

Topic 2: The Beginnings of the Revival, 1735-42

The Evangelical Revival was an international phenomenon which effected both Europe and North America. The influence of continental Pietism has already been mentioned. Although this module focuses on England and Wales, we need to say something about religious developments on the far side of the Atlantic Ocean.

i. The colonial dimension

British colonization of North America had occurred during the seventeenth century, first in Virginia on the southern seaboard as early as 1607, and then in New England to the north. Virginia in the south, and thereafter the Carolinas, reflected what would come to be known as the Anglican tradition while New England, firstly in the Plymouth colony in 1620 and soon after in Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island, was settled principally by Puritans. By the 1680s English Quakers had found a refuge from post-Restoration persecution in Pennsylvania, especially around Philadelphia, while a considerable influx of immigrants from Sweden, Switzerland, Germany and Holland replicated in the Middle Provinces (Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York) the varieties of Protestantism that had characterized their church life at home.

Just as the religious establishments in Britain and Europe were being blighted by formalism and the prevalence of a merely nominal profession of faith, by the late seventeenth century the decline in religious fervour in comparison with the spiritual verve of the early settlers, was worrying religious leaders in the colonies. The need for renewal was a constant refrain in the work of such Congregational stalwarts as Increase Mather (1639-1723) and his equally distinguished son Cotton Mather (1663-1728) at Boston, and Samuel Stoddard (1643-1729) in the Connecticut Valley. The Mathers held to the concept of 'the Half Way Covenant' in which unconverted children of converted church members were allowed the rights of baptism but not allowed to proceed to the Eucharist or vote in church affairs. This was itself an indulgence to the reality of spiritual decline and a recognition that religious conviction was not necessarily hereditary. Facing squarely the inevitability of spiritual declension, Stoddard (who was the grandfather of Jonathan Edwards (1703-58), soon to become America's greatest theologian) dispensed with the half-way covenant entirely and put his faith in zealous conversionism among spiritually deficient though baptized and confirmed church members. Although they battled with nominal faith among their hearers, both the Mathers and Stoddard had modest successes in inducing true conversions among the faithful. According to Jonathan

Edwards, his grandfather had presided over five separate ‘ingatherings’ in his church at Northampton, Mass., between 1680 and 1718. Although these leaders perpetuated the Puritan spirituality which had been so potent in pre-Restoration England, they would come to embody a link between an earlier form of piety and the exuberant qualities of the Evangelical Revival which would truly begin in the 1730s.

If the career of Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf spanned pre-Revival continental Pietism and the Evangelical Revival proper, the Dutch Reformed minister Theodore Frelinghausen (1691-1747) prefigured the outbreak of what in America would be termed ‘the Great Awakening’. Arriving from Europe in 1720, he followed the Pietistic norm of preaching the new birth among the small Dutch communities of New Jersey and organizing his converts into bands or fellowship meetings. He inspired the Ulster born but Yale educated Presbyterian minister Gilbert Tennent (1703-64), who imitated his methods among his parishioners in New Brunswick in the New Jersey province. Tennent soon became an early exemplar of wholesale itinerant, popular revivalism in the colonies and, along with the remarkable ministry of Jonathan Edwards in the Connecticut Valley in 1734-5, was instrumental in instigating ‘the late wonderful work of God ... in this country’ (*A Narrative of Surprising Conversions* (1737), *Jonathan Edwards on Revival*, p.7). Despite their conscientiously pious upbringing, both Tennant and Edwards had undergone conversion experiences during this pre-Revival period, while quietly, and unbeknown to them, the same pattern was occurring between Bohemia, Saxony, the British Isles and colonial America:

The pattern was becoming widespread. Clearly something was going on. More and more individuals were being deeply affected by the gospel. Soon more and more connections were linking such people with each other. Soon more and more instances occurred where large numbers of people became serious about their need for God. Next came revival (Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, p. 68).

ii. The religious development of John and Charles Wesley to 1738

Although a strong case could be made for the precedence of George Whitefield in the genesis of the Evangelical Revival in England, the protracted nature of their religious formation as well as the subsequent significance of the Methodist movement requires that we begin with the story of the brothers Wesley.

