

JOHN WESLEY, A MAN SENT FROM GOD

By Rev. B. C. Cochrane

Two hundred and fifty years ago, on June 17th, 1703, a baby boy was born in a little market town of Lincolnshire, England, who was destined to become a man of history. The parents of the child, Rev. Samuel Wesley, Church of England Rector of Epworth, and his devoted wife, Susannah, chose the biblical name, John, for this fifteenth child born to them (eight died in infancy, so that but six were living when John was born.) Providence must have guided in the choice of the infant's name, as in his birth, for like the forerunner of the Lord, John Wesley would herald the message of Light and Life to a country and generation given to "materialism, dim ideals and expiring hopes."

At the early age of five, young John was rescued from death, being literally snatched from the flames as the Epworth Rectory was destroyed by fire. Later in life referring to his narrow escape and rescue, Wesley spoke of himself as "a brand plucked from the burning."

Training and Call

John Wesley had the rich heritage which has been the common blessing of so many great men—a godly mother. Susannah Wesley, with numberless home duties and concerns of a Rector's wife, took time to teach her children the Word of God and the principles of Christian living. Before he left home to enter upon his formal school training, young John Wesley had learned much of the more important lessons concerning "the way he should go." As a young man he entered Christchurch College, Oxford, from which he graduated with honours, gaining a reputation for his ability in the field of classical education. It was while at Oxford that Wesley decided to train for the ministry, and for some time he was his father's curate at Lincolnshire. Later, he was called back to Oxford to serve as tutor. He was elected a Fellow of Lincoln College, where he became "Moderator of Exercises and Disputations." His mental genius is described by the poet, Southey: "No man was ever more dexterous in the art of reasoning!"

Spiritual Life

After his decision to enter the ministry, Wesley became a strict religionist. At Oxford he formed the famous "Holy Club," a group of young men who gave themselves so ardently, diligently, and consistently to religious exercises, that they were mockingly called "the methodists." In 1735 John Wesley and his brother, Charles, came to North America as missionaries to the North American Indians. They landed at Savannah, Ga., Feb. 5, 1735, and remained in the southern colony until December, 1737. While in Georgia and on the return trip to England, Wesley came under the influence of devout and spiritual Moravian Brethren whose testimony of assurance and witness of faith made the highly-educated, ardently-religious clergyman conscious of his spiritual poverty. "I went to America to convert the Indians," said he, "but oh! who will convert me?" The answer to this heart-cry came on the night of May 24, 1738, while attending a meeting of the Moravians in Aldersgate Street, London. While one read Luther's preface to the book of Romans, Wes-

ley testifies: "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." Later Wesley testifies to the discovery that "without holiness no man shall see the Lord" and after being guided of the Spirit into the experience of heart purity declared: "We are saved from all sin, we are made holy by faith." This I testified in private, in public, in print, and God confirmed it by a thousand witnesses." "We are all agreed," said he, "we may be saved from all sin before death;" and, to his preachers, he gave the admonition: "Let us strongly and explicitly exhort all believers to go on to perfection." And the life he lived, and the spirit he manifested, gave strength and power to the message he preached.

His Preaching

Wesley's sermons were simple, biblical, logical. The intellectual greatness of the man is reflected in the simplicity of his preaching. Like the Master Preacher Himself, Wesley brought the great truths of the Gospel within the range of all so that the common people heard him gladly." "I desire plain truth for plain people," said he. "I abstain from all nice and philosophical speculations; from all perplexed and intricate reasoning; and, as far as possible, from even the show of learning, unless sometimes citing the original Scripture. I labour to avoid all words not easy to be understood, all which are not used in common life; and in particular, those kinds of technical terms that so frequently occur in bodies of divinity—those modes of speaking which men of reading are intimately acquainted with, but which, to common people, are an unknown tongue."

Wesley's sermons abound with Scripture passages and expressions. He expounded the great truths and doctrines of the Word carefully and thoroughly and to his listeners "gave the sense and caused them to understand the reading." His love for and respect of the Bible as the divinely-inspired Word of God is manifest in his writings. "Oh, give me that Book! At any price, give me the Book of God! Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be "homo unius libri!" (a man of one Book).

The logic of Wesley's sermons would appeal to the most thoughtful listener or reader. He did not depend on the favour of friends or the charity of critics when preaching the Gospel, but sought to make his messages to harmonize perfectly with enlightened reason and practical application.

His Labours

Wesley was an energetic and tireless servant of God. At twenty-five years of age he began to arise at 4.00 a. m. and maintained the habit throughout his long and busy life. "He travelled (mostly on horseback) 226,000 miles, preached no less than 46,000 sermons, published 233 books and pamphlets. He made \$150,000 profits from his publications but spent only \$150.00 a year on himself, giving the rest to the poor and needy. Stanley Baldwin, when Prime Minister of Great Britain, said: "I am supposed to be a busy man, but by the side

of Wesley, I join the ranks of the unemployed." His life of service was a reproduction of the spirit of Him Who "went about doing good," whose chief joy and concern was "to do the will of Him that sent me." The Kingdom of Christ has never had a more unselfish and unsparing servant than John Wesley. He preached his last sermon just one week before his death.

Nor were the labours of this man of God solely in the realm of the spiritual. This was the realm in which he was primarily and especially interested and great were the results of his ministry. He preached to congregations as small as fifty and as high as twenty-five or thirty thousand in the open fields. Thousands were converted and sanctified under his Spirit-owned sermons and revival swept Great Britain. But Wesley was interested in the temporal as well as the spiritual welfare of the people. He declared: "Christianity is a social religion. To make it a solitary religion is to destroy it." Great social reforms were brought about as a result of his efforts in behalf of the labouring man.

His Influence

One of Wesley's biographers writes of his death: "He was carried to his grave by six poor men, leaving behind him nothing but a good library of books, a well-worn clergyman's gown, a much-abused reputation, and—the Methodist Church." But Wesley left much more than that. He left a transformed England, saved from bloody revolution by the revival which began under his ministry. He left behind him an influence that would be felt in every realm of life, social, industrial, political, and spiritual, an influence that would embrace two Continents and live on to effect the whole world for centuries to come. Dr. J. Wesley Bready, Canadian author and historian, who out of twenty years research on the life and times of Wesley has given us two splendid and highly informative books ("The Freedom Whence" and "Faith and Freedom") terms Wesley "the pivotal character of the 18th Century." He further states: "Wesley, and the marvelous Spiritual Awakening of which he was the entire centre, represents the Great Divide of Modern History. They re-established the moral and spiritual foundations upon which the British and American democracies were sustained and reared." Dr. Bready traces the founding of the Salvation Army, the British and American Bible Societies, the Y. M. and Y. W. C. A. as the Protestant world missionary movement, the Sunday School Movement, and other historic movements back to Wesley and the Evangelical Revival, as well as the abolition of the slave trade and slavery throughout all British domains—"the greatest single social triumph in all modern history."

John Wesley was indeed "a man sent from God." He left to his posterity, according to David Lloyd George, "a heritage incomparably sublime."

All who are called of God to minister in holy things might well aspire to the diligence, devotion, and disinterested loyalty to Christ of this servant of the Most High. And as we commemorate the anniversary of his birth, we might well pray that the Lord of the harvest may raise up in our times a man who would labour with comparable success in the world's great Harvest Field!