

Meet John Wesley

Meeting John Wesley is like exploring the ocean; there are many ways to do it. You can wade in the shallows or dive in the depths. Either way there is enjoyment and profit. Even after numerous trips you can still return to make new discoveries.

The same is true in coming to know Wesley. It really doesn't matter whether you are seeing him for the first time or the one-hundredth time. Either way your life will be richer. The study of Wesley holds a potential fascination that will keep you returning to him.

And yet, it is an interesting fact that many people who stand in the Wesleyan tradition do not know Wesley himself very well. They are familiar with his heart-warming experience at Aldersgate, but beyond that their knowledge falls off drastically. I have found this to be true among laity and clergy groups. The result is that much of what we label "Wesleyan" is unintelligently associated with the heritage, and sometimes what is included in the Wesleyan tradition is not true to Wesley at all.

Who is John Wesley? Can we meet him? Will that meeting make any difference in our Christian lives? On the biographical level it is helpful to mention some basic facts. He was born on 17 June 1703, the fifteenth child and second surviving son of Samuel and Susanna Wesley. His early life in Epworth was largely shaped by the example of his parents and in particular the educational program Susanna operated in the rectory.

When he was six, he was rescued from the burning rectory in so remarkable a fashion that Susanna believed the hand of God was upon him in a special way. Accordingly, she felt a particular responsibility to nurture the life of her son. What she did had its lifelong effects. And even today John Wesley's life at Epworth is rightly considered the "cradle of Methodism."²

In 1713 Wesley moved to London to attend Charterhouse School. In comparison to other periods in his life, his years at Charterhouse were of lesser significance. However, while there he continued to read his Bible and say his prayers daily.³ After six years at Charterhouse he matriculated to Christ Church College at Oxford where he received the Bachelor of Arts degree in 1726.

Wesley's early Oxford years saw the beginning of his spiritual pilgrimage. In 1725, after reading Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living* and Thomas a Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*, he resolved to dedicate his life to God.⁴ The next thirteen years were an agonizing attempt to work out the implications of that resolution. However, it all came together in the now-famous Aldersgate experience on 24th May, 1738. There Wesley found the personal assurance necessary to give life and power to his faith.

From this point onward Wesley became England's greatest preacher and organizer; multitudes responded to his preaching, and he sought to nurture them through the United Societies, which he organized. The last sixty years of his life were a constant motion of traveling and preaching that took him over 250,000 miles (mostly on horseback) and gave him the opportunity of preaching over 44,000 times. Erwin Paul Rudolph has commented that, "In Wesley's work we see the figure of a great preacher, an untiring worker, and a popular but

autocratic leader. He reveals a mind that is shrewd, but capable of humor, and that is filled with the sense of divine mission.”⁵

Wesley rested from his labors on 2 March, 1791. His last words served not only to capture the quality of life he lived, but also the kind of life he wished for others. He died saying, “The best of all is, God is with us!”

While these facts are important, they do not fully capture Wesley, the man. There are other qualities we should be familiar with if we are to “meet John Wesley” in these opening pages. For me, the most appealing thing about him is that he is a fellow pilgrim in the faith. He was in search of vital faith just as we are. When you read his diary, journal, and letters, this comes through loud and clear. He faced struggles similar to ours. He made his share of mistakes. He asked questions during time of doubt and depression. He knew the elation of victory. In a very real sense, Wesley was one of us.

Furthermore, Wesley was a *practical theologian*. This does not mean that he was unfamiliar with theology on a scholarly level, or that he could not handle himself with the so-called theological heavyweights of his day. One reading of his Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion is sufficient to dispel that notion.⁶ What does it mean is that Wesley was primarily concerned about developing a faith that worked in everyday living. He was in search of a “Scriptural Christianity” that was confirmed by human experience. The fact that his theology is biblical gives it timelessness; the fact that it is confirmed by experience gives it an authenticity that theology in the ivory tower sometimes lacks. Wesley’s theology has been road tested, and found effective.

To know Wesley is also to know a person of intense and meaningful discipline. Every day counted; every moment was a “God-moment.” Consequently, he gave himself daily to the spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible study, and devotion. But discipline was never an end in itself. It was the means to a vital relationship with God and the resulting power that comes from that relationship.

As the Methodist movement began to grow, Wesley sought to instill this same spirit of discipline into his followers. The bands, classes, and societies were all organized on explicit disciplinary principles.⁷ Members were held accountable for living up to the disciplines. And through the sense of personal and corporate discipline early Methodism had both a vitality and a stability that some contemporary church life fails to exhibit. To know Wesley is to know one who echoes the saying, “The soul and the body make the man; and the spirit and discipline make a Christian.”⁸

As you read this book, keep in mind the word “daily.” Wesley’s life and theology pulsate with this word. For over sixty years he faithfully engaged in devotional *living*. He calls us to do the same. He challenges us to break out of any compartmentalized concept of Christianity. Jesus is Lord! Every moment is to be lived in his presence. While we may not exactly duplicate his methods, we should strive to imitate his discipline.

