

John Wesley the Methodist

Chapter IV - The Crisis at Oxford

A Freshman of Christ Church.--No Religious Friends.--Letters from Home--Choosing a Profession.--The First Convert.-- Fellow of Lincoln.--Curate at Wroote.

JOHN WESLEY came up from the Charterhouse School to Oxford University in the early summer of 1720, and matriculated at Christ Church College. With all its fame as the chief English university, Oxford was not at that time an inspiring or stimulating place. Its religion had for the most part hardened into the most inflexible and spiritless forms of High Churchism, and the undergraduate life was rude, gay, and dissolute. Foppery, conviviality, and roistering were not altogether restricted to this class, for the dons were stigmatized as greedy, dissipated, rude, covetous, and stupid. How far the lad from Epworth went with these gay companions we do not know. He afterward accused himself of having been sinful and contented at this period, but the praying mother and the habit of the home which had made him a praying and Bible-reading schoolboy still bound him to these religious observances and probably restrained him from flagrant vice. It was five years, however, before he awakened to the serious purpose of life. He was until then content to stand well in his studies, surpassing all in logical acuteness, and to be a favorite with his fellows.

His contemporary at Christ Church, Badcock, describes him as "the very sensible and acute collegian, baffling every man by the subtleties of logic, and laughing at them for being so easily routed; a young fellow of the finest classical taste, of the most liberal and manly sentiments;" "gay and sprightly, with a turn for wit and humor." He wrote sparkling letters to his friends, and his brother Samuel received some stanzas after the Latin, composed as a college exercise, on "Cloe's Favorite Flea." In more sedate mood he sent verses on the 65th psalm to his father, who was pleased with them, and urged him not to bury his talent. His letters reveal a wealth of family affection and warm interest in all the little details of the home life at Epworth and at Wroote.

In 1724 the family removed to Wroote, the living which his father at this time held with Epworth. Begging for letters from his sisters, he says: "I should be glad to hear how things go on at Wroote, which I now remember with more pleasure than Epworth; so true it is, at least to me, that the persons, not the place, make home so pleasant." His sister Emilia was the eldest of the gifted sisters. "Her love for her mother was strong as death, and she regarded her brother John with a passionate fondness. Though so much younger than herself, she selected him as her most intimate companion, her counselor in difficulties, to whom 'her heart lay open at all times.'" Wesley was a most affectionate brother, and his letters show that he was the opposite of the "semistoical person, destitute of homely warmth and kindness," which some of his critics have supposed him to be.

For the first time Wesley became troubled about his health, and on one occasion, while walking in the country, he stopped violent bleeding of the nose by the somewhat drastic method of plunging into the river. He read Cheyne's Book of Health and Long Life, a plea for exercise and temperance. This book led Wesley to eat sparingly and drink water, a change which he considered to be one means of preserving his health. He had a constant struggle "to make ends meet," although there is no evidence to show that he was extravagant. "Dear Jack," wrote his mother, "be not discouraged; do your duty, keep close to your studies, and hope for better days. Perhaps, notwithstanding all, we shall pick up a few crumbs for you before the end of the year. Dear Jacky, I beseech Almighty God to bless thee." This letter was written just after he had taken his bachelor's degree, in 1724. Two years later he secured the Lincoln fellowship, which brought him financial relief.

When John Wesley was twenty-two years of age, in 1725, he came to a turning point in his life: he faced the question of his future work. The prospect of taking holy orders awakened his most serious thought, but he realized his spiritual unfitness for the work of the ministry. He had not fallen into flagrant sin; the aristocratic and expensive vice of some of the young noblemen at Christ Church was scarcely possible for him, even had he desired it. The letters of his mother carried always with them the aroma of her tender love and the purity of the Epworth life. He never lost his strong and touching love for his brothers and sisters. His love of learning, stimulated by his father's letters, was a safeguard from idleness.