John (1703-91) and Charles (1707-88) were among the ten surviving children of the nineteen born to the Revd Samuel Wesley and his wife Susanna. Both parents had been brought

up as Dissenters, Samuel being the son and grandson of ministers who had been ejected from their livings following the imposition of the Book of Common Prayer in 1662, while Susanna's father had been the renowned Dr Samuel Annesley, Presbyterian minister at Spitalfields, London. If they had defied family tradition to be confirmed into the Anglican Church (both in 1682 when Susannah was aged only 13 and Samuel was in his early twenties), they affirmed wholeheartedly their parents' deep Christian commitment and personal faith. Married in 1688, Samuel served as a curate in London and Lincolnshire before being appointed rector of Epworth, on the Lincolnshire Fens, in 1695. A loyal High Churchman and conscientious if irascible and somewhat inept parish priest, the bleak and desolate parish would remain the family home until Samuel's death in 1735. Discipline was the responsibility of the cool-headed Susanna, her husband's equal in intelligence, doctrinal aptitude as well as strength of will: 'She had a clear, shrewd mind, was a better theologian than her undergraduate son (viz. John), and gave him good counsel from a middle-of-the-road High Church theology which was none the worse for that (Gordon Rupp, *Religion in England, 1688-1791*, p. 343). Family life was bracing, boisterous and austere, with educational preference being given to the three boys. Despite the genteel poverty of a country rectory, Samuel, the eldest, and Charles would be sent to Westminster School and John to Charterhouse, before proceeding to Oxford. As for the seven girls, all of whom were gifted, 'with no money and a dowdy background they had no chance of making good marriages and most went to oafs below their own cultural capacity, one to a villain and to poignant tragedy' (ibid., p.344; cf. Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, pp. 51-2). The Wesley brothers would be hugely indebted to their parents, and never wavered in their appreciation of the High Church piety, stern discipline and wide culture gained during their Epworth youth.

John entered Christ Church, Oxford, in June 1720 graduating in 1724 while Charles came up to the same college two years later. By then, challenged by his father, John had felt a vocation to ministry. Although not fastidious or unbalanced in any way and heeding his mother's appeal: 'resolve to make religion the business of your life', he became more disciplined, and through reading the works of Jeremy Taylor and Kempis' *Imitatio Christi*, began to strive after 'inward holiness' rather than conventional or outward piety. He would soon become absorbed with the concept of 'Christian perfection', an idea which would characterize Methodist theology in the decades to come. He was ordained deacon in September 1725 and, much to Samuel's jubilation, elected to a fellowship at Lincoln College in the following March: 'What will be my own fate nobody knows ... Wherever I am, my Jacky is a

fellow of Lincoln!’ Having proceeded to his MA in 1727 and ordained priest in September 1728, John spent much time at Epworth and the accompanying parish of Wroote, functioning as his father’s curate, though it was with a sense of relief that he returned to Oxford in November 1729 to take up the more congenial task of tutoring undergraduates. He would later claim that having been ordained to a college fellowship rather than to a parochial charge, he was free to be an itinerant.

Despite their deepening spiritual seriousness, both John and Charles retained a basic sense of geniality and contentment: ‘His own and family letters suggest a cheerful and dutiful son with no pressing religious problems’ (Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p.69). After a year or two of savouring release from the sometimes gloomy atmosphere at Epworth, Charles too became more conscientious in his religious commitment. He had been elected to a Studentship (or junior fellowship) at Christ Church in 1727, graduated BA in 1730 and took his MA in 1733. Less sure than John of having a clerical vocation, he nevertheless began to gather a few friends together in order to support one another’s devotions. This small gathering, which included the Irishman William Morgan, a fellow Christ Church undergraduate, would be known to posterity as ‘the Holy Club’. It was less a tightly organized society than an informal group of intimates, keen to deepen their spiritual lives. By spring 1730 (with John now among its number) the gathering became more structured, and by the summer, under the inspiration of Morgan, the friends had begun a programme of prison visiting in the Castle Gaol and, with the blessing of the local clergy, care of the poor and sick. By 1731 members included James Hervey of Lincoln College, later to become a noted evangelical clergyman, and another Christ Church undergraduate, the Welshman John Gambold, latterly a Moravian bishop. More significant was the contribution of John Clayton of Brasenose, an unbending High Churchman and Jacobite, whose zeal for the ascetic practices of ‘Primitive Christianity’ or the life of the post-apostolic church, would have such a marked influence on the Wesleys. As well as reading together and visiting the sick, the routine now was to pray twice daily, to fast weekly and partake of the sacrament in Christ Church Cathedral each Sunday. Nevertheless, what ‘began as a study group, developed into an agency for good works and added to this experiments in spiritual discipline’ (Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p.95) would become embedded in Methodist lore, and provided for its members a compelling and practical vision for disciplined holiness.

