistas of astonishing evangelistic success opened up, Whitefield and the

Wesleys worked in the closest harmony, as brothers and equals. When Whitefield won converts through his amazing oratory, he relied on Wesley to help organize and instruct them.

John Wesley feared that Calvinism of Whitefield propagated fatalism and discouraged growth in holiness. Charles Wesley feared that predestination (and particularly the idea of reprobation, that God predestined some to damnation) represented a loving God as a God of hate. In his brother's famous hymn *Wrestling Jacob*, he deliberately capitalized the sentence "Pure Universal Love Thou Art." At one time there were Wesley's United Societies meeting in London on the same street as Whitefield's followers set up his Tabernacle. The relationship was described by one of Wesley's preachers as "agreement to differ." Whitefield was welcomed to preach among Wesley's societies. Wesley lent Whitefield one of his best preachers, Joseph Cownley, for work at the Tabernacle. Whitefield refused to build Calvinistic chapels in places that already had a Wesleyan society. Wesley agreed to the reverse. More than once Whitefield acted as mediator when the Wesley brothers fell out, notably when Charles sabotaged John's marriage prospects to Grace Murray.

Both Whitefield and Wesley (and the Moravians) deserve credit as Founding Fathers of the great revival. – the Great Awakening. What is most striking is the providential complementarity of the two men's gifts – Whitefield the orator, Wesley the source through whom the Holy Spirit entered people's lives.

At one time there were Wesleyan Methodists, Calvinist Methodists, Bible Christians, Primitive Methodists and the New Connexion. (Similarly, the Church of Scotland had many schisms, and many re-unions!) Wesley believed in personal transformation together with social holiness – not one, without the other. The class meetings for individual learning and growth in faith, the gathering together as congregation to love and encourage each other in praise, and prayer. He also believed that in order to feed people's souls, we must address the needs of the body.

The small groups and societies he formed had intensive, personal accountability, discipleship and religious instruction. He also trained and appointed itinerant, unordained preachers who travelled widely to [evangelise](#) and care for people in the societies.

Under Wesley's direction, Methodists became leaders in many social issues of the day, including the [prison reform](#) and [abolitionism](#) movements. It is a fact that the movement spread gradually, not like wildfire, and remained a small group because of the demands of Wesleyan discipleship.

Wesley wrote and published books, he used his education and position in society as an Anglican clergyman to forward the need for more care for the disadvantaged. Some sociologists suggest that the Great Awakening religious movement of John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield was one of the reasons why England didn't actually experience a Revolution, as happened in France.

The first resonance I made with Wesleyan theology was to understand the differences between his theology, and the more Calvinist theology of George Whitefield. Called Prevenient grace -- Wesley held strongly to the Arminian theology of Jacob Arminius, of Holland, which was rooted in the theology of Augustine – a theology which gives all precedence to the love of God coming to us in many and varied ways, until that love is felt and accepted in an act of free-will.

In modern English, the phrase *preceding grace* has a similar meaning. The sort of grace which the Prodigiously loving Father offers to the returning lost Son in Luke chapter 15.

I don't think I picked up the method of discerning a theological or moral disputation by using the Wesleyan Quadrilateral until I worked alongside Norman Young in the Heidelberg East Ivanhoe congregation. What is this Quadrilateral? Alongside Scripture, there are three other sources which play a role in helping us make important faith decisions. These are tradition, reason and experience. More recently, other theologians see the need to add revelation and culture to this list. People give different weight to these

components. However most would agree they are all important in the growth and nurturing of our faith, often throwing light on one another.

All are implicit in the *Basis of Union of the Uniting Church*: (from *Uniting Sexuality & Faith* p. 17): we must search through different translations of the bible, study the wisdom and creativity of Christians across time and place, creeds, teaching and statements from our leaders,

thirdly, use our minds as well as our hearts to think through questions, including being open to differing points of view; and

finally, add our own experience of God's grace working in our lives. We gain wisdom and maturity from life experience, especially when we pray and reflect about our story with other Christians.

(The Quadrilateral was actually synthesised from Wesley's theology by Methodist theologian Albert Outler in the 20th century.)

What is distinctive about the Methodist Church in this 21st century? – from the web-site of the Methodist Church of the UK:

1. (All can be saved) – everyone is acceptable and worthy of being liberated from what binds them to self-centred or destructive living.
2. God gives us the Holy Spirit, and when we respond, there is no limit to what the grace of God is able to do in a human life. We can't be perfect in an absolute way, as God is. But we can be made perfect in love. Methodists believe in what John Wesley called 'social holiness'. It is vital to meet and worship with other Christians in order to grow in the Christian life and to understand what is God's will for us and for our community. Holiness is not just about personal spirituality and prayer. It will also be expressed through a commitment to social justice.
3. Methodists mark a yearly Covenant with God, in which each congregation celebrates what God has done in the past year, and, commit themselves for the year to come. I'll print the Covenant prayer at the bottom of the printed sermon.
4. Methodist worship continues to contain much teaching and praying through song. Remember, Charles Wesley wrote over 6000 hymns.

So what of Wesley's theology do we have in our *Basis of Union*?

Our beliefs are drawn from the Bible and from the Apostles' and Nicene creeds. We also listen to the Reformation Witness in the Scots Confession of Faith (1647), the Savoy Declaration (1658), and the preaching of John Wesley in his Forty-four Sermons (1793). Our church affirms the place of ongoing theological, literary, historical and scientific study. The [*Basis of Union*](#) (1971) brings together aspects of all these writings and traditions and sets out the church's way of living and being.

1. **There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in God's justice which is more than liberty.
There's no place where human sorrows are more deeply felt than heaven;
there's no place where human failings have such kindly judgments given. Amen.**
2. For the love of God is broader than the measures of our mind;
and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.
But we make that love too narrow by the limits of our own;
and we magnify God's strictness with a zeal Love will not own.
3. There is grace enough for thousands of new worlds as great as this;
there is room for fresh creations in that endless world of bliss.
If our love were but more simple, we would trust the living Word;

and our lives would fill with gladness in the joy of Christ our Lord.

F. W. Faber, altered by Colin Gibson; from Hope is our Song, New Zealand Hymn Book

Recommended reading:

[WESLEY ON SOCIAL HOLINESS - The Methodist Church](http://www.methodist.org.uk/.../emtc-paper-wesley_on_social_holiness)

www.methodist.org.uk/.../emtc-paper-wesley_on_social_holiness

Methodist Church of UK Covenant Prayer

'I am no longer my own
but yours.

Put me to what you will,
rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing,
put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you,
or laid aside for you,
exalted for you,
or brought low for you;
let me be full,
let me be empty,
let me have all things,
let me have nothing:

I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours.'