But the divine fire burned low. John Wesley had become simply the gay collegian, a general favorite in society, a sparkling wit; maintaining a high repute for scholarship, but, according to his own account, comparatively indifferent to spiritual things. He writes: "I had not all this while so much as a notion of inward holiness; nay, went on habitually, and for the most part very contentedly, in some one or other known sin, though with some intermission and short struggles, especially before and after the Holy Communion, which I was obliged to receive thrice a year." Late one night he had a conversation with the porter of his college, which began with pleasantries, but ended with a point that deeply impressed the merry student:

"Go home and get another coat," said Wesley.

"This is the only coat I have in the world, and I thank God for it," replied the porter.

"Go home and get your supper, then," said the young student.

"I have had nothing to-day but a drink of water, and I thank God for that," rejoined the other.

"It is late, and you will be locked out, and then what will you have to thank God for "

"I will thank him that I have the dry stones to lie upon."

"John," said Wesley, "you thank God when you have nothing to wear, nothing to eat, and no bed to lie upon; what else do you thank him for "

"I thank him," responded the good man, "that he has given me my life and being, a heart to love him, and a desire to serve him;" and the porter's word and tone made Wesley feel that there was something in religion which he had not as yet found. He wrote home in regard to entering the ministry. His father's reply was written with a trembling pen: "You see," wrote the old man, "Time has shaken me by the hand, and Death is but a little way behind him. My eyes and heart are now almost all I have left, and I bless God for them." He counseled delay, not liking "a callow clergyman," and fearing, too, that his motive might be "as Eli's son's, to eat a piece of bread." But his mother judged his character better, and marked the change in her son's tone of thought. The rector came around --as he generally did--to the opinion of his wife. The latter writes: "Mr. Wesley differs from me, and would engage you, I believe, in critical learning, which, though incidentally of use, is in nowise preferable to the other (practical divinity). I earnestly pray God to avert that great evil from you of engaging in trifling studies to the neglect of such as are absolutely necessary. I dare advise nothing. God Almighty direct and bless you! . . . Now in good earnest resolve to make religion the business of your life, for, after all, that is the one thing that, strictly speaking, is necessary, and all things else are comparatively little to the purposes of life.' Then his mother's words become more pointed: "I heartily wish you would now enter upon a serious examination of yourself, that you may know whether you have a reasonable hope of salvation by Jesus Christ. If you have, the satisfaction of knowing it will abundantly reward your pains; if you have not, you will find a more reasonable occasion for tears than can be met with in a tragedy."

His father again cautioned him against taking up the ministry as a mere means of livelihood, adding that "the principal spring and motive . . . must certainly be the glory of God, and the service of the Church in the edification of our neighbor. And woe to him who with any meaner leading view attempts so sacred a work." The young man was in a mood to heed such noble words.

At this time, and a year later, Wesley came under the influence of some remarkable books which he never ceased to hold in high esteem, though he found deliverance from their ascetic and mystic tendencies. They were Thomas a Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* (in Stanhope's translation, *The Christian Pattern*); Taylor's *Holy Living and Dying*; and later, Law's *Serious Call*, and *Christian Perfection*.

The Christian Pattern profoundly moved the heart of Wesley. It had been his father's favorite book, his "great and old companion." Its sentences make us feel while we read them as though we had laid our hand on the heart, throbbing with sorrows like our own, which beat so many years ago in the old mystic's breast.

Wesley writes in his *Journal*: "The providence of God directing me to Kempis's *Christian Pattern*, I began to see that true religion was seated in the heart, and that God's law extended to all our thoughts as well as words and actions. I was, however, very angry at Kempis for being too strict, though I read him only in Dean Stanhope's translation Meeting likewise with a religious friend, which I never had till now, I began to alter the whole form of my conversation, and to set in earnest upon a new life. I set apart an hour or two a day for religious retirement. I communicated every week. I watched against all sin, whether in word or deed. I began to aim at and pray for inward holiness. So that now, 'doing so much and living so good a life,' I doubted not but I was a good Christian."