Although the Holy Club survived a little longer, attracting in 1733 the Yorkshireman Benjamin Ingham, a student at Queen’s, and a young undergraduate from Pembroke College, George Whitefield, it suffered the fate of many university societies in losing momentum after

its principal members had gone out into the world. This was especially true when the Wesley brothers' decided to leave for the colonies. Refusing point blank to take over the Epworth parish following Samuel Wesley's death in April 1735, John was recruited by Dr John Burton of Corpus Christi College and a trustee of the newly-established colony of Georgia, to take pastoral care of the community there. It was clear that the 32 year old Wesley was seeking a new challenge, and he coaxed Charles to forgo his qualms concerning the clerical vocation so that the two could partake of the mission together. Ordained by the Bishop of Oxford in quick succession, deacon on 21 September and priest a week later, Charles, along with John, their Holy Club colleague Ingham (whose ordination as deacon had occurred in June), and Charles Delamotte, the son of a wealthy Middlesex businessman, set sail for America in October 1735. Charles had been designated as assistant to General James Oglethorpe, the governor, while John would lead worship, preach to the colonists and administer the sacraments as well as assisting Ingham and Delemotte in the task of evangelizing the native Americans. Among those already settled in Georgia was a considerable band of German Pietists from Salzburg who had found refuge there through the auspices of the SPCK. Also bound for the colony, and companions on board the ship *Simmons*, were a party of Zinzendorf's Moravians. Intrigued by their religious practices and impressed by the quality of their Christian witness – when, during a storm, the Wesleys like everyone else were in fear of their lives, the Moravians seemed wholly unperturbed and just kept on singing hymns – John began to learn German in order to converse with them. Learning that they possessed an episcopal ministry in true apostolic succession, he was attracted to them even more. The Wesleys' interaction with the Moravians would have enormous significance not only for their own spiritual development but for the future of the Evangelical Revival in England, Wales and elsewhere.

Although outwardly a self-disciplined and mature Christian, the introspective nature of John's devotional regimen had long induced in him intense scrupulosity and doubt. As early as 1730 'his private discipline gradually became more complex, intense and obsessive' with everything centring on his own condition and motives (Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p.95). More and more he had a nagging feeling that things were not right between him and God. He admitted to his Oxford colleague, Dr Burton, that his chief aim in going to Georgia was 'the hope of saving my own soul', to which the Corpus man retorted that it would be better to think of the souls of others. But for John, to go to Georgia was to begin afresh, and 'to learn the true sense of the gospel of Christ, by preaching it to the heathen'. The exemplary faith of the Moravians, their serenity and peace of mind, was salutary. One memorable conversation with

Zinzendorf's deputy, August Gottlieb Spangenberg (1704-92), on 7 February 1736, the day after their arrival in Georgia, has gone down in evangelical history:

‘My brother, I must first ask you one or two questions. Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?’ I was surprised, and knew not what to answer. He observed it, and asked, ‘Do you know Jesus Christ?’ I paused, and said, ‘I know he is the saviour of the world’. ‘True’, he replied, ‘but do you know he has saved you?’ I answered, ‘I hope he has died to save me’. He only added, ‘Do you know yourself?’ I said, ‘I do’, but I fear they were vain words (Wesley's Journal, 7 February 1736; quoted in Rupp, *Religion in England, 1688-1791*, p. 352; Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p. 115; Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, pp. 77-8).

As it happened, Spangenberg was impressed by Wesley: ‘I observe that grace really dwells and reigns in him’, but by then all four Englishmen were becoming convinced that what they were lacking was true saving faith.