Knowing John Wesley requires that we see him in a community sense. Wesley was a churchman in the highest and best sense of the term. This is important to see early in this book.

Too often he is cast in the light of a malcontent just looking for a good reason to start a new church. Never forget that he lived *and died* an Anglican. He did not inaugurate a new denomination and he discouraged his followers from doing so.⁹ In the very first annual conference that Wesley held in 1744, he declared his allegiance to the Anglican Church and exhorted the Methodists to constant attendance of “both the word preached and the sacraments administered therein.”¹⁰ And throughout his lifetime, Methodism was a renewal movement within the larger Anglican Church.¹¹

Having said this, it is equally important to stress that Wesley’s ultimate loyalty was to God. As much as he loved the Anglican Church, he loved God more. Where he felt the church had strayed, he stood against it. He was a true “son of the Reformation.” The point to be stressed in all this is that his disagreements with the Church of England were not institutional, they were Scriptural. He felt that eighteenth-century Anglicanism had drifted from important Scriptural norms¹², and he viewed the Methodist movement as simply describing “the plain, old religion of the Church of England.”¹³ His goal was not defection, but rather renewal. His constant prayer was that the renewal could take place *within* Anglicanism. That it did not is a fact of church history, not a fact Wesley’s design. To know Wesley is to know a churchman.

Because his churchmanship was based on Scripture rather than contemporary doctrinal formulations¹⁴ his theology has a dynamism. He abhorred stagnant orthodoxy.¹⁵ He sought a Scriptural Christianity “energized” by the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit. While his theology comes from the eighteenth century, it is not bound by it. Furthermore, it moves in harmony with Christian experience. In his preface to the Standard Sermons he wrote, “I want to know one thing—the way to heaven.”¹⁶ For Wesley, that “way” was dynamic, moving from sin to glorification. I have tried to capture this feature of Wesley’s theology in this book by basing the chapters on the “order of salvation” that emerges in his writings. Wesley never produced a systematic theology in the formal sense, but what he did produce is systematic and consistent. I hope that the organization of this book will help you know Wesley in that light.

Finally, to know Wesley is to know someone you can read and understand. By his own design he avoided complex theological terminology. He wrote, “ I desire plain truth for plain people; therefore, of set purpose, I abstain from all nice and philosophical speculations.”¹⁷ As previously noted, he could deal with theology on a sophisticated level when he needed to. But in the general course of his ministry he desired to communicate with ordinary people in understandable ways. If you have previously shied away from reading theology, you are in for a pleasant surprise in Wesley. His simplicity will not insult your intelligence, it will increase it. His life-centeredness will touch you where you live, and cause you to consider your own beliefs and actions. This is the kind of experience I hope you will have as you read this book. It is a kind of experience Wesley would wish for you.

I trust this chapter has helped you sense something of a kinship with John Wesley. Such a kinship will enrich your reading of the following material. In fact, the following chapters cannot be read in a detached manner. Wesley would not only want you to understand his message, he would want you to be affected by it. He would want you to experience the Christ to whom it points. Time and time again Wesley wrote that he “offered Christ.” Through this reconstruction of Wesley’s message, he is offering Christ to you again!

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1. If you have not done so, it would be well to read a biography of Wesley. Two recent ones are Stanley Ayling's *John Wesley* (New York: Collins 1979) and Robert Tuttle's *John Wesley: His Life and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1978)
 2. Martin Schmidt, *John Wesley: A Theological Biography* (Nashville, Abington, 1962, 1:63.
 3. Thomas Jackson (ed), *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979, 1:98
 4. Jackson, *Works*, 11:366-67.
 5. Erwin P. Rudolph, *The John Wesley Treasury* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1979), p. 11.
 6. Jackson, *Works*, 8:3-247
 7. Jackson, *Works*, 7:248-388
 8. Ibid., 13:101
 9. The issue here is complex. The best interpretation I have found is Frank Baker's *John Wesley and the Church of England* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970)
 10. Jackson, *Works*, 8:280.
 11. More will be said on Wesley's theology of the church in chapter 9.
 12. eg., justification by faith, new birth, repentance in believers, entire sanctification, et al.
 13. Jackson, *Works*, 1:232
 14. He fully accepted and took seriously the Anglican Articles of Religion and the Homilies. In fact, he considered them more authoritative than some of his contemporaries did. But he did so on the basis of his conviction that they were reflections of Scriptural truth.
 15. Jackson, *Works*, 5:78
 16. John Wesley, *Forty Four Sermons* (London: Epworth Press, 1944), p. vi. Cf. Jackson, *Works*, 5:3.
 17. Jackson, *Works*, 5:2.