Canon Overton marks the irony of the last sentence, and asks if it is not right in this case to defend John Wesley against John Wesley. While thoroughly believing in the reality and importance of the later change, he thinks it cannot be denied that Wesley from this time forward led a most devoted life. Rigg believes he sees here the doctrine of entire Christian consecration and holiness, which afterward developed into the Methodist doctrine of Christian perfection. Full of spiritual beauty are Wesley's own words: "I saw that simplicity of intention and purity of affection, one design in all we speak and do, and one desire ruling all our tempers, are indeed the wings of the soul, without which she can never ascend to God. I sought after this from that hour."

Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living and Dying* strengthened the convictions awakened by a Kempis. "In reading several parts of this book," says Wesley, "I was exceedingly affectedI resolved to dedicate all my life to God--all my thoughts and words and actions--being thoroughly conscious that there was no medium, but that every part of my life, not some only, must either be a sacrifice to God or myself; that is, in effect, to the devil." Well does Tyerman note that here we have the turning point in Wesley's history. It was not until thirteen years after this that he received the consciousness of being saved through faith in Christ, but from this time his whole aim was to serve God and his fellow-men.

Another result of reading Taylor was the commencement of the famous *Journals*. They now occupy a well-recognized place in the

literature of the eighteenth century, but they were the outcome of Wesley's spiritual resolve to make a more careful use of all his time, and to keep an account of its employment.

Although during the next few years Wesley became an ascetic, with High Church beliefs, strong ritualistic tendencies, and a mystical bias, he was repelled by a Kempis's extreme doctrine of self-mortification, and Taylor's morbid teaching as to the necessity of perpetual sorrowful uncertainty concerning personal salvation. In a letter to his mother he writes:

If we dwell in Christ and he in us (which he will not do unless we are regenerate), certainly we must be sensible of it. If we can never have any certainty of our being in a state of salvation, good reason it is that every moment should be spent not in joy, but in fear and trembling, and then undoubtedly we are in this life, of all men, most miserable. God deliver us from such a fearful doctrine as this!

Here, in 1725, we have the basis of another of the characteristic doctrines of the coming Methodism--that of a present salvation from guilt and fear through the indwelling of Christ. This was opposed to the Carolan High Churchmanship of Taylor as well as to Calvinism. But Wesley had yet to learn by experience the power of evangelical faith which laid the foundation of his later teaching on conversion and the "witness of the Spirit."

In the same memorable year, 1725, Wesley and his mother rejected the doctrine of Predestination, which for centuries had terrified many earnest souls, and narrowed the sympathies and work of the Christian Church. Wesley asks: "How is this consistent with either the divine justice or mercy Is it mercy to ordain a creature to everlasting misery Is it just to punish man for crimes which he could not but commit That God should be the author of sin and injustice--which must, I think, be the consequence of maintaining this opinion--is a contradiction of the clearest idea 'we have of the divine nature and perfections.'" To this his mother replies:

The doctrine of Predestination, as maintained by rigid Calvinists, is very shocking, and ought to be abhorred, because it directly charges the most high God with being the author of sin. I think you reason well and justly against it, for it is certainly inconsistent with the justness and goodness of God to lay any man under either a physical or moral necessity of committing sin, and then to punish him for doing it.

Hugh Price Hughes, in the Contemporary Review for March, 1897, declared:

John Wesley killed Calvinism. No really instructed and responsible theologian dares to assert now that Christ died only for a portion of mankind, although the full logical effect of asserting the redemption of the entire race has not yet been universally realized. Little did the young Oxonian dream in 1725 that he and his mother were sowing the seed of the bitterest theological controversy of his life, over which Methodism would be rent in twain by an irreparable schism, that would unhappily leave the evangelical section of the Established Church on the wrong side of the breach, doomed to the comparative helplessness we witness to-day, although it would burst his fetters and enable him to exclaim, with prophetic truth, "The world is my parish."

In the midsummer of this same year, while preparing for ordination, Wesley won his first convert. He tells his mother: "I stole out of company at eight in the evening with a young gentleman with whom I was intimate. As we took a turn in an aisle of St. Mary's Church, in expectation of a young lady's funeral, with whom we were both acquainted, I asked him if he really thought himself my friend; and, if he did, why he would not do me all the good he could. He began to protest, in which I cut him short by desiring him to oblige me in an instance which he could not deny to be in his own power, to let me have the pleasure of making him a whole Christian, to which I knew he was at least half persuaded already; that he could not do me a greater kindness, as both of us would be fully convinced when we came to follow that young woman." The word went home. Eighteen months afterward the young man died of consumption, and Wesley preached his funeral sermon.