On one level the mission to Georgia was a chapter of accidents if not an unmitigated disaster. John's High Church zealotry precluded him from offering Holy Communion to Dissenters, which caused outrage: ‘They say they are Protestants, but as for you, they cannot tell what religion you are of’; his insistence that the Prayer Book service of matins should be held at 6 a.m. alienated many of the Anglican faithful; his tendency to meddle injudiciously in his parishioners' affairs produced serious tensions; while his keeping constant company with the German-speaking Moravians induced puzzlement if not outright hostility. Ever attracted to, indeed distracted by, feminine company, he was drawn to the 18 year old Sophy Hopkey, niece of the colony's chief magistrate, and when she decided to marry someone else, the disappointed Wesley, impetuously, refused to allow her and her new husband to partake of the Eucharist. John had a record of tactlessness, especially in regards to people's feelings, which went back to his youth. Sophy's irate uncle, Thomas Causton, immediately had him arrested, which virtually put paid to his ministry in the colony. If anything, Charles' situation had been even worse. The victim of malicious gossip, he was led to believe that Oglethorpe, his governor, was having an adulterous affair with one Mrs Hawkins, while she and a companion told the wholly innocent Oglethorpe that the young clergyman was intentionally blackening his name. After getting to the bottom of the intrigue, John retrieved the situation and engendered a reconciliation between Charles and the governor. It was, though, too much for the naïve and inexperienced Charles. He resigned his position in July 1736, five months after landing, and promptly returned to England. John would persevere for a year and three-quarters, until December 1737. ‘I went to America to convert the Indians’, he wrote despairingly, ‘but who

will convert me?’ Underlying his anguish was a conviction of utter failure, both practically and spiritually.

On another level, surprisingly much had been achieved. John had been assiduous in his labours, and despite everything, remarkably successful in his pastoral ministrations. He had established a range of small but flourishing societies, on the Moravian model, in which lay people met for prayer and edification. While retaining his High Church principles, he had been led to appreciate spontaneous and extempore prayer. There was little doubting ‘his ability to respond to the test of experience even against his own inherited prejudices, especially when experience appeared to show religious reality in unexpected places’ (Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p. 121). Not least of his achievements was to have translated German hymns from a variety of sources, Lutheran, Pietist and Moravian, in what was a first-class hymnbook: ‘These he turned into English verse, hymns as fine as his brother would ever write’ (Rupp, *Religion in England, 1688-1791*, p. 353). Wholly oblivious to the long-running and poisonous feud between the Halle Pietists, represented in Georgia by the Salzberger community, and Zinzendorf’s Moravians (see W. R. Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening*, pp. 3-4), he came to appreciate the compelling immediacy of Pietist heart religion, the confident quality of Moravian assurance, while his understanding of saving faith was moving steadily (unbeknown to him) in the direction of classical Lutheran orthodoxy. In fact, there was much positive to be said about John Wesley’s Georgian ministry. According to the Bishop of London’s colonial commissary, writing in late 1737, ‘no one could be more approved, better liked and better respected of, by all the people of Georgia. He was innocent of anything criminal, and after all Quincy [the colony’s former minister] had had much the same treatment’ (quoted in Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, pp. 133-4). Most important perhaps, that by being tested so intensely, morally, spiritually and doctrinally, John Wesley was being manoeuvred into a position where he could forsake all else, and trust simply in the healing mercy of God.

Having returned home, Wesley found himself at something of a loose end. Staying with an old associate, the Non-juring clergyman John Hutton and his family at their home in Dean’s Yard, Westminster (which was next-door to his elder brother Samuel, a school master), he heard of the impending visit of Peter Böhler (1712-75), a 25 year old graduate of the University of Jena and one of Zinzendorf’s lieutenants in the Moravian Church. Böhler had been charged with strengthening the Church’s ecumenical links in London and, if possible, establish a presence at Oxford, the Church of England’s principal intellectual centre. The two met first on 7 February and during the next three months the German’s influence on Wesley, nine years his

senior, would be profound. Leaving together for Oxford later in the month, they engaged in constant conversation: ‘My brother, my brother, that philosophy of your must be purged away’, was one of the Moravian’s comments to John. The subject of most immediate concern was the nature of saving faith. Whereas Wesley, the High Churchman, still believed it to include an active striving for holiness, Böhler was adamant that it was a sovereign work of God which allowed the believer simply to trust in Christ: ‘What Böhler had to say was not on the margin between Pietist and Moravian theology, but from the heart of the original Protestant Reformation. It is not accidental that the writings of Martin Luther now appear at the centre of the story’ (Rupp, *Religion in England, 1688-1791*, p. 356). By March Wesley had been brought over wholly to the Moravian’s views, especially as they accorded, as he now realised, with the formularies of the Church of England, especially Articles XI to XIII and Cranmer’s Homily on Salvation. Yet faith, as a conscious experience, was something that Wesley felt that he did not possess. When he suggested that he should refrain from preaching, Böhler’s response was memorable: ‘Preach faith *till* you have it, and then *because* you have it you will preach faith’. (Susanna, as it happens, had told her son as early as February 1734: ‘By faith I do not mean an assent only to the truths of the gospel ... but such an assent as influences our practice, and makes us heartily and thankfully accept him for our God and our saviour’, quoted in Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p. 100).

On 1 May Wesley was peripherally involved in the establishment of what would become the Fetter Lane Society (which met initially at Aldersgate Street, near St Paul’s Cathedral), the first specifically Moravian type congregation in England. There had been a small unofficial group of London-based Germans gathered by Zinzendorf during his visit a year earlier (when he had secured recognition for Moravian orders by John Potter, archbishop of Canterbury). Another group, an offshoot of John Hutton’s conventional High Church religious society and led by Thomas, Hutton’s son, had also been formed. This had been influenced specifically by the Evangelical Revival which had gained ground considerably in the capital during John’s sojourn in Georgia. Böhler’s new society however, which attracted members from each of the other groups, was distinctive. Members would be admitted not on the basis of any previous commitment to holiness but simply as sinners seeking grace; they would be divided into ‘bands’ of five to ten people according to sex, who would meet weekly, on a Wednesday, for prayer, worship and, most importantly, mutual confession of sins; there would be a ‘love feast’ or *agape* on every last Saturday in the month. This was the Moravian model, fundamentally different from a traditional religious society or an *ad hoc* evangelical

fellowship meeting. John Wesley, its only Anglican clerical member, consented to its formation readily: ‘The founding of this band was an event of the utmost significance for it was soon to grown into the Fetter Lane Society, the main seed-bed from which the English Evangelical Revival would spring’ (Colin Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England, 1728-60*, pp.38-9).

By now Wesley’s relations with some of his High Church colleagues, John Clayton especially, were exceedingly strained. News of his talk of ‘the New Birth’, instantaneous conversion and the like, and that he was practicing extempore rather than liturgical prayer, had unnerved his old Holy Club friends. Yet for all his zeal, he still claimed to be bereft of a felt, experiential faith. Charles, who had spent much of the spring teaching Böhler English, had also been drawn to the Moravian’s understanding of faith and, like his brother, felt that he was a stranger to personal salvation. He was even more drawn to the witness of John Bray, ‘a poor ignorant mechanic who knows nothing but Christ’, a member of the recently formed society in Aldersgate Street. Staying with Bray’s family while recovering from a bout of pleurisy, on Whit Sunday, 21 May, he heard the words, spoken by Bray’s sister: ‘In the name of Jesus of Nazareth arise and believe, and thou shall be healed of thy infirmities’, a quotation from the Book of Acts. Charles immediately affirmed these words for himself: ‘Convinced, I know not how nor when’, yet ‘I found myself at peace with God, and rejoicing in hope in Christ’ (Charles Wesley’s Journal, 21 May 1738; quoted in Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p. 144; cf. Gareth Lloyd, *Charles Wesley and the Struggle for Methodist Identity*, p. 47). It was John’s breakthrough, three days later, equally dramatic but more memorably phrased, which has resonated through Methodist history ever since:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, when 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 ... I then testified to all there what I now first felt in my heart (John Wesley’s Journal, 24 May 1738; quoted in Rupp, *Religion in England, 1688-1791*, p. 357; Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p. 144; Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, p.89).

Released at long last from their spiritual turmoil, the brothers set forth with exuberance to share not only the faith but their own sense of assurance. At first it was not always an edifying spectacle. Attending the religious society overseen by John Hutton on the following Sunday, John announced to the congregation that previously he had never been a Christian and by implication, neither were they. An appalled Mrs Hutton responded, not unreasonably: ‘If you

was not a Christian ever since I knew you, you was a great hypocrite, for you made us all believe you was one' (Daniel Benham, *Memoirs of James Hutton*, p. 33). 'Wesley, in the first hard phase of his evangelicalism', writes Rack, 'was a harsh judge', and some of his dicta were characterized by 'the arrogance of the new convert' (*Reasonable Enthusiast*, p. 142). Even after his 'heartwarming' experience, he would sometimes lose his sense of assurance and doubt the sincerity of his faith. On 4 January 1739, for instance, on analysing his condition, he wrote in his journal: 'I am not a Christian ... I have not the fruits of the spirit of Christ'. Fortunately, neither this unpleasant censoriousness nor debilitating insecurity would last long. On 13 June 1738, three weeks after his Aldersgate Street breakthrough, John, along with Benjamin Ingham (whose evangelical conversion had occurred in Georgia two years earlier), embarked on a three month journey to the continent in order to discover Moravian life for themselves. Still enchanted by the simplicity of the German disciples, he learned at Herrnhut that that Böhler's insistence that all true Christians should enjoy full assurance was not held universally within the Church. Although 'the atmosphere of his travel letters exudes the enthusiasm and romantic vision of one who is seeing primitive apostolic Christianity in action' (Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p. 185), a note of reality would later creep in. Despite their indebtedness to the Moravians, by mid-1739 both John and Charles had distanced themselves from their movement and thereafter became more discerning in their assessment of its virtues and openly critical of its faults.

In his absence the Fetter Lane Society had gone from strength to strength. 'Fourteen were added to us since our return', he wrote in October, 'so that we now have eight bands of men, consisting of fifty-six persons, all of whom seek salvation only in the blood of Christ. As yet we have only two small bands of women ... but here are many others who only wait till we have leisure to instruct them'. A little earlier, on 17 September, he described his activities after having returned home:

I began again to declare in my own country the glad tidings of salvation, preaching three times, and afterwards expounding the Holy Scripture to a large company ... On Monday I rejoiced to meet with our little society which now consisted of thirty-two persons. The next day I went on to the condemned felons of Newgate and offered them free salvation.

More that he realised at the time, this whirl of activity including preaching, witnessing, evangelising and organizing, would continue almost unabated throughout the rest of his life.

The energy expended by the missionaries, now confident in their faith and finding unprecedented receptivity in their hearers, marked the emergence of what would become a new phase of popular Christianity within the Protestant world. From Transylvania to New England, religious establishments were being revived, nominal adherence to Christianity was being transformed into vital, experiential faith and the gospel was being seen as good news, powerful for individuals' salvation. Concepts like 'the New Birth', justification by faith not only as a doctrine but as a felt and revolutionary experience, and preaching not just as instruction but as the means whereby God's very Word would make itself known, were becoming explosively new. In England there were others, George Whitefield most markedly, whose ministry in Gloucester and Bristol had already shaken the foundations of conventional religiosity, while following his return from Georgia in February 1737, Benjamin Ingham had established a number of evangelical fellowships in his native Yorkshire. By 1738 revival had also begun to register in Bedford, Cambridge and Nottingham (see John Walsh, 'The Cambridge Methodists', in P. Brooks (ed), *Christian Spirituality: Essays in honour of Gordon Rupp*, pp. 249-83). In Wales, Howell Harris and Daniel Rowland, had spearheaded a potent movement of renewal since mid-1735. Far from being lonely innovators, John and Charles Wesley were entering into a fellowship of mostly young Christian leaders who had already been captivated by a unique vision of spiritual revolution. As 1738 drew to a close a remarkable unity prevailed among them, with keen expectations of greater things to come.

iii. **The early career of George Whitefield**

Whitefield (1714-70) was the youngest son of the proprietor of the Bell Inn, Gloucester. Although his forebears had been people of note, by the early eighteenth century the family had forfeited much of its influence and status, while the death of his father when George was only two, followed by his mother's disastrous second marriage (which had ended in divorce), had engendered in him a deep sense of inferiority. His major talent in school was mimicry and he was soon drawn towards the theatre, but his ambitious mother steered him towards a career in the church, apparently for social rather than spiritual reasons. Unlike the Wesleys, his background was only perfunctorily religious, though his upbringing as the son of an innkeeper's wife gave him a much wider understanding of the fortunes and foibles of ordinary folk than he would have acquired had he been brought up in the Epworth parsonage: 'As an eighteenth century innkeeper, Whitefield must have encountered all sorts of characters, including drunks, politicians, prostitutes, gamblers, pickpockets and a tippling cleric or two', Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern*

Evangelicalism, p. 10). Learning of the possibility of entering Oxford as a servitor, or poor scholar who would pay his way by doing menial tasks for privileged undergraduates, he began to take his religious as well as his academic responsibilities seriously, and soon he had embarked on a severely ascetic regime of rigorous consecration. He became regular in worship, scrupulous in preparation for Holy Communion, disciplined in his devotional reading and excessive in fasting. Matriculating at Pembroke College in 1732, aged 18, he made few friends and had virtually no status among his fellow students: 'I ingratiated myself into the gentlemen's favour so that many, who had it in their power, chose me to be their servitor'. This did nothing to boost his feelings of inferiority or to enhance his standing within the college, but a chance meeting with the naturally self-confident Charles Wesley, Student of Christ Church, introduced him to the Holy Club which, for a lonely, ascetically-minded young man, was a godsend. He broke irrevocably with his interest in the theatre (the Wesleys for all their piety, were never averse to socializing or card-playing), while his mortifications became so severe that his tutors became seriously concerned for his welfare: 'Afterwards, by degrees, I always chose the worst sort of food ... I fasted twice a week. My apparel was mean ... I wore woollen gloves, a patched gown, and dirty shoes'. Despite having rejected the frivolity of acting, there would remain something theatrical even about his deprivations.