Wesley's earnestness soon exposed him to the raillery of the college wits, and this evoked a characteristic clarion blast from his father: "Does anyone think the devil is dead, or asleep, or has no agents left Surely virtue can bear being laughed at. The Captain and Master endured something more for us before he entered into glory, and unless we track his steps, in vain do we hope to share that glory with him." As leaders of the militant host of God both the Wesleys owed much of their moral muscle to their father, and that old soldier's words echo in many a war song by Charles Wesley.

John Wesley was ordained deacon by John Potter, Bishop of Oxford, in Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, on Sunday, September 19, 1725, and priest on September 22, 1728. His first sermon was preached at South Leigh, in Oxfordshire, in 1725. Of the fruitlessness of all this early preaching he wrote long afterward: "Preaching was defective and fruitless, for ' from 1725 to 1729 I neither laid the foundation of repentance nor of preaching the Gospel, taking it for granted that all to whom I preached were believers, and that many of them needed no repentance. From 1729 to 1734, laying a deeper foundation of repentance, I saw a little fruit. But it was only a little--and no wonder; for I did not preach faith in the blood of the covenant."

There was great rejoicing in the rectory at Wroote on March 17, 1726, when John Wesley was elected a fellow of Lincoln College. His father had only 5 to keep his family from March until after harvest, but he wrote in high spirits: "What will be my own fate, God knows,

before this summer is over-sed passt graviora [but we have suffered heavier troubles]. Wherever I am, my Jack is a fellow of Lincoln."

For more than a quarter of a century Wesley was connected with Lincoln College, and its name appears on the title pages of all his works. The college was founded in the fifteenth century by two Bishops of Lincoln, who were bent on extirpating the Wyclifite heresies and other opinions dangerous to the Church. Goldwin Smith says: "The two orthodox prelates would have stood aghast if they could have foreseen that their little college of true theologians would one day number among its fellows John Wesley, and that Methodism would be cradled within its walls."

Wesley's Lincoln apartments are the second-floor rooms on the right, or south, side of the first quadrangle opposite the clock tower. In these rooms the "Holy Club" met in 1739. Hundreds of visitors ramble into this quiet quadrangle to-day, many of them from the colonies and America. They pluck a leaf from the vine, look into the study of the man whose parish was the world, visit the chapel, with its windows of rich stained glass, stand in the pulpit from which Wesley preached, and gaze upon his portrait by Williams, in the dining hall.

Wesley found the moral tone and discipline of Lincoln superior, on the whole, to that of other colleges, and the fellows "both well-natured and well-bred." He was soon appointed Greek lecturer and moderator of the classes. It became his duty to lecture weekly in the college hall to all the undergraduates on the Greek Testament. The Greek text was the basis of the lecture, but the main object was to teach divinity, not merely a language. As moderator of the classes he presided over the disputations, held every day except Sunday. The disputants argued on one side or the other; the moderator had to listen to the arguments, and then to decide with whom the victory lay. John Locke, at Christ Church seventy years before, lamented the "unprofitableness of these verbal niceties;" but Wesley writes, "I could not avoid acquiring thereby some degree of expertness in arguing, and especially in discovering and pointing out well-covered and plausible fallacies. I have since found abundant reason to praise God for giving me this honest art."

He became a hard and wide student, and, indeed, continued such all his life. Hebrew, Arabic, Greek, Latin, logic, ethics, metaphysics, natural philosophy, oratory, poetry, and divinity entered into his weekly plan of study.¹ He obtained the degree of Master of Arts in 1727, acquiring much reputation in his disputation for his degree. His financial struggles were over, but he was rigid in his economy and was able to help his father and his family to the end of life. He saved about 2 a year by allowing his hair to grow long, in spite of the protest of his mother, thus escaping the expense of a wig. In a letter to his brother Samuel occurs his well-known sentence: "Leisure and I have taken leave of one another. I propose to be busy as long as I live, if my health is so long indulged me."