Plagued by illness and insomnia induced by his unbalanced austerities, in 1735 Whitefield took time out from Oxford and returned home to convalesce. Charles Wesley had already loaned him a copy of the Scottish Episcopalian Henry Scougal's *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (1677) where he read that true Christianity was not a matter of good works or strenuous exercises or external duties, but simply 'a union of the soul with God, a real participation of the divine nature, the very image of God drawn upon the soul, or, in the apostle's phrase, "It is Christ formed within us"'. Although these terms suggest a theology of mystical union, its basis was Christ's objective atonement on behalf of sinful humankind on the cross:

The eternal Son of God did clothe himself with the infirmities of our flesh, and left the company of those innocent and blessed spirits who knew so well how to love and adore him, that he might dwell among men, and wrestle with the obstinacy of that rebellious race ... and then to offer himself up as a sacrifice and propitiation for them.

The partaking of the fruits of this atonement demanded no less than a new birth, a shedding of the old Adam in order to become one with the new. The reading of this book helped Whitfield turn from despair to understanding and quietly, imperceptibly, he came to experience release

and the forgiveness of sin: 'I was delivered from the burden that so heavily oppressed me. The spirit of mourning was taken from me, and I knew what it was truly to rejoice in God my saviour'. Where this occurred and when he does not say, but the very reticence of the report suggests its authenticity: 'It is one of the least melodramatic of all conversion stories of the Revival' (Rupp, *Religion in England, 1688-1791*, p. 340). He returned to Oxford to find the Holy Club languishing, the Wesleys and Ingham having left for Georgia. Completing his degree examinations in May 1736, he proceeded a month later for ordination as deacon in Gloucester Cathedral at the hands of the conscientious and devout Bishop Benson. He was aged 22 at the time.

Considering what his next step would be, he responded to John Wesley's call, mediated by Charles after his return to Oxford some time earlier, to continue the missionary and pastoral work in Georgia:

Only Mr Delamotte is still with me, till God shall stir up the hearts of some of his servants, who, putting their lives in his hands, shall come over and help us, where the harvest is so great and the labourers so few. What if thou art the man, Mr Whitefield?

Between then and his departure, which would occur in February 1738 following John's return, Whitefield discovered his vocation as a preacher, indeed 'the greatest popular preacher since Hugh Latimer, and perhaps of all time' (Rupp, *Religion in England, 1688-1791*, pp. 340-1). His first sermon preached on the Sunday after his ordination at his parish church from boyhood days, St Mary's de Crypt in Gloucester, caused a furore: 'I have since heard that a complaint has been made to the bishop that I drove fifteen mad'! Whereas its theme was uncontroversial, namely the benefits of Christian fellowship, the stress which he put on the necessity of the New Birth was unprecedented. By August he had begun preaching in London, deputizing for two months for his former Holy Club colleague Thomas Broughton, chaplain at the Tower of London. Almost immediately feted as 'the boy preacher', he was also causing notoriety for his insistence that his hearers' should experience for themselves the reality of the New Birth. During November and December he served as a locum in Dummer, Hampshire, then in early 1737 he deputized for the vicar of Stonehouse, Gloucestershire. Knowing of his intended departure for the colonies, later in the year he preached many charity sermons, especially in London, Bristol and Bath, aimed at collecting money and supplies for the Georgia mission. His theme, nevertheless, was epitomized in the title of his first publication, *The Nature and Necessity of our New Birth in Christ Jesus, in Order to Salvation* (1737), and the impact his preaching had was remarkable. A born orator who understood the appeal of the dramatic:

‘Whitefield was not concerned simply to talk about the New Birth; he had to sell it with all the artifice of a huckster’ (Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, p. 40), and despite his youth, cannily astute at self-publication (see Frank Lambert, *Pedlar in Divinity: George Whitfield and the Transatlantic Revivals, 1737-70*), he ‘used the marketing techniques at his disposal to turn himself into an overnight media sensation’ (David Ceri Jones et.al, *The Elect Methodists: Calvinistic Methodism in England and Wales, 1735-1811*, p. 7).

There were many who asked as to the secret of his success. Whereas other orthodox and faithful preachers taught the doctrine of regeneration, Whitefield would underscore the need for the *experience* of the New Birth, and whereas they would appeal to the heart and will through the mind, he had the ability to inspire the passions and fire the imagination. In a short time he had become phenomenally popular; in a London teeming with people, no-one had ever imagined that gospel preaching could draw such crowds. And of course, success bred success. Realizing that he had become ‘a name’, he began issuing his sermons, sure of a ready market, while his published *Journals*, which would appear during his sojourn in Georgia, served to enhance his reputation even more. Even the envy of the more conventional clergy became grist to his mill, with his treating their criticisms of his narrow theology and religious arrogance as tokens of an unbelieving spirit and unregenerate heart. For a formerly shy, indeed servile personality, crippled with feelings of inadequacy and lowliness, this level of adulation was palpably dangerous. Despite the inevitable intimations of pride (which would become all too visible in his published *Journals*), he succeeded, in the main, to keep his head. Even the most cynical had to admit his sincerity of heart. Although only 23 years old and not yet in priest’s orders, there was no disguising the fact that Whitefield’s preaching was characterized by unprecedented spiritual power; it was given with unique authority and had lasting and beneficial effects on multitudes of his hearers. ‘The Word’, he claimed, ‘was sharper than a two-edged sword. The doctrine of the New Birth ... made its way like lightening into the hearers’ conscience’.

George Whitefield departed for Georgia in February 1738 in order to take up where John Wesley had left off. Despite his boyishness and conversionist zeal, he won the respect of both the crewmen on board the *Whitaker*, and the regiment of soldiers who were travelling in order to become the colony’s garrison force. During the stopover in Gibraltar, he further extended his public reputation by preaching to large congregations. Arriving in America on 7 May, he made a favourable impression on General Oglethorpe and showed immediately – as he had on board ship – that his social skills were superior to the privileged Wesley brothers,

and that, surprisingly perhaps, he had a ready and genuine gift for friendship. He soon came to realise, however, how challenging the new situation would be. The colony was different from anything he had experienced in the past. Its two principal towns, Savannah and St Frederica 90 miles to the south, were no more than ramshackle villages (St Frederica was a stockade). There was no dedicated school or church building and the population, such as it was, was widely scattered. People lived in flimsy, makeshift, brush houses. The difference between colonial life and the bustle of London, Bristol, Gloucester or Oxford was total. Unlike Wesley, he was not tortured by religious doubts and he cheerfully did his best to befriend the inhabitants. He refused to alienate Dissenters; he did not meddle unwisely in the affairs of parishioners, and he never became over-familiar with either Moravians or Pietists. There is no evidence, however, that he scored any startling revivalistic successes through preaching. Much of his work was pastoral in nature and among small gatherings in private homes. The most significant thing that happened in Georgia was the developing of a vision that would sustain him for the rest of his life, namely the establishment of an orphanage on the lines of Francke's famous orphanage in Halle: there was a small such home in Ebenezer, the Pietist community in the colony. Such an establishment would serve as a focus for charity collections among the English churches, parishes and dioceses; it would allow Whitfield the freedom to travel, preach and itinerate in order to raise funds while justifying an extra-parochial ministry; it would afford him the opportunity to continue the popular preaching ministry to which he knew now that he had been called. Although the villages and hamlets of Georgia would thereafter claim his commitment, loyalty and affection, he would not have to forgo the satisfaction afforded by great city crowds of London, Bristol and Bath (and soon Philadelphia, Boston and New York), hanging on his every word. Indeed, he would claim on 3 March 1739, in a letter to his friend Daniel Abbott, that 'the whole world is now my parish', predating Wesley's identical, though better known statement, by a month.

Having won the trust of the colonists, and having received Oglethorpe's blessing for the orphanage project, Whitefield left for England on 9 September. His ministry in the colony had lasted a mere three months. The description of his adventures, issued in his published *Journal*, was read avidly by multitudes of appreciative admirers. The *Journal* became an immediate best-seller in which he projected himself at his most winsome and appealing. The curious mixture of egotism and humility was apparent to all, disciples and detractors alike. He returned in December to resume the shared leadership of a movement which was making an unprecedented contribution to the religious vitality of the land of his birth.

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