His brother Charles came up from Westminster School to Christ Church soon after John Wesley's removal to Lincoln. When John spoke to him about religion he said, "What, would you have me to be a saint all at once" and would hear no more. But the heart of John was set upon saintliness. He courteously broke off acquaintanceships which hindered him, after fruitless attempts to bring his companions to his own serious view of life. He now began the system of early rising, which he continued to the end of life. He could say, after sixty years, that he still rose at four o'clock.

His father was now sixty-five years of age, and in feeble health. To fill the small living of Wroote in addition to that of Epworth, he needed a curate. A school in Yorkshire had been offered John, with a good income, and he was attracted by the seclusion it promised, but his mother saw that God had better work for him to do, and, again following her advice, he declined it. He went to Lincolnshire and acted as his father's curate for two and a quarter years, returning at intervals to Oxford. This was the only experience he ever had in parochial work.

Wroote was surrounded by fens, and often had to be reached by boat. During one journey, in 1728, Wesley narrowly escaped drowning, the fierce current driving the boat against another craft and filling it with water. The small brick church in which he preached at Wroote was taken down a century ago and the material used for paving the streets of Epworth. One incident of this period is worth preserving, as it bears upon the organized fellowship of the Methodists. He tells us that he traveled several miles to converse with a "serious man" who said to him, "Sir, you wish to serve God and go to heaven. Remember you cannot serve him alone; you must therefore find companions or make them; the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion." He was recalled to Oxford by the rector of his college in 1729, and found the Methodist movement commenced by his brother Charles.

Wesley was becoming an earnest ascetic ritualist. He held that water should be mixed with the wine in the daily Holy Communion. He advised something near akin to confession, as a racy letter from his sister Emelia shows:

To lay open the state of my soul to you, or any of our clergy, is what I have no inclination to do at present; and I believe I never shall. I shall not put my conscience under the direction of mortal man as frail as myself. To my own Master I stand or fall. Nay, I scruple not to say that all such desire in you or any other ecclesiastic seems to me like Church tyranny, and assuming to yourselves a dominion over your fellow-creatures which was never designed you by God.

The old Puritan spirit comes out in the letter of this sister, Owho had the Puritan blood in her veins. Her brother was teaching almost all that a High Anglican of to-day teaches, except that he does not appear to have held to the "conversion of the elements" in the Eucharist. A little later, under the influence of his friend Clayton, he left the guidance of the Bible to follow that of tradition, or such pretended

tradition as the Apostolical Constitutions. He says of himself that he "made antiquity a coordinate rule with Scripture."

The strict High Churchman also sought rest for his heart in mysticism. He first read William Law's *Christian Perfection and Serious Call* in 1728 or 1729. These two powerful devotional treatises did not contain the mystical errors of Law's later teaching. Although in later years Wesley diverged widely from Law, he never lost his admiration for the *Serious Call*. A very short time before his death he spoke of it as a "treatise which will hardly ever be excelled, if it be equaled, in the English tongue, either for beauty of expression or for justice and depth of thought." He owned that Law's two books sowed the seed of Methodism.

Later Law went astray into the fields of mysticism. Wesley visited him at Putney in 1732, and from that period began to read the German mystics. Their noble descriptions of union with God and internal religion deeply impressed him, but he never followed Law into the unfathomable confusions" of Behmen. He never accepted the theories which deny the necessity of the means of grace. He appears to have extricated himself from the meshes of mysticism during his sojourn in Georgia, and writes to his brother Samuel: "I think the rock on which I had the nearest made shipwreck of the faith was the writings of the mystics; under which term I comprehend all and only those who slight any of the means of grace." He asks his brother to give him his thoughts upon the scheme of their doctrines which he has drawn up, and thinks they may be of consequence "not only to all this province, but to nations of Christians yet unborn." Thus this Christian knight was delivered from this "wandering fire;" he never passed "into the silent life," and we must return with him to Oxford to practice the counsel of the "serious" countryman who told him that "the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion."